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Being Interpreted
A (Queer) Systematic Theology

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Abstract

Drawing upon queer theory, theological ontology, and Methodist/Wesleyan theology, this dissertation reimagines systematic theology as a performative, ethically accountable practice. Critiquing Systematic Theology's complicity in heteronormative and racialized violence, the project argues that theology must be judged by its effects. Drawing on Judith Butler's gender performativity, Paul Tillich's ontological systematic method, Santiago Zabala's hermeneutic ontology, and Christian Danz's pneumatology, the dissertation weaves together a theory of theological performativity that attends to the ontological function of doctrines as the norms through which both religious contents and religious persons come into being. Rather than static essences, Christian contents such as God are understood like gender as historically contingent – and therefore ethically entangled – embodied constellations of meaning through which social life is possible. Without abandoning systematic coherence or the creative power of God, this approach redefines systematic theology as a site of critical agency and communal formation.

The project insists that because LGBTQIA+ persons already participate in the practices of embodiment through which Christianity is constituted, their lives must continue to be taken seriously as sources of/for theological reflection. Engaging queer theologians such as Patrick Cheng and Marcella Althaus-Reid, as well as the words of gender-nonconforming performance artist ALOK, the dissertation invites systematic theology out from the essentializing closet of heteronormativity by recognizing its already critical method and its role in ongoing ethical reflection. In doing so, "Being Interpreted" proposes a (queer) systematic theology that is not descriptive but constructive, cultivating diverse theologies of abundant life as part of a scientific (*wissenschaftliche*), ethically responsible, and relational discipline.

Abstrakt

Mittels Queer-Theorie, theologischer Ontologie und methodistischer/wesleyanischer Theologie wird in dieser Dissertation Systematische Theologie als eine performative, ethisch verantwortliche Praxis neu konzipiert. Das Projekt kritisiert die Komplizenschaft der systematischen Theologie mit heteronormativer und rassifizierter Gewalt und argumentiert, dass die Theologie nach ihren Auswirkungen beurteilt werden muss. Unter Rückgriff auf Judith Butlers Gender-Performativität, Paul Tillichs ontologisch-systematische Methode, Santiago Zabalas hermeneutische Ontologie und Christian Danz' Pneumatologie verwebt die Dissertation eine Theorie der theologischen Performativität, die sich mit der ontologischen Funktion von Lehren als den Normen befasst, durch die sowohl religiöse Inhalte als auch religiöse Personen ins Sein kommen. Christliche Inhalte wie Gott werden nicht als statische Essenzen, sondern wie Geschlecht als historisch kontingente - und daher ethisch verschränkte - verkörperte Sinnkonstellationen verstanden, durch die soziales Leben möglich ist. Ohne die systematische Kohärenz oder die schöpferische Kraft Gottes aufzugeben, definiert dieser Ansatz systematische Theologie als einen Ort des kritischen Handelns und der gemeinschaftlichen Bildung neu.

Das Projekt besteht darauf, dass LGBTQIA+-Personen bereits an den Praktiken der Verkörperung teilnehmen, durch die sich das Christentum konstituiert, und dass ihr Leben weiterhin als Quelle theologischer Reflexion ernst genommen werden muss. Unter Einbeziehung von Queer-Theologen wie Patrick Cheng und Marcella Althaus-Reid sowie den Worten des gender-nonkonformen Performance-Künstlers ALOK lädt die Dissertation systematische Theologie ein, aus dem essentialisierenden Schrank der Heteronormativität herauszutreten, indem sie ihre bereits kritische Methode und ihre Rolle in der laufenden ethischen Reflexion anerkennt. Auf diese Weise schlägt „Being Interpreted“ eine (queere) systematische Theologie vor, die nicht deskriptiv, sondern konstruktiv ist und verschiedene Theologien des Lebens in Fülle als Teil einer wissenschaftlichen, ethisch verantwortlichen und relationalen Disziplin kultiviert.

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Content Warning

It is necessary to name at the outset that this work engages the theology of Paul Tillich, a German-American theologian whose intellectual contributions continue to be instrumental in many circles of Protestant theology. However, accounts of Tillich's personal sexual misconduct, specifically with female students at Union, are deeply concerning and must be addressed. These violations, as Marcella Althaus-Reid surmises, are interconnected with heteropatriarchal systems of theology. Therefore, Althaus-Reid thoughtfully asserts that,

Our difficulty with Tillich is his lack of integrity and not necessarily his developed taste for bondage practices, which were probably shared by many other academic colleagues, fellow priests and everyday fellow Christians. Systematic theologians such as Tillich are representative of the millions of Christian people struggling to remain in their own sexual closets and in their own preferential beds while building their identities without sharing their sexual stories and even condemning them in their writings. They keep pretending that friendship is not and cannot ever be a lustful business, and that the chaotic nature of sexuality does not belong to the sphere of interest of theology—except to condemn it.¹

This citation is not included to excuse or aestheticize misconduct, but rather to underscore the systemic silences and theological operations that shield abuse and shame sexuality. Linda G. Mills, Professor of Social Work, Public Policy, and Law at NYU, brings to light the function of shame in both the “overshadowing” of a victim's experience and as a motivation of perpetrators.² The aim of queer theology, as I see it, is to set free those practices and persons long confined to the shadows and closets of shame – not to enable wrongdoing, but to confront and dismantle the heteropatriarchal Operating System of theology that continues to perpetuate harm through shame and silence. With Althaus-Reid, I believe queer theology can be one of the “new mechanisms for identifying and addressing shame” that Mills says “may be key to interrupting violence, as well as preventing its transmission to the next generation of victims and offenders.” This engagement with Tillich, then, is not a celebration of the man, but a critical and constructive repurposing of theological concepts that might yet provide pathways toward liberation, embodiment, and healing.

If you or someone you know has been harmed by sexual misconduct, the National Sexual Assault Hotline is available for support in the U.S. (800.656.4673). In Austria, the Gewaltschutz Zentrum is available as a resource for victims of violence and their relatives: www.gewaltschutzzentrum.at.

¹ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 88 – 89.

² Linda G. Mills, “Shame and Intimate Abuse: The Critical Missing Link between Cause and Cure,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 30, no. 6 (2008): 631–38, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2008.01.010>.

Introduction

[D]o good designs and good desires make a Christian? By no means, unless they are brought to good effect. 'Hell is paved,' saith one, 'with good intentions.' The great question of all, then, still remains. Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart? Can you cry out, 'My God and my all'? Do you desire nothing but [God]? Are you happy in God?

– John Wesley, “The Almost Christian”³

God has become a function of heteronormative theology and its orthodox decency, a guarantor of the sexual order it promotes and of its unquestionability. The question of who God really is, on the other hand, has been systematically excluded from theological consideration. In order to get to this God, the surface story first has to be undone.

– Hanna Reichel, *After Method*⁴

What does theology do? What is the responsibility of a theologian and/or a person of faith when God is used to justify all sorts of harm, such as the exclusion and marginalization of LGBTQIA+ persons, the inhumane treatment of immigrants – such as what is happening under the current regime in the U.S.⁵ –, racism, tribalism, genocide, ableism, eugenics, and systematic gender-based discrimination? If the motivation behind these acts is “service to God,” are they justified? Asked with different implications, *Are injustices committed in the name of God a “bug” within theology or, as Hanna Reichel surmises, “its effective functioning: not a bug but a feature”*?⁶ The question of and injunction against theology is, then, what is its purpose – *what is it designed for*? More specifically, is Systematic Theology designed in such a way that God *must* function as the model and cause for the latest iteration of toxic masculinity, white Christian nationalism, and the other evils of our time? Is this toxic God a feature of Systematic Theology?

³ John Wesley, “The Almost Christian,” in *John Wesley's Sermons: An Anthology*, Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), p. 67.

⁴ Hanna Reichel, *After Method: Queer Grace, Conceptual Design, and the Possibility of Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023), p. 33.

⁵ Camilo Montoya-Galvez, “U.S. sending nonviolent, ‘low-risk’ migrants to Guantanamo, despite vow to detain ‘the worst’ there,” *CBS News* (February 12, 2025), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/guantanamo-bay-migrants-trump/>.

⁶ Reichel, *After Method*, p. 37.

If so, then even “good intentions” for following this God inevitably lead to the violence occurring across the globe in *His* name (and of course, God is masculine in this concept), paving over and drilling under forests, creating Hell in the process.

If, however, neither “good designs” nor “good intentions” make a Christian but rather “good effects,” then already in Methodist/Wesleyan traditions there exists ethical criteria for theology as a self-critical practice of the Christian faith. As John Wesley, one of the founding figures for the later Methodist and eventually Wesleyan churches asked, *Is the love of God shed abroad in your heart?* Does one not only mean well, but behave well toward God and neighbor? From this founding question, it seems logical that a key feature of theology ought to be its capacity to cultivate the love of God and neighbor in those who claim to be Christian. But how is this love to be manifested? With implicit reference to the Gospels and Epistles (cf. Mtt 22:36-40; Mk 12:28-34; Lk 10:25-37; Jn 15:9-17; 1 Jn 4:7-21), Wesley clarifies that the love of God is manifested in the love of neighbors and enemies.⁷ Therefore, if the love of God and neighbor is not the end product of the theological system – if theology does not bring about good effects – then this harm would be a bug, not a feature. Furthermore, an additional feature described by Wesley is *joy*. He asks, *Are you happy in God?* If a theological system does not lead to the fruition of a love of God, self, and neighbor and to an experience of joy, then the design itself is flawed.

A. Wesleyan Methodism and the Ethical Criteria of “Good Theology”

There are now at least two diverging perspectives on Systematic Theology: either it is designed to enact the harm currently being perpetuated in the name of the Christian religion and its God, or something has gone horribly wrong, and a virus has corrupted the system, bringing about effects that were not intended by – and are even in blatant violation of – the

⁷ Wesley, “The Almost Christian,” p. 67: “And is this commandment written in your heart, ‘that he [sic.] who loveth God loves his brother also’? Do you then love your neighbor as yourself? Do you love every man, even your enemies, even the enemies of God, as your own soul? As Christ loved you?”

parameters set for the system. Violence is either a bug or a feature. What if, in queer fashion – meaning at minimum a refusal to operate within binary categories – it is *both* a bug *and* a feature? Rather than looking to intentions (which can only be speculated) or design flaws, what matters – in the very material meaning of that word – are the effects of theology on bodies, on the queer, disabled, immigrant bodies currently imprisoned in a U.S. Naval Base. There are as many designs as there are theologians in the broadest sense of the term (from professional academicians to faithful mothers praying every day for their child’s safety). The challenge, then, is perhaps not to essentialize Systematic Theology as one entity that exists unchanged across time and contexts – though the pervasive imposition of Western imperialism, with its theological justifications, certainly seeks to reify this phantasm – but rather to identify the fact that there are already many systems existing alongside, within, and against one another even as Systematic Theology (as an academic discipline) often seeks to hide or closet this reality. The task of ethical theology today becomes taking up the following question with every piece of every system we encounter: *Is this doctrine perpetuating harm?* If so, how and why – what is its function for the System? If systems do not exist in some unreachable metaverse or as essentially, universally, and immutably true descriptions of a reality we cannot access, but are instead constituted by their effects, then these effects reveal the innerworkings of systems themselves. By their fruits they shall be known (Mtt 7:16).

This is to say, theological intentions and designs must primarily be judged by their *effects*. This is already a logical conclusion based on Wesley’s sermon quoted at the outset; that Hell is paved with good intentions, and therefore it is good effects that constitute a Christian. This emphasis on effects is also upheld by the Methodist General Rules: to do no harm, do good, and attend to the ordinances of God.⁸ When a System does harm, it transgresses the

⁸ These rules are from Wesley’s General Rules for the early Methodist societies in England and can be found in The United Methodist Church’s discipline, *The Book of Discipline* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), ¶ 104 (pp. 78 – 80).

General Rules that (at least theoretically, though often not practically) guide Methodists and Wesleyans in our way of life. In this way, Systematic Theology from a Methodist/Wesleyan perspective sets its own standard for quality control: If a doctrine does harm, it cannot be “good” theology. As Reichel observes, however, to set the task of doing “good” or “right” theology is not only an impossibility but also a project that is perhaps counter to Jesus’ teachings. Reflecting on Jesus’ encounter with the rich young man in Mark 10, Reichel offers that for theology “[t]he greater challenge is to give up our pursuit of ‘the good’ as something we can locate and allocate.”⁹ As a United Methodist theologian, such a proposition is, however, counter to my tradition’s most fundamental claims: the very goal of “Christian perfection” toward which a Methodist strives is the pursuit of the good. For theology to give up assisting in such striving would be to fail to perform its function for the life of faith. While these approaches seem firmly planted in staunch opposition at first – and indeed divergences will arise implicitly throughout this work given its Methodist/Wesleyan soil, which differs from the Reformed soil of Reichel’s work – a more complex relationship is being drawn out that helps clarify a common misperception of Methodist/Wesleyan theology.

Reichel rejects “good”/“right” theology as something that can be *obtained*, specifically challenging the claim that any theology can justify and impose itself as *the* good theology against which all others are bound to fall short for all eternity. While Methodism’s most audacious claim is that Christian perfection is possible in this life, it is not a state that one obtains as if imbued with indefinite and immutable virtue. As Wesley clarified over the course of his writings from 1725 to 1777, Christian perfection implies neither “a dispensation from doing good, and attending all the ordinances of God, [nor] a freedom from ignorance, mistake, temptation, and a thousand infirmities necessarily connected with flesh and blood.”¹⁰ Christian

⁹ Reichel, *After Method*, p. 77.

¹⁰ John Wesley, “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” *Wesley Center Online* (accessed April 3, 2025), ¶15, <https://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/a-plain-account-of-christian-perfection/>.

perfection is, rather, “loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength.”¹¹ “Good” or “perfect” theology within Methodism/Wesleyanism avoids the pitfall rightly critiqued by Reichel, for it does not assert a state of being or of theology. Good theology here is that which continues to cultivate love of God and neighbor – an endeavor which willingly practices humility by admitting that it can and will often fall short of this goal without ceasing to strive toward it. There is, then, good theology insofar as theology is pursued for the ends just described and it self-critically reflects and corrects doctrines and practices that do harm as a necessary function of its theological Operating System (OS). This is perhaps the Methodist/Wesleyan way of describing what Reichel calls “better” theology.¹² Therefore, theology must be judged not only – or even primarily – by its logical and historical coherence, but rather by its effects on the lives of the poor, the marginalized, and the socially demonized (those deemed to represent all that is counter to a system). And so, we return to the opening questions and postulate initial – and incomplete – responses, which will continue to evolve over the course of this work:

Question: *What does theology do?*

Response: It cultivates love of God and neighbor.

Question: *What is the responsibility of a theologian and/or a person of faith when God is used to justify all sorts of harm?*

Response: Because love of God is manifested through love of neighbor, Christians are required to reflect self-critically and to challenge any concepts of God that cause harm, for these concepts break the Methodist General Rules (do no harm, do good, attend to the ordinances of God) and hinder one’s movement toward Christian perfection.

¹¹ Wesley, “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” ¶20.

¹² Cf. Reichel, *After Method*. This concept of “better” theology is developed throughout their work, but it begins in the Introduction as follows: “First, the call for *better* theology indicated that things are *bad* in theology” p. 1 and concludes with “this is therefore less a book on theological method than a book on the ethics of doing theology *after method* – a call for ‘doing better’ even as we know we will never ‘be good,’” p. 6.

Question: *Are injustices committed in the name of God a “bug” or a feature of Systematic Theology?*

The remainder of this work seeks to respond to this last question and to expand upon the responses to the other two by reading theology through the insights and critical lenses of gender studies and queer theory. In turn, I will also read gender studies and queer theory through a critical theological lens. In other words, I argue that the turn to theology’s effects can be better understood through the gender theory of Judith Butler, particularly through their theory of performativity, and that the meaning made of gender, can be better understood through the symbolic-ontological theology of Paul Tillich and the pneumatology of Christian Danz. In order to more adequately attend to these questions, clarification is necessary on what is meant by Systematic Theology and the particular approach to this discipline that is taken up here.

I. A (Queer) Systematic Method: Dining in Postmodern Fashion

What is Systematic Theology? This question alone could occupy a dissertation; it would be the “main dish” (*Hauptspeise*) at any theological restaurant. At this table, however, it is served simply as an appetizer (*Vorspeise*), a preparation for what is to come, namely, a work of (queer) systematic theology. Latina bisexual theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid, whose work will be engaged throughout this book, uses the capitalized “Systematic Theology” to indicate the often oppressive and universalizing tendency of the discipline.¹³ Reichel uses the capitalized version to convey that they are making use of and in many ways deconstructing an existing typology.¹⁴ I use the capitalized version throughout this work to convey Systematic Theology

¹³ Althaus-Reid’s works address and seek to overcome the imperialistic claims of Christian theology as Systematic Theology by locating holiness and sources of theological reflection among marginalized communities in Latin America – paying particular attention and honor to their sexual practices as sites of holy resistance. For one of her many critiques of Systematic Theology, see Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 27: “The wealth of the theological Western bourgeoisie is then represented in the Systematic Theology which has forgotten in its abstractness the living suffering and praxis of the oppressed which precedes it, that is, the real ‘theologians’ who are the people who reflect and act from their sufferings under theo/ideological structures of oppression.”

¹⁴ Reichel’s use and subversion of the categories Constructive and Systematic Theology will be further detailed throughout this section. With regard to their use of the terms, Reichel writes, “I will thus use the terms ‘Systematic Theology’ and ‘Constructive Theology’ strictly and strategically to frame ‘types’ for heuristic and diagnostic

as a category of theology that has historically done harm through the imperial imposition of its Systems as universally valid. I use a lowercased version to indicate the humility required for a (queer) systematic theology, which analyzes and subverts existing systems of reflection and their claims to ultimacy. While perspectives vary on the nature and content of Systematic Theology as such, a general consensus can be found in that Systematic Theology is a method, a way of *doing* theology. This method has historically been employed in two ways: (1) interpreting the contents of the Christian faith with an overarching metaphysical framework, and (2) describing the relationships between various contents.¹⁵ These approaches are not mutually exclusive and are often interwoven. We see both of these objectives queerly mingling together in the theology of Paul Tillich (1886 – 1965), whose work rearticulates the relationship between various contents by interpreting them through the overarching framework of God as the “ground and abyss of being,” the symbolic condition for the possibility of existence, which will be further explored in Chapter One. But first, what movements informed the development of the Systematic method and when and how did it become an academic theological discipline?

A. Excavating Systematic Theology

Before the discipline emerged within Protestant faculties, Reichel traces the first appearance of Systematic Theology to a Calvinist theologian and philosopher, Bartholomaeus Keckermann, who is considered to have coined the term and published his *Systema SS Theologicae* in 1602.¹⁶ Just over a century later, Johann Franz Buddeus develops this further into the first “full-fledged” Systematic Theology, which corresponds with the “hierarchical taxonomies of Carl Linnaeus’s *Systema Naturae*. Like other contemporary scientists, Linnaeus understood himself to be reflecting the ingenious order of God’s creation in his method.”¹⁷

purposes—not to give a nuanced or accurate account of any individual actually existent position.” Reichel, *After Method*, p. 17.

¹⁵Cf. Ian A. McFarland et al., “S,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Ian A. McFarland et al., 1st ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 452 – 93.

¹⁶ Reichel, p. 54.

¹⁷ Reichel, pp. 54 – 55.

Thus, Reichel critically observes, the emergence of Systematic Theology takes place within the wider emergence of systematicity as the hallmark of Enlightenment science. Continuing chronologically, Immanuel Kant represents an “epistemological turning point [for systematicity] from a model of organization to a *criterion of truth*,” with *systematicity* becoming a requirement for *scientificity*.¹⁸ In this context, for something to be scientifically true, it must have a systematic unity and coherence.

Reichel continues to trace this development between scientificity and systematicity from Kant to Hegel. “Rather than maintaining that the real should also be the rational, [Hegel] now postulated, in his account of the self-development of the Spirit, that the rational *is* the real. In order to count as real, reality now had to conform to the logic of the system.”¹⁹ Though the system has no justification outside of itself, it is only through the system that reality is constructed or regarded as such. Thus, theology’s ability to systematize its contents also became its ability to justify the validity of its truth claims. For these reasons Reichel asserts that “[f]rom its inception, systematicity displays a tendency not only toward the organization of thought but also ultimately of the material world as well,” and it is this “crossing-over” that “allowed for science to operate in the threefold extension of understanding, prediction, and control over nature that such systematicity to the glory of God intertwined.”²⁰ For something to be valid or real required that it was systematic. Reichel concisely clarifies the convergence between systematic constructions and scientific justification, drawing attention to the historical and methodological motivations behind Systematic Theology’s often imposing claims. But when did Systematic Theology become a *discipline* with its own location within European Universities? And how did the development of this discipline continue and/or subvert its methodological origins?

¹⁸ Reichel, p. 56. Emphasis added.

¹⁹ Reichel, p. 57.

²⁰ Reichel, p. 55.

i. Systematic Theology as Wissenschaft. In less than a century after Buddeus, Systematic Theology as a discipline emerged as a uniquely Protestant phenomenon. The German-Austrian theologian Christian Danz describes the rise and location of Systematic Theology in the following way:

The discipline emerged in connection with the differentiation of the sciences around 1800 in the so-called ‘saddle period’ of modernity [ca. 1750 - 1850]. Since then, a number of individual disciplines such as philosophy of religion, dogmatics, ethics and others have been grouped together under the term at Protestant theological faculties. In Catholic theology faculties, on the other hand, no such discipline has been established. As a rule, fundamental theology, dogmatics, moral theology, social ethics, etc. are taught here as independent subjects.²¹

While on the one hand Systematic Theology describes the imperialistic tendency of Enlightenment science not only to classify but to shape reality, on the other, systematic theology as a theological discipline appears to occupy a queer position. That is, generally speaking, systematic theology as a disciplinary science, or *Wissenschaft*, is recognized in some locations (Protestant faculties) and not in others (Catholic faculties). Its existence and intelligibility, like that of LGBTQIA+ persons, is constantly negotiated and in question depending on the context and institutions whose disciplinary norms determine its intelligibility. Is systematic theology a subject in its own right or the location where several subjects are brought into conversation? Systematic theology as a discipline and *Wissenschaft* cannot be defined as a static or stable essence but is rather constituted by its perichoretic, promiscuous relationship to norms, ethics, moral theology, dogmatics, and other named and unnamed partners.

The particular German Lutheran approach to systematic theology, epitomized here through the work of Paul Tillich in the twentieth century and Christian Danz at the University of Vienna in the present, makes transparent – i.e., invites out from the closet – yet another queer

²¹ Christian Danz, *Systematische Theologie*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 2024), p. 14. My translation.

aspect of the field. While many theologians, including my earlier works, understand theology from an etymological standpoint as “talk about God” (*Theo-logos*), and therefore regard God as the object of theology’s inquiries, both Tillich’s and Danz’s systematic theologies, on the other hand, view theology as “asking about the nature of Christianity as a religion.”²² For Tillich, “Theology is the methodological interpretation of the contents of the Christian faith.”²³ While Tillich’s theology does assert a general concept of religion that all cultures and cultural spheres participate in, he also continues to assert that no one image, religion, or construction can claim to absolutely express this general religious substance. The boundaries of Tillich’s theology will be discussed in greater detail throughout Chapter One below. For both Tillich and Danz, however, systematic theology’s task is a scientific method of elucidation whereby the contents of the Christian faith and the meaning that is made of them by Christian communities are regarded as interdependently arising together, and only this relationship forms the discipline’s object of study. Danz clarifies that “[i]f systematic theology is concerned with determining the nature of the Christian religion, then it must address the religious use of the content-related statements of Christianity. From this arises the task of analyzing the inner function of Christianity.”²⁴

This approach to systematic theology does not seek to create a “binding system” of belief since such a System would be insufficient for the inherently queer task of systematic theology, that is, of describing Christianity and its contents as a religion, as an embodied form of communication (distinct from but mutually influenced by artistic forms, political movements, economic systems, etc.).²⁵ But what does it mean for Christianity to be a religion

²² Danz, *Systematische Theologie*, p. 15.

²³ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 15

²⁴ Danz, p. 15.

²⁵ Danz further clarifies that “As a historical religion, Christianity changes in history. In the course of its history, it has incorporated new statements, ideas and images that go far beyond its biblical form. Current forms of the Christian religion differ significantly from earlier forms such as the Reformation or New Testament Christianities. Which of its forms should we then look to in order to gain fundamental statements about Christianity from them? However, a summary of Christian statements falls short for another reason: at the level of content-related statements, which are compiled in order to grasp the core of the Christian religion, it is not yet possible to

– for its contents to be engaged religiously? This is the question that Tillich’s and Danz’s systematic theologies, as an academic discipline (*Wissenschaft*), methodically pursue. And for the English-speaking Protestant world, this approach to systematic theology further illuminates its queerness: It is second- and third-order reflection on the meaning that is made of Christianity and its symbols by those who participate in it and on the assumptions and contexts that enable the ongoing functioning of this discourse. It is not an attempt to speak definitively, cautiously or even apophatically about a God who exists as a subject of inquiry.²⁶ For these reasons – its queer, precarious position as a self-contained discipline within theology, the fluidity of its disciplinary partners, and its second- and third-order of engagement – systematic theology, thus understood, is an (often closeted) queer mode of doing theology.

The critiques that Reichel and Althaus-Reid rightly levy against Systematic Theology will be taken up as necessary for projects of (queer) systematic theology. Systematic Theology and systematic theology are not synonyms. (Queer) systematic theology is to be understood as a method of theological construction and critique, which cracks open and exposes the imperialistic universalizing claims of Systematic Theology. As Reichel notes, this critical function is already present within systematic theology as an “anti-dogmatic edge,”²⁷ which is akin to what Tillich refers to in his *Systematic Theology* as both the “prophetic”/“Protestant” principle. “The Protestant principle is the restatement of the prophetic principle as an attack against a self-absolutizing and, consequently, demonically distorted church.”²⁸ The unoriginal claim I am reiterating, then, is that already within systematic theology there exists a version of its method that is explicitly opposed to the logic of imposing or defending absolute and

sufficiently recognize whether they are a religion. Content statements can also be meant historically, aesthetically, politically, etc.” Cf. Danz, p. 15.

²⁶ For Tillich, God cannot be the object of theology for that would reduce God from the ground and abyss of being and make God merely one object among others. Cf. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 172 and “God as Being” pp. 235 – 241.

²⁷ Reichel, p. 58: “Despite today’s often almost synonymous usage of terms like ‘doctrine,’ ‘dogmatics,’ and ‘Systematic Theology,’ the methodology of Systematic Theology had a decidedly anti-dogmatic edge...”

²⁸ Tillich, vol. I, p. 227.

objectively universal claims. Such claims are counter to its anti-dogmatic edge and prophetic/Protestant principle of theological self-critique. Within works of Systematic Theology, however, these claims can often be closeted by the pursuits of systematicity, which seek to order thought and the material world, and therefore to define the real. Systematic theology as a *Wissenschaft* can – but need not – be synonymous with systematicity as an imposed requirement for validity. A (queer) systematic theology, as the next section will further explicate, exposes the hidden systematizing-validity operation of Systematic Theology since this operation runs counter to the anti-dogmatic Protestant principle and does material theological harm.

ii. A Bug-Feature. Producing and defending a certain (read: white heteropatriarchal) reality could be considered a “bug-feature” of Systematic Theology. A bug feature is any unintended consequence of code that is recognized as potentially valuable, and so rather than being corrected is retained as a feature of the system. Since systematicity emerged as a response to Enlightenment science as the way for theology, among other disciplines, to justify its place in modern universities, the fact that this absolutizing feature contradicts the anti-dogmatic Protestant principle was perhaps dismissed. The value of systematicity, of determining and shaping the real, is far more lucrative than the cost of a negative discipline: systematic theology’s method is only positively defined as the continual negation of all claims to absolute status. Regardless of the historical development, the Systematic Theolog(ies)y critiqued by many Constructive Theologians contains a bug-feature in which it seeks unity and coherence, maintaining the right to critique ecclesiastical dogmatics while recusing its own method from the same critical inquiry. This is done because its method is synonymous with Enlightenment science, which is equated with reality. This bug-feature has proven itself invaluable to Systematic Theology in its pursuit of coherence and unity at the expense of persons and practices who are rendered unintelligible or “deviant” by the System. This phenomenon will be further explored in Chapter Two. A (queer) systematic theology, then, identifies this “bug-

feature” and transforms the system by reintroducing the anti-dogmatic Protestant principle against the System itself. This enables a more robust response to an augmented version of the first question posed at the beginning of the chapter:

Question: *What does (queer) systematic theology do?*

Response: It cultivates love of God, self, and neighbor by revealing the Systematic operations that render some persons and living beings expendable or nonexistent.

iii. *Queering Systematic Theology.* As the bisexual Latina theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid critiques, Systematic Theology closets God.²⁹ Reichel channels Althaus-Reid’s critique and asserts that heteronormative patriarchal Systematic Theolog(ies)y makes of God a “guarantor of the sexual order it promotes and of its unquestionability.”³⁰ It forces God to be a heterosexual masculine object/agent, which is then definitively studied by and validates the claims of the Systematic Theologian. The present work, therefore, further queers this version of Systematic Theology by taking up systematic theology as a *Wissenschaft*, as second- and third-order reflection, within which the notion of God as an object/agent (heterosexual or otherwise) is a question beyond its disciplinary bounds. Rather than seeking to systematize, order, and shape one objective reality, systematic theology is the academic discipline of critically describing and analyzing the Christian religion and its embodied effects. This method takes up and furthers the fourth strand of queer theology identified by Patrick Cheng, which is queer theology itself. In his foundational work, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology*, Cheng asserts that there are “four different strands in the evolution of queer theology,” which should not be regarded as dividing queer theology “into distinct theological ‘eras’” or as being mutually exclusive.³¹ “Rather, they are roughly chronological ways of describing certain trends in the development of queer theology over the last fifty years,” and

²⁹ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003), p. i.

³⁰ Reichel, *After Method*, p. 33.

³¹ Patrick Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), p. 26.

any work may contain multiple strands.³² I will briefly review this development to better situate this project.

These strands are (1) **apologetic theology**, “which can be summarized by the phrase ‘gay is good,’” (2) **liberation theology**, which moves beyond acceptance/inclusion and argues “that liberation from the oppressions of heterosexism and homophobia is at the very heart of the gospel,” (3) **relational theology**, which “centers upon the notion that God is found in the ‘erotic,’” and (4) **queer theology**, which challenges the “fixed” and “impermeable” binary categories of gender and sexuality.³³ This fourth strand, drawing from the works of queer theorists such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “challenges essentialist notions of sexuality and gender identity” by arguing that they are instead “socially constructed through language and discourse.”³⁴ Because Cheng continues this strand by systematically identifying how Christian theology’s contents, such as its teachings about Jesus the Christ, overcome binaries of humanity and divinity, this work is able to go further and to apply the challenge of essentialism to the method of Systematic Theology itself. It seeks to challenge the ways in which Systematic Theologies perpetuate essentialist conceptions of God, humanity, and even theology through the bug-feature of systematicity, which limits the scope of the anti-dogmatic Protestant principle.

Therefore, this fourth strand of queer theology will be woven with the *wissenschaftliche* systematic theologies of Tillich and Danz to show how theology itself is *performative*, proffering seemingly static essences (such as God and humanity) that are themselves constructions, which become real in time through the repetition of embodied acts that are made meaningful in interpretative communities (e.g., churches). The thesis driving this work is that the fourth strand of queer theology, the systematic theology of Tillich, and the pneumatology

³² Cheng, *Radical Love*, p. 26.

³³ Cheng, p. 26.

³⁴ Cheng, p. 36.

of Danz enable conscientious scholars and participants to examine concepts such as gender and God not as static absolutes or essences but as social and theological constructions with symbolic-hermeneutic ontological implications. Such an approach has come to be called “poststructuralist,” but the diversity of usages and deployments of this term renders it at the very least unhelpful. What is meant here is that both German systematic theology as *Wissenschaft* and queer theory examine their subjects as constructions (though only queer theory seems to consciously recognize the material effects), and both locate agency within the field of construction – be that through social and/or theological norms. For these reasons I place queer in parentheses before (queer) systematic theology so as to draw attention to the fact that systematic theology, thus understood, is an inherently queer discipline. In other words, a (queer) systematic theology can become a synonym for Constructive Theologies that are self-consciously systematic, which will be elucidated in the next section.

B. Vorspeise: Systematic vs. Constructive Theology?

This work of (queer) systematic theology, is a meal, meaning firstly and fundamentally that it is both *relational* and intended to be *nourishing*. To view systematic theology in this way also clarifies from the outset that, try as I may, this meal will not and cannot attend to the needs and tastes of every person or community. This fact should not be taken as an excuse for inaction or as recusing myself from potential deficiencies and oversights. Rather, to recognize that theology, like food, is an occasion that can both be life-giving and incredibly harmful – saturated in a complex combination of shame, memory, disease, ecstasy, isolation, community, and more – challenges the theologian to create with care, to name allergens from the outset, to identify the sources of their ingredients/material transparently and to source them responsibly. Now, as we grab the small fork from the outside of our place setting and begin to poke at the grilled asparagus appetizer, let us pause to give thanks for the hands and bodies and environment that have prepared it – from the worms wriggling room for oxygen in the dark soil, to the exhausted farmers tending to the crop for years as it slowly matures, to hands of the

harvesters as they gather one-by-one the nourishment we are about to enjoy, and the transporters and cooks too – and we must not forget the waiter who, only moments ago, lowered the appetizer before us in its pretty, plated, and presentable form.

I sit at the table with the intention and expectation that what I am about to enjoy will replenish my strength for the tasks of the day. But not only that, in a restaurant I expect that the chef has some overarching theme, some concept in mind that unites the flavors and dishes into an organized and well-thought-out gastronomical experience. Rather than an experience for the rich, it is a rich experience for those who are hungry and are willing and able to slow down – to take in the artistry of a well-prepared meal. This is a community restaurant where customers pay as they are able. The meal begins and does not end with an appetizer. The foretaste is a foretaste only if there is a taste-to-come. The *Vorspeise* is a before/pre-meal (*Vor-*) because it anticipates a *Haupspeise*, and the main course is only given that honored position in its relation to the *Vor-* and *Nachspeise* (even if I tend to favor the *Nachspeise*, the *Haupspeise* remains the main!). To serve the question, *What does systematic theology do?*, at the beginning of this theological meal is to place it in relation both with what is to come and with the reader/participant. This first bite is not insignificant. It prepares the pallet. I have sought to show – in an appetizer portion – just where this asparagus comes from and why it is presented here, now, in the way that it is.

i. A Brief Methodological Sketch. Simply put (and therefore bound to be at least partially false, or perhaps just partial), systematic theology, as described above, is the attempt to make things make sense as best one can – to order the contents of the Christian faith in a logical, coherent manner. The methodological assumption is, therefore, that the ingredients must work together to create to coherent and pleasurable menu/System. Thus, another divergence from Systematic Theologies is that *pleasure* and *desire* have an honored and recognized place in this theological construction. No longer relegated to the shadows or discretely directed while

denied, pleasure and desire motivate a (queer) systematic theology – as will be discussed throughout this work with reference to Butler, Cheng, and Althaus-Reid. Attention is given to flavors and spices and textures and smells so that food would not only be nourishing but enjoyable. There is a reason this glossy green stalk rests against the porcelain the way it does with thin shaves of parmesan, coarsely cracked pepper corns, and scattered granules of sea salt – and there is a reason why I see this display and *know* it is an appetizer rather than a main course. So too there is a reason one encounters a work and knows it is systematic theology.

Ivy Helman, a queer Jewish feminist scholar at Charles University in Prague, identifies three such “salient characteristics” of systematic theology, which she proposes could benefit queer theology. In her article, “Queer Systems: The Benefits of a More Systematic Approach to Queer Theology,” Helman draws from systematic theologians Paul Tillich, A. N. Williams, Christine Helmer, Leo Garrett Jr., Daniel Jenkins, and Nicholas Healy to identify the following three characteristics:

- 1) “a logical, coherent argument based on a unifying principle,”
- 2) “an ordered, in-depth investigation of a broad range of topics,”
- 3) “[an exploration of] cultural and social components of society [that] reinterpret Christian truth in a way that accounts for this context.”³⁵

These characteristics compliment the two objectives of S/systematic T/theology stated previously: (1) interpreting the contents of the Christian faith with an overarching metaphysical framework, and (2) describing the relationships between various contents. After analyzing five books on queer theology,³⁶ Helman concludes that if queer theologians were to self-consciously

³⁵ Ivy Helman, “Queer Systems: The Benefits of a More Systematic Approach to Queer Theology,” *CrossCurrents* 61, no. 1 (2011): 45–62.

³⁶ These books are Gary Comstock's *Gay Theology without Apology*; Kathy Rudy's *Sex and the Church: Gender, Homosexuality, and the Transformation of Christian Ethics*; Carter Heyward's *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God*; Robert Goss' *Queering Christ: Beyond Jesus Acted Up* and the edited book *Religion Is a Queer Thing: A Guide to the Christian Faith for Lesbian, Gay Bisexual and Transgendered Individuals*. Cf. Helman, “Queer Systems,” p. 47.

recognize and further cultivate these systematic tendencies that are often *already* present within queer theological works, this recognition would be “vital to its theological impact” beyond the niche subdiscipline or specialization that queer theologians are often forced into (a phenomenon Reichel laments as well).³⁷

Most of the queer theology books Helman examines already imply “orderliness, coherence, unity and context.”³⁸ However, Helman notes that queer theology could be further strengthened by addressing its lack of two systematic qualities: the *breadth and depth of engagement* that are typically associated with systematic theology and the *appeal to rationality*. By rationality, Helman means specifically an approach “that takes into account the broader experiences of the queer community itself,” rather than the reflections of gay men that were/are focused almost exclusively on male homosexual spiritual and/or religious practices.³⁹ “A more systematic queer theology,” Helman suggests, “should help foster a more just, humane and accepting Christian tradition.”⁴⁰ On the other hand, Reichel and Althaus-Reid (as discussed above) seem to assert an incompatibility between Systematic Theology (ST) and Constructive Theology (CT), of which queer theology is considered a part. Reichel uses Althaus-Reid’s queer theology to represent CT in the ST-CT tug-of-war for theological superiority. In describing their own international experience and differing approaches to theology, Reichel reflects on how, in their West German academic context, “‘the theological’ was practically identified with the systematic method, and detached, ‘objective’ reasoning with scholarly rigor.”⁴¹ As I work on this project in Vienna, where many of the faculty come from West German institutions, it

³⁷ Helman, p. 60. Cf. Reichel, *After Method*, p. 43: “Special appointments and whole subdisciplines like Feminist, Queer, and Postcolonial Theologies might be allowed to form, where they will be free to develop alternative methodologies and insights. In reality, such conditional recognition functions like reservations, isolating the contribution as pertaining only to a particular constituency and limiting the scope of its impact to a circumscribed domain while continuing business as usual in the larger world of theology.”

³⁸ Helman, p. 60.

³⁹ Cf. Helman, p. 59: “For example, it seems quite hard to label Goss’ book *Queering Christ* systematic when the experiences he traces throughout the book do not seem to incorporate a significant amount of the queer community.”

⁴⁰ Helman, p. 60.

⁴¹ Reichel, p. 11.

has similarly been my experience that theology is synonymous with systematic theology, and systematic theology as a *Wissenschaft* is a *necessarily* detached method, one that consciously recuses itself from political debates. This is done, at least within the Systematic Theology department, with the aim of correcting theology's past transgressions of imposing theological claims on all spheres. The detachment in this case is an attempt to get theology to "stay in its lane" and not swerve across other disciplines, leaving imperialistic havoc in its wake. Constructive Theology, then, is that "other side," the one that is characterized by its commitment that the experiences of oppressed persons matter for theology – that theology must be concerned with political and economic systems as a matter of faithfulness to the God of justice.

Upon meeting fellow doctoral students in Systematic Theology here, I was greeted with a sense of generous curiosity. "Oh, you study queer theology?!" many asked with interest, having read or become familiar with the works of Butler – but never in a theological setting. As I returned interest and inquired into their topics, a general trend emerged that described many, but not all, of the research topics here as related to various periods of the philosophy of Schelling, other historical figures of German Idealism (such as Kant and Fichte), the history of Tillich's early German years before his exile to the U.S., and other historical topics that generally constitute the study of Systematic Theology in the German-speaking world. My colleagues outside the Systematic Theology department, however, actively engage questions of gender in biblical exegesis and church history, AI and theology, and other explicitly culturally-relevant topics. I imagine our meeting was a moment of intellectual "culture shock" on both sides. I was at first skeptical – perhaps even feeling some righteous indignation – as I struggled to understand how systematic theology could be attending so much to the past that it seemed totally uninterested in the present. Gradually I came to appreciate the historical approach of my German-speaking colleagues in which the "greats" of German – and therefore of much Western – philosophy and theology, are understood by theologians to a depth I have not experienced in

my U.S. contexts. Understanding Kant's critique of pure reason had and continues to have profound effects for the basic presuppositions of theology that I would not even be conscious of without their attention to the historical and ever-evolving relationship between philosophy and theology.

My U.S. experiences, on the other hand, instilled in me Constructive Theology's general recognition that theology is never neutral, that it is either complicit in systemic harm or it is actively naming these harms and working to build – to construct – something(s) more just. This re-articulation of faith, often self-consciously located within the biblical prophetic tradition, is what I understand the purpose of theology to be – not only Constructive Theology, but theology in general. At many U.S. theological institutions courses under the title of "Systematic Theology" are no longer offered or are re-branded as Constructive Theology, often without addressing this difference. It is as though the difference were merely one of semantics – which my long-time friend who studies linguistics is always quick to condemn, "*only* semantics?!" That's my field of study you're talking about!" The ST-CT debate is not only one of terminology (and terminology matters), but also and fundamentally a debate, as Reichel's work clarifies, over method. Is ST inevitably surpassed by CT, left in the museums that are being defunded under the current U.S. regime, destined to fall into irrelevance? Must ST confine itself to a historical, self-consciously politically-disengaged approach to theology, which is therefore corrected by CT? Are Germanic S/systematic T/theologies and Latin American and U.S. Constructive Theologies destined to remain incompatible and to render one another either as unscientific or irresponsible?

Reichel quickly clarifies that these "categories are types at best, and caricatures at worst," and that many folks with strong commitments to one over the other "would understand these two sets of commitments and concerns not to be mutually exclusive and indeed rather

intertwined.”⁴² Like Reichel, I see and have experienced these two approaches and commitments in a queer way, as often indescribably interwoven – though certainly not always, and often in direct confrontation. That is to say, Systematic and Constructive Theology *can be* co-laborers in the vineyard of Christianity. This queer relationship between the two does not seek to neglect the Constructive critiques of theologies that fail to take seriously the experiences and struggles of marginalized communities. Rather, by moving beyond the supposed incompatibility of this couple, generative and constructive insights emerge that simply would not occur had they remained in their silos and essentialized as a strict binary. Recognizing that both can and often do discount the other on methodological terms, Reichel takes the discourse beyond or “after method.”

Indeed, it is because I do not think that methodological dogmatism, whether on the “left” (liberationist orthopraxis?) or the “right” (dogmatic orthodoxy?) can overcome these pressing dangers, that I argue—much like Feyerabend!—not “against science” and not even “against method” but against the *tyranny* of any method, against being controlled by it, and against the myth that getting method “right” might *save* us—in theological terms: I am arguing for a desoteriologized understanding of method, a mindful and threefold use of it as an instrument of grace rather than its condition.⁴³

Neither the method of Systematic nor of Constructive Theology can justify or save the discourse from irrelevance. Method, rather than justifying or determining theology’s content, becomes a guide in its ongoing pursuit of truth and justice. As for Reichel, systematic and Constructive theologies are understood to be responding to the demands of different contexts and have the potential to be engaged as allies in the task of doing ethical theology today.

II. Contextual Apologetics & Queer Theology

Your chef today is trained in the schools of Methodist/Wesleyan theology, queer theology, and Tillichian theology. The German-American theologian Paul Tillich is very likely

⁴² Reichel, *After Method*, p. 16.

⁴³ Reichel, p. 248.

the only systematic theologian to have enjoyed a great deal of fame within popular U.S.-American discourse, having been featured on the cover of *Time Magazine* and invited to President John F. Kennedy's Inauguration.⁴⁴ Even if one has not dared to open Tillich's dense three-volume magnum opus, many are at least familiar with his "method of correlation." And so, one place to begin – and explicitly one of many – this historical and methodological sketch is with Tillich and his method. Simply put, for Tillich, the "method of correlation explains the contents of the Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence."⁴⁵ That is to say, a question such as *Why is there something and not nothing?* is asked in relationship to theological answers [responses]⁴⁶ – humanity's questions are shaped by and prefigure a meaning-making system in which the questioner is situated. This is an important rationale for Tillich's identification of his theology as "apologetic theology."

To clarify, Tillich uses the term "apologetic" in a way similar to the use of "queer" today – he is reclaiming a term that has, according to him, "fallen into disrepute because of the methods employed in the abortive attempts to defend Christianity against all attacks from modern humanism, naturalism, and historicism" – especially when apologetics attempts to plug the gaps in scientific knowledge with God "in an otherwise completely calculable and 'immanent' world."⁴⁷ Like the term queer for many (though not all) LGBTQIA+ persons today, Tillich reclaims apologetics by redefining it – or rather, re-centering an understanding of the term and its method that has been marginalized by time and misuse. As the German systematic theologian Oswald Bayer concludes, for Tillich "the apologetic task of theology is not its

⁴⁴ As the German Tillich scholar Werner Schüßler recounts, "Tillich retired from Union [Theological Seminary in New York] in 1955, but his academic career was far from over. In autumn 1955 he was invited to become University Professor at Harvard, one of the most prestigious academic positions in the United States. During this period Tillich traveled extensively throughout America to lecture, and his fame grew in an unprecedented way: he appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1959 and attended John F. Kennedy's presidential inauguration two years later." Cf. Werner Schüßler, "Tillich's life and works" in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich*, Russell Re Manning, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 13.

⁴⁵ Cf. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 60.

⁴⁶ I will substitute "response" for "answer" as I believe it to be more accurate to Tillich's intention than the language of his time.

⁴⁷ Tillich, vol. I, p. 6.

‘other,’ second task ... it is its only task.”⁴⁸ Apologetic theology *is* the method of correlation: it “[responds to] the questions implied in the ‘situation’ in the power of the eternal message and with the means provided by the situation whose questions it [responds to].”⁴⁹ Theology’s task is not to provide judgements from on high or even to “correctly” interpret the Bible (which will be discussed in Chapter One). Theology’s task is a contextual process of meaning-making whereby the current situation of someone who self-identifies as a Christian finds meaning through Christian contents, and in which these contents, in turn, are transformed through the ongoing interpretative process. This space where Christian contents find meaning amidst changing contexts is apologetic theology, and it can be considered the birthplace of queer theology.

As previously mentioned, queer theology arises as part of a broader movement of contextual theologies typically clumped together under the title Constructive Theology. These theologies include Liberation Theologies (Gutiérrez, 1971; Cone, 1970), Feminist Theologies (Ruether, 1983; Tribble, 1984; Johnson, 1992), Womanist Theology (Williams, 1993; Grant, 1998; Douglas, 1999), Mujerista Theology (Isasi-Díaz, 1996), Asian/Asian American Feminist Theologies (Chung, 1990; Kwok, 2000), Indigenous Feminist Theologies (Smith, 2005), among others. These movements challenged traditional, Eurocentric, patriarchal interpretations of Scripture and doctrine by centering marginalized voices. Before the term “queer theology,” theologians such as John McNeill (*The Church and the Homosexual*, 1976) and Carter Heyward (*Touching Our Strength*, 1989) laid the groundwork by affirming same-sex desire as compatible with Christian faith. Lesbian and gay theologies often sought inclusion and validation within existing Christian frameworks and thus continued the ongoing method of apologetic theology.

⁴⁸ Oswald Bayer, “Tillich as a systematic theologian,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 20.

⁴⁹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 6. Chapter One will clarify that in postmodern fashion the “eternal truth of its foundation” can be thought outside the imperialistic claims of an objectively universal and transcendental one. Chapter Three will clarify the nature of eternity outside linear time through conceptions of the body as intercorporeal.

While some queer theologians today understandably assert that we are now “beyond apologetics,” Tillich’s method offers an alternative: reclaiming apologetics as the contextual meaning-making process of theology itself. This understanding of apologetics is situated, therefore, at a critical distance from the Bible-thumping debates that mark(ed) Gay and Lesbian Theologies necessary apologetics in the face of homophobic institutions and persons. Queer theology can and is moving beyond *combative/proof-texting* apologetics, but it cannot move beyond apologetics itself. The unique intimacy between apologetics and queer theology adds something new to theological discourse: it makes explicit the implicit and constitutive function of one’s social/historical context for theology. Queer theology responds to the existential questions of our time from the experiences of particular communities, which are constantly evolving and expanding as they/we seek to offer theological content that extends the abundant life Jesus proclaimed and embodied (Jn 10:10). As an apologetic theology, queer theology takes up the program of systematic theology in new ways.

This interpretative process is part of what Tillich refers to as the “theological circle” within which a theologian is situated. The theological circle restricts theology to hermeneutics, meaning that it invites the theologian to take a step back in reflection to ask *Who is asking this question? To whom? In what context? and For what purposes?* To reiterate once more the Tübingen professor of systematic theology, Oswald Bayer, to do theology, for Tillich, is to be situated – be that at the table beside us in this allegorical theological restaurant, in the struggles of Indigenous communities against settler colonialism in the Americas, or in the reflections of trans women in Uganda struggling to survive under the country’s Anti-Homosexuality Law.⁵⁰ The emphasis of theological reflection shifts, therefore, from a question that demands one, universally valid answer, to a question that is given a particular meaning (a) *because of the*

⁵⁰ “Uganda: Court Upholds Anti-Homosexuality Act” *Human Rights Watch* (April 4, 2024), <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/04/uganda-court-upholds-anti-homosexuality-act>. The nonprofit I lead is in partnership with Talented Youth Community Fellowship, a small grass-roots organization of trans women in Uganda who seek to provide housing and community to fellow trans and queer persons in the capital city, Kampala.

community in which it is asked and (b) *the tradition that has informed both its formulation and response*. The theological circle recognizes this dynamism between question and response in which both parts of this process exist together in mutual interdependence. Christianity today emerges from the continual and generative tension between message and context in which both poles are themselves transformed, and which only exist together.

The theological circle urges us to look up from this asparagus and to recognize where we are eating – *What is this restaurant we are in?* – for it is here in *this* restaurant that this particular asparagus and its seasonings find meaning. You see, these salt granules scattered intentionally across the plate come from the Mediterranean, near where the chef grew up in Apulia, which is where much green asparagus is grown. It is not white, blanched, and covered with hollandaise, as many Germans would eat it, not because that style is unappetizing to the chef, but because this is an *Italian* restaurant. The menu, herbs, spices, wines, table settings and even the coffee – especially the coffee – all of it works together because we are in an Italian restaurant. And because of these complimentary components we are consciously made aware of the fact that we are indeed in an Italian restaurant as opposed to one of my favorite Viennese Cafés, where we would be preparing to enjoy some *Spinatknödel* or a Wiener Schnitzel with only a slice of lemon and some cranberry sauce on the side (much to the disappointment of many Germans, who prefer sauce and pommes/fries with their Schnitzel). What makes the restaurant Italian is the culmination of these elements. What makes these elements Italian is that they are used in an Italian restaurant to curate an Italian meal. In Vienna where I am located, these elements arise together: I only know this appetizer is Italian because I am in an Italian restaurant – and I only know I am in an Italian restaurant because of the Italian ingredients and décor. Had I been served Dolsot bibimbap I would either think “this restaurant is not Italian” or wonder if “they know what Italian food is” because of my heritage as an Italian American (among many other national identities that form the confusing history of who and how I

understand myself and my family to be). The restaurant and the food are interdependent in maintaining their Italian identity through the continuation and subversion of certain traditions.

The theological circle, like the restaurant guide, draws our attention to the fact that we are doing theology from a particular tradition among many traditions, and not from “on high” or “outside” any context in some “purified” realm where theology drops from Heaven and directly into the canons of churches. Accordingly, it precludes theology from debating God’s existence because such a debate posits something outside of theology itself – it leaves the theological circle.⁵¹ Such a debate asserts, by privileging its position as absolutely and universally valid, that *this* asparagus recipe is the best and only proper one in the world, meanwhile most of the world’s asparagus comes from China, Peru, Mexico, and Germany.⁵² But since we find ourselves dining in a *postmodern* Italian restaurant (which will be discussed in the opening of Chapter One), the chef can claim with pride that she cooks the best *Italian* asparagus in Vienna, and this claim can be validated or refuted based on the specifications of Italian cuisine and Italian cuisine in *Wien*.

i. Queer Systematics? Because Helman constructively posits ways in which queer theology can benefit from the method of systematic theology, the possibility of making the reverse assertion was instantly intriguing: that systematic theology will benefit by being queered or, more precisely, that *systematic theology is an inherently queer exercise that has yet to affirm these qualities within itself*. Specifically, there are [at least] three characteristics of queer theology that systematic theology will benefit from when it is ready to claim these identity markers:

- 1) Queer theology’s logic is often non-linear, narrative driven, and metaphorical;⁵³

⁵¹ Cf. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, pp. 8 – 11.

⁵² “Top Asparagus Producing Countries In The World,” *WorldAtlas*, April 25, 2017, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/top-asparagus-producing-countries-in-the-world.html>

⁵³ Florian Zitzelsberger discusses the intersection of queer theory and narrative, noting that queer approaches challenge traditional, linear storytelling by embracing non-normative temporalities and structures. Cf. Florian

2) Queer theology is inherently interdisciplinary since it emerged in response to the needs of LGBTQIA+ religious persons for affirming theological resources, drawing from poststructuralism, Feminist Theory and Theology, Womanism, Mujerista Theology,⁵⁴ and many other named and unnamed partners;

3) Queer theology is a theology of “abundant life” (Jn 10:10) that maintains a position of openness to new possibilities,⁵⁵

[3B/4] which performs the necessary prophetic function of deconstruction that is already internal to the method of systematic theology.

While the metaphor of coming out of the closet has been understandably challenged today, the notion of something once hidden – or forced into hiding – experiencing the embrace/light/warmth of affirmation for the first time is a recurring biblical metaphor (Mic 7:8; Ps 139:7-12; Mt 5:16; Lk 8:17; Jn 8:33; Eph 5:13). This work seeks to assist systematic theology in its coming out process, meaning in its self-affirmation and identification as a queer discipline. This coming out is not to be forced. It is undertaken here for the sole purpose of opening new pathways for life in abundance; it is a gradual self-recognition, from a queer systematic theologian, of the queerness already present, but often denied, within systematic theological discourse and its method.

ii. *Constructing Gender and Systems*. This claim builds upon the work of Queer theologian Patrick Cheng. Cheng writes that “Christian theology is a fundamentally queer

Zitzelsberger, “Queer Theory and Narrative,” *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 66, no. 2 (2021): 201–22, <https://doi.org/10.33675/AMST/2021/2/7>. In *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology*, Gerard Loughlin utilizes narrative and metaphor to explore theological concepts, demonstrating how storytelling can subvert conventional, linear theological discourse. Cf. Gerard Loughlin, *Alien Sex: The Body and Desire in Cinema and Theology* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

⁵⁴ “Mujerista Theology” is a Latina feminist theological perspective rooted in the lived experiences, struggles, and spiritual wisdom of Latina women—especially those in the U.S. Cf. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996).

⁵⁵ The website and popular podcast of the same name, “Queer Theology,” supports this interpretation as well, interpreting LGBTQIA+ pride (rather than shame) in our identities as claiming the abundant life Jesus proclaimed. Cf. “The Sin of Pride,” *Queer Theology*, accessed on April 7, 2025, <https://www.queertheology.com/the-sin-of-pride/>.

enterprise,” because it, like queer theory, “is about the breaking down of traditionally fixed boundaries and categories.”⁵⁶ Cheng concisely identifies Christian theology’s transgression of the barriers between and binaries of divine and human, death and life, guilt and innocence as revealing its fundamentally queer nature. Cheng’s claim can now be examined more closely in the case of systematic theology and its method. The second characteristic Helman noted about systematic theology is its “in-depth examination of a broad range of topics.” This act, inherent to the systematic method, transgresses the boundaries of each individual doctrine by naming and recognizing their interconnection and interdependence – that each doctrine exists in dynamic interrelation with the others; that a system only arises through and with its components and not before.⁵⁷ It is inherent to the method of systematic theology that it refuses to examine a doctrine of creation alone – it must also examine Christology, pneumatology, and so on, and their interrelationship for the system(s) it constructs. Doctrines are constructed and constituted within the systematic method as responses to particular situations rather than as external or objective truths that systematic theology merely expounds. Systematic theology is the mechanism of construction itself through which doctrines come into being.

This insight is applied to theology from queer theory via the work of Judith Butler. Butler reconceptualizes both sex and gender by asserting that, rather than regarding *gender* as a social construction that is applied to natural sexes, gender must be understood as “the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established.” Therefore, “[t]his production of sex as the prediscursive ought to be understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by *gender*.”⁵⁸ So too, theology is the very apparatus of production whereby the doctrines themselves and their subjects (God, creation, Christ, Spirit,

⁵⁶ Cheng, *Radical Love*, p. 139.

⁵⁷ Ernesto Laclau describes how, “On the one hand, each element of the system has an identity only so far as it is different from the others: difference = identity. On the other hand, however, all these differences are equivalent to each other inasmuch as all of them belong to this side of the frontier of exclusion.” Cf. Ernesto Laclau, “Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?” in *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 36–46.

⁵⁸ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York; London: Routledge, 1990), p. 310. Author’s emphasis.

and so on) are established and cordoned off. This means that within theology – and specifically, within the systematic method – lies the mechanism for theology’s liberation from the very confines that constitute it and which it perpetuates. The doctrines of God, creation, revelation, anthropology, Christology, ecclesiology, pneumatology and eschatology are not fixed or solitary doctrines that exist prior to theological discourse but rather are the effects of the apparatus of construction/production that is theology. Like the restaurant, systematic theology is constituted by its doctrines, which are constructed together to form the system(s). The systems and their contents arise together. It is only through the contents that the systems are constituted, and it is only through the systems that the contents are understood as such. Rather than a random piece of asparagus on the pavement or an odd quibble about the body of some guy who may or may not have lived a long time ago, these contents are given meaning because they are located within menus/systems. That asparagus was my Italian appetizer, and that guy is called the Christ, and he means everything to millions of people in numerous and diverse contexts.

Furthermore, systematic theology is queer because its broad range of topics transgresses the boundaries of individual doctrines. Systematic theology can be further queered by explicitly naming the fact that its method of broad engagement calls into question the stability of the category of doctrines altogether and the substantial subjects they purport to describe. The notion that a doctrine of God can be thought and analyzed without or simply alongside a doctrine of creation or ecclesiology – rather than as an interdependent and simultaneous construction of theology – presupposes a prediscursive/pre-constructive essence of “theology”/God that is beyond the theological circle. By embracing its queerness, theology, like gender for Butler, can be regarded as performative.

that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, [theology] is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed... There

is no [divine content] behind the [doctrines] of [theology]; that [theology] is performatively constituted by the very ‘[doctrines]’ that are said to be its results.⁵⁹

Theology, like gender, is a *doing* – a construction that produces the very content it studies; it is constituted by the doctrines that are said [or implied] to precede it. There is no “pure” or “perfect” theology that Christian doctrines must capture and express, but rather phantasmatic religious constructions posing as essential, timeless Christian truths. What if systematic theology, integrating the critical advancements of queer theory and understood as a *Wissenschaft* (as second- and third-order reflection), no longer regarded its task as expounding *the* doctrines of Christian faith and their God, but rather as the method through which these doctrines are constituted in history?

For these reasons, Butler’s “antifoundationalist approach to coalitional politics assumes neither that ‘identity’ is a premise nor that the shape or meaning of a coalitional assemblage can be known prior to its achievement.”⁶⁰ Identities coalesce through political/theological discourses and necessarily form through exclusion. “An open coalition,” Butler contends, “will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure.”⁶¹ Christians may never agree on what proper theology is or what it does, but this is already the case, as evidenced by the sheer number of denominations and churches globally and the countless books, articles, podcasts, and even courses at seminaries (apologies to my students!) on the various meanings of theology. The idea that there is one understanding of what Christian theology is or does is itself a construction that closets the reality of many Christians. By embracing the open-

⁵⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 34. I have substituted “theology” for “gender” in this quote. The original text reads: “that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed... There is no gendered identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”

⁶⁰ Butler, p. 21.

⁶¹ Butler, p. 22.

coalitional politics of Butler and their antifoundationalist approach, what happens is not a pulling of the proverbial rug out from those gathered in good faith to do theology, but rather a recognition that we have ended up in this restaurant, or on that blanket on the lawn discussing theology *by choice* and/or *by circumstance*. There was never one theology we all practiced, but rather a scattering of blankets and mats in various temples and markets and retreat houses and villages and cities that all claim to be doing theology. To ask which gathering got it right is to ask a question that this reality has already demonstrated to be irrelevant. The question is, rather, like the whisper to Elijah on the ledge, “*What are you doing here?*” (1 Kgs 19:13) *What drew you to this study of theology and why?*

III. A Religious Person?: Gender, Selfhood, and Salvation

But who is the “you”, the subject addressed by this question? Can a religious subject exist in contexts where religion is no longer seen as universally operative in daily life? For Protestant theology, since Luther himself, faith has been understood as the appropriation of salvation, which presupposes an already established conception of the self. With reference to Martin Luther and subsequent Reformation theology, Danz states that “[t]he Spirit of God itself is the religious appropriation of Christ as the norm and image of faith.”⁶² Therefore, “Dogmatic descriptions of faith as the appropriation of salvation [*media salutis apprehensiva*] always contain an image of humanity as persons, their identity and their origin.”⁶³ Both conceptions of the self and of theology are historically developed and therefore depend upon the historical contexts within which they are articulated. Neither the self nor theology exist in a vacuum or fall, fully formed from the *Himmel*. Furthermore, “Theology, even where it distances itself from the culture of its own present and turns to its ‘cause,’ is always an expression of its time.”⁶⁴

⁶² Christian Danz, *Gottes Geist: eine Pneumatologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), p. 315 Cf. footnote 457: “Luther, *De fide*, WA 39 I; 34, 21 f. (thesis 12). Following the Reformer, Old Lutheran dogmatics defined faith as *media salutis apprehensiva*, as an appropriative means of salvation. Cf. Schmid, *Dogmatik*, 296 – 306, followed by Härle, *Dogmatik*, 511, who takes up the distinction between faith as salvation and as a means of salvation and dissolves the latter into a developmental scheme.”

⁶³ Danz, *Gottes Geist*, p. 315.

⁶⁴ Danz, p. 315.

Therefore, conceptions of the religious subject – which are presupposed within Protestant theolog(ies)y’s concept of faith – exist only in an interdependent relationship with the cultural-philosophical constructions of its time. This is the state and condition of theology, which it cannot disavow.

This interpretation of theology, while perhaps common for some professional/academic theologians remains understandably paradigm-shattering for others and for many faith communities that rely on the concept of an absolute and universal understanding of God and doctrines as definitive descriptions of this essential reality. As discussed previously, the universal and absolute claim of these beliefs functions as a justification of their validity within Systematic Theology as a method of systematicity. If something is not absolutely and universally true, how can it be valid or meaningful? This is often the question/injunction of/against postmodern theorists, usually under the charge of “everything-goes relativism.”⁶⁵ But as Danz described through Luther and Protestant theology generally, theology always depends upon social-philosophical constructions, such as concepts of the self and world. These concepts are the necessary precondition for theology, which are then taken up by theology for religious purposes and become religious only in their religiously appropriated use. Therefore, the conceptions of the self today bear immediate relevance for theology and our articulations of what it means to live as a self-consciously/self-identified Christian person in the twenty-first century. This necessarily involves conceptions of gender, sex, and sexuality. In other words, what our societies say about gender, sex, and sexuality are all part of our conceptions of the self or subject, which is implicitly and/or explicitly taken up by theology.

i. The Performativity of Faith. While his pneumatology will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three, Part IV.3 is of relevance here as Danz details the interrelationship of

⁶⁵ For a general introduction and overview of Postmodernism and the critiques of its general skepticism toward objective truth claims, cf. Encyclopedia Britannica, “What Are Some General Characteristics of Postmodernism?” (accessed April 7, 2025), <https://www.britannica.com/question/What-are-some-general-characteristics-of-postmodernism>.

conceptualizations of the self since the nineteenth century, when theology as a *Wissenschaft* was in a crisis of establishing its foundation against the changing philosophical contexts of the Enlightenment and then Kant's critique of reason.⁶⁶ As part of this rearticulation of theology and its method, Danz argues that religion was incorporated into theories of consciousness as a general and universal element, "which itself [was] assumed to be general but cannot be represented" – and is "realized in historically changeable forms."⁶⁷ According to Danz,

The twentieth century further developed the understanding of faith by dissolving constructions of religion that were based on the theory of consciousness' faculties (*vermögenstheoretische*) and thus universally valid in Protestant theology. Faith is now religion bound to its performative act (*Vollzug*), which represents its reflexive structure in its content. By reformulating faith as *an act of appropriation bound to its performative act*, theology deals with the repercussions of the modernization process that took hold around 1900 on the notions of personal identity. The religious self only emerges in the act of faith, which is conceived as a decision, and is not already presupposed as a disposition or *a priori*.⁶⁸

Danz describes faith as a performative act (*Vollzug*), citing both Schleiermacher and Bultmann as asserting that already "the coming-to-self of the human being and consequently true humanity or actual existence" (Bultmann) and "the constitution of a universally valid and truth-related self, which in and with its contents represents the conditions of its coming into being" (Schleiermacher).⁶⁹ It is therefore already present – though closeted – within Protestant theology in the twentieth century to interrelate the concepts of a religious subject and the meaning of faith as being mutually constitutive. In contrast to postmodern conceptions of the self, however, they operated upon the assumption of a transcendental and essentialized self that gains expression in religious contents.

⁶⁶ Cf. Reichel, *After Method*, Chapter 1 "'Bad Theology!'", pp. 25 – 49, where Reichel discusses the crises of identity and relevance faced by theology.

⁶⁷ Danz, *Gottes Geist*, p. 316.

⁶⁸ Danz, p. 316. Emphasis added.

⁶⁹ Danz, pp. 316 – 317.

In this postmodern theology, when one consents to actively participate in the ongoing and embodied process of communication that is the Christian religion, only then does the religious subject and the religion they choose to participate in emerge. In other words, faith is not a predisposition, condition, or universal essence through which the religious self emerges. Faith is *performative*; it exists in and as the faithful actions of the faithful, through which the faithful – as a communal identity – are constituted. Christianity is not a universally valid belief system whose claims can be empirically defended or attacked. Christianity is performative, it exists in and as a way of life that is passed on through communication, which depends upon media (such as the Bible, artwork, liturgy, and so on), and which – moving beyond, though not in disagreement with Danz – forms the ontological self-understanding of Christians. This will be explored further in Chapter Three, but while Danz elaborates a theory of Christianity as appropriation or as a performative act, his system intentionally neglects an ontological element of identity due to his understanding of religion as a form of communication in culture. This means that religion is nothing other than one form of communication standing alongside the many other forms, such as economics, politics, etc. This separation has its clear advantages, limiting Christianity from its previously imperialistic claims to absolute truth which it sought to impose upon all cultures and cultural spheres. Accordingly, while a religious self arises in religious communication, it is merely a linguistic or communicative element of the process of faith, which exists exclusively in faith as faith. A religious subject could not, *as* a religious subject, critique the wealth amassed by billionaires as a *religious* critique. This critique would need to be an economic one from the differentiated sphere of economics.⁷⁰ However, as the present work seeks to demonstrate, I believe it is a “growth to the side” (as Reichel puts it) of

⁷⁰ In a lecture given under the title “The Birth of Religion from the Spirit of Capitalism: Religion and Economy in the Global World of the 21st Century,” Danz clarifies that “Religion, according to my thesis, has become an autonomous form of communication alongside other views of the world in modernity. It solves neither problems of modern society nor those of modern capitalism.” Cf. Christian Danz, “The Birth of Religion from the Spirit of Capitalism: Religion and Economy in the Global World of the Twenty-First Century,” in *Business, Economy and Commerce in the Name of God*, ed. Ednan Aslan, *Wiener Beiträge zur Islamforschung* (Cham: Springer VS, 2024).

Danz's theory to elaborate a hermeneutic ontology by integrating the gender theory of Butler into systematic theology's reflections. This means a recognition of the ways in which systematic theology determines and/or subverts the conditions for religious subjects – how its norms determine who can be and whose being has meaning. This being is performatively constituted *without* recourse to a transcendental or essentialist subject. Constructing such a Christian hermeneutic ontology in its interrelationship with the doctrines of God, creation, and revelation is the aim of the first chapter.

A. A Primer: Performativity & Gender Theory

Before continuing further into the overview of chapters, it is necessary for the sake of disciplinary accessibility that I say a few words in this work of theology on the *performativity* theory of Judith Butler. It is in large part thanks to my students at the University of Vienna and Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School in New York that the need for such a primer emerged. I continue to be deeply grateful for their patience and willingness to transgress the boundaries of our usual theological syllabi as we waded through the theoretical works of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Judith Butler. It is primarily because these texts fall outside theology that their vocabulary, syntax, sources, and methods are unfamiliar to many students of theology and to Christians at-large. It is necessary at this point, then, to clarify that performative does *not* mean fake, as in the fictional performance of something one consciously pretends is real. It also does not mean insincere or artificial, as in the case of the unfortunate pejorative “their activism is merely performative” (this distinction will be further elucidated below). Rather, performative describes the very way in which a concept comes into being, that is, how a subject is ontologically constituted through actions that either conform to or deviate from norms. For example, it is not the materials of a stained-glass window that make it religious – they do not come from a heavenly glass and stain factory. The substance of the window is not inherently religious. Rather, the window *becomes* religious when persons engage it religiously, i.e., they knowingly incorporate this window into their religious practices. In Tillich's language,

the window becomes a religious symbol when it becomes a medium of one's ultimate concern.⁷¹ In the religious act a stained-glass window becomes a religious item – not before and not because of its substance, but in the meaning that is made of it through the *religious* practices of persons who understand themselves as religious. This describes Danz's theory of religious communication, hereafter understood as performativity, and which further clarifies the usefulness of Butler's similar theory within theology.

I have also experienced it to be the case that often in theological communities (churches, seminaries, theology faculties), performativity is regarded simply as a fancier academic way of saying "performance" or "construction." My students have also been instrumental in helping me clarify, to the best of my ability, Butler's evolving theory and its implications for theology by way of distinguishing performativity from its common synonyms. Whereas *performance* may be thought of today as conveying something intentionally false or fictional, the root of the word in Latin, Middle English, Old French and its cognate (*frummen*) in Old High German all convey *the completion, execution, or accomplishment of something*. It is not until the eighteenth century that the term comes to describe public entertainment. In contemporary speech it retains both aspects of public entertainment and the carrying out of a task, "they performed their duty with distinction." In *Gender Trouble*, the word "performance" appears only in twenty different locations (including twice in the 1990 preface and once in the 1999 preface). The 1990 preface offers insight into the nuanced differentiation of terms within Butler's evolving theory:

Does being female constitute a "natural fact" or a cultural performance, or is "naturalness" constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex?⁷²

Cultural performance is contrasted here with "natural fact," calling attention to the fictional element associated with performance. "Performative acts," however, transcend this binary

⁷¹ Tillich clarifies his theory of religious symbols under his discussion on "The Actuality of God." Cf. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, pp. 235 – 241.

⁷² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. xxxi.

categorization – a key method of queer theory – by refusing to enable or perpetuate their unquestioned validity. What becomes clear is that Butler is not engaged in a debate of reality vs. fiction, of original vs. copy/imitation. Rather, *performativity* is the process through which the very idea of “naturalness” as a norm – against which all bodies must be measured – affects bodies, namely by perpetuating the myth of original binary sexes and mimetic heterosexuality. This takes place through a variety of mechanisms and institutions, including theology and churches. What is happening here is a careful refusal to say that a gendered performance is a false embodiment of gender because there is, in actuality, no natural or original against which a mere “performance” can be measured. Butler continues in this preface to ask, “Is drag the imitation of gender, or does it dramatize the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established?” Drag may be a performance of gender, but it is the performance of a series of performances that constitute the idea of “natural” genders. *Performance* is an intentional act; *performativity* describes the conditions within which – and the process through which – one must live, or try to.

This distinction, while drawn from Butler, critiques what appears to be a contradiction and false equivalency in their own work whereby they insist on the one hand that performativity cannot “be simply equated with performance” and in the very next paragraph proceed to do just that, describing performance with the same terms they use for performativity: “‘performance’ is not a singular ‘act’ or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint...” compared with “The ‘performative’ dimension of construction is precisely the forced reiteration of norms.”⁷³ Therefore, performance can be regarded as an aspect of performativity similar to how the ontic relates the particular to a general theory of ontology. One possible reconciliation of terms and uses could be as follows: Performativity describes the gendered condition through which subjects emerge in discourse (the fact that we must reiterate

⁷³ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the discursive limits of “sex”* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 59 – 60.

gendered norms in order “to be”), and performance describes the active and ongoing reiteration by these performatively produced subjects (a concept that will be clarified in Chapter Three). This proposal is at the very least supported in the introduction of *Bodies That Matter*, where Butler states that “performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.”⁷⁴ **Performativity**, as Butler elaborates throughout *Bodies That Matter*, describes the *material effects* of discourse: the way in which it affects and even determines the boundaries of what is considered *my* body through citational processes. **Performance** may be thought of as the individual side of this theory: the subject emerges and is performatively produced, that is, constituted by a series of gendered acts that are intelligible because of the norms of their society that *demand* these acts be performed. Performativity, then, is the condition, gendered performance the effect. This leads us to (at least) one other term to further clarify the current two, *construction*, and then we will reemerge from these linguistic weeds for some air and refreshment!

When reconceptualizing gender in this way, it is common – especially in progressive churches and communities – to define gender as a “construction” as a well-meaning way of educating our communities on the fact that persons can change genders and that persons who may look one way do not necessarily identify as the gender one perceives them to be. The problem here is that viewing gender as a construction often implies that its biological correlate, sex, is a fixed “natural” fact. As we have already gleaned from Butler, such a static essentialist notion of sex is not as self-evident as it leads one to believe, and sex is itself a construction. But what is a construction, and how might the relationship between sex and gender be rethought in such a way that sex no longer operates as a biological basis which one either expresses or transgresses through their gender identity?

⁷⁴ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. xii.

First, to repeat what has been said in Butler's own words: *sex* itself must be understood as "an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize 'sex' and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms."⁷⁵ Rather than regarding gender as a social construction that is applied to natural sexes, *gender* must be understood as "the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established," and, therefore, the "production of sex as the prediscursive" – as that which exists *before* cultural constructions – "ought to be understood as the *effect* of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by gender."⁷⁶ Therefore, construction must not be contrasted with nature or "natural" sexes. The idea of sex itself is an effect of the social construction of gender (i.e., the question "What does it mean to be male?" precedes and informs the reply "To have a penis"). It is because of our understandings of femininity and masculinity that our societies have conceived of the sexes as they currently do. And this theory is further elaborated in *Bodies That Matter* to show that the construction of sex, which is an effect of gender, has material effects – namely, "the regulatory norms of 'sex' work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative."⁷⁷ Rather than regarding construction as artificial, Butler describes *construction* in *Bodies That Matter* as "constitutive constrain," as a recognition that certain constructions "have this character of being that 'without which' we could not think at all" and, therefore, "we might suggest that bodies only appear, only endure, only live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas."⁷⁸ Rather than unnecessary or "woke" theories that are applied to alter or open up natural facts of life, constructions – specifically constructions of gender and sex – are necessary conditions of

⁷⁵ Butler, p. xii.

⁷⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 10. Emphasis added.

⁷⁷ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. xii.

⁷⁸ Butler, p. x.

life as social beings. We speak, we organize ourselves, we disagree, we categorize and fight and kill and love and conquer and make treaties and have sex and pray all through socially constructed notions of what it means to be a citizen, a spouse, a president, a colleague, a Christian, and fundamentally a person – which, according to Butler’s theory, means to be gendered. These realities are not deemed false but are recognized as constituted through binary gendered conceptions of a subject, and these realities have real – often deadly – effects.

What does this mean practically speaking to reconceptualize the terms of sex, gender, construction, performance, and performativity? Rather than thinking of gender as an external expression of an internal fact (one wears trousers and thereby expresses one’s inner “manliness”), *gender* ought to be considered as a “corporeal style” of sorts, a repeated act, like a ritual, that is performed (accomplished) by bodies under the compulsory regulation (construction) of heterosexual reproduction.⁷⁹ Simply put, the movement of influence when conceiving of gender is reversed from what is commonly assumed: heterosexual cultural norms shape the very way we understand and experience our bodies as we are compelled to perform the very thing we were told was within us all along: a (heterosexual) gendered self/identity. In this way, gender casts a veil over its own genesis, and it has more to do with time (repetition) than it does with an essence of humanity. Butler poignantly summarizes their theory as follows:

In the place of an original identification which serves as a determining cause, gender identity might be reconsidered as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction.⁸⁰

Therefore, if there is no gendered kernel of identity deep within each of us just waiting to blossom, but there is instead a heterosexual classificatory scheme within which one must fit in

⁷⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 190.

⁸⁰ Butler, p. 188.

order to “be” considered human – either “male” or “female” *must* be listed on a birth certificate in most nations – then gender, as the “apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established,” is performative. Gender produces and sustains the construction of natural binary sexes through the repetition of gendered norms, which affect the very ways in which our bodies are constituted. Performativity, rather than conveying a falsehood, describes the condition for the possibility of social existence.

Susan Heckman, a feminist professor of political science, clarifies this distinction by referring to Butler’s own evolving description following the publication of *Bodies That Matter*:

One of the best ways of characterizing the shift in Butler’s thinking is [their] argument that *performativity* is a more useful term than *construction* because performative effects may become *material effects* and are part of the process of *materialization*. Performativity entails a shift from metaphysics to ontology and offers an account of ontological effects that allow us to rethink materiality itself.⁸¹

Performativity cannot be reduced to a synonym for social construction, neither can construction be reduced to designate the artificial in contrast to the natural. Concepts of the self are socially and theologically constructed. However, performativity in both queer theory and theology means more than this. Like the concept of faith for Danz, to say that the gendered self is performative is to assert that the concept of gender exists only in and as its effects, which not only manifests in or on bodies, but shapes our very notions of what the body is, its limits, and its comprehensibility.

⁸¹ Susan Heckman, “Vulnerability and Ontology” in *Australian Feminist Studies* 29, no. 82 (2014): 452 – 464, p. 459, citing Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (New York: Verso, 2009), p. 168. Heckman’s attention to Butler’s ontology stands in contrast to Stephen White, whose “weak ontology” will be discussed in Chapter One, Part III “Hermeneutic Ontologies.” For White, Butler’s work provides a “thin” ontology as opposed to a weak one, which means for him “a reticence to affirm very much ontologically.” Cf. Stephen K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), p. 76. I side with Heckman, seeing ontology as central to Butler’s works even as Butler critiques certain forms. This will be the subject of Chapter One, Part II “‘On the Boundary:’ Moving Beyond an Essentialist Ontology.”

B. Theological Performativity: An Overview

God, like sex, has been understood within certain periods of time – and still in many Christian communities today – as a prediscursive natural fact, which makes demands on how one lives in relation with others and even how one can identify and conceptualize of oneself. Therefore, the question arises: How might Butler’s critique of gender essentialism and the compulsory heterosexuality that insists upon it be incorporated into (queer) systematic theology’s contextually constructive task? First, by identifying for Christians that for something to be constructed is not to deem it fake but is rather a description of the condition within which we live. It is only through constructions that one is able to live their life – or try to –, and this includes constructions of God for Christians. To paraphrase Acts 17:28, “Through social-theological constructions we live and move and have our being.” This situation, as described above with reference to Danz, is not new. Theology always articulates its concepts by making use of the available philosophical tools of the time. Therefore, regarding theology and its contents as performatively constituted is the logical continuation of theology as such. Chapter One, “*Being* Postmodern,” therefore continues theology’s ongoing, self-critical and constructive engagement with philosophical developments in greater detail. It begins with a very basic sketch of the norms that have shaped doctrines of God: biblical texts and the writings off early church theologians (referred to as patristics). It asks the question, *What does interpretation do?* and proceeds to respond through Elizabeth Johnson’s apophatic feminist theology, which is regarded as part of the anti-dogmatic Protestant principle of (queer) systematic theology. In other words, it demonstrates how essentialized heteropatriarchal images and conceptions of God become outdated bug-features in systematic theology’s OS by reducing the mystery of God and perpetuating harm against women, people of color, and gender non-conforming persons.

The chapter then moves into an overview and clarification of what is – and is not – meant by the term “postmodern” in this work, laying a foundation from which to explore the

ontological implications of a performative theology. The chapter therefore engages the philosophical works of Victor Anderson and Calvin Warren, who challenge, in different ways and in the service of different ends, ontology as a category that inherently oppresses African Americans. Using the ontological reflections of feminist and queer theory, the chapter seeks to clarify and distinguish ontology from essentialism in order to address and attend to the critiques of Anderson and Warren among others, including Butler herself in *Gender Trouble*. We then return to the theology of Paul Tillich as a means of moving discourse from an essentialist ontology to a symbolic theological conception. By using the ontological critiques of feminist and queer theory to draw Tillich's radical symbolic ontology beyond the confines of his time, this chapter demonstrates how his onto-theology can offer liberative potential for Christian communities today. Building upon a postmodern reading of Tillich's God as the ground of being (not essence), the chapter concludes with the work of Italian philosopher Santiago Zabala. As far as I am aware, this section offers the first theological engagement of Zabala's philosophical conceptualization of "hermeneutic ontology." From this queer interdisciplinary interplay, the chapter concludes by re-constructing doctrines of God, creation, and revelation from the perspective of a theological hermeneutic ontology. In other words, it furthers God as the ground of an ontological system that shapes Christians' understandings of themselves and God without imposing or presupposing a universal essence or substance. It asks and seeks to respond to the questions, *What does it mean to be in a postmodern context?* And, *What does a postmodern conception of God as the ground of Christian ontology change in terms of theology's method and its effects?*

Second, if God, like sex, is not prediscursive or accepted as an *a priori* fact (existing before or outside the theological circle) but is rather recognized as the effect and/or production of theological discourse itself, new sites of agency emerge for persons who identify as Christians (as consciously within the meaning-making communication of Christian theology). Practically speaking, dissolving the concept of "natural" sexes as a component of the

heterosexual ordering of life for reproduction does not deny the ontological nature of gender – humanity still comes to be through gendered ways of understanding one another, but these conceptions are opened to greater variation and, therefore, possibilities of life.⁸² Furthermore, as Reichel notes with regards to method, these gendered conceptions can cease to be tyrants and act instead as tools or guides for livable lives. Chapter Two, “*Being Beyond the Binary*,” therefore, will examine this discourse in greater detail as it relates to Christology, soteriology, and hamartiology. Beginning with patristic sources, this chapter reconstructs early Christology with attention to the doctrines of the Incarnation and *theosis*, or deification, through the writings of Athanasius and the Cappadocian fathers: Basil of Caesarea, his younger brother, Gregory of Nyssa, and their friend and colleague bishop, Gregory of Nazianzus. Because Christology is indecently aroused by and rouses doctrinal reflections on atonement and the human condition, specifically “the fall,” this chapter then draws from the works of feminist and womanist theologians, namely Elizabeth Johnson and Delores S. Williams (respectively), to surface the hidden intentions and designs of heteropatriarchal Systematic Theology. This analysis proposes that heteropatriarchal concepts of Christ, his ministry and his theological function bring about a fall, or bug-feature, in theology itself. In line with the (queer) systematic theology I have outlined, this analysis moves backward in reflection from the theological implications of the narratives of Christianity themselves to the *construction* and *function* of these narratives in theological systems. The pernicious effects of Original Sin and the fall are identified not only as bug-features of the System, but as part of its core logic, ensuring a gendered and unbridgeable

⁸² In his reading of Graham Ward’s Christology, Andy Buechel asserts that “Our personhood is constituted only by ‘participation in an economy of desire for and by the other,’ and otherness that is sexed, but irreducible to uncomplicated male/female difference only. This participatory economy is only properly discerned when the key relation between Creator and creature is acknowledged, however.” “Ward’s reading of Irigaray,” Buechel continues in footnote 34, “is very similar to the thought of Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*. Without using the Lacanian vocabulary, Halberstam also permits feminine/masculine to retain their usual meanings and connotations, but separates them from male and female bodies. Therefore, as a body sexed male can bear both the phallus and the two lips for Irigaray—rendering it complexly gendered—so can Halberstam read a body sexed female as embodying masculinity.” Cf. Andy Buechel, “Incarnation: Christ’s Queer Body,” in *That We Might Become God: The Queerness of Creedal Christianity* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015), p. 19.

gap between the religious self and the God of its System that only heterosexual reproduction can overcome. Feminist and womanist theologians have named these effects for decades, and their work remains necessary for a queer theology such as this, which is self-identified as a theology of abundant life.

As the second chapter will elucidate, this theological fall should not be read as presupposing a perfect or blessed state of theology, for such a paradigm perpetuates the very binary thinking that is antithetical to a queer theological method. Rather, the fall of theology can be regarded as the theological term used to describe the phenomenon whereby theology enacts violence by coding shame into its construction of humanity as a necessary feature of its core logic. Core logic refers to the fundamental set of rules, principles, or algorithms in coding that drive the essential functionality of a program or application. It is the central decision-making and problem-solving mechanism that ensures the software performs its intended tasks well. Therefore, this project may also be considered an attempt at using queer theory to overcome the violence that is often part of Systematic Theology's core logic by constructing alternatives – not by unearthing a pure, good core. Drawing from Althaus-Reid, the chapter identifies queer bodies as necessary sites of disruption that clog up what I call the Salvation Machine™ of Systematic Theology, through which essentialized binary relations are impressed upon Christians as “necessary” components of a heteropatriarchal process of salvation. The speeches and Instagram videos of nonbinary performance artist ALOK are then integrated to demonstrate the generative nature of queer and trans disruptions. A new Christology emerges that calls Christians beyond the binary to experience the salvation of gender euphoria and the affirmation of our various sexualities as “very good.”

This leads to Chapter Three, “*Being Together; Being Re-membered*,” which further explores Danz's pneumatology through a brief overview of Jan Assmann's theory of “cultural memory,” which Danz explicitly builds upon. Within Danz's use of Assmann's theory of

cultural memory, the Holy Spirit functions as the memory of Jesus the Christ and symbolizes the three-part communicative event of faith: the Spirit is giver, gift, and appropriation or embodiment. By focusing specifically on the location where Christian communication is shaped and perpetuated, i.e., in churches, this chapter relates Butler and Danz's theories of performativity with Jan Assman's theory of cultural memory to assert that churches are the sites where the memory of Jesus the Christ is not only passed on but constituted through embodied forms of communication. Furthermore, Ola Sigurdson and Johanna Kristensen's conceptions of the body as intercorporeal and the effect of such a conception on eschatology are incorporated into the previous discussion to explicitly attend to the bodies through which Christian discourse materializes. In other words, this chapter further develops the project's thesis of theological performativity in relationship to pneumatology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. The chapter then take up Tillich's ecclesiology, Patrick Cheng's queer pneumatological ecclesiology, as well as Joy Ladin and Kai Daniel Moore's trans theologies as a beginning for rethinking our bodies and God in ways that embrace multiplicity and affirmation communal formation. The chapter closes by weaving all these theorists and theologians together within the Bryan Stone's ecclesiology, which understand salvation as the cultivation of a communal way of life. It poses the following question not as an end but as a perpetual call: *What does it mean to cultivate Christian communities that understand our bodies and identities as relationally constituted as we unite in the work of the Spirit, that is, of re-presenting the Christ today?*

Finally, one more methodological note to orient the text that follows. This (queer) systematic theology is explicitly organized using Trinitarian logic for it is in the queer incommensurability of the Trinity that theological performativity finds its symbolic expression. The trinity is constituted by its individual members who are members insofar as they participate as one in the Trinity. A theologian has no recourse to an "immanent" Trinity or essence behind

discourse.⁸³ Such a concept is beyond the bounds of systematic theology as a *Wissenschaft*, or the postmodern presuppositions of a (queer) systematic theology. An essentialized immanent trinity cannot be defended or disputed. What can be systematically explicated are the biblical and traditional accounts of God the creator, God the overcomer, and God the transformer acting in history, which together constitute a doctrine of the Trinity. When one acts in the name of the Triune God, the Triune God is performatively realized in history – which queerly locates the Trinity within the embodied practices of Christians. This (queer) systematic theology, then, is a Trinitarian theology; it incorporates philosophical conceptions of identity today into the continued explication of the Christian faith, which is continued only through this transformation. The Trinity, as an identity that is discursively constituted in time through embodied actions – rather than describing a static, a priori essence – becomes a central Christian symbol for understanding theological performativity and the ongoing task of (queer) systematic theology.

⁸³ Known as “Rahner’s Rule,” Karl Rahner emphasized the mutual relations of the Trinity, which challenges the traditional separation between the immanent and economic Trinities through the concept of mutual influence. His famous formulation is as follows: “The ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity is the ‘economic’ Trinity.” Cf. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (London: Continuum, 2001 [1970]). Rahner, however, maintains a stable and essential identity of the Trinity that is expressed in history whereas such a presupposition is outside the bounds of systematic theology as a *Wissenschaft*.

Chapter One: *Being* Postmodern?

In 1882 Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844 – 1900) proclaimed in his book, *The Gay Science* (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*), that “God is dead.”⁸⁴ A few decades later Europe would witness devastation like never before with the start of the first World War and political crises that would eventually lead to another. In this context, (German) Systematic Theology found itself in the midst of a crisis: could it continue to defend the divine “*omnis*” of classical theism (omnibenevolence, omnipotence, omniscience, and so on) in the wake of Nietzsche and the carnage of World Wars, or would it need to overcome its own conceptions of God to meet the demands of the time? In this context of reevaluating the doctrine of God comes the interrelated question of ontology, the question of being and the importance of Tillich in the history of late modern Protestant theology.

As mentioned in the Introduction, for Tillich God is both the ground of being and being-itself. Therefore, ontology is necessarily theological. To inquire about being is to inquire about God. For this reason, the present chapter will begin with a historical overview of the doctrine(s) of God, which play a normative role in shaping Christian understandings of and attitudes toward ourselves, our neighbors, and all creation as participants in being. From this brief historical sketch, we then move into the historical milieu within which Tillich’s own onto-theological musings were shaped and against which his creativity – his twist on this dish – emerged. After a cursory engagement of German theological thought on ontology, the second part of the chapter engages the onto-theological debates of the mid and late-twentieth century by engaging namely Paul Tillich and James Cone, after which critiques of ontology from Black philosophers, namely Victor Anderson and Calvin Warren, will be engaged. These critiques of

⁸⁴ Christian Benne, Jutta Georg-Lauer, *Friedrich Nietzsche: Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (Berlin; Boston: De Gruyter, 2015). For a recent introduction to *The Gay Science* and Nietzsche’s philosophy, cf. Michael Ure, *Nietzsche’s The Gay Science: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). In this introduction, Ure places *The Gay Science* as the source of Nietzsche’s “ideal of tragic joy, and shows how he revives an ancient conception of philosophy as a way of life and the philosopher as physician.”

ontology move the discourse into the third section of the chapter, “Hermeneutic Ontology & Anti-Essentialism.” Through the necessary and prophetic critiques of [essentialist] ontologies by Black, feminist, and queer scholars, the third section is able to point toward an alternative ontological paradigm that, as an act of philosophical integrity and justice, seeks to overcome the harm of essentialist ontological paradigms by drawing on the work of Judith Butler, Gianni Vattimo, Stephen K. White, and Santiago Zabala.

The aims of this chapter, then, are to (1) demonstrate the historic mutual interdependence between ontology and the doctrine(s) of God, and then (2) to grapple with the effects of postmodernism on both. While I disagree staunchly with his neo-orthodox conclusions, which retains an element of objectivity within biblical hermeneutics, Kevin Vanhoozer offers an insightful introduction to the difficult – intentionally impossible – task of defining postmodern theology:

Postmodern thinkers rejected the idea that ‘reason’ names a neutral and disinterested perspective from which to pursue truth and justice. Specifically, postmodern theory rejects the following modern postulates: (1) that reason is absolute and universal (2) that individuals are autonomous, able to transcend their place in history, class, and culture (3) that universal principles and procedures are objective whereas preferences are subjective.⁸⁵

As the postmodern restaurant of the Introduction sought to describe, reason – and by extension doctrines and theories, such as ontology – cannot be absolute or universal for to insist upon such a claim would be to further the imperialist claims of Western societies. A diner cannot

⁸⁵ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Theology and the condition of postmodernity: a report on knowledge (of God),” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 8. His understanding of hermeneutics is where our approaches diverge since for Vanhoozer, hermeneutics still seeks to reveal the really real, or rather, “the real in Christ” as both an objective and subjective proposition. His description of interpretation as a form of “personal formation” is very near Vattimo’s and White’s, which will be discussed in Part III below, and yet Vanhoozer has a very different presupposition: “To come to Scripture is to be confronted with a truth that is both *objective and rational* on the one hand and *personal and relational* on the other.” Cf. Kevin Vanhoozer, “Lost in Interpretation? Truth, Scripture, and Hermeneutics,” *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 48 (2005), p. 111.

arbitrarily declare that Italian cuisine is the only cuisine to properly prepare fish; such a proclamation would presuppose a universally valid palate that fails to take into account the various ways in which fish is prepared and served in different cultures around the globe. Such a claim thrusts one set of culturally-specific preferences onto the world-stage and crowns it king. This would presuppose that the individual diner was able to transcend the culture and class that has informed their palate, and which likely led them to their generalized and totalizing conclusion. For these reasons, postmodernisms generally reject the notion that these supposedly universal claims are in fact objective.

Therefore, this chapter continues the theory of theological performativity by applying these postmodern presuppositions, which have been applied explicitly to ontology through the works of Judith Butler, Gianni Vattimo, Santiago Zabala and others, to a doctrine of God. Such an approach, utilizing the philosophical advancements of postmodernism while working from the interdependence between God and ontology, has yet to be undertaken in theology in a constructive-productive way. Theological performativity seeks to do just that so that Christians today would be well positioned to engage in ethical theology that reflects upon and shapes communities of faith where a love of God and neighbor flourishes beyond essentializing dogmatic exclusivism.

I. Creating God(s)

What is the relationship between God and humanity? Is it in need of salvaging? Is it doomed to from the start? Is it a hierarchical one, like a 1950s U.S. model of the ideal patriarchal family that lives quaintly – at least by appearance – in a suburban house with a yard, two kids, and at least one gas-guzzling car? Who decides the responses to these questions, and why? This divine-human relationship is often worked out within systematic theology or dogmatics within Christology, and it builds upon the doctrines of God, creation, theological anthropology, and revelation. That is to say, a doctrine of God is queerly constituted by its holy promiscuity and

fluidity. Within the present framework of theological performativity, it is necessary to reiterate the queerness of the construction of a doctrine of God (and any doctrine for that matter). God is not, as this chapter will explore, a static essence or substance that preexists religious acts or theological systems. Rather, a doctrine of God emerges only in mutual interdependence with doctrines of creation, revelation, and so on. Through the productive constraints of theology, all doctrines arise together as components of the theological system, through which the system itself is constituted. This relationship will be further elaborated in Chapter Three through a discussion on the Holy Spirit (thus demonstrating the queer nature of systematic theology). As a (queer) systematic work, all components are mutually interdependent and therefore the chapters need not be read in the order presented.

i. Biblical Accounts. So, what is God within Christian theological discourse? From a biblical perspective, the opening of Genesis establishes God's identity through the act of creation: God is creator and, therefore, creative. The psalmist(s), Deuteronomic editors, and prophets further assert that God is just (Ps 7:17; Deut 19:18; Deut. 32:4; Ezra 9:15; Isa 30:18) and merciful (Ex 34:6; Deut 4:31; Neh 9:17; Ps 86:15; Ps 103:8, 111:4, 116:5, 145:8, etc.). Throughout the scriptures a recurring attribute of God is holiness (Ex 15:11; Lev 19:2; 1 Sam 2:2; Isa 57:15; Acts 3:14; Rev 15:4, etc.) steadfast love (Gen 24:27; Deut 23:5; 1 Kgs 10:9; Neh 9:32), and love itself (1 Cor. 13; 1 Jn. 4:8, 16). However, God is also described in less-than-flattering terms in many of these same texts. God is described as wrathful (Ex 32:11; Deut 9:7; 2 Kgs 22:17; 2 Chr 36:16; Ezra 8:22; Job 20:28; Jer 7:20; Mtt 3:7; Lk 3:7; Jn 3:36; 1 Thess. 1:9 – 10) etc.), jealous (Ex 20:5; Num 25:11; Deut 4:24; Jos 24:19; Ps 78:58, etc.), and even violent (Gen 6:17; Jos 6:21; 1 Sam 15:3; Mtt 10:34; Rom 13:4; and most of Revelation). Typically, scholars and pastors attempt to either justify, reconcile, or dismiss these negative attributes. To justify God's wrath, for instance, some Christians – primarily those who would identify as evangelical and/or fundamentalist – assert that God does not desire to be wrathful, but that humanity brings this wrath upon itself. Furthermore, God would not be just if God did not

punish wrongdoing.⁸⁶ Some in this type argue that God must be wrathful against various groups, be they “unbelievers,” LGBTQIA+ persons, or others who they deem deliberately deny or disobey their God and His commands. God’s wrath in these cases is justified by such Christians because fundamentally the persons receiving God’s wrath deserve it. Within this type, it is common to assume that God’s wrath does not negate God’s love.

Others, primarily moderate, progressive or liberal Christians, will seek to reconcile rather than justify texts describing a wrathful God by placing them within an overarching narrative of God’s redemptive love.⁸⁷ In this type of interpretation, the texts describing God’s mercy and the sayings of Jesus that emphasize care for the marginalized form the hermeneutical lens through which all other scriptures are read. This is sometimes referred to as a “canon within the canon,” a collection of texts within the Bible that informs how one reads the others.⁸⁸ An example of this is my use of John 10:10 as the standard of God’s mission through which all other texts are read. What makes this type slightly more critical in its engagement than the previous one is its recognition (generally speaking) that regardless of how one reads the Bible, *everyone* approaches it with a hermeneutical lens. That is to say, whether one sees God as

⁸⁶ In the first part of his Tyndale Lecture at Cambridge in 1951, New Testament scholar R.V.G. Tasker writes the following: “In more recent years, however, there has been widespread neglect and indeed denial of the doctrine of the divine wrath; and emphasis has been placed almost exclusively upon the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ... It is surely time that the balance was redressed, and that a generation which has little or no fear of God should be faced with the reality of his wrath as well as with his loving-kindness.” Cf. R.V.G. Tasker, “The Biblical Doctrine of the Wrath of God,” *Themelios* 26.2 (April, 2001), <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-biblical-doctrine-of-the-wrath-of-god>. Independent scholar Eitan Bar names such approaches in his critiques Calvinistic interpretations of Hell. Cf. Eitan Bar, “‘Justice’ According to Fundamentalism,” <https://eitan.bar/articles/hell-justice-according-to-calvinism/>. He quotes several prominent theologians and pastors on this topic, which I will share here: “His holiness is so pure that he cannot forgive without punishing” Stan Mast; “Why God punishes sin... The primary reason is that God’s righteousness demands it so that he might be glorified in the universe that he has created” Wayne Grudem; “He cannot merely forgive or remit sin without punishing it... Sin left unpunished would leave God’s economy out of order” Millard Erickson.

⁸⁷ Cf. Adam Hamilton, senior pastor of the largest United Methodist Church in the U.S., has authored several books on this topic, including: *Why? Making Sense of God’s Will* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), *Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn’t Say* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2016). Cf. also J.J. Warren, *Reclaiming Church: A Call to Action for Religious Rejects* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020).

⁸⁸ In an article for a U.S.-based Lutheran publication, *Word & World*, Michael Rogness briefly clarifies this concept as follows: “‘Canon within the canon’ does not mean abridging or condensing the Bible, like Marcion chopping out the Old Testament and most of the New, or Thomas Jefferson taking his scissors to the Gospels. Rather the term acknowledges the fact that every reader of the Bible selects some passages as more important than others.” Michael Rogness, “A Canon within the Canon? Yes: Proclaim Christ,” in *Word & World*, Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota (2006), p. 436.

wrathful or loving is shaped by the experiences and tradition one is formed within, which informs how one views the texts, and therefore, God. The question for some – but certainly not all – within this type is less likely to be “Is God wrathful?” and more likely to build upon a fundamental presupposition that God’s love and mercy are of highest importance. Texts of God’s wrath, then, have to be carefully analyzed within their historical contexts and within the overarching narrative of God’s love and mercy in order to reconcile them – that is, in order to justify why such texts do not challenge the presupposition of God’s love and mercy. Arguments of this type can be used to support the first: that God’s love demands injustices are punished, though many progressive pastors and scholars would avoid this move.

The third type can be a continuation and combination of the first two. Texts regarding either God’s solidarity with the marginalized or God’s wrath toward some group – or God’s wrath as a response of God’s solidarity – are dismissed for a variety of reasons. Some from the first type will argue that because God’s love cannot be understood in human terms, the ethical conundrum of God’s wrath is a moot point. God’s wrath does not nullify God’s love because it is beyond our understanding, some write (and therefore claim to understand). Others from the second type will argue, often based on Biblical higher criticism, that texts depicting God’s wrath do not describe God inasmuch as they describe the historical context of the authors. Texts of God’s wrath can be dismissed as outdated contextual responses that no longer have bearing on our communities today. My aim in providing this cursory typological sketch has been to call attention to the fact that all types involve interpretation – it is not self-evident that (1) there is a divine being referred to in English as God, that (2) such a being can be simultaneously loving and wrathful, and (3) that the Bible presents this being’s character clearly. This is not new. But if we can accept that every type involves interpretation, then we are confronted with the question, *What does interpretation do?* Does interpretation seek to reveal the one true meaning divinely wedged between the pages of a twenty-century English translation? Or does interpretation entail something else, some process for meaning-making that still refuses to

dissolve into “everything goes” relativism? For now, I’ll place the pot with this question on the backburner and let it simmer in our minds as we continue further into recipes/doctrines of God.

ii. *A Dash of Patristics*. How to interpret the Bible – in particular its descriptions of God – has been a question of the Christian faith since its very beginnings. Before the Arian controversy was the *Soup du Jour* of ecclesiastical debate, Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 299 – 373) published his apologetic work, *Contra Gentes*.⁸⁹ In this fourth-century treatise, Athanasius asserts in contradistinction to the Gnostics and Marcionites that because God is the creator of all that is (and therefore, not a subordinate demiurge), evil cannot be a substance.⁹⁰ In other words, God could not create what is evil because God is, by nature, good.⁹¹ Athanasius weaves together doctrines of God and creation in order to defend his understanding of Christianity from those he deemed heretical. In Chapter thirty-five of *Contra Gentes*, Athanasius asserts that the works of creation reveal the creator:

For since God is good and loves [humanity] and cares about the souls which were made by [God], since [God] is by nature invisible and incomprehensible, existing beyond all created substance and since because of this human race would be devoid of knowledge of [God], because creation is out of nothing, but [God] is un-created, – for this reason God ordered in [God’s] own Word creation in such a way that, since [God] is by nature invisible, [God] might be known by [humanity] at least through [God’s] works.⁹²

We will return to Athanasius’ Christology in Chapter Two, particularly as it weaves together a doctrine of the Incarnation and deification, or becoming like God, as central to the function and ministry of Christ. For now, several distinct theological claims relating God and creation together can be explored. Firstly, the claim is made that God is *good* and *loves* humanity. What

⁸⁹ In his Introduction to the work, E.P. Meijering provides a litany of reasons for dating the work before Arianism was considered a heresy, including the omission of any reference to Arius, though this has been argued by others as intentionally ignoring the Arians. Cf. *Contra Gentes: Introduction, Translation and Commentary*. E.P. Meijering, tr. (Leiden: Brill, 1984).

⁹⁰ Cf. M. David Litwa, *The Evil Creator: Origins of an Early Christian Idea*, 1st ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), Part II “Marcionite Approaches to the Evil Creator.”

⁹¹ Athanasius, *Contra Gentes* (Leiden: Brill, 1984), Part IV.

⁹² Athanasius, Chapter 35.

has become a commonplace “Sunday school” description of God was a polemical assertion against Marcion(ites), who “exposed questionable actions like preventing knowledge, sending a flood, and killing children,” and from these biblical stories “concluded that the creator was wicked.”⁹³ Biblical texts can be used to justify both arguments: that God is good and that God is wicked, evil, or at the very least, problematic. Entering the debate on essentialist terms, which would argue for one true essence of God or Scripture that must reign universally as the absolute and eternal answer, which is either illuminated or shrouded by interpretation, means at the very least a selective engagement with or conscious omission of various biblical texts as discussed in the previous section.

In this postmodern theory of theological performativity, however, the fact that such an essence posits something outside of theology itself invalidates the concept. Such a concept would leave the theological circle and transgress the methodology of systematic theology as a *Wissenschaft*. This transgression is not a queer one, however, for it does not transgress norms in order to create more space and openness – i.e., to challenge essentialism – but rather to reify them. Furthermore, the notion of an absolute and universally valid God (which will be discussed in the second part of this chapter), has imperialistic motivations that must be condemned by Christians of good will today. And yet, the implications of this decision – whether God is good or wicked or even something else – within the doctrine remain paramount in shaping the rest of the system and the faith that is informed by it. To begin, if the religious content of God is regarded as fundamentally good, as Athanasius asserted, then this has implications for creation. Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430), for example, continues Athanasius’ assertion that “creation is out of nothing” in his articulation of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Augustine uses his philosophical education to begin to expound a theological ontology that is evident in but not developed by Athanasius’ works.

⁹³ Litwa, *The Evil Creator*, p. 158.

In *Confessions*, Augustine writes the following about God, ontology, and creation:

In you it is not one thing to be and another to live: the supreme degree of being and the supreme degree of life are one and the same thing (*Book I.X*)

Where could this capacity come from except from you, from whom everything has being insofar as it has being? But the further away from you things are, the more unlike you they become – though this distance is not spatial. And so you, Lord, are not one thing here, another thing there, but the selfsame, very being itself...” (*Book XII.VII*)⁹⁴

In the philosophical theology of Augustine, the doctrine of God is related explicitly to ontology. Furthermore, ontology is not only theological but also explicitly infused with a value judgement: if God is “being itself” for Augustine, and God is good, then being itself is good. Humanity, then, participates in being by doing “good,” i.e., by imitating the nature of its creator. Any behaviors deemed to be against the “good” then also have ontological implications: to act contrary to the good is to act contrary to being, to fall away and be distanced from being, i.e., to approach non-being. One’s ontological status hinges upon one’s ability to act in accordance with what has been deemed good. The moral and the ontological are bound to one another in the theological ontology that Augustine works out within a doctrine of God in the fourth and fifth centuries.

He – and I use the male pronoun purposefully here – who has the power to determine what is good possesses the power to determine what, or rather, *who*, has the possibility of being, whose lives are intelligible as “good,” and therefore, worthy of being.

Augustine’s doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* appears to clarify a nuance within Athanasius’ writings regarding creation and revelation. As the Dutch patristics scholar E.P. Meijering notes in his commentary of *Contra Gentes*, God’s invisibility was both “an argument that the visible parts of creation cannot be divine” and yet in the excerpt above, “now he [also] argues that the

⁹⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, Henry Chadwick, tr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

visible creation can point towards the invisible Creator.”⁹⁵ Like the artist who is known through their works, the harmony of the universe is evidence of this good God. While the world itself is not holy, it is God’s masterpiece and as such can be said to reveal the invisible God. Strong and saucy claims are made here regarding the queer relations between God, creation, revelation and Christology. Citing Isaiah 45:7 (“I am he who creates evils”), Jeremiah 18:11 (“behold I fashion evils (*kaka*) against you”), Amos 3:8 (“will there be evil (*kakia*) in the city which the Lord has not caused?”) among other verses, Marcion and his followers regarded Yahweh, the creator God of the Hebrew scriptures, as an arrogant and wicked deity – the creator of evils.⁹⁶ As M. David Litwa, scholar of ancient Mediterranean religions, summarizes, “In their minds, Marcionites did not invent the evil creator. Rather, they exposed him from his own scriptures.”⁹⁷

The question of God’s nature is sticking to the bottom of this theological discussion and beginning to burn because if the Marcionites’ interpretation is adopted, then the rest of the system is radically affected. *Creation*, rather than a source of revelation, would *not* be capable of revealing the transcendent God above the demiurge. Creation would only reveal the creator of evils who, as such, could not be the transcendent and good God.⁹⁸ Therefore, Marcion and his followers believed it was only through Jesus and the New Testament sources that the good and transcendent God was revealed. One of Marcion(ites)’s justifications for this claim, as identified by Litwa, are the diverging views within the Bible on retaliation: “Christ forbade retaliation, while the creator enforced it. The moral character of the Christ who rejected

⁹⁵ Meijering, *Contra Gentes*, p. 117.

⁹⁶ Cf. Litwa, *The Evil Creator*, Part II Chapter Three, pp. 67 – 89.

⁹⁷ Litwa, p. 89.

⁹⁸ In his own words, according to Tertullian, Marcion argued that “If god is good and knows the future and is able to prevent evil, why did he allow humanity, his own image and likeness—even his own substance on account of the soul²⁵—to fall from obedience to the Law into death, outwitted by the devil? For, given the fact that god is good, he would not have wanted such a horror to occur, and given the fact that he foreknows, he would not be ignorant of what was to come, and given the fact that he is powerful, he would be able to prevent it. Therefore what cannot occur under these three conditions of divine majesty could by no means have happened. But given that it [the fall into evil] did happen, we must conclude that god is neither good, foreknowing, or powerful.” Cf. Tertullian, *Contre Marcion*, edited by René Braun and Claudio Moreschini. 5 vols. (Paris: Cerf, 1990–2004), 2.5.1–2. Cited from Litwa, pp. 72 – 73.

retaliation was therefore significantly different from the creator who commanded it.”⁹⁹ Therefore, the argument was made, that the creator god was morally subpar to the transcendent God that Jesus reveals. Revelation, then, is bound to the Christ and creation is dismissed.

iii. *Creation, Revelation, and Ontology in Twentieth-Century German Theology*. Such a Christo-centric stance is also evident in the dialectic theology of twentieth century German Lutheranism, namely, in Friedrich Gogarten, Karl Barth, and Rudolf Bultmann. John H. Smith, a scholar of German philosophical traditions from the Enlightenment to the present, describes how, at “some level,” Gogarten, Barth and Bultmann “all address the issue of God as ‘wholly Other.’”¹⁰⁰ Smith traces this emphasis to Rudolf Otto and specifically his work, *Das Heilige* (1917), which, as Danz’s elucidates, was also highly influential for Tillich.¹⁰¹ The main themes of Otto’s argument, “the turn to Paul,” who understood the “true, numinous nature of Christianity,” the “critique of all theologies that undermine the ‘wholly Otherness’ of the divine, the emphasis on the ‘fallen’ creatureliness of human being, and the decision-quality of faith” are what Smith regards as characterizing the theology of the early twentieth-century.¹⁰² In his essay on “The Wholly Other” (*Das ‘Ganz Andere’*), Otto describes it in the following way: “And this uncanny, this ‘wholly Other’ that stands opposed to all that is human, is the mysterious foundation on which all rationality is built up and which shines through all ‘human likeness.’”¹⁰³ A strict divide between God and humanity – and creation – is asserted as a fundamental presupposition for theology.

Gogarten, Barth, and Bultmann identified their time as one of crisis or, as Smith describes, the continuation and inevitable culmination of the effects of the debate between

⁹⁹ Litwa, p. 81.

¹⁰⁰ John H. Smith, *Dialogues between Faith and Reason: The Death and Return of God in Modern German Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), p. 205.

¹⁰¹ Christian Danz, *The Theology of Paul Tillich: Contexts and Key Issues* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2020), pp. 35 – 37.

¹⁰² Smith, *Dialogues between Faith and Reason*, p. 207.

¹⁰³ Rudolf Otto, *Aufsätze*, 16. Cited from Smith, p. 206.

Luther and Erasmus four-hundred years earlier regarding the historicizing of the Bible, free will, justice, and grace.¹⁰⁴ The self-understanding of this Lutheran cadre of “new theology” is best described by the title of their journal, “Between the Times” (*Zwischen den Zeiten*, 1920 – 1933). Indeed, their publications and historical position was between the World Wars, and the horrors of the first brought about challenges that reconfigured some of the most basic presuppositions of theology. This takes place within the evolving theories of religion, which are beyond the scope of this project but nonetheless relevant insofar as they sought to determine the place of religion, and by extension theology, within scientific discourse.¹⁰⁵ What matters here is that, in a way not dissimilar to the Marcionites, the dialectical theologians of twentieth-century Germany restricted God’s revelation to Jesus the Christ. Though their motivations were different as their theologies responded to different contexts and crises, their result was similar insofar as creation was discarded as a non-revelatory object/collection of objects.

A. Tillich’s Queer via media.

Athanasius’ statement above regarding creation is, on the one hand, that creation is not divine (it is visible, and God is invisible) and, on the other, that it can point toward the Divine like how a masterpiece reveals the genius of its creator. Augustine continues this argument and asserts that everything derives being from God and retains its power of being through its likeness with God. There remains a separation between God and humanity, but creation can and does reveal God. This is incompatible with the Christo-centric revelation of the dialectical theology discussed above. Tillich, however, occupies a queer space between these camps in which he affirms with Otto and the dialectical theologians that God is wholly other,¹⁰⁶ and yet he also works out a doctrine of revelation whereby all creation – including cultural creations,

¹⁰⁴ Smith, pp. 206 – 207.

¹⁰⁵ On the evolution of theories of religion and their relationship to revelation, cf. Christian Danz, Chapter III “Religious A priori or Directedness Towards the Unconditioned” and Chapter V “General and Special Revelation of God” in *The Theology of Paul Tillich: Contexts and Key Issues* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2024).

¹⁰⁶ For example, Tillich asserts that “Being-itself infinitely transcends every finite being. There is no proportion or graduation between the finite and infinite. There is an absolute break, an infinite ‘jump.’” Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 237.

such as paintings – can be regarded as revelatory, as participating in the ground of being. But how does Tillich arrive at such a conclusion, and is it all that different from Athanasius’ and Augustine’s?

For Tillich, a theologian must concentrate themselves on that which is of “ultimate concern,” by which he means “that which *determines our being or not-being*. Only those statements are theological which deal with their object in so far as it can become a matter of being or not-being for us.”¹⁰⁷ Immediately several uniquenesses of Tillich’s system are introduced, which the remainder of his three-volume *Systematic Theology* expounds. The first is his ontology where “being” is understood as “*the whole of human reality*, the structure, the meaning, and the aim of existence.”¹⁰⁸ Ontology describes — or rather, constructs — the structure, meaning, and aim of existence. Since God is the ground and abyss of being, through which the meaning-making process is possible, the theologian must take up the ontological question, *the question of the meaning of being*.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, ontology is theological within the Tillichian system because it is the study of the depth from which cultural and religious forms find meaning. In other words, ontology is the study of God – but not the agential or supra/supernaturalistic God of classical theism(s). This God is not *a* being in the sky or in another dimension, willing creation into existence. No, this God is something else, something Augustine described as “very being itself” (*Book XII.VII*).

This theological ontology is the basis for Tillich’s method of correlation, which structures his whole system. “God is the answer to the question implied in being... The ontological question is: What is being itself?”¹¹⁰ Tillich clarifies genealogically, however, that this “does not mean that first there is a being called God and then the demand that [humanity] should be ultimately concerned about [God];” rather, “It means that whatever concerns [one]

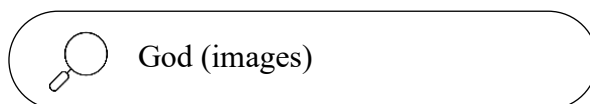
¹⁰⁷ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 14, emphasis added.

¹⁰⁸ Tillich, vol. I, p. 14, emphasis added.

¹⁰⁹ Tillich, vol. I, p. 22.

¹¹⁰ Tillich, vol. I, p. 163.

ultimately becomes god for [them], and, conversely, it means that a [person] can be concerned ultimately only about that which is god for [them].”¹¹¹ If most modern theistic theologies operated upon the assumption of a substantive, agential concept of God (hence the theist-atheist debate),¹¹² then postmodern theologies, for example the a-theistic theology of Hartmut von Sass or that of John D. Caputo, operate under the assumption that such a concept is untenable for an honest theologian unable to prove or disprove such a presupposition. Rather, a postmodern theologian, broadly speaking, moves God from a strictly transcendental realm that is outside the theological circle beyond critique¹¹³ and into the realm of cultural and theological construction and interpretation. As Caputo writes, “God is what God does, and what God does is what is done in the name of God, which is the birth of God in the world.”¹¹⁴ God is not an entity or a being, rather, God is, as in Tillich’s system, a symbol. This book seeks to further develop the notion of God as a symbol within postmodern theological discourse, which will necessarily require moving beyond Tillich himself. But first, a responsible theology must name the harmful effects of this symbol.



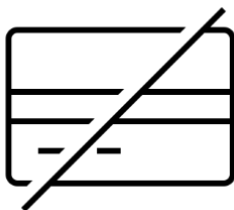
¹¹¹ Tillich, vol. I, p. 211.

¹¹² Cf. Hartmut von Sass, *Atheistisch glauben: ein theologischer Essay* (Berlin: Matthes & Seitz Berlin, 2022).

¹¹³ For Tillich’s “theological circle,” cf. Tillich, vol. I, pp. 8 – 11.

¹¹⁴ John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God: a Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), p. 36.

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“Creation of God” by Harmonia Rosales. Photo Credit: Wikimedia Commons,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Creation_of_God_by_Harmonia_Rosales.jpg

B. Symbols of Counterhegemony

*The symbol of God functions. Beyond verbal or visual references, it focuses a whole complex of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, emotions, and associations, very deep and tenacious. It is never neutral in its effects, but expresses and molds a community's bedrock convictions and actions.*¹¹⁵

Elizabeth A. Johnson

As the Catholic feminist theologian Elizabeth A. Johnson states concisely, *the symbol of God functions*. It mobilizes (often literal) armies of the faithful, casts out and condemns, lifts up and affirms, incites violence and demands peace, blesses relations and heaps so much shame upon them that one struggles to survive. All this and more is done in the “name of God,” which is to say, these acts are a *participation in* and *performative materialization of* the symbol of God in the world. The symbol of God that communities of faith both invoke and shape is never neutral – “it focuses a whole complex of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, emotions, and associations, very deep and tenacious.” There is a queer interplay and multi-directionality occurring that refuses to be simplified in which the symbol of God both “expresses” a community’s core convictions and actions (that is, the convictions of the community shape the symbol of God they invoke) and “molds” this same community (that is, the symbol of God they invoke shapes the community’s self-understanding of their beliefs). This is nothing other than the underivable act of faith, or Tillich’s theological paradox. God cannot be derived either from a religious subject or from religious content; God arises in and as a symbolic representation of the reflexive process of faith. The triadic structure of this event will be developed further in Chapter Three through Christian Danz’s pneumatology.

In describing Tillich’s theory of religion since 1919, Danz describes the underivable act of faith as follows: “The content of the concept of God is the inner connection of *act* and

¹¹⁵ Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Female Symbols for God: The Apophatic Tradition and Social Justice,” *International Journal of Orthodox Theology*, 1:2 (2010), pp. 41.

representation in consciousness as the object of consciousness. Exactly this reflexive structure represents the God above God, the disclosedness of consciousness bound to its act, which can appear in consciousness only as negation of the functions of consciousness.”¹¹⁶ The symbol of God, for Tillich’s theology since the end of World War I, describes the self-reflexive structure of faith. Because God symbolizes the self-reflexive structure of faith, God cannot be derived either from special contents or subjects (religious persons). Despite the technical language of this Germanic description, the effects of this structure become matters of life and death, which feminist, womanist, and queer and trans theologians make clear. Let us blend this further...

If we take Danz’s description of Tillich’s theory of symbols (as self-reflexive and therefore underivable) and apply Johnson’s description of the symbol of God quoted above, then the meaning of God is shaped by — but not reducible to — particular communities of faith and their symbolic representations. This reflexive activity, whereby the meaning of God emerges only within a community’s context, describes God’s *immanence*. However, the symbol of God a community shapes is not entirely undetermined; “it focuses a whole complex of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, emotions, and associations, very deep and tenacious,” which have been shaped by a tradition and the religious symbols that the community actively perpetuates and transforms. The symbol of God is less like soup, which would spill through our cupped hands, and more like rice, which sticks together but can still be formed as it clings to our fingers and palms or is wrapped in seaweed. The symbol of God takes on particular meanings in particular communities at particular times, but it always transcends these contexts for it only takes shape as a symbol of the Christian God against the background of the tradition within which it is received. This aspect of the reflexive structure of faith describes God’s *transcendence*. But what happens when *a* symbol is claimed to be *the* symbol of God?

¹¹⁶ Cf. Danz, *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, p. 130.

When this happens, when one symbol is taken to be absolute and (objectively) universally valid, thereby invalidating all others as falsehoods, then the self-reflexive structure of faith is collapsed. Participants, such as white Christian nationalists, refuse to recognize their role in shaping the God they claim to be serving while violently abducting and detaining international students and immigrants merely for expressing their opinions on U.S. involvement in the ongoing genocide of Palestinians.¹¹⁷ The white nationalist God becomes the *only* God and is said to exist outside the theological circle, derived from select Biblical texts (notably omitting the texts of mercy and compassion toward immigrants), and is sold for thousands of dollars by televangelists.¹¹⁸ This phenomenon is what womanist theologian and ethicist Emilie Townes describes as the “fantastic hegemonic imagination.” Through a development of and dance between Michel Foucault’s reconceptualization of the imaginary and the fantastic and the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci’s conceptualization of hegemony as ideological domination, Townes articulates her concept of the fantastic hegemonic imagination as follows:

The fantastic hegemonic imagination traffics in peoples’ lives that are caricatured or pillaged so that the imagination that creates the fantastic can control the world in its own image. This imagination conjures up worlds and their social structures that are not based on supernatural events and phantasms, but on the ordinariness of evil. It is this imagination, I argue, that helps to hold systematic, structural evil in place. The fantastic hegemonic imagination uses a politicized sense of history and memory to create and shape its worldview. It sets in motion whirlwinds of images used in the cultural production of evil. These images have an enormous impact on how we understand the world, as well as others and ourselves in that world. Subjugation and consent sashay to deadly images that are largely unchecked until they lose their force and are replaced by

¹¹⁷ Karina Tsui, “What we know about the federal detention of activists, students and scholars connected to universities,” *CNN* (April 2, 2025), <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/03/31/us/what-we-know-college-activists-immigration-hnk/index.html>.

¹¹⁸ The President’s faith advisor and televangelist Paula White offered “supernatural blessings” this Easter (2025) for \$1,000. Mark Wingfield, “Trump’s faith adviser selling seven Easter blessings for \$1,000 gift” *Baptist News Global* (March 25, 2025), <https://baptistnews.com/article/trumps-faith-adviser-selling-seven-easter-blessings-for-1000-gift/>.

more deadly and sinister images such as the movement from the Black Matriarch to the Welfare Queen. It is most important to note at this point that *the fantastic hegemonic imagination is in all of us. It is found in the privileged and the oppressed*. It is no respecter of race, ethnicity, nationality, or color. It is not bound by gender or sexual orientation. It can be found in the old and the young. None of us naturally escape it, for it is found in the deep cultural codings we live with and through in U.S. society.¹¹⁹

White supremacy does not always call upon supernatural powers but is a rather ordinary evil that utilizes media and institutions, such as churches and government agencies, to shape our imaginations to such an extent that we often – including marginalized persons – are coerced into participating in and perpetuating the evil of white racial “superiority.” It is deep and tenacious, shaping and coding our understandings of God and the world. If systematic theology fails to recognize this aspect of the self-reflexive structure of faith — that hegemonic conceptions are taken in and not only affect but re-code the structure with heteropatriarchal and radicalized language — then once again the structure collapses. The transcendence of a complex tradition is forfeited in favor of the immanence of its present oppressive form.

For instance, hegemonic masculinity – that is, a culturally dominant and idealized form of masculinity – seeks to maintain the central and powerful position of the white, heterosexual male body and has had profound and deleterious effects on theology and persons of faith. Think for a moment of the sixteenth-century painting “The Creation of Adam” by Michelangelo. This famous fresco has looked down upon millions of visitors to the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City over the last five-hundred years, and it has been foundational within the fantastic hegemonic imagination of Western theology. This image has become so engrained in Western theology and popular culture that it is almost difficult to regard it as *one* interpretation among many, as a context-dependent symbolic representation within the self-reflexive structure of faith, rather than as *the* authoritative depiction of God. In an effort to displace and dislodge this image within

¹¹⁹ Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 21. Emphasis added.

theological imaginations, it has not been included it here. Instead, another symbolic representation was provided at the beginning of this section – one that critically engages and subverts the racialized hegemonic masculinity that is at work within and propelled by “The Creation of Adam.”

The image shared at the outset of this section is entitled the “Creation of God.” [You are invited to pause and return to the image before continuing.] This symbolic representation was created by Harmonia Rosales, an Afro-Cuban U.S.-American artist, whose “artistic concern has focused on Black female empowerment in Western culture, depicting and honoring the African diaspora.”¹²⁰ Before even engaging the artwork itself, the title reminds us that it is the *artist* and their *social location* (the socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, sex/gender identity, and sexual orientation of the artist) that affects and creates the artistic representations of God that are available to us. *The artist, from their social location, creates a God that reflects their own social location, which also transcends the artist who creates, like the chef of our restaurant, within and against a certain tradition.* So, if our theological imaginations are saturated with images of God that are shaped by and reflect a racialized hegemonic masculinity, then what is the role of a conscientious theologian? How can we methodologically move from complicity in our perpetuation of this oppressive system through the uncritical use of exclusively white masculine pronouns, images, and symbols for God to a critical engagement that moves us into a more expansive and theologically-sound engagement? This is the work of *counterhegemony*, which destabilizes the dominant position’s claim by questioning its authority and by openly identifying and sharing alternatives.¹²¹ Such a move is not only motivated by social concerns but is also necessary for upholding both the immanence and transcendence of God.

¹²⁰ This information was gathered from that artist’s website: <https://www.harmoniarosales.art/theartist>.

¹²¹ Townes summarizes Gramsci’s hegemony in the following way: “For Gramsci, hegemony does not mean there is only one universally valid position for all time. Rather, other worldviews—in any given stage of historical development—can provide the major way of interpreting and perceiving the world. This opening provides the intellectual and sociopolitical space from which Gramsci argues that changing the popular consensus and the ways in which institutions work is possible. It creates a space that allows questioning the right of leaders to rule in their

*C. Apophatic Feminism*¹²²

Rather than categorizing Rosales' and Michaelangelo's paintings simply as contrasts, we can hold both in a creative tension – a tension which itself points toward some deeper activity and concept about interpreting God. This creative tension, the paradox or self-reflective structure of faith, informs our theological imaginations by asserting that there is no single “correct” image of God and, as Elizabeth Johnson's work demonstrates, that the creation and deployment of diverse images and names when referring to God is *necessary*. Johnson “argues that using female symbols for God, not exclusively but *in combination* with male, animal, and cosmic images, is both *legitimate* and *necessary* for the healthy life of the church.”¹²³ To be clear, Johnson is not advocating for the exclusive use of feminine pronouns and imagery for God. The goal is not to replace an exclusively male-centric image with an equally exclusive female-centric one. Such a move is not only counter to Johnson's apophatic aim, it would also continue to ignore the reality that the male-female binary does not reflect the lived experiences of nonbinary persons and the many people for whom these traditional categories have policed and censored our bodies. The goal is neither an exclusively female nor an exclusively male God; the goal of (queer) systematic theology must be something more expansive: it is the embrace of practices of counterhegemony as necessary for the self-reflexive structure of faith. Practices that actively dislodge hegemonic conceptions of God, therefore, actualize the Protestant principle that is constitutive for systematic theology's method.

The symbol of God that Christians engage, which is informed by the white male images that construct the fantastic hegemonic imagination, not only expresses the values of a community, but it also, and reciprocally, molds these same convictions. Johnson has called our

current way. The success of counterhegemony, for Gramsci, is that it permeates society with a new system of values, beliefs, and morality.” Cf. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, pp. 20 – 21.

¹²² This section builds upon a previously published academic blog: J.J. Warren, “God's Pronouns? Displacing Hegemonic Masculinity within Theological Scholarship through a Diversity of Language, Imagery, and Symbols,” *RaT-Blog* 8 (2023), <https://rat-blog.univie.ac.at/?p=3660>.

¹²³ Johnson, “Female Symbols for God,” p. 40.

attention to the functioning of the perilous theological loop in which images of God such as Michelangelo's both (a) *express* the hegemonic masculinity of his context, and (b) continues to *mold, shape, and perpetuate* this hegemonic masculinity in many contexts today. Within this perilous feedback loop, the continual re-creation of God takes place and perpetuates itself. Johnson goes on to say that women's scholarship has "made it piercingly clear that naming God almost exclusively in the image of a powerful ruling man has at least three pernicious effects:"

- 1) By literalizing this image, it reduces the living God to something much less, indeed, to an idol.
- 2) It legitimates structures of male authority in civil and ecclesial communities: in the name of the Father God who rules over all, men have the duty to command and control, on earth as it is in heaven.
- 3) It robs women of their dignity by distancing their human nature made in the image and likeness of God from their own concrete, bodily identity.¹²⁴

Juxtaposed with these three pernicious effects, Johnson outlines three "ground-rules" of apophatic theology for talking about the divine:

- 1) "The first and most basic is this: the reality of God is a mystery beyond all imagining" (p. 43).
- 2) "Consequently, there is a second ground rule: no expression for God can be taken literally" (p. 44).
- 3) "From this,' Thomas Aquinas argues, articulating the third ground rule, 'we see the necessity of giving to God many names'" (p. 44).

¹²⁴ Johnson, p. 42.

This juxtaposition, made by the contribution of women – and I would add by scholars who do not conform to heterosexual norms – poignantly illustrates how referring to God with exclusively masculine pronouns, images, and symbols undermines the very discipline of theology itself by transgressing its own ground-rules. The fantastic hegemonic imagination, in which God is always pictured as a physically exaggerated, white heterosexual male, reduces God to *an* image that becomes an idol, no longer beyond all imagining. The self-reflexive structure of faith is collapsed. Furthermore, the repetition of this hegemonic masculine image of God transgresses the second ground-rule: it becomes a literal referent for the identity of God rather than a contextually-contingent interpretation. This exaggerated image also harms the men who perpetuate it by elevating one ideal of manliness that no men can actually achieve or perpetually perform. Finally, using exclusively masculine language transgresses the third ground-rule because, in its assertion of *the* image of God, it dismisses the *necessity* of other names and images. God is no longer beyond all imagining. This image of a masculine God becomes the objective image of God and there is, accordingly, no need to use other names for the divine. The circular logic of hegemonic masculinity neuters theology as it transgresses its own apophatic ground-rules and defeats its own purposes.

*i. Masculinity and a Disregard for Diversity.*¹²⁵ For theology and communities of faith, the exclusive use of masculine language, images, and symbols for God harms everyone who does not adhere to the ideal of heterosexual hegemonic masculinity and forces theology into a self-defeating exercise. To reiterate: It is not just “woke” or “politically correct” to use other images for God; it is essential to theology itself as a self-referential and self-reflexive discipline and to the critical method theologians employ in our research. *Diversity, brought about through practices of counterhegemony, is necessary for theology as a Wissenschaft and for the*

¹²⁵ This section builds upon an academic blog post for the Center for Religion and Transformation at the University of Vienna. Cf. J.J. Warren, “More Men, More Toxic Theology? Critical Questions on Being the Church from a Gen Z Theologian,” *RaT-Blog* Nr. 18/2024.

wellbeing of our communities. Specifically, for theologians and researchers on religion, a diversity in the pronouns and images of God that we use and refer to displaces hegemonic masculinity and its transgression of the three ground-rules established by the apophatic tradition. By perpetuating a masculine God, we perpetuate, to a certain degree, a disregard for diversity because this disregard is necessary for hegemonic masculinity to retain its power.

This relationship is especially concerning given the data about my generation in the United States, Generation Z (Gen Z). Gen Z embodies a rapidly changing reality in the U.S. and in many countries around the world. According to several recent polls, not only is Gen Z (persons born roughly between 1997 and 2012) less religious than previous generations in the U.S. (33% identifying as “religiously unaffiliated”),¹²⁶ we are also less likely than previous generations to identify as Republicans (21%), more likely to identify as LGBTQIA+ (28%), and the “most racially and ethnically diverse generation” in U.S. history.¹²⁷ With an estimated 41 million Gen Zers who were eligible to vote in the 2024 election,¹²⁸ taking account of these seismic shifts in the terrain of U.S. political and cultural life has even greater importance. But the uniqueness of my generation does not stop here. As reported by *The New York Times*, “For the first time in modern [U.S.] American history, young men are now more religious than their female peers. They attend services more often and are more likely to identify as religious.”¹²⁹ For researchers on religion and churchgoers alike, this is paradigm shattering!

For the first time in modern U.S. history, the men of a generation are more likely than the women of their generation to be religious – and it must be said that this binary report leaves

¹²⁶ Russell Contreras, “Exclusive poll: Gen Z is less religious, less Republican than others” *Axios* (January 23, 2024), <https://www.axios.com/2024/01/23/gen-z-less-religious-more-liberal-lgbtq>.

¹²⁷ Richard Fry and Kim Parker, “Early Benchmarks Show ‘Post-Millennials’ on Track to Be Most Diverse, Best-Educated Generation Yet,” *Pew Research Center* (November 15, 2018), <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2018/11/15/early-benchmarks-show-post-millennials-on-track-to-be-most-diverse-best-educated-generation-yet/>.

¹²⁸ Alberto Medina and Sara Suzuki, “41 Million Members of Gen Z Will Be Eligible to Vote in 2024,” *CIRCLE* (October 18, 2023), <https://circle.tufts.edu/latest-research/41-million-members-gen-z-will-be-eligible-vote-2024>.

¹²⁹ Ruth Graham, “In a First Among Christians, Young Men Are More Religious Than Young Women,” *The New York Times* (September 23, 2024), <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/23/us/young-men-religion-gen-z.html>.

out nonbinary persons and those who do not identify within the male-female scheme. Nevertheless, this dramatic shift carries with it not only implications for our theoretical frameworks as scholars but also in the lived experiences of religious persons in the U.S. This shift also comes at a time when Christian Nationalism, an “ideology that seeks to create or maintain a legal fusion of Christian religion with a nation’s character,”¹³⁰ is on the rise in the U.S. According to a survey done by the Pew Research Center,

White evangelical Protestants are more likely than adults in most other groups to say the Bible should have *at least some influence* on U.S. laws (86%) – including 55% who say the Bible should have “a great deal” of influence. A majority of Hispanic Protestants (78%) and Black Protestants (74%) also think the Bible should *hold at least some influence* on the country’s laws.”¹³¹

So, if the religious persons of Gen Z are more likely to be men, and as *The New York Times* described, these men are often attending evangelical churches, which tend to hold more conservative beliefs, then young Christian spaces in the U.S. face a potentially dangerous reality: churches, which once shared belongings in common (Acts 2:42 – 47) and were commanded to welcome the outcast and provide for the poor (Mtt. 25:31 – 40), are now poised – perhaps for the first time since the Inquisition and the ideology of “manifest destiny”¹³² – to be echo chambers of a toxic theology, unmitigated by the Protestant/prophetic principle. This is not to idealize the church’s history or to deny the fact that Christian denominations have historically supported and benefitted from exploitative practices, including slavery and

¹³⁰ A. Volle, “Christian nationalism,” *Encyclopedia Britannica* (August 15, 2024), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christian-nationalism>.

¹³¹ “3. Christianity’s place in politics, and ‘Christian nationalism,’” *Pew Research Center* (March 15, 2024), <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2024/03/15/christianitys-place-in-politics-and-christian-nationalism/>. Emphasis added.

¹³² “Manifest Destiny, in U.S. history, the supposed inevitability of the continued territorial expansion of the boundaries of the United States westward to the Pacific and beyond. Before the American Civil War (1861–65), the idea of Manifest Destiny was used to validate continental acquisitions in the Oregon Country, Texas, New Mexico, and California. The purchase of Alaska after the Civil War briefly revived the concept of Manifest Destiny, but it most evidently became a renewed force in U.S. foreign policy in the 1890s, when the country went to war with Spain, annexed Hawaii, and laid plans for an isthmian canal across Central America.” Cf. D.S. Heidler and J.T. Heidler, “Manifest Destiny,” *Encyclopedia Britannica* (March 24, 2025), <https://www.britannica.com/event/Manifest-Destiny>.

segregation. It is rather to identify that, if left unchecked, Christianity in my generation risks devolving even further into a demonic force of injustice in U.S.-American life.

According to the same *New York Times* article, men in my generation, who are more religious than our female counterparts, are also less educated than the women of our generation (again this binary erases people). This reality has profound consequences because it has been shown that persons who receive more education are more likely to have an egalitarian outlook; specifically, they are more likely to reject negative racial stereotypes.¹³³ It must be noted, however, that this outlook does not necessarily translate into support for “specific policies designed to overcome racial inequality.”¹³⁴ The question, then, is not merely about a desire for an egalitarian society but more presciently about *gaining the ability to create such a reality in our daily lives*. To crudely interpret the meaning of this for churches with more men from my generation it means that, generally speaking, the folks in our communities are less likely to value egalitarianism, less aware of and more likely to deny racial, ethnic, and gender-based discrimination,¹³⁵ and less likely to have the skills necessary for creating an egalitarian community. And this reality has even further consequences...

According to the Dunning-Kruger model, persons who are less competent at a skill also tend to overestimate their ability because they lack the competence to recognize their incompetence.¹³⁶ In other words, I may think I am a great cook simply because I did not learn what good cooking entails. If I take a culinary course, I would come to realize the faults in my method and application. I would learn which potatoes are starchier and why they should be boiled and then peeled or vice versa for optimal texture. This is what it means to gain

¹³³ Geoffrey T. Wodtke, “The Impact of Education on Inter-Group Attitudes: A Multiracial Analysis,” *Social psychology quarterly* vol. 75,1 (2012): 10, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3883053/>.

¹³⁴ Wodtke, “The Impact of Education on Inter-Group Attitudes.”

¹³⁵ J. Biggs, P.H. Hawley, and M. Biernat, “The Academic Conference as a Chilly Climate for Women: Effects of Gender Representation on Experiences of Sexism, Coping Responses, and Career Intentions” *Sex Roles* 78, 394–408 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-017-0800-9>.

¹³⁶ Justin Kruger and David Dunning, “Unskilled and unaware of it: how difficulties in recognizing one’s own incompetence lead to inflated self-assessments,” *Journal of personality and social psychology* 77 6 (1999): pp. 1121 – 34.

competency, to gain and develop skills that make one better at whatever it is one is trying to do. But do the men in my generation *want* to be egalitarian? Can egalitarianism, specifically actively working against racism and sexism, be treated as a competency? This is exactly what researchers Keon West and Asia A. Eaton assert in their 2019 research in which they applied the Dunning-Kruger model to egalitarianism.¹³⁷ Their research found that “[i]n line with the Dunning-Kruger model, participants overestimated their levels of racial and gender-based egalitarianism, and this pattern was strongest among the most prejudiced participants.”¹³⁸ That is to say, people who are less competent – persons who have not received the education and training necessary for a certain skill, in this case *egalitarianism* – are more likely to overestimate their egalitarianism. This is not to support elitism but rather demonstrates that higher education often provides the competencies necessary for beginning to work toward egalitarian communities.

A poignant example, which is quoted at the opening of their article, is Donald J. Trump saying, “I’m the least racist person that you have ever met” immediately following a quote from Senator Bernie Sanders saying that Trump is “the most racist, sexist, homophobic, bigoted president in history.”¹³⁹ It has been shown that white people regard racism as less of a problem than persons of marginalized racial and ethnic identities; it has also been shown that “men, compared to women, are less likely to notice or respond to sexism.”¹⁴⁰ As West and Eaton illustrate, the Dunning-Kruger model is true of racial and gender biases as well.

Gen Z men are less educated than Gen Z women and more religious. Therefore, as discussed above, since white men are less likely to notice sexism, and white people with less

¹³⁷ Keon West and Asia A. Eaton, “Prejudiced and Unaware of It: Evidence for the Dunning-Kruger Model in the Domains of Racism and Sexism,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 146 (2019): 111–19.

¹³⁸ West and Eaton, “Prejudiced and Unaware of It,” p. 111.

¹³⁹ West and Eaton, p. 111.

¹⁴⁰ Jacklyn Biggs, Patricia H Hawley, and Monica Biernat, “The Academic Conference as a Chilly Climate for Women: Effects of Gender Representation on Experiences of Sexism, Coping Responses, and Career Intentions,” *Sex Roles* 78, no. 5–6 (2018): 394–408; cited from West and Eaton, p. 111.

education are more likely to deny racial and ethnic discrimination, *the Christians of my generation run the risk of being the most prejudiced gathering in U.S.-American life*. And by integrating the research of West and Eaton, we now know that this same gathering – Christians from my generation – is, based upon the demographics, perhaps the most prejudiced gathering *and also* the most likely to overestimate how egalitarian we are. “We’re not racist or sexist” says a white male pastor who looks out at a crowd of young white men who, generally speaking, have not had the training necessary to recognize our own prejudices. But as Christians we believe that there is always hope! West and Eaton show us that egalitarianism, specifically recognizing and working to overcome racism, sexism and – I would add – transphobia and homophobia, is *a skill that can be gained*. The challenge is for us as churches, theologians, and religious leaders to recognize the need for egalitarianism as a competency. After all, Christ-followers are to be known by our love for one another (Jn 13:35), and no member of the body can deny the value of another (1 Cor. 12:21-27). Therefore, we must make it clear that in gaining the competency of egalitarianism we gain the competency necessary for being the church.

While West and Eaton do not provide a detailed plan for overcoming this situation, they speculate that “most diversity training does not involve any actual training in techniques to reduce bias, but rather focuses on the delivery of information about bias.”¹⁴¹ We must not only educate our communities on the statistics and effects of biases, but we must also provide them with the techniques necessary for reducing our own biases so that we can become the church more fully. Two of these techniques, which they passingly reference, are “counter-stereotypic imaging and stereotype replacement.”¹⁴² In other words, practices in counterhegemony are necessary for ethical theology today. Using the theology of feminist theologian Elizabeth

¹⁴¹ West and Eaton, p. 117.

¹⁴² West and Eaton cite Patricia G. Devine, Patrick S Forscher, Anthony J Austin, and William T.L Cox, “Long-Term Reduction in Implicit Race Bias: A Prejudice Habit-Breaking Intervention,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 48, no. 6 (2012): pp. 1267–78.

Johnson and the work of Afro-Cuban American artist Harmonia Rosales, I have demonstrated one possible way of using these techniques in churches and theology.

As Johnson notes, the symbol of God shapes our behavior, and as we have seen, that symbol can either lead to a rejection of diversity or to its embrace. A male God reinforces hegemonic masculinity, which centers white heterosexual men and, in so doing, perpetuates the fantastic hegemonic imagination that devalues and dehumanizes all others while claiming to be “loving” or to promote “diverse perspectives” while defunding and targeting diversity trainings.¹⁴³ I have, therefore, tried to demonstrate how theologians and/or people of faith can move from complicity in the coercive functioning of the fantastic hegemonic imagination to a critical re-imagining of God. This critical re-imagining is a practice of counterhegemony, which each chapter will continue to practice. This section began with a Black female image of God to dislodge the one that has become literalized and idolized in its constant use. The effects of Michelangelo’s image were described without perpetuating the use of that image. Systematic theology, as a *Wissenschaft*, operates upon the theory of a reflexive and self-referential structure of faith, which the symbol of God represents. To understand God in this way, as a symbol that arises in the act of faith, which is passed on, transformed, and made meaningful (materialized) in particular communities at particular times, is another way of describing theological performativity.

But what does it mean for God to be the ontological ground of Christian discourse if God is understood in this way? Is not a ground counterintuitive to practices of counterhegemony and queer challenges of essentialism? The next section attends to these simmering questions.

¹⁴³ Dani Anguiano, “Trump signs orders cracking down on diversity and inclusion at US universities” *The Guardian* (April 24, 2025), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/apr/23/trump-education-diversity-hcbu>.

II. “On the Boundary:”¹⁴⁴ Moving Beyond an Essentialist Ontology

To regard God as a symbol within a Tillichian framework affirms both that the concept of God is a historically-contingent construction and also that this symbol entails a *direction* and *orientation*: it directs those who engage with and claim it towards some experience of reality that is conditioned by the traditions they inherit.¹⁴⁵ As discussed in the Introduction with regards to Butler, to identify something as constructed or symbolic is not to deem it unreal or fake. This is also true for Tillich. Tillich explicitly states that to equate the symbolic with the “unreal” or false would be a mistake, one that is “partially due to the identification of reality with empirical reality, with the entire realm of objective things and events.”¹⁴⁶ As already mentioned, postmodern theorists would critique any such claims to an absolute and objective reality, unmediated by the observer/participant. Therefore, to say that God is a symbol is to liberate God and theology itself from such imposing, self-defeating claims and their harmful effects.

At this point one might understandably begin to wonder, if God is a symbol, what keeps this symbol from taking on so many different interpretations that it becomes unrecognizable and loses relevance completely? This question undergirds the classic critique levied against postmodernists, i.e., relativism. In describing the logic of “discursive continuities,” the Italian philosopher Santiago Zabala writes that “preferring one description to another is justified as a response to the description’s own historical constellations; in other words, all preferences, decisions, or solutions become responses to the epochal order of the horizons from which they

¹⁴⁴ This is part of the title of Tillich’s autobiography, Paul Tillich, *On The Boundary: An Autobiographical Sketch* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1966).

¹⁴⁵ In discussing the difference between signs and symbols Tillich writes that, “while the sign bears no necessary relation to that to which it points, the symbol participates in the reality of that for which it stands. The sign can be changed arbitrarily according to the demands of expediency, but the symbol grows and dies according to the correlation between that which is symbolized and the persons who receive it as a symbol. Therefore, the religious symbol, the symbol which points to the divine, can be a true symbol only if it participates in the power of the divine to which it points,” Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 239. I use “we” as a self-conscious awareness that I, as a queer member of the clergy, am writing from and to a particular audience that has been shaped by and is tasked with tending to Christian symbols.

¹⁴⁶ Tillich, vol. I, p. 241.

come, thus, ‘from within.’”¹⁴⁷ What I am suggesting is that God is one such discursive continuity, and that tradition (be that Roman Catholic, United Methodist like this author, or that of any other self-defined religious community) constitutes the historical constellation within which the concept of God is given meaning as it is received and appropriated in diverse contexts by diverse persons. Therefore, recognizing the symbol of God as a theo-social construction, which is given meaning within interpretative communities (i.e., Christians in churches acting “in the name of God”), need not lead to a situation in which “anything goes.” One is always working from within a tradition, that is, within dynamic historical constellations. The functioning of this process is the subject of Chapter Three. The fantastic hegemonic imagination affects us all – oppressed and oppressors, and the spaces in which our multiple identities queerly complexify such a dualism.

In this hermeneutic situation, God is not an entity with objective universal validity extending beyond or outside the communities that engage with and are oriented by this symbol. And also, God is not irrelevant or any less real for the persons who participate in this communal symbolic process. To reiterate Caputo’s point, “God is what God does, and what God does is what is done in the name of God.” For this reason, Caputo writes that the call of God “is only made manifest in the response that is made to it. The response is what exists and bears the only witness we have to what insists.”¹⁴⁸ When one acts in the name of God, one actualizes God in the world, and this theo-socially constructed religious symbol becomes real. No longer can the theologian hide behind the infallible demands of a being beyond question or within the tower of theology as a self-reflexive discipline that is so distinct from religion that it is recused of responsibility. Rather, theology plays an active role in continually (re)constructing the call one responds to and the ways in which one responds. Theology becomes a critical site of

¹⁴⁷ Cf. Santiago Zabala, *The Remains of Being: Hermeneutic Ontology After Metaphysics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 119.

¹⁴⁸ Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, p. 37. Author’s emphasis.

responsibility.

But does Tillich's theology fit as neatly into the postmodern theology I have thus far sought to demonstrate? In his famous formulation, Tillich's concept of God is a "God above God," a concept beyond the categories of modern theology – and yet not totally rid of them. As Tillich writes in *The Courage to Be*, the God above God is a concept "above the scheme into which theism has forced [God]."¹⁴⁹ This is to reiterate that God is not a being or even a highest being, for "if God is brought into the subject-object structure of being, [God] ceases to be the ground of being and becomes one being among others... [God] ceases to be the God who is really God."¹⁵⁰ For Tillich, the God above God is humanity's ultimate concern and the aim of human existence – whether or not one realizes or consents to this state of affairs.¹⁵¹ Accordingly, Tillich concludes that "[r]eligion is the substance of culture, and culture the form of religion."¹⁵² And with this conclusion, Tillich's boundary position becomes clearer: he is at odds not only with traditional theistic models of God, but also with the postmodernism described thus far in which God *cannot* be the ground of (all) being. In the postmodern theology I have sought to demonstrate, God is both a contextually-dependent symbol in a historical chain of transmission through which being finds meaning in interpretative communities and also a Christian symbol for this reflexive process. Moving beyond Tillich, the Christian God can no longer be the ontological ground of *all* being and the aim of *all* human existence for this would be an overreach of theology, imposing itself upon other cultural spheres and upon expressly nonreligious persons and activities. Such a concept would hegemonically impose itself and transgress the theoretical presuppositions of (queer) systematic theology as a *Wissenschaft*.

¹⁴⁹ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), p. 187.

¹⁵⁰ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 172.

¹⁵¹ In the Epilogue of his recent publication, Christian Danz discusses the limits of Tillich's theology today specifically in relation to different models of pluralism. Cf. Danz, "Epilogue: Paul Tillich and the Contemporary Theological Debates" in *The Theology of Paul Tillich*.

¹⁵² Paul Tillich, "Aspects of a Religious Analysis of Culture," in *The Essential Tillich*, F. Forrester Church, ed. (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 103.

As discussed in the first part of this chapter, Danz notes that Tillich's concept of revelation in the early part of the twentieth century contrasted Karl Barth and Friedrich Gogarten's Christo-centrism.¹⁵³ That is to say, while Barth and Gogarten restricted God's revelation to Christ alone, Tillich's concept of a general revelation opened nature and culture as valid media of revelation for Protestants as well. The ecstatic experience of encountering what one perceives to be the depth of reality can be experienced not only in the Bible's depictions of Jesus, but also while encountering a work of art or music. And since gender and sexual identities are understood to be social constructions, queer identities and bodies, too, can be regarded as valid media of revelation. I have propose that in the experience of "gender euphoria"¹⁵⁴ and/or of affirming one's sexuality for the first time, one often experiences something akin to what Tillich describes as encountering the ground of being.¹⁵⁵ Tillich's theology, therefore, highlights the important relationship between revelation and ontology – between a community's understanding of God, the ground of their ontological structure, and their understanding of the human, which derives meaning from this ground as one expresses and experiences it in art, music, and/or gender and sexual identities. Historically, Tillich's theology widened the field of revelation for Protestants, giving theological meaning to culture and human constructions since they, too, participate in the God who is being-itself. His modern presuppositions, however, led Tillich to impose this claim on all persons and cultures. In section A below, I propose that the essentialist ontological critiques of queer theory can aid in the application of Tillich's thought today in the affirmation of LGBTQIA+ persons within the systematic method.

¹⁵³ Cf. Danz, *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, Chapter V "General and Special Revelation of God: Paul Tillich's Discussion with Karl Barth and the Formation of the Method of Correlation," pp. 89 – 123.

¹⁵⁴ "In contrast to gender dysphoria, which originates in psychiatry, the term 'gender euphoria' has been mobilized by some LGBTQ people to describe the powerfully positive emotions that can come from one's gender/sex." Cf. Beischel WJ, Gauvin SEM, van Anders SM, "A little shiny gender breakthrough: Community understandings of gender euphoria," *International Journal of Transgender Health* 2021; 23(3): pp. 274 – 294. Published 2021 May 3.

¹⁵⁵ Cf. J.J. Warren, "The (Queer) New Being: Synthesizing Paul Tillich and Judith Butler's Approaches to Ontology," *Bulletin of the North American Paul Tillich Society* 50, no. 1 and 2 (2024): pp 32 – 39.

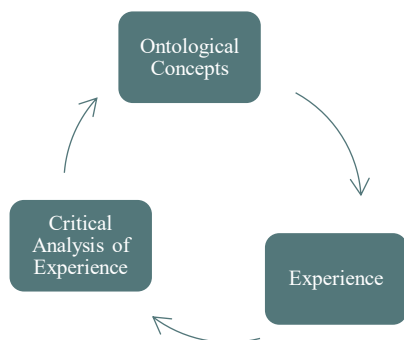


Figure 1: Tillich's Ontological Scheme

i. Ontology and Epistemology in Tillich. Operating behind these questions is a theory of epistemology and its critical relation to ontology: how does one come to know what one knows – about God, consciousness, or anything at all? In describing the epistemological character of ontological concepts, Tillich writes that

ontological concepts are *a priori* insofar as they “determine the nature of experience.”¹⁵⁶ This does *not* mean, however, that ontological concepts are “known prior to experience,” but rather that “they are products of a critical analysis of experience”¹⁵⁷ (see Figure 1 above). As such, ontological concepts are open to critique and change. While ontological concepts have changed, and will continue to change, Tillich asserts that there persists “a structure of experience which can be recognized within the process of experiencing and which can be elaborated critically.”¹⁵⁸

While Tillich's Christological concept of the New Being forms the center and salve of his system, which will be discussed in the next chapter, Tillich's theology works counter to the Christo-centric theologies described earlier in which it is only through Jesus the Christ that God is revealed and nowhere else. The relationship between *ontology* and *revelation* that Tillich brings to the fore and develops within his theology of culture, which determines the value of all creation (including humanity's creative acts), is what positions his theology as invaluable for the queer task of overcoming the binary opposition between Christo-centric theologies and the theo-ethical value of creation and human cultural productions. Because God is the ground of being for Christians, cultural creations can be regarded within Christian communities as valid media of revelation insofar as everything that has being participates in the ground of being (Augustine; Tillich). However, this claim must not impose a transcendental or objective

¹⁵⁶ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 166.

¹⁵⁷ Tillich, vol. I, p. 166.

¹⁵⁸ Tillich, vol. I, p. 167.

universality upon all persons, but ought to be read instead as a position of openness – nothing and no one are categorically excluded from consenting to participate in the ongoing message of Christianity. This will be further developed below in Part III of the chapter. In other words, the theologian must ask, *What is the meaning of existence* for Christians?¹⁵⁹

A. Destabilizing Substance: A Critical Genealogy of Gender

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler utilizes a wide array of critical methodologies and disciplines to interrogate the concept of gender and, as a result, Butler radically shifts the epistemological paradigm of gender from one of traditional ontology/metaphysics (that is, of substance/essence) to one of *social temporality* and *citationality* (that is, socially constituted in time through the repetition and subversion of norms).¹⁶⁰ As discussed in the Introduction, rather than thinking of gender as an expression of an internal fact (for example, that one's anatomy or clothing expresses some inner core that is gendered), gender ought to be considered a "corporeal style" of sorts, a repeated act, like a ritual, that is performed by bodies under the compulsory regulation of heterosexual reproduction.¹⁶¹ To reiterate, when conceiving of gender, the movement of influence is reversed for Butler: cultural norms are compulsorily *thrust upon* bodies that perform/seek to perform the very thing they were told was *within* them all long: a gendered self/identity. And yet, as their later work shows, an identity – a gendered I – is necessary for social existence. But how does Butler systematically arrive at their paradigmatic

¹⁵⁹ Citing Tillich, I have used the word "meaning" several times without clarifying what is meant by meaning. Steven Cassedy explores the various uses of "meaning" in Tillich's works, noting that the change in language from German to English necessarily involved a change in vocabulary, some of which continues to reflect the German word *Sinn*, which is occasionally translated into English as "meaning," but with "a peculiar history in German" that distinguishes it from the English word. In conclusion, Cassedy extrapolates that "In his English writings Tillich used meaning in the following senses (among others): the nexus of "comprehensibility," "value," "direction," from existential philosophy (what is missing when life is meaningless); "ultimate concern" (the "meaning which gives meaning to all meanings"); in the plural, something undefined that man "lives in"; the thing that grasps us when we are in the state of faith; and "God." See Steven Cassedy, "What Is the Meaning of Meaning in Paul Tillich's Theology?" in *Harvard Theological Review* 111, no. 3 (2018): pp. 307 – 32.

¹⁶⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 191.

¹⁶¹ Butler, p. 190.

reversal of gender? And, furthermore, how might Butler's theory of performativity as citationality be compatible with Tillich's ontology?

This paradigmatic shift follows Michel Foucault's methodology of a "critical genealogy" in his *History of Sexuality*, and Butler uses it to describe how the myth of gender as an expression of an inner identity casts a veil over gender's own genesis. Butler poignantly summarizes their appropriation of Foucault's theory as follows:

In the place of an original identification which serves as a determining cause, gender identity might be reconsidered as a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which refer laterally to other imitations and which, jointly, construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self or parody the mechanism of that construction.¹⁶²

Seen in this light, one begins to understand the legitimate concerns that Butler voices regarding ontology and its oppressive use in justifying "gender essentialism," which is "[t]he presumption of a binary gender system [that] implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it."¹⁶³ Cultural assumptions about gender and its relations to sex, where sex is regarded as a fixed and "natural" substantive fact, function to restrict both sex and gender, and thereby limit the potentialities that can be actualized by a person (to use Tillichian language). Therefore, and this is a key distinction that Butler does *not* make in *Gender Trouble*, the *essentialist*-ontological concept of gender and sex must be challenged.

Genealogically, the social construction of gender creates the fiction of natural binary sexes, and not the other way around. Gender, like God for Tillich, becomes the condition for the possibility of social existence. The "I" only comes to be an I when it is gendered. Though working within different disciplines and regarding different topics, Butler and Tillich are,

¹⁶² Butler, p. 188.

¹⁶³ Butler, p. 9.

effectively, taking a similar course of action: using epistemology to challenge the failures they recognized in the ontological schemes of their contemporaries. The essentialist ontological concept of binary genders could be said to be *a priori* insofar as it determines the nature of one's experience. If one is regarded by one's society to be a man, for instance, one is very likely to be paid more for the same work than someone who is socially defined as a woman.¹⁶⁴ Both Tillich and Butler recognize the impact of ontological concepts on the lived experiences of persons, though Butler makes clear the constitutive function of gender within ontology. I understand gender essentialism to be a component of the fantastic hegemonic imagination, which coerces us into policing ourselves and others. It is not the norms themselves that oppress, but the policing of these norms as absolute, transcendental truths and the demand for conformity.

i. Undoing Gender: Anti-Essentialist Critique. In the final pages of *Gender Trouble*, Butler condemns ontology as a “normative injunction that operates insidiously by installing itself into the political discourse as its necessary ground.”¹⁶⁵ Butler's early work uses Foucault's method of critical genealogy in an attempt to reveal the harmful relationship between ontology and gender. However, it becomes apparent in their later works that Butler is not critiquing ontology altogether; rather, Butler is critiquing a particular type of ontology, that is, *gender essentialism*. Susan Heckman, a feminist professor of political science at the University of Texas Arlington, notes that from 2004 onward, Butler's works begin to examine ontology more deeply. Heckman writes,

It is an ontology that departs radically from the ontology of the essentialist subject prior to discourse, but it is an ontology nonetheless. I would even go so far as to say that, for

¹⁶⁴ The Pew Research Center notes, “The gender pay gap – the difference between the earnings of men and women – has barely closed in the United States in the past two decades. In 2022, American women typically earned 82 cents for every dollar earned by men. That was about the same as in 2002, when they earned 80 cents to the dollar.” Cf. Pew Research Center, “The Enduring Grip of the Gender Pay Gap,” (accessed December 13, 2023) <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/03/01/the-enduring-grip-of-the-gender-pay-gap/#:~:text=The%20gender%20pay%20gap%20%E2%80%93%20the,80%20cents%20to%20the%20dollar.>

¹⁶⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 203.

Butler, there is a there there, a subject who resists norms and ‘undoes’ gender; but it is a subject who cannot be thought outside the norms that constitute it. The resistance itself is performed inside those norms and is made possible by them. Most importantly, it is a subject whose ontology, whose being, is dependent on those norms.¹⁶⁶

And so, we begin to see how even for a postmodern scholar such as Butler, ontology *can* play a role in ethics. Ontology can have a function within postmodern discourse, but its function is no longer to impose an a priori and determinate essence from which humanity’s being is assigned meaning. Rather, ontology is ethically understood as social possibility. Gender essentialism is condemned but the ontological significance of norms and the language in which they are articulated persists in such a way that they are not exclusively determinative but open to subversion from within. While Butler does not utilize the concept, their theory is differently nuanced but not opposed to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s concept of “strategic essentialism” insofar as such a concept does not reify or propose a static essence but rather recognizes the political power that is possible when culturally marginalized persons unite to advance their rights (without dissolving their differences).¹⁶⁷

Because sexuality itself is a discursive construction of power and law, which prohibits and produces the performance of identity, the categories of gender and sexuality are open to shifts in power in which no *one* identity can claim to be original, but where all identities share

¹⁶⁶ Susan Heckman, “Vulnerability and Ontology” in *Australian Feminist Studies* 29, no. 82 (2014): 452 – 464, p. 456.

¹⁶⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak first proposed the concept of “strategic essentialism” in her 1985 essay, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” in which she critically examined the work of the Subaltern Studies Group, a collective of Marxist historians, and argued that while essentialism might be a temporary and strategic tool, it should not be seen as a true or permanent label. Cf. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1988). In a 1991 symposium in New York entitled “The Identity in Question,” Butler addressed the topic of strategic essentialism explicitly: “Diana Fuss, Naomi Schor, and Gayatri Spivak have spoken about the rhetorical use of the essentialist claim, sometimes in terms of ‘strategic essentialism.’ Spivak underscores the necessity of insisting on culturally specific differences over and against the theoretical and political efforts erase or subordinate them. But this is not a question of offering an adequate representation in language of a preconstituted group; in a sense, *it is the performative invocation of an identity for the purposes of political resistance to a hegemonic threat of erasure or marginalization*” (emphasis added). Cf. Judith Butler, Stanley Aronowitz, Ernesto Laclau, Joan Scott, Chantal Mouffe, and Cornel West, “Discussion,” *October* 61 (1992): 108–20, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778790>.

a constructed status.¹⁶⁸ Such an ontology can be considered a practice of *counterhegemony*.

Townes describes the fantastic hegemonic imagination in a similar way:

However, it is not only ghosts and shifted realities that comprise the fantastic. It may also be structures of domination and subordination. This is not to suggest or advocate a subtle or not so subtle determinism. It is, however, to suggest that the cultural production of evil can and does entrap many if not most of us. We often operate out of structurally determined limits that do, at points, offer some creativity and autonomy—but these are controlled and managed by hegemonic forces.¹⁶⁹

Gender acts as one such “culturally determined limit” that produces racialized heteropatriarchal fantasies that entrap us within worlds of subordination and domination. Both Townes and Butler draw from Foucault, and Butler furthers his genealogical method with gender in an effort to “understand the discursive production of the plausibility of that binary relation [between illusion/artificiality and the real/authentic] and to suggest that certain cultural configurations of gender take the place of ‘the real’ and consolidate and augment their hegemony through that felicitous self-naturalization.”¹⁷⁰ While some genders have been regarded as “natural,” Butler’s project exposes their hegemonic claim to naturalization and “realness” as one of power and law, where power and law produce the naturalization they purport to describe. Thus, to recognize that gender – and, therefore, *ontology* – is performatively constituted is merely to describe the discursive production of identity itself; it is “an ongoing discursive practice [that is] open to intervention and resignification.”¹⁷¹ Butler’s anti-essentialist critique of gender intrinsically articulates an alternative ontology.

¹⁶⁸ Channeling Foucault, Butler concludes that “Power, rather than the law, encompasses both the juridical (prohibitive and regulatory) and the productive (inadvertently generative) functions of differential relations. Hence, the sexuality that emerges within the matrix of power relations is not a simple replication or copy of the law itself, a uniform repetition or copy of a masculinist economy of identity. The productions swerve from their original purposes [heterosexual reproduction, exogamy] and inadvertently mobilize possibilities of ‘subjects’ that do not merely exceed the bounds of cultural intelligibility, but effectively expand the boundaries of what is, in fact, culturally intelligible.” Cf. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 40. It is necessary to note that *Gender Trouble* is critiqued for not adequately taking the body into account as more than a canvas for political discourse – a critique Butler recognizes and seeks to respond to in their following works. Cf. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the discursive limits of “sex”* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993) and *Undoing Gender* (New York; London: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁶⁹ Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, pp. 19 – 20.

¹⁷⁰ Butler, p. 45.

¹⁷¹ Butler, p. 45.

Furthermore, Butler defines gender as “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being”¹⁷² – i.e., gender essentialism. Butler’s political genealogy of gender aims, therefore, to (1) “deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts,” and (2) “locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender.”¹⁷³ In Part I of this chapter, I sought to deconstruct substantive/theistic concepts of God into their constitutive acts (exegesis, patristic sources, theological developments, and artistic representation) by drawing attention to the self-reflexive structure of faith. I then sought to locate and account for the various ways in which the fantastic hegemonic imagination (re)produces the ordinary evils (i.e., human-made) of racism, sexism, and queer and transphobia by determining these acts through various forces – including national and denominational politics – that police symbols of God and, because of the ontological interconnection, police bodies as well.

In conclusion, Butler asserts that

paradoxically, the reconceptualization of identity as an effect, that is, as produced or generated, opens up possibilities of agency that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed. For an identity to be an effect means that it is neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary [...] construction is not opposed to agency; It is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible.¹⁷⁴

Though some critique anti-foundationalist scholars such as Butler as removing agency by removing the fiction of a stable gendered agent (the “doer behind the deed”), Butler demonstrates how the constructed nature of identity itself provides greater agency in that the

¹⁷² Butler, p. 45.

¹⁷³ Butler, p. 45.

¹⁷⁴ Butler, p. 201.

categories of identity only exist through repetition, and in each repetition resides the very possibility of subverting and contesting these norms. To appropriate Caputo, gender is what gender does, and what gender does is what is done in the name of gender.

We have seen how both Tillich and Butler critically re-imagine ontology without discarding its constitutive function for social life altogether. James H. Cone, considered to be the father of Black liberation theology, drew upon Tillich's ontology in his seminal work, *A Theology of Black Liberation* (1970), to articulate the claim that God is ontologically Black.¹⁷⁵ However, as we will encounter in the next section, some have criticized Cone for his reliance upon white scholars in articulating a Black theology. With these critiques arose critiques of ontological Blackness and of ontology altogether. I now turn to two of the most vocal critics of ontological Blackness, Victor Anderson and Calvin Warren to take seriously the challenges they pose as I work to construct a postmodern ontology within a (queer) systematic doctrine of God.

B. Beyond Ontological Blackness

I suggest that as long as black theology remains determined by ontological blackness, it remains not only a crisis theology but also a theology in a crisis of legitimation.¹⁷⁶

Victor Anderson

Roughly two decades after the rise of the Black Power movement in the United States, and with it the (public) rise of Black theology, Victor Anderson offered a bold critique of the very foundations that much of James H. Cone's theology prophetically proffered. But on what grounds – or *against* what grounds – is Anderson's critique formulated and at what cost to the aim of liberation? In *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism*, Anderson takes up the task of cultural criticism, which for him

¹⁷⁵ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis Books, 1970), cf. "God is Black," pp. 66 – 70.

¹⁷⁶ Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1995), p. 87.

inherently involves religious criticism, to *describe, critique, and move beyond* the reification of race in cultural and religious thinkers that ontological blackness connotes.¹⁷⁷ As Anderson makes clear throughout the text, his approach to cultural criticism, much like a (queer) systematic theology, not only involves description and critique, but it is also constructive, offering alternatives that seek to advance cultural fulfillment and human flourishing.¹⁷⁸ Therefore, as we wade into Anderson's critique of ontological Blackness, it should not necessarily be read as a negation or condemnation, but rather as a reformation from within the discourse, deconstructing and challenging concepts within Black cultural/religious criticism and theology that no longer serve the communit(ies)y in a postmodern context.¹⁷⁹

As the previous section summarized, one of the liberating contributions of Cone's theology was his positive articulation of ontological Blackness, and from that, a Tillichian affirmation that God, the ground of Being, must therefore be Black. Anderson, however, challenges the ontological presupposition upon which this argument is constructed. Recounting early critiques of Cone, Anderson lists among these the "absurdity" that (quoting Cone) "black experience is possible only for black persons," the separation of Cone's Black theology from the creeds and evangelical message of Black churches, and his simultaneous use and rejection of European sources – an "apologetic preoccupation" that not only created contradictions within his own thought but also broadened the rift between his theology and the practices of Black churches.¹⁸⁰ Furthermore, though Cone appropriates Tillich's theory of symbols, to Anderson Cone transgresses the foundational principle of this theory: that symbols point toward and participate in a ground of ultimate meaning, but symbols *must not* be mistaken for that ground

¹⁷⁷ Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, p. 11.

¹⁷⁸ Anderson, p. 28.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. Anderson, pp. 143 – 144: "I am not interested in either commending or assigning culpability to these past projects in African American cultural criticism. ... What I stress are certain consequences of this aesthetic for the subsequent development of African American cultural philosophy under today's drastically changed conditions in which neither the portest politics of the 1960s nor the revolutionary rhetoric of the 70s seem effective."

¹⁸⁰ Anderson, pp. 86 – 92.

itself. To mistake a symbol for that to which it points is what Tillich refers to as idolatry.¹⁸¹ As Anderson points out, Cone's theology makes Blackness "a totality of meaning" that "cannot point to any transcendent meaning beyond itself without also fragmenting."¹⁸² Hence the "absurdity" that Anderson sees in Cone's claim that somehow the symbol of ontological Blackness can only be experienced by persons rich in melanin. Such a totality refuses to recognize, or worse rejects as "traitors to the race" and "Uncle Toms," Black persons who do not conform to the heroic symbol of ontological Blackness and its moral masculinity – it continues to exclude Black women and LGBTQIA+ Black persons from the very discourse that is meant to liberate Black communities. Thus far, the ontology Anderson critiques is an *essentialization* and *totalization* of Black life under the symbol of ontological Blackness.

Furthermore, and here I quote Anderson at length,

Because black life is fundamentally determined by black suffering and resistance to whiteness (the power of nonbeing), black existence is without the possibility of transcendence from the blackness that whiteness created. Without transcendence from the determinacy of whiteness, black theology's promise of liberation remains existentially a function of black self-consciousness (to see oneself as black, free, and self-determined). However, since as Cone argues it is whiteness, white racism, and white theology that threatens the nonbeing of blacks, the promise of black liberation remains bracketed both existentially and politically. Existentially, the new black being remains bound by whiteness. Politically, it remains unfulfilled because blackness is ontologically defined as the experience of suffering and survival. Any amelioration of these essential marks of blackness performatively contradicts ontological blackness in black theology.¹⁸³

Anderson's critique of Cone brings to the fore the tenuous place of ontological discourse generally within postmodern scholarship – not only in feminist political discourse and queer

¹⁸¹ This would be the "elevation of a preliminary concern to ultimacy." Cf. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 13.

¹⁸² Anderson, p. 92.

¹⁸³ Anderson, pp. 92 – 93.

theory, but in Black cultural criticism and theology as well. What Anderson observes and critiques in theology and cultural studies is a “metaphysical ontology” that undergirds the construction of race and the meaning of Blackness in these discourses: “In metaphysical ontology, race denotes essential properties (essences), such that to lack any one property renders one a member of a pseudospecies.”¹⁸⁴

Right from the introduction Anderson identifies a paradigmatic shift regarding ontology by referencing the “postmodern blackness” of bell hooks. For Anderson, “[p]ostmodern blackness recognizes the permanency of race as an effective category in identity formation. However, it also recognizes that black identities are continually being reconstituted as African Americans inhabit widely differentiated social spaces and communities of moral discourse.”¹⁸⁵ This postmodern approach to race both refuses to reify race as a static essence or totalizing reality *and also* takes seriously the real consequences that racial categories have on the lives of persons and communities. Such an approach challenges the ways in which even a subordinated community, such as African Americans, can participate in the fantastic hegemonic imagination by participating in the very essentialism that undergirds the system of subordination in the first place. Reflecting on this maintained tension, Anderson writes,

The new literary critiques of African American cultural philosophy are not naive about the pervasive and historic influences of white racial ideology on the construction of black presence and identity. However, any failure to acknowledge the effects of racism/racing in the politics of black identity must render talk about constructing a new politics of difference internally incoherent. For it is very difficult to explicate connotatively the *new* without at the same time displacing those prior discourses that have representationally structured African American cultural life.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ Anderson, p. 12. As Anderson explains, the concept of *pseudospecies* is developed by Erik Erikson and is “connected with group identity formation.” Cf. Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968).

¹⁸⁵ Anderson, p. 12.

¹⁸⁶ Anderson, p. 142.

Anderson envisions Blackness(es) that is(/are) neither determined by white racism nor ignorant of its historic and present reality in the lives of African Americans. It is a Blackness that is constantly reconstituted by and encourages difference. The central role of difference in this work is intended “to alert critics of the linguistic danger of reifying the categories that govern their discourses in such a way as to mimic, represent, and mirror the discourses they want to reject.”¹⁸⁷

What Anderson offers is a postmodern critique of Black identity politics and the metaphysics supporting these beliefs through cultural and religious criticism. If Cone is building upon Tillich’s theory of symbols, and if – as I have said – Tillich’s theology occupies a liminal space on the boundary between modernism and postmodernism, then is it possible that some of Anderson’s critiques arise from a modern interpretation of Cone? That is to say, if Tillich’s ontology is not actually substantive but seeks to take account of the ways in which societal constructions (the ontological concepts that are *a priori*) impact and shape one’s experience of the world, then could ontological blackness not be regarded as a concept that is still informed by the historic and present oppression of anti-Black racism but remains, as in Tillich’s ontology, open to critique and change? In other words, one could affirm the unique insight and experiences that Black theologians and ecclesial communities express from their particular location while not reducing these insights to an essentialized position of marginalization – and while also recognizing the role of anti-Black racism in the historic and present contexts of Black communities. Anderson’s critique of ontological Blackness becoming a totality for Cone is perhaps a two-fold critique of both Tillich’s theology and Cone’s application. What I mean is that in his postmodern approach, Anderson rightly criticizes Cone’s *essentialized* ontological Blackness as a “totality of meaning,” one that not only transgresses the negative side of Tillich’s theology by asserting that the symbol of ontological Blackness *is*

¹⁸⁷ Anderson, p. 144.

the ground itself, but also – and here is the critique of Tillich – Anderson challenges the modern assertion that a totality of meaning is theoretically possible or ethically advisable.

As described above, the validity of Tillich's one non-symbolic statement – that God is being-itself – imposes a Christian religious totality of meaning (the ground and abyss of being) on all aspects of culture, even the self-identified secular ones. Therefore, Anderson's critiques of Cone are equally valid and necessary for Tillichian scholarship concerning ontology and its place in postmodern discourse. The symbol of ontological Blackness, or of God as the ground and abyss of [all] being, may indeed be liberating for some, but these symbols, as all symbols do, risk becoming oppressive forces if they remain within the imperialistic tendencies of modern thought to unify and totalize – they participate in the fantastic hegemonic imagination. As Rebecca Copeland summarizes Townes, "It is hegemonic because it denies all alternative possibilities, demanding acceptance of the injustices of our societies as the only possibility."¹⁸⁸ Therefore, what Anderson critiques in Cone as a transgression of Tillich's theory actually identifies a weakness of Tillich's own theology: namely, the way in which Tillich's concept of God as the ground of [all] being – and with it the truism that "religion is the substance of culture and culture the form of religion" – transgresses Tillich's own critical principle that nothing (and therefore, not even his notion of God as being-itself) can be regarded as absolute.

All contents must remain open to prophetic critique so as to avoid becoming demonic, even the notion that there is *one* ground and abyss of [all] being. What Anderson does is not to deny the power of the symbol of ontological Blackness, but rather he continues the critique that is necessary to keep symbols – even liberative ones – from becoming tools of oppression and idolatry. In so doing, it can be said that he continues the queer (critical) task of systematic theology.

¹⁸⁸ Rebecca L. Copeland, *Entangled Being: Unoriginal Sin & Wicked Problems* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2024), p. 4.

This critical task, identified by Tillich as the “prophetic”/“Protestant principle,” is what Anderson deems the “iconoclastic function” of religious criticism. He writes,

Religious criticism seeks to fulfill its iconoclastic functions by exposing the demonic present even in those forms of criticism that parade as liberating and revolutionary projects... It attempts to disclose those emancipatory aspects of individuality that each person has a legitimate right to expect of cultural fulfillment within Western democratic societies. As a viable mode of cultural criticism, religious criticism can be enlightening and iconoclastic when it exposes and rejects totalities (race, class, gender, and sexuality) that would deny cultural fulfillment of persons on the grounds of differences—whether ethnicity, social status, biological determinants, or sexual orientation. Religious criticism as cultural criticism can be emancipatory and utopian when it sees beyond the debilitating and oppressive structures of culture possibilities for human flourishing and cultural fulfillment.¹⁸⁹

Like a (queer) systematic theology, religious criticism for Anderson is both *enlightening* and *emancipatory*, *iconoclastic* and *utopian*. It not only identifies the oppressive effects of cultural and religious discourse; religious criticism also works to overcome these effects through counter narratives of diverse possibilities for human flourishing and cultural fulfillment. Similarly, in reflecting on the words and life of the late Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, Townes asserts that to “begin dismantling the cultural production of evil” we must realize that this work is a “group project. Our individual acts, while helpful, will not provide enough moral oomph to unhinge and dismantle the tremendously entrenched force of the fantastic hegemonic imagination.”¹⁹⁰ The necessary work of challenging the fantastic hegemonic imagination involves all of *us*, working together in various – and even conflicting – ways to unsettle totalizing claims about God, humanity, and all creation. As we have seen, these totalizing claims depend upon an essentialized ontology and the interdependence between ontology and doctrines of God.

¹⁸⁹ Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, pp. 37 – 38.

¹⁹⁰ Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, p. 160.

i. Nihilistic Emancipation? A pressing question, which is at the heart of this study, still remains: does the move beyond an *essentialist* or *totalizing* ontological concept of Blackness, as demonstrated by Anderson, necessarily require the abandonment of ontology altogether? Furthermore, is such an abandonment possible? – is it possible to speak of one’s experience, or a community’s experience, without an underlying concept of that person’s/community’s *being*? In other words, what is ontology’s role in a postmodern context? In *Ontological Terror*, nihilist philosopher and professor of African American studies Calvin Warren argues not only that ontology has no place in discourse today, but that it must be “annihilated.”¹⁹¹ Using the paradigm of the antebellum “free black,”¹⁹² Warren demonstrates the sinister efficacy of the ontological claims that underlie law and politics. In explicit nihilistic fashion, he ultimately asserts that the ontological framework of humanism institutes and perpetuates a “metaphysical holocaust” in which Black bodies are denied ~~being~~ (struck through because they have no being). Blackness, and specifically Black ~~being~~, “constitutes the nothing in an antiblack world” and is simultaneously necessary (metaphysics *needs* nothing for its framework) and hated (being always seeks to conquer and dominate nothing).¹⁹³ For this reason Warren concludes that “antiblackness is anti-nothing.”¹⁹⁴

Rather than turning to what Warren calls “black humanism,”¹⁹⁵ a Black nihilistic acknowledgement of Black ~~being~~’s location – which ~~is~~ nowhere – can move Black thinking beyond “the human and its humanism fantasies.”¹⁹⁶ The fine point that Warren makes here is that though some may fear abandoning the human, i.e., why some persist in advocating for Black persons to be seen and valued as equally human, *this fear arises within the humanist*

¹⁹¹ Cf. Calvin L. Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

¹⁹² The “Antebellum era” is a period of U.S. history between the War of 1812 and the beginning of the Civil War in 1861. It was during this time that slavery transformed, especially – but not exclusively, in the Southern United States into a pillar of society that must be defended.

¹⁹³ Warren, *Ontological Terror*, p. 6.

¹⁹⁴ Warren, p. 10.

¹⁹⁵ Cf. Warren, p. 4.

¹⁹⁶ Warren, p. 170.

framework that values the white human above all else. For Warren, Black thinking's move beyond the human and ontology altogether is *not* to reject the value of Black persons; rather, it is to reject the framework within which value is assigned to the white human exclusively, and it affirms an alternative existence – a “black existence without Being, humanism, or the human.”¹⁹⁷ Warren leaves us with the beginnings of a proposal for this existence, which rests “in the crevice between the impossibility of transforming the world and the dynamic enduring power of the spirit.”¹⁹⁸ In this new existence, which occurs through the “obliteration of Being,” the focus moves away from the human and toward the *spirit*, “something exceeding and preceding the metaphysical world.”¹⁹⁹

Within the lens of Warren's Black nihilism, it is clear that the ontological framework of much of the Western world has not only elevated whiteness but has also predetermined and subjugated Blackness – and Black persons – as a necessary antithesis of Being. A few crucial details appear to be missing in Warren's analysis, however. Specifically, an intersectional analysis that refuses to de-sex/gender the poor queer subject as fervently as it attends to the physical and metaphysical violence against Black bodies. The sexuality and gender of the persons who have been forced to function as the incarnation of metaphysical nothing is absent from Warren's critique. Furthermore, there appears to be no accounting for other communities of color within Warren's binary framework of white-black, metaphysics-nothing. Are brown/Latinx, Asian, Indigenous bodies simply to be assimilated into the Black (non)location of nothing? This oversight of the role of gender, class, sexuality, and the ontological (non)relation of other persons who fall outside the (predominantly heterosexual) white-Black binary brings to the fore the real harm this onto-metaphysical worldview perpetuates. Perhaps this is implicitly understood for Warren, but one cannot know for certain from the text.

¹⁹⁷ Warren, p. 171.

¹⁹⁸ Warren, p. 171.

¹⁹⁹ Warren, p. 171.

Following Heidegger, Warren understands Being as “an event that structures historical reality and possibility itself;” it is “the grand aperture that has provided *the condition for relationality* for many epochs [which has been] reified [by the metaphysical tradition] as a static presence, a presence to be possessed and analyzed. In this sense,” Warren surmises, “we lose the grandeur of Being and confuse it for being.”²⁰⁰ Warren’s fundamental claim is, however, “that Being is not universal or applicable to blacks.”²⁰¹ Applying Heidegger’s thought, he states that “[to] allow Being’s unfolding, or *to be*, is the melding of standing-forth and abiding, or enduring, such standing. In an antiblack world, such standing forth, or emerging/becoming, is obliterated,” which is what he refers to as the “metaphysical holocaust.” But what exactly does he mean by the claim that “blacks have an existence without being? It is helpful here to quote Warren at length:

To be, according to Heidegger, is to become, to emerge and move within Being-as-event. But what happens when such becoming does not occur? When the event of Being does not stimulate a productive anxiety of actualization, but gets caught in a repetition of event-less demise and nothingness? To inhabit such a condition is to exist as perpetual falling, without standing-forth, without Being. This, then, is the devastation of the metaphysical holocaust: black ~~being~~ never becomes, or stands forth, but exists in concealment, falling, and inconsistency. When I say, then, that blacks lack being but have existence, I mean that they inhabit the world in concealment and non-movement (this is the condition of objects, despite the work of object-oriented ontologists who project humanism onto objects). Thus, the task of black thinking is to limn the devastating distinction between “existence” (inhabitation) and “being.”²⁰²

The reified being of metaphysics is an unchangeable fact for Warren, foreclosing the possibility of critiquing and transforming ontological schemes altogether. Perhaps this conclusion is not nihilism alone, but a nihilistic and exclusive use of Heidegger, whose Nazi sympathies should alert one to potential devastating conclusions within his thought. But

²⁰⁰ Warren, p. 12.

²⁰¹ Warren, p. 12.

²⁰² Warren, p. 13.

Heidegger's scheme, while highly influential, is certainly not the only one with a wide audience and influence.

As we have seen, Paul Tillich, who was a contemporary of Heidegger but was removed from his university position in Germany for refusing to condone or support Nazi ideology, offered a starkly different ontology. Even in Heidegger's time his thought was not regarded as the *only* available option regarding metaphysics, and today's Protestant theology has been profoundly impacted by the thought of Tillich – who both utilized and critiqued Heidegger. My aim, therefore, is not to critique Warren's brilliant use of Heideggerian philosophy to describe the violence against black ~~being~~; rather, my aim is to illustrate that a deterministic and exclusive use of Heidegger's thought as a fundamental rationale for "obliterating ontology" altogether as the only liberative path is *not* the only possible way forward – though I say this with the recognition of the limitations of my own social location as a white queer cisgender male. I seek to be Warren's accomplice in his aim, even if that means offering an alternative method. In fact, the pneumatological vision that Warren offers in his "Coda" is not all that different from Tillich's, and it is significant that Tillich's *Systematic Theology* ends with pneumatology as the salve for the system. Both Tillich and Warren point to the spirit as a way beyond the confines of their different contexts, so the question here becomes is obliteration still necessary if alternative ontological paradigms, aside from Warren's use of Heidegger's, do exist and have impact? And if so, what might those alternatives entail in terms of the relation between ontology and human suffering?

Before continuing on, it is important to name that there is a methodological distinction between Heidegger as a philosopher (who studied theology) and Tillich as a theologian, which carries with it the differing assumptions and world views of their disciplines. I highlight this distinction because it seems that Warren, in his use of Heidegger, may have followed a similar method – for there is no other reason I can offer to explain why Warren's book on Blackness

and ontology does not engage with the seminal work of James Cone, whose very public and influential theology developed the concept of God as ontologically black. While some have critiqued Cone's approach, its absence from Warren's text altogether, without the possible rationale just offered, is puzzling. In other words, perhaps because both Heidegger and Warren are philosophers, they did not concern themselves with their theological counterparts (Tillich and Cone). The interdisciplinarity of a (queer) systematic method, on the other hand, transgresses these disciplinary boundaries for the group project of counterhegemony.

ii. Alternative Paradigms. While Warren, following Heidegger, critiques ontology for analyzing a "static presence"/substance, Tillich's ontology is starkly different. Tillich explores the interdependence between perception and being when he writes that "we transform reality according to the way we see it, and we see reality according to the way we transform it."²⁰³ As Figure 1 illustrated earlier, ontological concepts shape one's experience, but these concepts are the products of a critical analysis of experience, meaning that the concepts themselves are always open to change. This is why Tillich regards ontological concepts as historical rather than as timeless universals.²⁰⁴ With this scheme in mind, one can take up Warren's critique of ontology as part of the necessary analysis through which ontological concepts are formed and transformed throughout history. While Warren's work cannot be fully reconciled with the task of reimagining ontology beyond essentialism undertaken by this project, his critiques of the racist structure of essentialist ontology, also made by Anderson, must be incorporated as yet another motivation for alternative ontological paradigms within theology and communities of faith.

Alternative ontological paradigms, as constructive community projects (as opposed to annihilation), are required within the present project because ontology is theological: the

²⁰³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 76.

²⁰⁴ Tillich, vol. I, pp. 163 – 168.

question of being is the question of God. To obliterate one would be to obliterate the other. This is what is meant by the mutual interdependence of ontology and doctrines of God. However, as this chapter has sought to demonstrate, articulating alternative paradigms intrinsically involves critique and deconstruction of totalizing/essentialist ones and (re)constructions of alternatives. Furthermore, Tillich refers to God as both “the ground and abyss” of being, which is to say that being finds meaning in God, its ground, and that this depth of meaning will always precede and exceed humanity’s ability to grasp it – it is the abyss.²⁰⁵ Warren’s description of Blackness as abyss, then, does not preclude Blackness from ontology within a Tillichian scheme. In fact, the abyss is necessary – the abyss is the ground beneath the ground that can never be reached, only sought after.²⁰⁶ It is to reject the framework within which value is assigned to the white human exclusively, and it affirms an alternative existence – a “black existence without Being, humanism, or the human—something exceeding and preceding the metaphysical world.”²⁰⁷ This existence, within Tillich’s thought, is not nothing; Warren is describing the nature of being-itself, the ground an abyss that points humanity beyond itself and toward some deeper reality beyond the subject-object divide. While Warren wants to obliterate being, he points us directly toward its groundless ground, or the spirit. But is the realm of the “spirit,” which is beyond differentiated bodies, not also projecting a universal and totalizing concept? Is the transition from being to spirit a semantic maneuver or is it one possible alternative – and perhaps a necessary one – to the essentialist ontological paradigm? These questions will be placed on the back burners for now as we wait for them to soften. We will return to them in Chapter Three when we are ready to create the pneumatology course of this meal.

C. Ontological Policing: God and Gender as Essentialist Cellmates

The essentialist ontological paradigms that Anderson, Warren, and Butler rightly

²⁰⁵ Cf. Tillich, vol. I, “God as Being,” pp. 235 – 241.

²⁰⁶ Cf. Tillich, vol. I, “The Depth of Reason,” pp. 79 – 81.

²⁰⁷ Warren, *Ontological Terror*, p. 171.

criticize have deadly effects. In a qualitative study of persons who perpetrated antigay violence, Karen Franklin concludes that “antigay violence can be seen primarily as an extreme manifestation of pervasive cultural norms rather than as a manifestation of individual hatred.”²⁰⁸ Norms can and do incite violence against Black, queer, trans, female, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and disabled bodies. In the three cases Franklin discusses, none of the perpetrators sees themselves as violent “hate-filled extremists,” but in “a nation [the U.S.] that glorifies violence and abhors sexual diversity, a minority perceived to violate gender norms functions as an ideal dramatic prop for young men to use in demonstrating their masculinity, garnering social approval, and alleviating boredom.”²⁰⁹ Hetero-patriarchal norms, built upon a hierarchical notion of gender essentialism, mobilized the men in this study to police the gender and sexuality of strangers through physical violence. Because hegemonic masculinity enforces heterosexual norms, it forecloses possibilities of embodied being and in so doing denies the inherent creativity and openness that is necessary if God is considered the ontological ground. From a theological perspective, policing bodies unjustly destroys revelatory sites of God in the world.

The use of exclusively masculine images of God not only perpetuates harmful heteropatriarchal relations, but it also transgresses the ground rules of apophatic theology identified by Johnson by casting an idol in the image of hegemonic masculinity. Incorporating Butler’s insights, one can see that this masculine idol perpetuates and retroactively inserts itself into theological discourse as its “necessary” masculine ground. And with the help of Johnson and fellow feminist and womanist theologians, one also sees how this ground transgresses the task of theology itself and must be overcome.²¹⁰ Hegemonic masculinity, therefore, not only

²⁰⁸ Karen Franklin, “Unassuming Motivations: Contextualizing the Narratives of Antigay Assailants” in *Stigma and Sexual Orientation*, 1 (Thousand Oaks; London; New Delhi: SAGE Publications, Incorporated, 1997), p. 20.

²⁰⁹ Karen Franklin, “Unassuming Motivations,” p. 19.

²¹⁰ There is now a great plethora of feminist and womanist theology available, so I simply list here some of the works that have influenced this chapter most explicitly: Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She who is: the mystery of God in feminist theological discourse* (New York: Crossroad Publ. Co., 1992), Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: the Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2017), and Christena Cleveland, *God is a Black Woman* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2022) among others.

polices and restricts human bodies and behaviors as Franklin has shown and as the cyberbullying of Olympic gold medalist Imane Khelif demonstrated, it also – and in an intimately interconnected way – polices and restricts possibilities for God.²¹¹ In this case, the immanence of God is distorted through claims to a transcendent (white masculine) God, which could not be known without culturally-contingent representations, that is, without the very immanence that is supposedly categorically rejected. A postmodern theology is able to move theology beyond essentialist conceptions of God as queer theory does with essentialized conceptions of the human, specifically as it relates to gender, and as Anderson and Warren do as it relates to constructions of Blackness.

It is here in the interrelation between postmodern concepts of God and poststructuralist concepts of the human that the (Queer) New Being – the (Q)NB – functions as the salve for the system, and which Chapter Two will take up. Both heteronormative essentialist concepts of the human as well as modern substantive concepts of a God who, in many cases determined LGBTQIA+ persons to be ontologically other – removed and cut off from the grace and love of Christian communities – can be overcome by naming that both conceptions of God and humanity are historically constructed social constellations of meaning, which then dissolves the ontological gap that was theologically inserted to keep God and humanity apart, and which has been insidiously naturalized within Christian worldviews. Once again, this is nothing other than the self-reflexive act of faith.

Neither God nor the human are tethered to an objective substance or essence; both are recognized as cultural constructions with *real* impacts on the lives of persons and communities. The reality of God is experienced and located in the embodiments of those who act in God's

²¹¹ After defeating her opponent in just 46 seconds, the Algerian Olympic gold medalist boxer, Imane Khelif, was accused of “not being a woman,” harassed online, and had her eligibility questioned by the International Boxing Association. Cf. “Algerian Imane Khelif wins boxing gold medal after her gender was wrongly questioned,” *NBC News*, August 9, 2024, <https://www.nbcnews.com/sports/olympics/algerian-imane-khelif-wins-boxing-gold-rcna166029>.

name. So, too, socially constructed and experienced gender identities are perpetuated and subverted by those who claim them (i.e., what it means to be a woman or a man or queer is constantly evolving and open to resignification). Through the existential question of gender identity, the socially constructed nature of ontology itself is the theological response, otherwise known as *hermeneutic ontology*.²¹² The final section of this chapter will explore the theological implications of a hermeneutic ontology for doctrines of God, creation, revelation, and theological anthropology. The aim is to offer *a* way for Christians to understand and affirm the diversity of humanity from within our own symbolic systems and the traditions that simultaneously shape us and are shaped by us. It is the never-ending quest for God.

III. Hermeneutic Ontologies

Santiago Zabala is a philosopher and cultural critic raised in Rome, Vienna, and Geneva, and the current Research Professor of Philosophy at the Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona. Zabala is the former student of Gianni Vattimo (1936 – 2023), an openly gay Catholic politician and philosopher whose “weak thought” has become a staple of postmodern philosophy and theology.²¹³ Caputo, for instance, picks up this weak thought in his concept of a “weak God.”²¹⁴ In a review of the English translation of his teacher’s work, Zabala writes,

When the original Italian edition was released by the very liberal publisher Feltrinelli in 1983, it immediately became a cultural event: a best seller, promptly translated into several languages [...] In these thirty years, weak thought has become a respectable philosophical position within continental philosophy and is still today the most original Italian contribution to philosophical debates since World War II.²¹⁵

²¹² Santiago Zabala the former student of Gianni Vattimo, develops what he calls an “ontology of remnants,” picking up from Heidegger’s destruction of Being as presence and saying with Heidegger that while ontology as presence is destroyed, ontology cannot be gotten over – only overcome from within. That is to say, we must work from within “the remains of being.” Cf. Zabala, *The Remains of Being*.

²¹³ Cf. Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti, *Weak Thought*, Peter Carravetta, tr. (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012). Originally published in Italian, *Il pensiero debole* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1983).

²¹⁴ Cf. John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

²¹⁵ Santiago Zabala, “Weak Thought,” *Common Knowledge* 21, no. 1 (January 1, 2015): pp. 115–16.

While an in-depth examination of Vattimo's works is beyond the scope of this project, a very basic and humble summary of the key elements of his work that are furthered or overcome by Zabala is necessary. Such a cursory introduction seeks to orient us as best as possible for the hermeneutic ontology that is at the center of my explicitly ontological theory of theological performativity.

A. Weak Thought

In his introduction to the English translation of *Weak Thought (Il pensiero debole)*, Peter Carravetta reflects on the ways in which Vattimo's works invite philosophy and theology to acknowledge and embrace the metaphysical challenges posed by the twilight of modernity and the loss of its objective, rational ground. In summary, Carravetta asserts, the reality that Vattimo invites us "to face is that even the presumed univocal meanings of science, the undisputed truths of first principles and the godhead, and the inerasable facts of history are ever *de facto* subject to interpretation."²¹⁶ Like the theological circle for Tillich, meaning only exists within and through historically-contingent interpretations – B/being does not stand unchanged outside time. In his own words, Vattimo writes, "There are no transcendental conditions of possibility for experience which might be attainable through some type of reduction or *epoché* suspending our ties to historical-cultural, linguistic, and categorical horizons."²¹⁷ Vattimo's weak thought invites us to begin not with first principles or Being, but with the quotidian, "the everyday, which is also and always historically qualified and culturally dense."²¹⁸ Our everyday experiences are already shaped or situated, not grounded upon transcendental conditions but qualified by histories of interpretation, or rather, historically-contingent interpretations. The challenge of weak thought is both to recognize that behind the curtain there is no wizard *and* that even after the curtain has been pulled back, the curtain remains there, lying on the ground.

²¹⁶ Peter Carravetta, "Introduction" in *Weak Thought*, p. 5.

²¹⁷ Vattimo, *Weak Thought*, p. 40.

²¹⁸ Vattimo, p. 40.

To assert that there are no objective transcendental truths or essential qualities of being-itself does not and *cannot* deny the reality that concepts of being nevertheless persist and shape how communities make meaning(s) within their contexts.

Therefore, within this weak ontology Vattimo proposes that “truth is the product of interpretation not because through its process one attains a direct grasp of truth” – interpretation is not “deciphering” or “unmasking” – “but because it is only in the process of interpretation, in the Aristotelian sense of *hermeneia*, expression, formulation, that truth is constituted.”²¹⁹ As with the biblical descriptions of God that were discussed at the outset of the chapter, interpreting God, ourselves, and the world (and even formulating the question with this differentiation) is not a practice of excavating *the* absolute and universal answer; it is rather a practice or process through which being’s meaning(s) is/are constructed. That is to say, through the process of interpretation being comes to be – but in a queer way. Within weak thought Being and truth no longer have recourse to transcendental essences or *ousia*. Philosophy is *weakened*; it no longer describes the structure of Being but becomes “trans-mission,” procedures, and rhetoric.²²⁰

James Martin, Professor of Political Theory at Goldsmiths University of London, summarizes that for Vattimo, “Heidegger’s conception of Being as an event refuses all metaphysical certainties.”²²¹ For this reason weak thought is a *weakening* rather than a “refutation;”²²² it does not postulate a new ground but works within the decay of the modern. Vattimo continues Heidegger’s distinction between *Verwindung* and *Überwindung*, where *Verwindung* “denote[s] the way a non-metaphysical approach to Being invites a ‘working through’ of our philosophical inheritance.”²²³ *Überwindung*, or “overcoming,” on the other

²¹⁹ Vattimo, p. 50.

²²⁰ Vattimo, p. 50.

²²¹ James Martin, “A Radical Freedom? Gianni Vattimo’s ‘Emancipatory Nihilism,’” *Contemporary Political Theory* 9, no. 3 (2010): 325–44, p. 329.

²²² Martin, “A Radical Freedom?,” p. 329.

²²³ Cf. Vattimo, *Il pensiero debole*, p. 21; *Weak Thought*, p. 46. Martin directed me toward this distinction in Vattimo’s work. Cf. Martin, “A Radical Freedom?,” p. 329.

hand would convey a rejection of metaphysics, which is not the case for weak thought. Martin remarks that Heidegger's use of *Verwindung* rather than *Überwindung* "rethink[s] the truth of our Being as an historical and cultural legacy, an opening to certain possibilities handed down to us."²²⁴ The truth of being is that both being and truth are constituted through historical and contextual processes; we cannot stand firm on a solid foundation and yet here we are, present amidst the destruction of being as presence while relying on and challenging these inherited notions to make meaning. For Vattimo, "*Verwindung* frees these metaphysical categories from precisely what made them metaphysical: the presumption of gaining access to an *ontos on*."²²⁵ There is no transcendental reality, a "really real," which metaphysical concepts either reveal or distort. But this recognition need not "invalidate" these categories altogether. Rather, they "become 'valid' as monuments, as a heritage evoking the *pietas* due to the traces of what has lived."²²⁶ The calling of Vattimo is, then, not only of "withdrawal," or the weakening of metaphysical categories, but also one of piety – of loyalty or critical devotion, whereby the fading power of metaphysical concepts is simultaneously destructive and productive.

The weakening of metaphysical categories, and particularly ontological concepts, is destructive insofar as it dares to acknowledge – as with the counterhegemony practices of Townes and the gender theory of Butler – that absolute and universal claims hide their own contingency. Such claims are, therefore, built upon deception at worst and intellectual negligence at best. It is productive insofar as naming this state of affairs does not destroy the former concepts altogether – many of which have become structurally necessary for life – but rather, because this acknowledgement opens up the possibility for persons within such systems to affirm alternatives. This is not to say that local traditions or queer sexualities are only intelligible as contrasts or limits of an ontological norm, but rather that the very existence of

²²⁴ Martin, p. 329.

²²⁵ Vattimo, p. 47.

²²⁶ Vattimo, p. 47.

diverse cultural and religious traditions and sexual practices challenges the assumed stability of hegemonic constructions. It is perhaps like standing in the ruins of a temple continuing to light incense and to display deference to a site that has shaped one's ancestors, the ruins of which continue to shape the community today, but not in a divinely dictatorial way. Rather, these ruins continue to orient and provide meaning – not because their elements are of a supernatural material or because the God(s) can be reached there – but because the stories of these God(s) and this temple continues to shape how a community understands itself. God is still present, just in a different way.

This situation, in the waning days or “remains” of Being (to use Zabala's term), is why Vattimo describes the context of weak thought as one of nihilism. Martin clarifies that while nihilism is usually regarded as “a loss of ultimate meaning and certainty,” for Vattimo “its true potential lies in the ‘active’ rather than ‘passive’ sense of the term whereby we refuse to resign ourselves to a feeling of loss but, instead, grasp this loss as an opportunity to conceive ourselves as creators of new values.”²²⁷ And if Christians understand ourselves as made in the image of God the creator, then Vattimo's conclusion that the loss of absolute certainty leads to greater agency as we ourselves become creators does not destroy, but rather reiterates a core Christian belief. Because God is the creator, and because humanity is made in the image of God, we are, therefore, creative. To recognize our role in creating the values that shape our communities is not only to live more fully who we are as creative creatures; it is also to take up the yoke of the Good Shepherd who calls Christians to ethical relations of interdependence (“What you did to the least of these, you did to me” Mtt 25: 40 – 45, and “Do to others as you would have them do to you” Lk 6:31). Warren's call beyond humanism to life in the spirit could be taken up in this way. While a further exploration of nihilism is beyond this scope of this work, Vattimo's weak thought and their shared nihilism is generative. Vattimo's nihilism, however, is similar to

²²⁷ Martin, p. 331. Martin cites Vattimo, *The two senses of Nihilism in Nietzsche. Dialogue With Nietzsche* (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 134 – 141.

Derrida's deconstruction, which is taken up by queer theory, insofar as it does not seek to destroy but sets out to critically reexamine and interpret texts and their meanings.²²⁸

i. *White's Weak Thought & Politics*. In his monograph from 2000, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory*, Stephen K. White develops a concept of "weak ontology" distinct from, though not opposed to, Vattimo's.²²⁹ While much of what White describes as weak ontology is in line with postmodernism(s)'s general critiques of transcendental truth claims and absolute objectivity, White insists that if "the shift is over identified with postmodernism, the whole topic is made to appear too dependent upon what is only one manifestation of it."²³⁰ Nevertheless, White asserts that weak ontologies respond to two pressing concerns: (1) "the acceptance of the idea that all fundamental conceptualizations of self, other, and world are *contestable*," and (2) that these conceptions are "nevertheless necessary or unavoidable for an adequately reflective ethical life. The latter insight demands from us the affirmative gesture of constructing foundations, the former prevents us from carrying out this task in a traditional fashion"²³¹ As with Vattimo, White asserts that there is no underlying essential or substantive ontological ground. Nevertheless, ontological conceptions persist and are "necessary or unavoidable." White describes an ontological shift within recent years as a willingness to question the "entities" (the ontological concepts) that lie behind or

²²⁸ Martin notes that "In *Beyond Interpretation*, Vattimo takes issue with Derrida's deconstructive reading of texts, describing them as a form of 'aestheticism' which exposes the contingency of truth-claims but fails to look beyond the text to an emergent form of Being characterized as 'multiplicity, temporality, mortality' (Vattimo, 1997, p. 92. See also pp. 12, 100–103)," p. 342, footnote 4. In his review of Zabala's 2009 work, Ian Thomson begins with a critique of Vattimo's nihilistic interpretation of Heidegger: "As an interpretation of Heidegger, however, Vattimo's hermeneutics suffer from a serious problem. The issue is complicated, but to put it simply: Vattimo ends up treating the 'nihilistic,' Nietzschean position Heidegger opposes (namely, the reduction of being to nothing but becoming) as if it were Heidegger's own view and one we should all adopt (thereby becoming proud "nihilists" ourselves)." Cf. Ian Thomson, Review of *The Remains of Being: Hermeneutic Ontology after Metaphysics*, by Santiago Zabala, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, October 12, 2010, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/the-remains-of-being-hermeneutic-ontology-after-metaphysics/>.

²²⁹ In footnote 10 in the Introduction, White clarifies that "Gianni Vattimo often employs the term weak thinking to gesture in a broadly similar direction; and he has at least once used weak ontology synonymously. Although my use of the latter term shares a broad directional emphasis, I have no idea whether Vattimo would find my elucidation of the characteristics of a felicitous weak ontology compatible with his own views." Stephen K. White, *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), p. 7.

²³⁰ White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, p. 5.

²³¹ White, p. 8.

below one's view of the world. This shift highlights the “entangled” relationship between ontological commitments, identity, and history since they are woven together in “how we articulate the meaning of our lives, both individually and collectively.”²³² The ontological question is necessarily a political and ethical one since it is upon ontological convictions that ethical determinations are made. As we will see, in a relationship of mutual interdependence, ethical determinations likewise shape ontological convictions.

The motivation behind dealing with such a seemingly pompous or out-of-touch academic concept as ontology should now become clearer as one that is, on the contrary, deeply interconnected and influential in shaping ethical norms within both theology and politics (and their non-discreet dalliance). For White, strong [modern] ontologies purport to describe the way the world really is or the being of God and its absolute relationship to human beings and creation: “It is by reference to this external ground that ethical and political life gain their sense of what is right.”²³³ Thus, to challenge essentialist or substantial conceptions of ontology is to challenge the very foundations of ethical life and the relationship between God, self, other, and world. This challenging, or affirmation of possibilities in the “wake” of strong ontologies, is not, however, necessarily opposed to universalisms or generalizations entirely. A weak ontology rejects the absoluteness of universal claims and dismisses any recourse to a transcendental ground/foundation. However, a weak ontology specifically, and postmodernism generally, can and occasionally do affirm universal concepts insofar as these concepts provide direction and orientation while remaining open to continual critique and a diversity of interpretation and application.²³⁴ This is what White describes as “existential realities,” by which he claims that “language, finitude, natality, and sources are in some brute sense universal constitutives of human being, but also that their meaning is irreparably undetermined in any

²³² White, p. 4.

²³³ White, p. 6.

²³⁴ Christian Danz shares this sentiment in his systematic theology, where Christianity can be said to be universal insofar as anyone can take up and continue the Christian tradition. He develops this notion throughout the text. Cf. Christian Danz, *Systematische Theologie*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, 2024).

categorical sense.”²³⁵ While no one true meaning of life or ground for ethical action exists, there persists, nevertheless, the cultivation of ways of life that are informed by tentative norms.

ii. The Practice of Weak Ontologies & Tillich’s Theological Ontology. As I have already sought to convey with the present theory of theological performativity (to which we will return at the end of the chapter) and through Vattimo’s weak thought, postmodern existence is a creative tension between greater agency (one is no longer bound by absolute universal claims for all eternity) and tradition (one exercises agency in the context of what came before). One does not simply choose to belong to a certain cultural and religious context, but rather one inherits such traditions and either critically perpetuates or consciously disavows them in favor of others. But there is no *tabula rasa* state from which an individual picks and chooses each element of life, from one’s language to one’s clothing and gender identity. We are always working from within a community and a context that has shaped these very choices, though we remain free to rebuke, subvert, or consciously replace them with others.

In a similar vein, White argues that weak ontologies have an *aesthetic-affective* quality,” meaning that they “disclose the world to us in such a way that we think *and* feel it differently than we might otherwise.”²³⁶ Because of this quality, we cannot simply hop from concept to concept as one might from store to store. Such a condition is less like shopping in a mall with low thresholds for entry and exit into each store, and more like discerning among various monastic traditions to participate in – communities that will cultivate particular ways of life (though of course religion, too, is not safe from commodification). Like Stone’s Wesleyan deep pluralism and evangelism model (which be discussed in the next chapter), ontology becomes

²³⁵ White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, p. 9.

²³⁶ White, p. 10. Author’s emphasis.

an apprenticeship into a distinct way of life that orients how one engages with the world – without claiming to be the *only* way or having *the* truth that trumps all others.²³⁷

For White, the aesthetic-affective quality of weak ontology’s tentative claims means that “one must patiently bring it to life by working it into one’s life,” which evokes “the notion of cultivation.”²³⁸ Not only are ontological concepts inherited, as with Vattimo, but cultivated through practice. “The cultivation unfolds through the measured pursuit of an array of related practices and self-disciplines,” and in this way the cultivation of weak ontologies is similar to the cultivation of virtues – without the “unshakable foundation” from which such cultivation proceeds.²³⁹ Indeed, within White’s approach to weak ontology, as with this project’s theory of theological performativity, the framework *itself* is continually and critically cultivated.²⁴⁰ And so the question arises once more as to how ethical claims can be made from within a weak ontology since there is no recourse to transcendental truths or objective universal principles.

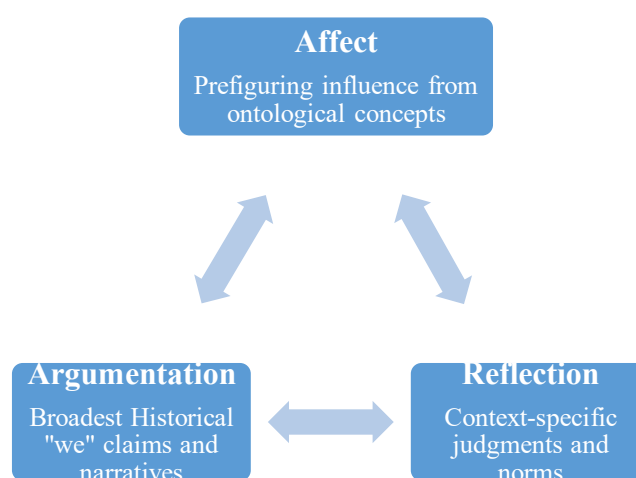


Figure 2: White’s Circuit of Reflection, Affect, and Argumentation

This is where generative similarities between White’s and Tillich’s ontologies begin to emerge. Rather than a horizontal relationship from humanity to a ground/foundation or “skyhook” for

²³⁷ Cf. Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Pluralism: The Ethics of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).

²³⁸ White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, p. 10.

²³⁹ White, p. 11.

²⁴⁰ White, p. 11.

ethical claims, White proffers a “horizontal circuit of reflection, affect, and argumentation” (see Figure 2).²⁴¹

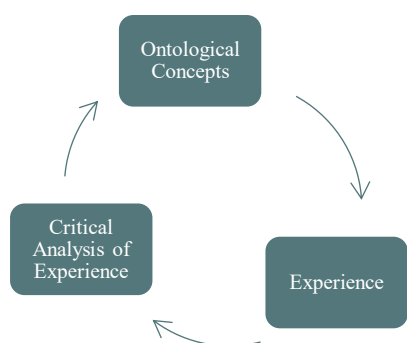


Figure 1: Tillich's Ontological Scheme

Now compare this with Tillich's ontological scheme (Figure 1). If we understand Tillich's "Ground and Abyss of Being" not as an objective essence or substance, but rather as a negative symbol, similar to that of Ernesto Laclau's "pure being"/empty signifier,²⁴² then for both

White and Tillich there is no privileged starting point – neither ethics nor ontology can claim priority, and no starting point can claim objectivity or absolute universal applicability. White notes that Levinas critiques Heidegger for starting with ontology rather than ethics for philosophical reflection, but within White's approach – and I argue also within Tillich's – "ontological figurations will always be expressing ethical concerns to a degree and ethical insights will always be rooted in some specific way of conceptually carving up self, other, and world."²⁴³ Because ontological concepts are historically contingent social constructions, rather than absolute entities, they express the norms of their particular contexts and shape what – and who – is possible. Like the symbol of God for Johnson, ontology both expresses and shapes a community's theo-ethical convictions.

For Tillich, as with White, ontological concepts both shape and are shaped by one's experience of reality, which White would call the "existential realities" of language, finitude, natality, and sources. While Tillich's theology operates upon the assumption of an abysmal

²⁴¹ This diagram is based upon White's description of the circuit, cf. White, *Sustaining Affirmation*, pp. 11 – 12.

²⁴² James Martin reflects on the difference between Laclau and Vattimo by clarifying Laclau's thought in the following way: "But – and here is where [Laclau] begins to depart from Vattimo – if an objective ground is impossible, nevertheless the 'figure' of ground remains important at a symbolic level. Emancipatory discourses must signify a break that extends across society and makes 'equivalences' with a multiplicity of demands, otherwise they remain isolated particularities. This figure, in Laclau's analysis, presents itself negatively, as the principle of an 'absent fullness' that imagines a future order via 'universal' goals, such as democracy, justice or equality, for example. Of course, these universals cannot ever be fully achieved." Cf. Martin, "A Radical Freedom?," p. 339. For Laclau's elucidation of the empty signifier, cf. Ernesto Laclau, "Why Do Empty Signifiers Matter to Politics?" in *Emancipation(s)* (London: Verso, 1996), pp. 36 – 46.

²⁴³ White, p. 12, footnote 13.

ground, he explicitly rejects – as does White’s weak ontology and Vattimo’s weak thought – a static structure of experience.²⁴⁴ This structure can and will often change, but the fact that any structure is necessary for experience – this dynamic (or in White’s terms, “tentative”/“weak”) structure is God. God is not a being. God is not a static essence or structure. For Christians, God is the condition for the possibility of existence, that is, the dynamic and historically contingent hermeneutical processes through which our experiences and identities are made meaningful and intelligible.

B. Zabala’s Hermeneutic Ontology

From within this tradition of weak thought Zabala develops a hermeneutic ontology, which he calls an “ontology of remnants.” Following Vattimo’s reading of Heidegger, Zabala asserts that while being as presence is destroyed, ontology cannot be gotten over – only overcome from within. That is to say, we must work from within “the remains of being.”²⁴⁵ In his critical review of Zabala’s work, William H. Smith summarizes that “following Vattimo, the project does not attempt to once again grasp Being in itself – which would be ‘strong thought’ (p. 95) – rather, the project is the outcome of productive interpretations that are self-consciously insufficient to grasp Being as it is.”²⁴⁶ What Smith teases out is the potential internal contradiction of Zabala’s approach: on the one hand, Zabala, working within Vattimo’s weak thought, rejects objective metaphysics/strong ontologies and, on the other hand, there persists a notion of “Being as it is” (in Smith’s words) or the “Being of being [that] addresses itself to philosophers.”²⁴⁷ Therefore, Zabala ambitiously claims that “my interpretation cannot be a description of their opinions but must be an interpretation of Being through them.”²⁴⁸ In

²⁴⁴ Cf. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 166: “Nor does a priori mean that the ontological concepts constitute a static and un-changeable structure which, once discovered, will always be valid. The structure of experience may have changed in the past and may change in the future, but, while such a possibility cannot be excluded, there is no reason for using it as an argument against the a priori character of ontological concepts.”

²⁴⁵ Zabala, *The Remains of Being: Hermeneutic Ontology after Metaphysics*, p. 8.

²⁴⁶ William H. Smith, “What Is Postmetaphysics? Zabala on the Question of Being,” *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 2, no. 1 (2010): 117–31, p. 119.

²⁴⁷ Zabala, *The Remains of Being*, p. xv.

²⁴⁸ Zabala, p. xv.

this last claim Zabala appears to assert that hermeneutics – counter to Vattimo – is indeed like deciphering, sifting through and finding the remnants of Being that persist amidst and in spite of the philosophers questioning its meaning and structure. And yet, Zabala insists that his “ontology of remnants” is uniquely positioned to “avoid the problem of finding the authentic meaning of being or limiting it to only one terrain.”²⁴⁹ So, just what is Zabala doing with metaphysics, and how might his hermeneutic ontology be utilized and queered as we reconceptualize the being of God, humanity, and all creation for a postmodern theology?

Zabala summarizes the trajectory of philosophy as it relates to metaphysics in the following way:

Metaphysics began with Plato and ended with Nietzsche because, thanks to this destruction, we have overcome the interpretation of Being as an object that caused conceptual limitations through such polarities as presence versus absence, Being versus nothingness, truth versus error, mind versus matter, soul versus body, or man versus woman. But metaphysics cannot be abandoned, because it constitutes our understanding of Being, which we cannot escape, since it is part of what has shaped our tradition, humanity, and destiny. This is why contemporary philosophers speak of our epoch as “postmetaphysical”: we are now finally aware that metaphysics is not something rigid and determining, because we have the ability to take it up consciously as our own, to shape what we see it to have been, where it will take us in the future, and even what it will become.²⁵⁰

Zabala’s account of metaphysics appears queer in at least two ways: it challenges not only an essentialist ontology that is “rigid and determining” but also the fundamental binaries of metaphysics, revealing the constructed nature of imposed dichotomies such as mind and matter, soul and body, and so on. However, it quickly becomes apparent through his critics and his own

²⁴⁹ Zabala, p. 16.

²⁵⁰ Zabala, p. xiv.

language that he borders on undermining the very postmetaphysical project he purports to propose.²⁵¹

Zabala repeatedly asserts in his introduction that “metaphysics is not something we can overcome but something we can only accept as a *remnant* we must come to terms with.”²⁵² By remnant he means “the traces and scraps of Being that [he] use[s] to discover this ontology.”²⁵³ The importance placed on Heidegger’s distinction between *überwinden* and *verwinden* reemerges, as Zabala asserts that metaphysics cannot be overcome (*überwinden*) but something that must be worked through, or “gotten over” from within (*verwinden*).²⁵⁴ Zabala’s postmetaphysics, then, is not an abandonment of metaphysics, but – and he does not clarify his approach with this language – a move beyond an *essentialist/objective* metaphysics.²⁵⁵ Such a description is supported by his standing within the weak though of his teacher, Vattimo, whose work he explicitly refers to throughout the preface. Citing Vattimo, Zabala describes how within such an approach “philosophy ceases to be the search for Being ‘as an objective datum that precedes the application of conceptual schemes’ and becomes a ‘remembering of Being,’” which they argue Heidegger sought to inaugurate.²⁵⁶ This is the paradoxical position that Thomson places at the center of his critique of Zabala: “‘overthrowing’ the metaphysical tradition allegedly responsible for alienation, homelessness, and violence does not mean

²⁵¹ In his review of Zabala’s 2009 work, Ian Thomson opens with a critique of Vattimo’s interpretation of Heidegger: “As an interpretation of Heidegger, however, Vattimo’s hermeneutics suffer from a serious problem. The issue is complicated, but to put it simply: Vattimo ends up treating the ‘nihilistic,’ Nietzschean position Heidegger opposes (namely, the reduction of being to nothing but becoming) as if it were Heidegger’s own view and one we should all adopt (thereby becoming proud ‘nihilists’ ourselves).” Zabala takes up his teacher’s interpretation of Heidegger, which crystalizes one of the primary critiques of this work. Cf. Ian Thomson, review of *The Remains of Being: Hermeneutic Ontology after Metaphysics*, by Santiago Zabala, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, October 12, 2010, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/the-remains-of-being-hermeneutic-ontology-after-metaphysics/>.

²⁵² Zabala, p. 6.

²⁵³ Zabala, p. 6.

²⁵⁴ Zabala, p. 8.

²⁵⁵ Zabala cites Vattimo as proposing that viewing Being as event (*Ereignis*) “excludes all essentialist views of Being.” Cf. Zabala, p. 94.

²⁵⁶ Cf. Zabala, p. 9; cited from Gianni Vattimo, *Nihilism and Emancipation*, ed. Zabala, W. McCuaig, tr. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 6. Debating Vattimo and Zabala’s interpretations of Heidegger is beyond the scope of this project, however I have identified some of the key issues of this debate in the previous footnotes of Zabala’s critics, namely, Smith and Thomson.

‘overcoming’ it but, instead, ‘learning to live with it’ (p. 45)!”²⁵⁷ However, as we saw with Vattimo, learning to live within the remains of strong ontologies does not doom one to unquestioned determinism or hinder the articulation of alternatives.

i. Hermeneutic Philosophy. Toward the end of his brief subsection on Vattimo, Zabala begins to expound in greater detail his theory of hermeneutics: “Hermeneutics is the philosophical position that grasps Being’s vocation of giving itself as the truth of human language” insofar as “all experience of the world is primarily a series of linguistic events that happen to *Dasein* as the being that is ‘in-the-world.’”²⁵⁸ Being as event, which is shaped by “the linguistic horizon that constitutes it,” is not a thing or essence to be derived, but rather is “the product of a history of formulations, interpretations, and deconstructions that ‘are ‘givens’ of destiny understood as a process of transmission.”²⁵⁹ Ontology *must* become a practice of hermeneutics because being only happens through language and its cultural contexts – and it is in and through language that the realities we encounter (as well as our descriptions of these encounters) are themselves constituted. For this reason, Zabala asserts in his summary of Vattimo that,

If *Dasein* exists and is in-the-world as a thrown project (*geworfener Entwurf*), then our existence would also always already be thrown into language, because *Dasein* exists in the form of a project in which things are only insofar as they belong to this project. And since this occurs only in the form of meanings, things become accessible because every act of knowledge is nothing more than an interpretation of this existence in-the-world, making the universal structure of knowledge interpretative: “to know” is always “to interpret.”²⁶⁰

To know is to interpret because every claim happens as a historically and culturally informed response to a particular situation that is understood through ontological categories (that

²⁵⁷ Thomson, review of *The Remains of Being*.

²⁵⁸ Zabala, *The Remains of Being*, p. 96.

²⁵⁹ Zabala, p. 94; citing Vattimo, “Dialectics, Difference, and Weak Thought,” *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 10 (1984): 151.

²⁶⁰ Zabala, p. 96.

something or someone *is* or cannot *be*), which are themselves linguistically constituted, i.e., historically contingent constellations of meaning. White's recognition of the mutual interdependence between ontology and ethics is therefore compatible with Zabala's hermeneutic ontology, which is drawn from Vattimo's weak thought.

In the third and final chapter of *The Remains of Being*, Zabala's own development of Vattimo is lowered before us on our proverbial postmodern dining table. He begins the chapter by stating that "I am going to show how *hermeneutics is the philosophy of generation*, that is, that which generates Being."²⁶¹ As with theology, "hermeneutics involves a circle: that is, it presupposes that we cannot understand a part without some understanding of the whole or understand the whole without some understanding of its parts, because to learn what being is we need to examine *Dasein's* Being."²⁶² The ethical-ontological constructions that already reside within and are re-constituted by language (not as an essence but as a historical process) shape how we experience the world, and our experiences of the world in turn (re)shape our ontologies. Figure 1 depicting Tillich's ontological scheme parallels Zabala's surprisingly well: ontological concepts shape our experiences of reality, but these concepts in turn are re-shaped by critical analyses of experience, that is, by the ongoing process of interpretation. Through Tillich, the generative aspect of Zabala's hermeneutic ontology becomes easier to digest. When Zabala writes that interpretation generates Being "because Being is already there," it becomes clearer through Tillich and White that "Being is already there" only insofar as concepts of B/being affect and influence interpretation – even interpretations of Being. Hermeneutics is circular.

As in the theology of my *Doktovater*, Christian Danz, for Zabala "[t]hings remain by means of generation."²⁶³ In Danz's terms, the coherence of tradition is only constituted through

²⁶¹ Zabala, p. 99. Emphasis added.

²⁶² Zabala, p. 100.

²⁶³ Zabala, p. 103.

difference – every act of appropriation is also/simultaneously an act of transformation.²⁶⁴ This will be explored further in Chapter Three in relation to pneumatology. Difference, therefore, rather than destroying becomes generative. Chapter Two will explore the implications of difference in generating being through Christology, specifically as it relates to LGBTQIA+ persons and the continual proliferation of gender and sexual identities. But first, what does this ontology offer as it relates to my appropriation of Butler’s theory of performativity within theology?

C. God & Gender: (Re)Generative Being

As with Butler’s theory of gender performativity, Zabala’s hermeneutic ontology recognizes the linguistic chains of citationality that are instrumental in the processes of (ontological) identity formation. This is to reiterate that our understanding of being does not drop from the sky, but is something we inherit, encounter, and critically (re)produce/subvert through language embodied in communities. As with Vattimo and Zabala, Butler’s theory destabilizes (ontological) norms without destroying them. Gender becomes a generative concept; it no longer predetermines human expression through essentialized categories but becomes part of the ongoing hermeneutic ontological process. To know is to interpret, and to interpret is not to describe but to work “within the remains of being” as we make meaning of existence. To ontologize and weave in Danz’s theory, being happens – that is, is constituted – through the ongoing processes of communication within interpretative communities. Diverging from White, I regard this ontological paradigm as firmly postmodern for it rejects objective universals and absolute claims and, with them, the ability of anyone or any theory to transcend their historic-cultural contingency. Theories may proffer universals insofar as their

²⁶⁴ Cf. Christian Danz, *Gottes Geist: eine Pneumatologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), Part IV “The Holy Spirit: Giver, Gift, Appropriation.” Cf. also Chapter Three below.

interpretative systems are open, allowing anyone to thoughtfully take up and transform such systems without being denied from the outset.

i. Discursive Continuities. The citational process taken up here is described as “discursive continuity” by both Zabala and Butler and is generational for Zabala “because in its acts of bringing into Being it reproduces and produces Being.”²⁶⁵ For Butler, discursive continuities are generative since identity is an *effect* of discursive practices: “As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification.”²⁶⁶ For this reason, Butler understands their method to be “a genealogy of gender ontology,” which “seeks to understand the discursive production of the plausibility of that binary relation and to suggest that certain cultural configurations of gender take the place of ‘the real’ and consolidate and augment their hegemony through that felicitous self-naturalization.”²⁶⁷ The being of identities – including God – is discursively constituted in historically and culturally contingent communal practices of embodied communication. That is to say, because “materiality is constructed through a problematic gendered matrix then the discursive practice by which matter is rendered irreducible simultaneously ontologizes and fixes that gendered matrix in its place.”²⁶⁸ A community’s gendered language shapes the very bodies and materiality that it asserts are prediscursive.

ii. Beyond Relativism: Location & Intelligibility. Such a situation, as this chapter – and indeed this entire work – implicitly seeks to demonstrate, need not lead to a relativistic state in which “anything goes” or in which all claims are equally affirmed or denied as “personal opinion.” It is clear for both Butler and Zabala that while challenging and opening up static ontologies, their theories do not destroy them altogether. One is always working from “within

²⁶⁵ Zabala, *The Remains of Being*, p. 105. While Butler does not use the phrase “discursive continuity” they describe identity in both *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* as the effect of ongoing discursive practices.

²⁶⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 45.

²⁶⁷ Butler, p. 45.

²⁶⁸ Butler, p. 5.

the remains of Being” or within the “productive constraint” of norms. For Zabala, “Understanding only proceeds from the inside, and interpretation is never an explication of objects but only of situations in which we are involved.”²⁶⁹ This is a further compatibility between Zabala’s hermeneutic ontology and Tillich’s systematic method since a theologian must be located *within* the theological circle and, therefore, involved as a participant rather than as an observer.²⁷⁰ For this reason, while I recognize the distinction between theology and religion in *wissenschaftliche* systematic theology, systematic theology must happen from within a tradition because its acts of construction depend upon the religious contents, which can only be known through interpretation. As Butler concludes, “there is no possibility of agency or reality outside of the discursive practices that give those terms the intelligibility that they have. *The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself.*”²⁷¹ While we cannot simply do away with ontological categories, we can – and in fact must – continue to proliferate their meanings through our diverse and divergent embodiments of these identities, proliferating the categories to the edge of intelligibility.

I was instructed in Tillich’s theology and only stumbled upon Butler and Zabala as I tried to make sense of the queer reality of identity that I understood in both Tillich’s works and my own experiences as a queer person. I have found that their similarities with regards to ontology despite their different disciplines – theology, gender/political theory, philosophy/political theory (respectively) – are startlingly fruitful. I did not expect these ingredients to work so well together – and perhaps some will argue that they do not. I began adding each to theological cooking pot praying they would blend well, having some sense that

²⁶⁹ Zabala, *The Remains of Being*, p. 117.

²⁷⁰ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, pp. 22 – 28 on “Theology and Philosophy: An Answer. “The theologian, quite differently, is not detached from [their] object but is involved in it. [They] look at [their] object (which transcends the character of being an object) with passion, fear, and love. [...] it is the love that accepts saving, and therefore personal, truth,” pp. 22 – 23.

²⁷¹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 202 – 203. Emphasis added.

their unique flavors would complement the dish overall, but not knowing for sure that they would – and not realizing at first how they brought me to similar conclusions as my doctoral supervisor. For the purpose of this (queer) systematic theology, the insights they provide into reconceptualizing ontology have proven necessary components not only for challenging essentialist ontologies and the harm they perpetuate in theology, gender studies, and political theory, but also for generating possibilities for ethical action across disciplines. And because Tillich's method of ontological theology was my starting point, Butler's and Zabala's (and through Zabala, Vattimo's, and through Vattimo, White's) reconceptualizations of ontology necessitated that they be taken seriously for doctrines of God and humanity within a postmodern theology. It is to this relation that I now turn as this chapter draws to a close.

iii. A Postmodern Theological Ontology. Returning to the relationship between ontology and revelation, Christian discourse has ontological significance for its participants for it is through discursive continuities that identities are produced and ontology congealed. Theology, as a discourse, determines who can *be* – whose identities are revelatory, that is, are intelligible within its self-reflexive onto-theological structure, which is itself (re)constituted and transformed in history. Hermeneutic ontology, the perpetuation and transformation of meaning within interpretative communities, takes on theological value in that the hermeneutic ontological process describes – for Christians – the function of the Christian God.

God is the condition for the possibility of existence. God is, for Augustine and Tillich, “Being itself.” And, within a theological hermeneutic ontology, it is from God that all things have being. This is so because “hermeneutics,” for Zabala, “is the philosophy of generation, that is, that which generates Being.”²⁷² *It is, therefore, only through a hermeneutic ontology that the Christian God continues to create (in) the world.* Only from within Christian theological discourse and its interpretative communities is the happening of God revealed. The

²⁷² Zabala, *The Remains of Being*, p. 99.

event of God is universal insofar as anything and anyone can consent to participate in this embodied form of communication that affects and transforms the very way in which one sees/engages the world. But this universality is not absolute or objective, it recognizes its contingency as the necessary site of its own continuation. If the tradition was not interpreted, it would not be known. If it was not known, it would not be available for interpretation. Historical contingency, rather than something to be feared or rejected by theologians/Christians, is to be embraced as the “yes” of faith – as the decision to participate in a community that is, for Tillich, oriented by God as its ultimate concern.

Another Alternative. However, since this is a queer work, my aim is not only the academic hope of furthering our collective knowledge ever so slightly through a unique conclusion, but also (and primarily) of opening possibilities of being for livable lives. Therefore, in what I have described thus far, God can be regarded as the open-ended ontological abysmal ground within a theological hermeneutic ontology – that is, the condition that makes the system possible (Laclau). God can also represent the structure of this meaning-making system itself, which Chapter Three will develop through Danz’s pneumatology. However, God is also a doctrine of the Christian faith, that is, one of its contents. Within this theory of theological performativity, all doctrines are regarded as onto-ethical constructions that arise as components of the system with the system itself. Therefore, God can be understood not only as the symbolic representation of the self-reflexive system itself (through which meaning, and therefore, worlds, are created), but also as one of its contents, which is religiously appropriated in religious acts. In this sense, God, like metaphysics for Zabala, persists through its remnants, “the traces and scraps of Being that [Zabala] use[s] to discover this ontology.”²⁷³ In the religious use of “God” in one’s life – such as acting in the name of God – one constitutes and reproduces the very concept one purports to be responding to. That is, by acting in the name of God, with

²⁷³ Zabala, p. 6.

a particular concept in mind, we both learn about and are shaped by God. Thus, God continues to be known through God's revelation, of which creation – the ongoing and communal processes through which we, our bodies, our relations, and conceptions of the earth *come to be* – retains a vital role. And this is not a simple word game or academic sleight of hand. The concept of God still transcends us; it is historically conditioned, and we encounter it as historical persons within webs of citationality, referring back even as we prophetically critique and break open. For God to be a remnant is for God to be sought after anew and to reveal to us, in the contingency of such a concept, the nature of being (performatively understood).

Chapter Two: *Being Beyond the Binary*

Ontology, as discussed in the previous chapter, need not be equated with essentialism – and indeed, to do so is to perpetuate harmful paradigms. Additionally, a doctrine of God need not be agential or rely upon an absolute essence for its ontological ground. Therefore, this (queer) systematic theology must explore the implications of these postmodern onto-theological claims for the rest of the system. Returning to the three postmodern propositions from the introduction, the first claim – that there is no universal ground of being or essentialist ontological structure – was elucidated in the previous chapter through a critical engagement with ontology in both theology and philosophy. We now turn to the second proposition, *that being still matters and gives meaning to persons as creative, embodied creatures*. This chapter continues constructing a (queer) systematic theology by taking up the question of ontology with relation to gender. That is to say, it explores the possibilities that exist for concepts of humanity to *be* more than the constitutive constraints of the gender binary purport to allow.

I begin with a cursory overview of patristic sources, exploring the promiscuous evolution of Christology from various sources and contexts, particularly by examining the queer relation between doctrines of the Incarnation and *theosis*, or deification, and the Methodist/Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification. The purpose for this historical engagement is two-fold. Firstly, within the present method of theological performativity, patristic sources can be regarded as the norms that determine the emergence and intelligibility of Jesus the Christ and his body to this day. Rather than static or essentialized sources, they perform a normative function – like gender – for a postmodern theological ontology. To repeat Derrida, deconstruction, is *not* destruction.²⁷⁴ These early sources and quibbles, which have become

²⁷⁴ Cf. Jacques Derrida and John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), p.57: “For deconstruction is not—we will repeat this again and again—a destruction or demolition, but a way of releasing and responding, of listening and opening up, of being responsible not only to the dominant voices of the great masters, but also to other voices that speak more gently, more discreetly, more mildly in the texts of dead white European males and in quite a few other texts, too.”

authoritative, are engaged not for the purpose of doing away with them (such a move would cease to be Christian theology). Rather, patristic sources, understood as norms can be critically valued for their constitutive function in establishing the onto-theological meaning of the Christ, and by extension, the meaning of Christians' understandings of our own being as hermeneutically and performatively constituted. Secondly, as norms, these patristic sources function as constitutive constraints that shape not only Christology but Christian theology generally. That is, if doctrines function within the present system like sex in Butler's postmodern theory, they do not describe content that exists "before" theological discourse. Doctrines describe contents that are created within discourse, which always entails a complex relationship between power and knowledge (Foucault)²⁷⁵ as concepts crystalize – or appear to – for certain purposes over time. Therefore, the examination of patristic sources as norms in the first section of this chapter identifies some of the constitutive constraints for Christian theology generally.

From this historical approach, the critical engagement of Tillich's theology is continued specifically as it relates to Christology, revelation, and ontology. This section builds upon the reframed ontological paradigm constructed in the previous chapter and applies it to Tillich's Christological concept of the "New Being." It continues and exemplifies the underlying thesis of this whole project that by embracing a postmodern perspective within the systematic method, one in which both God and human identities are understood as socially constructed symbols, theology is liberated to move beyond essentialist ontologies that police both images of God and

²⁷⁵ Many books within Foucault's own corpus, and many more on his works, elaborate his theory of discourse to such a degree that further attention to this fascinating concept would distract us – though perhaps with pleasure – from the task at hand. Foucault discusses the "Incitement to Discourse" in Volume I of his *History of Sexuality*, which will be discussed in the next section below. Ellen K. Feder describes the nuance involved in translating Foucault's French phrase *pouvoir/savoir*, as follows: "Foucault urges us not to think of power only in terms of its 'old' monarchical form, as something an individual possesses or wields over another or others. For him power works through culture and customs, institutions and individuals. Likewise, its effects are also multiple, not simply negative or positive, but, as he puts it, 'productive': they are both positive and negative, unstable valuations that can be reversed through history," p. 56. Ellen K. Feder, "Power/knowledge" in *Michel Foucault: Key Concepts*, ed. Dianna Taylor (London: Routledge, 2011). Thus, power/knowledge describes the performative and/or productive function of discourse.

gender expression. The (Queer) New Being offered in the second part of this chapter subverts static concepts of identity, emphasizing the ongoing, creative reinterpretation of both God and humanity that takes place within interpretive communities (which will be discussed in the concluding chapter), one that embraces the diversity of human experiences and identities. But this is not just the intellectual love child of postmodern theology and queer theory; the (Queer) New Being emerges as a necessary component of systematic theology as a *Wissenschaft*, i.e., from its systematic reflection on the embodied religious practices of LGBTQIA+ Christians today. The present reflections, therefore, are necessary components of systematic theology as a method of apologetics.

I. Christ's Body in the Making²⁷⁶

In the year 325 – 1700 years ago – Emperor Constantine called together the Council of Nicaea, which had before it the primary task of refuting a fellow church leader who was recently perceived to have gone rogue. This now infamous man was Arius. Arius was born around 270 in Ptolemais of Libya and died in Constantinople in 336, roughly ten years after the Councils that anathematized his theology. But he was not always considered a heretic – he was a well-respected and “well educated presbyter in one of the leading churches in Alexandria at the beginning of the fourth century.”²⁷⁷ Because of his devotion and commitment to the uniqueness and unoriginated status of God, Arius argued that the Son could *not* be co-eternal with God. In his own words, “We are persecuted because we say, ‘the Son had a beginning, but God is without beginning’ ... And this we say because he is neither part of God, nor of any lower substance.”²⁷⁸ Before Arius entered the scene, two of the earliest recorded bishops, Ignatius of

²⁷⁶ This section utilizes patristics research from my unpublished Bachelor's thesis, J.J. Warren, “A Divinizational Hermeneutic for Liberation Theology,” Bachelor's thesis (Oxford University, 2018).

²⁷⁷ Michael B. Thompson, “Arianism: Is Jesus Christ Divine and Eternal or Was He Created” in *Heresies and How to Avoid Them: Why it Matters What Christians Believe* (Ada: Baker Academic, 2012), p. 17.

²⁷⁸ Arius, “283 Letter of Arius to Eusebius, bishop of Nicomedia, c. 320” in *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to A.D.337*, James Stevenson, ed. (London: SPCK Publishing, 2013), <https://research-ebSCO-com.uaccess.univie.ac.at/linkprocessor/plink?id=a5a03569-122d-3743-99ab-39fab280871a>, p. 284.

Antioch (c. 35 – 108) and Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130 – 202), emphasized the physical body and blood of Christ through the practice of the Eucharist,²⁷⁹ with Irenaeus writing explicitly against those who devalued or rejected the humanity of Christ in his pentalogy, *Against Heresies*.²⁸⁰

While Gnosticism generally rejected Jesus' humanity, Arius rejected Jesus' substantial unity with God. The Gnostics' rationale was grounded in their belief that the corporeal world was inherently corrupt, and therefore, for Jesus to be human would be to corrupt God. Arius' denial of Jesus' substantial unity was founded upon the objection that "For God to impart His [sic.] substance to some other being, however exalted, would imply that He is divisible and subject to change, which is inconceivable."²⁸¹ A crucial distinction between the Gnostics and Arius emerges: Arius' rationale was not grounded in a negative view of the material world but rather sought to defend the indivisibility and immutability of God. Concerned that affirming the full divinity of the Son would compromise God's transcendence, Arius interpreted Scripture through the lens of Greek philosophical categories and concluded that the Son was begotten by the Father and therefore not eternal or of the same substance (*homoousios*). Later followers of Arius would propose that the Son was of like substance (*homoiousios*), attempting a compromise with Nicene orthodoxy.²⁸²

²⁷⁹ Ignatius, "Ignatius to the Trallians" in *The Epistles of St. Clement of Rome and St. Ignatius of Antioch*, James A. Kleist, trans. (New York: Paulist Press, 1946), §8.1.

²⁸⁰ *Against Heresies* is common shorthand for Irenaeus' pentalogy, *On the Detection and Refutation of the of the Knowledge Falsely So Called*. Cf. Robert M. Grant, trans., *Irenaeus of Lyons* (London: Routledge, 1997).

²⁸¹ Arius "283 Letter of Arius to Eusebius, bishop of Nicomedia, c. 320" in *A New Eusebius*, p. 284.

²⁸² As the remainder of this section will take up, translating *ousia* is a difficult task to say the least. While many English texts translate Arius' – and therefore the Nicene Creed's – use of *ousia* as "substance," it could equally well be translated as "essence," epitomizing the ontological debate discussed in Chapter One. The official websites of the Church of England, The United Methodist Church, The Episcopal Church, and the Vatican all translate *homoousion* in their English-language versions of the Nicene Creed as "of one Being with the Father," cf. <https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/worship-texts-and-resources/common-worship/common-material/new-patterns-28>, <https://www.umc.org/en/content/glossary-nicene-creed>, <https://www.episcopalchurch.org/what-we-believe/creeds/>, https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part_one/section_one/chapter_three/article_2/the_credos.html. On the official website of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, however, *homoousion* is translated as "consubstantial with," and the Christian Reformed Church translates it as "of the same essence as the Father." Cf. <https://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe>, <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/creeds/nicene-creed>.

According to Oxford theologian J.N.D. Kelly, Arius argued that “the Son must be a creature... whom the Father has formed out of nothing by His mere fiat.”²⁸³ Therefore, Arius’s views can be summarized as follows: (1) the Logos has a beginning and is therefore *not* co-eternal with God, (2) the Logos has a creaturely status (albeit a first and highest creature) and is therefore *not* of the same *ousia* as God, and (3) the Logos was, therefore, not *truly* God since his divinity was granted/derived from God the Father, making the Son subordinate to the Father. These assertions and their consequences clearly placed Arius at odds with many of his contemporaries, as the synod of Antioch under Bishop Ossius of Cordoba in early 325 – and later the Council of Nicaea under Emperor Constantine in June of that year – went on to demonstrate.²⁸⁴ Three years after these Councils, Athanasius (c. 299 – 373), who had participated in the proceedings of Nicaea, was consecrated as the bishop of Alexandria – the metropolis of Arius’ home region. Though he participated in the Council, he did so as a deacon, as one who had served on the frontlines of ministry with the poor, distributing money, food and aid to those the church supported. David Gwynn, a scholar of late antiquity in London, writes that “Athanasius was not a theoretical or intellectual theologian. The questions that inspired his teachings were those that concerned his congregations and the wider Christian people.”²⁸⁵ From his pastoral perspective, Athanasius articulated a high Christology that valued both the divinity and the humanity of Christ as deeply relevant to the physical needs of the persons he served as a deacon. Therefore, his rebuke of Arius homed in on a pastoral doctrine of the Incarnation. His theology was “rooted in a profound belief in human salvation through the Incarnation of God’s Son and Word”²⁸⁶ – “it made sense only if the Logos was God’s way of being personally present in the World.”²⁸⁷

²⁸³ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), p. 227.

²⁸⁴ Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 232.

²⁸⁵ David M. Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria: Bishop, Theologian, Ascetic, Father* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 66.

²⁸⁶ Gwynn, *Athanasius of Alexandria*, p. 55.

²⁸⁷ Richard A. Norris, *The Christological Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 19.

i. The Incarnation. In his own words, Athanasius clarifies the importance of the Incarnation in refuting Arius as follows:

For the Word, realizing that in no other way would the corruption of human beings be undone except, simply, by dying, yet being immortal and the Son of the Father the Word was not able to die, for this reason he takes to himself a body capable of death...²⁸⁸

Because the Logos is the Word through which the universe was created, the Son is the fleshy, material being through which humanity is redeemed. What makes Athanasius' Christology particularly interesting for our purposes is his insistence on the necessity of the body for salvation history (*Heilsgeschichte*). The salvation of humanity that the embodied Logos manifests through the Incarnation is the only solution – for Athanasius – to the problem of corruption and death that resulted from humanity's transgression against God in Genesis 2:17. "Being the Word of the ~~Father~~ and above all, he alone consequently was both able to recreate the universe and was worthy to suffer on behalf of all and to intercede for all before the ~~Father~~."²⁸⁹ The Incarnation – the enfleshment and embodied presence of God – became central for the emerging church as it defined its doctrines, i.e., as it determined the substance of its message. This substance then serves as a hermeneutic-ontological norm: determining the ontological function of the Christ determines how Christians interpret our own bodies and the material world. The material of Christ's body and of our bodies today is not supernaturally transformed or altered by these doctrines. However, the meaning that his body and ours have *is* shaped and transformed by these norms, which purport to describe what they are, in actuality, actively creating.²⁹⁰ Thus we move from metaphysics to ontology, from universal essentialisms to communal hermeneutics.

²⁸⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria, "On the Incarnation," in *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr (Yonkers: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), §9.

²⁸⁹ Athanasius, "On the Incarnation," §7

²⁹⁰ The hermeneutic ontological constitution of the body will be discussed below in Chapter Three, Part II.C "Queer Bodies: Intercorporeality & Eschatology."

Athanasius continues to assert that, “It was appropriate for the Lord, when he was clothed in human flesh, to put it on in its totality, together with the passions proper to it... even though they did not touch him in his deity.”²⁹¹ We can see the pastoral theologian attempting to work out what exactly the Nicene Creed meant in terms of Christ’s nature. For Athanasius there is the Logos, which “has always been God” (*Orations*, 3.29), and there is the body of Christ, which can be properly called “God’s body” insofar as the Godhead was present within it (*Orations*, 3.31). Richard A. Norris, Professor Emeritus of Church History at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, clarifies Athanasius’ Christology in the following way: “Tears, hunger, ignorance, and the like, do not belong to the Logos himself; they belong to him by virtue of his incarnate state. They are proper to the flesh which is proper to the Logos.”²⁹² In this way, Athanasius attempts to refute Arius’ claim that if the Logos were truly God, it would mean God underwent change, was tortured, and even died. “Consequently, when the flesh was suffering, the Logos was not apart from it. That is why the suffering also is said to belong to him. When he was doing the works of the ~~Father~~ in a divine way, the flesh was not external to him. On the contrary, the Lord did these things in the body itself.”²⁹³ As he states in this same section, it was “human spit” and a “divine act” that brought sight to the man born blind. Athanasius’s practical pastoral sensibilities are emphasized to call attention to the meaningful ways in which his context likely shaped his theology: “human spit and divine act” expounds Christology to his contemporaries in a far clearer manner than the philosophical language of the Nicene Creed. His Christology did not condemn the material world or the human body, but rather, as John Behr, the British Eastern Orthodox Priest and former dean of St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary in Yonkers, summarizes, the Incarnation placed God in communion with humanity so that humanity could be in communion with God “through

²⁹¹ Athanasius, “Orations Against the Arians,” in *The Christological Controversy*, Richard A. Norris, ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), Book III, §32. This will hereafter be referred to in the text simply as *Orations*.

²⁹² Norris, *The Christological Controversy*, p. 20.

²⁹³ Athanasius, “Orations Against the Arians,” §32.

contemplation of [God's] Word and Image, the Savior Jesus Christ.”²⁹⁴ It is through the Incarnate Logos that humanity's “proper characteristic or state of human existence” as communion with God is restored.²⁹⁵

The centrality of the Incarnation for salvation is furthered by the Cappadocian fathers, Basil of Caesarea (330 – 379), Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335 – 395), and Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329 – 389). For the Passion and Resurrection to have occurred, the Incarnation of the Logos is fundamental. When addressing the assumption of flesh, Gregory of Nazianzus remarks of Jesus' birth saying, “[t]hat it was from a woman makes it human, that she was a virgin makes it divine” (*Oration* 29.19).²⁹⁶ Here, the bishop of Constantinople emphasizes the importance of both the human reality and the divinity of Christ by looking instead to his birth. This dual emphasis on the realities of the birth of Christ demonstrates the key concept of the Cappadocian understanding of the Incarnation and builds upon Athanasius' concept: “He remains what he was; what he was not, he assumed” (*Oration* 29.19). The Nicene Creed was foundation for the Cappadocian articulations of the Incarnation, which Basil defends, among other instances, in Letter 159 “To Eupaterius and his Daughter”: “In it [the Nicene Creed] the Son is confessed to be of the same substance as the Father and of the same nature as the One who begot him” (*Letter* 159.1).²⁹⁷ Like Athanasius, the Cappadocians supported the co-eternal status of the Son and advanced the doctrine of the Incarnation by emphasizing the real union of divine and human natures in Christ – without confusion or mixture. Though Apollinaris, their contemporary and theological opponent, insisted that Christ had a human body but not a human mind (*nous*), the Cappadocians embraced the complex mystery that both the divine and the human were, through communion, fully present and one in the person of Jesus the Christ. He was not one or the other;

²⁹⁴ Behr, *On the Incarnation*, p. 25.

²⁹⁵ Behr, p. 25.

²⁹⁶ Gregory of Nazianzus, “Oration 29,” in *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, trans. Frederick Williams and Lionel Wickham, Popular Patristics Series 23 (Yonkers: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002).

²⁹⁷ Cited from Mark DelCogliano, “Basil of Caesarea, Letters 159 and 236.6” in *The Cambridge Edition of Early Christian Writings*, ed. Andrew Radde-Gallwitz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 224 – 28.

Jesus as the Christ is fully God and fully human. According to the Cappadocians, this embodied ontological unity that happens through the Incarnation is necessary for a particular understanding of the salvation of humanity, that is, of becoming like God.

ii. Theosis, Deification, and/or Sanctification. Brian E. Daley, a U.S.-American Catholic Priest and professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame writes that “Gregory [of Nyssa] presents the Incarnation of the Word as the culmination of the theophanies of sacred history – all acts of self-revelation by a single divine Son.”²⁹⁸ The importance placed on the physical body in the Passion is made theologically meaningful through the Incarnation. The Incarnation is thereby as essential to soteriology as the Passion and Resurrection. I continue to belabor the emphasis on the Incarnation among patristic sources because, while most Christians can agree that the *missio Christi* fulfills and is not separated from the *missio Dei*, many Christians today emphasize the violent death of Jesus from Nazareth as central to their understandings of the *missio Christi*. This emphasis risks obscuring a fuller patristic vision in which the Incarnation itself – performatively realizing God’s solidarity with humanity – is foundational for the *missio Dei*. Furthermore, if the *missio Dei* and *missio Christi* are essentially the same or arise together in mutual interdependence – the mission of Christ is a *component* of the Trinitarian mission of God – then violence in one means violence in both. As the Christian philosopher and social activist Martin Luther King, Jr. elucidates in his philosophy of nonviolence, one can only attain peaceful ends through peaceful means.²⁹⁹ Violence cannot be a path to peace. The violence that is built into the *missio Christi* for many is, therefore, an injunction against the *missio Dei* itself as inherently violent.

²⁹⁸ Brian E. Daley, “Divine Transcendence and Human Transformation: Gregory of Nyssa’s Anti-Apollinarian Christology” in *Re-Thinking Gregory of Nyssa*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2003), p. 69.

²⁹⁹ “Martin Luther King, Jr.’s ‘A Christmas Sermon on Peace’ Still Prophetic 50 Years Later,” Beacon Broadside: A Project of Beacon Press, accessed March 11, 2025, <https://www.beaconbroadside.com/broadside/2017/12/martin-luther-king-jrs-christmas-sermon-peace-still-prophetic-50-years-later.html>.

Athanasius and the Cappadocians, however, shifted the soteriological emphasis from the Passion of Christ to the Incarnation of the Logos without devaluing or disregarding the former. In her book on *The Making of Human Dignity in Christian Antiquity*, Jadwiga Guerrero van der Meijden draws attention to the way in which Athanasius's "deification formula" alluded to above (God became man so that man could become God), "introduces some idea of human value, for to 'become God' (θεοποιεῖν) clearly assumes an elevation of the axiological status of a human being to that of the most perfect being."³⁰⁰ Thus, the Incarnation is queerly interrelated with deification, of becoming like God. Similarly, in his summary of Gregory of Nazianzus's theology of the Incarnation, patristics scholar Christopher Beeley says that the Incarnation of Christ is the "determinative factor in our existence."³⁰¹ The incarnation, as a norm, determines the meaning of existence for Christians. Because of the transgression of humanity against God in the second Genesis account, humanity's communion with God was interrupted. Through a process described by the early Greek fathers as deification, which is made possible because of the Incarnation, Christ makes possible a restoration of the communion between God and humanity. Thus, it is the Incarnation and its queerly interrelated doctrine of deification – not only, or even primarily, the violent Passion – that determines the meaning of human existence.

Rather than viewing our embodied-being and the material world as inherently sinful, and therefore something to escape (which will be discussed below), through the norm of the Greek patristic doctrines of the Incarnation and deification, Christians can view our bodies as the necessary medium through which God is encountered. In other words, our bodies, informed by the norm of these Christological doctrines, are revelatory. More precisely, in and through our embodied ways of life as self-identified religious persons, God is performatively constituted

³⁰⁰ Jadwiga Guerrero van der Meijden, ed. *The Making of Human Dignity in Christian Antiquity*, 1st ed. (Paderborn: Brill/Schöningh, 2024), p. 42.

³⁰¹ Christopher A. Beeley, "Jesus Christ, the Son of God," in *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 120.

in the world. Chapter Three will take up this concept in greater detail through ecclesiology and its queer interrelation with pneumatology.

Returning to the task at hand, according to Athanasius and the Cappadocians the purpose of humanity is not merely to be saved from destruction and reunited with God postmortem, *but to become like God*. The same theological ingredients are being utilized differently and are creating a distinct variation of the dish of Christology, which meets the requirements of conscientious diners/participants. With flour, water, egg and a pinch of salt we can make fettuccini, linguine, ravioli, or naan, biscuits, Crepes, tortillas, East African Chapati, Indian Paratha, and so on. Same ingredients. Different quantities, cooking methods, and contexts produces very different meals to nourish different persons with different sensibilities, palates, and desires. “Gregory [of Nazianzus] understands Christian salvation in terms of the larger idea of [...] divinization[/*theosis*], the transforming participation of the human person in the being and life of God.”³⁰² It was this Gregory who coined the term *theosis* in his poetry to describe the process of deification.³⁰³ Salvation, for the Nazianzen, is not merely from corporeal death, but from ontological obscurity. While pasta soaks up the sauce, chapati carries it like a deliciously flakey utensil, leaving one’s hands glistening with good fats. The Cappadocian doctrine of the Incarnation and deification/*theosis* is one in which human nature is not “annihilated,” but is rather saturated by the “stability and luminous vigor of God.”³⁰⁴

One could view such a doctrine today as one of *intentionality*: it is not that human bodies are inherently evil or that there is a “God-sized hole that only Jesus can fill” (as popular tracts often claim), but rather *theosis*/deification and its soteriological consequences can be regarded as an invitation to live intentionally and, in so doing, experience wholeness. Becoming like God becomes the primary intention of life. It seems logical, then, that the early church theologians,

³⁰² Beeley, “Jesus Christ, the Son of God,” p. 116.

³⁰³ Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov, “Introduction,” in *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, ed. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2006), p. 1.

³⁰⁴ Daley, “Divine Transcendence and Human Transformation,” p. 71.

whose work emphasized the role of the Incarnation in salvation history, were also the ones to develop a doctrine of *theosis*. While this term may be unfamiliar to many in the West, its directionality – the process of becoming more godly – is akin to the later Methodist/Wesleyan doctrine of *sanctification*, of daily “advance[ing] in the knowledge and love of God [our] Savior.”³⁰⁵ For Wesleyans/Methodists, sanctification, or advancing daily in godliness, carries with it theological presuppositions and consequences that parallel the three theological axes that United Methodist clergyperson Bobby Lynn Rackley identifies in his dissertation as necessary for the doctrine of *theosis* to be intelligible:

- 1) an understanding of God as desiring true union with humanity;
- 2) a theological anthropology which sees the telos of humanity as true Godlikeness; and
- 3) a soteriological thrust that points to redeemed humanity as participating in the Godhead.³⁰⁶

As Rackley describes, all three axes are present in both a doctrine of deification/*theosis* as well as in the Methodist/Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification, which is why they will be hereafter used as synonyms, informed by their respective historical contexts.

Put another way, the centrality of grace within Wesleyan/Methodist theology has profound soteriological implications: salvation becomes not only a one-time event (not the instantaneous conversion of the Moravians Wesley was in community with), but a *way of life* –

³⁰⁵ See Wesley’s sermon, “Christian Perfection” in Albert C. Outler, and Richard P. Heitzenrater. *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), p. 73. Bobby Rackley identifies the content of theosis in John Wesley’s theology through an extensive study of his writings, including Wesley’s entire sermon corpus. Cf. Bobby Lynn Rackley, *Recovery of the Divine Nature: Wesleyan Soteriology and Theosis Calmly Considered*, Dissertation (Duke University, 2020), retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/10161/20649>. David Robert Walls traces the influence between the early Greek theologians, the patristic renaissance in the Church of England, and the writings of John Wesley in his dissertation, *The Influence of the Greek Father’s Doctrine of Theosis on John Wesley’s Doctrine of Perfection*, Dissertation (University of Toronto, 2015), <http://hdl.handle.net/1807/71001>.

³⁰⁶ Rackley, *Recovery of the Divine Nature*, p. 5.

the total restoration of the image of God in humanity.³⁰⁷ It is by the grace of God, which is continually at work within humanity (*sanctifying grace*), that humanity matures and grows in godliness and is perfected in love. And this is the *telos* of Christian life: to daily “advance in the knowledge and love of God [their] Savior.”³⁰⁸ This understanding blends well with Cheng’s own evolving theory of sin and grace, in which he asks, “What if grace were understood less as an acquittal or rehabilitation of criminals, but rather as deification[/*theosis*], or the process of growing and maturing to become like God?”³⁰⁹ This cursory overview of the development of the doctrine of the Incarnation in different geographical, historical, and ecclesiastical contexts has curated a paradigm that values bodies and the physical world as much as it values S/spirits and possible worlds to come.

As Cheng asserts, Christian theology is fundamentally queer.³¹⁰ The Incarnation and its intimate partner, *theosis*/sanctification, bring Christianity’s fundamental queerness to the fore: For Athanasius, the Cappadocians, and Wesley, God and humanity do not exist as an essentialist binary, but rather, through the process of sanctification – which is made possible by a doctrine of the Incarnation – God and humanity become one, unified while unique. To some it may seem strange for a work of queer theology to emphasize Christology – after all, many of our families or ex-church communities are actively praying for Jesus to enter our hearts and make us heterosexual. It is in the name of Jesus that LGBTQIA+ youth are sent to conversion therapies that ultimately lead many to suicide. It is in the name of Jesus that parents kick out their LGBTQIA+ teens and force them into homelessness. It is in the name of Jesus that churches refuse to bless queer relationships, ordain LGBTQIA+ persons as clergy, or affirm LGBTQIA+ persons *as we are* as children of God. However, as the brief historical sketch above has sought to demonstrate, it is through Christology that the queerness of Christianity becomes visible. In

³⁰⁷ Outler and Heitzenrater, *John Wesley's Sermons*, p. 13.

³⁰⁸ See Wesley’s sermon, “Christian Perfection” in *John Wesley's Sermons*, p. 73.

³⁰⁹ Patrick Cheng, *From Sin to Amazing Grace: Discovering the Queer Christ* (New York, NY: Seabury Books, 2012), p. 54.

³¹⁰ Patrick Cheng, *Radical Love*, p. 10

Cheng's words, "it is in Jesus [the] Christ that all of these seemingly fixed binary categories are ultimately challenged and collapse."³¹¹ The task before us now is to explore how and why Christology became an oppressive feature of Christian theology and then to gather resources and tactics for subversion in order to open more alternatives for livable lives within Christian discourse.

A. Sin and Biopower

As the method of this work seeks to demonstrate, a system functions by creating doctrines together – they are, like the body of Christ, relationally constructed. Christology presupposes a doctrine of God, or does it? Rather than one presupposing another, the relationship is better described as interdependence. These doctrines arise together within the discourse – which always means within a complex web of power/knowledge, *pouvoir/savoir* – of Christian theology. To pull the thread on one end of the tapestry or to change the *Vorspeise* in the menu would inherently alter the overall experience. Therefore, Christology, and the doctrines of Incarnation and sanctification/*theosis* are necessarily interwoven with the question of sin and the human condition to which they seek to respond. Following the method of Foucault's critical genealogy, however, the narrative/temporal progression from original sin, which then required God's intervention (as expounded through Christology) is named as a construction of the system itself. Rather than original sin being original or "natural," and therefore necessitating some mechanism for salvation external to the system – be that through faithful adherence to law or through the Gospel's fulfillment of these laws – both arise together. To draw out this calling-into-question of genealogy with regards to doctrines, and therefore as a tactic for unsettling claims to "naturalness" made within theology, I began with the Incarnation and now come to doctrines of sin.

³¹¹ Cheng, p. 11.

This work is not, however, an attempt to systematically recount Christian doctrines from their earliest articulations to the present in a complete and coherent manner. Rather, I invite at-will various partners into this intimate exchange, reading various Christian sources, such as patristic texts and creeds, not for consolidation within the present system as somehow superior to others, but to identify such sources as fundamental to the establishing of norms for “decent” theological responses. I draw on patristic sources not as a patristic scholar but as a queer theologian who recognizes the function of these sources in establishing the boundaries for what is considered Christian theology by many today. As we have seen through a gendered reading of theology, it is only through these norms that Christian contents, even Christians ourselves, are constituted. So, what is the norm of sin and its interdependent impact for other doctrinal threads of the Christological tapestry?

i. Original Sin? As Cheng notes, the traditional doctrine of sin is a legalistic one in which human pride leads to disobeying God’s commands.³¹² Beginning with the etiological tale of Adam and Eve in Genesis, God’s law is broken, and humanity is punished. The expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden is not the end of their punishment; it is the beginning of humanity’s perpetual “perversion.” Augustine of Hippo asserts that this event constituted humanity as fundamentally, or “originally,” marred.³¹³ Cheng describes how for Augustine this tainting of human nature that began in Eden, which Augustine uses to construct the doctrine of “original sin,” is “passed on from generation to generation through *sexual acts*.”³¹⁴ Disobedience is bound to sex – to sexual intercourse and, for much of history, unjustly to women.³¹⁵ In this

³¹² Cf. Cheng, “Traditional Doctrine of Sin as Disobedience” in *Radical Love*, pp. 71 – 73.

³¹³ “Thence, after his sin, he was driven into exile, and by his sin the whole race of which he was the root was corrupted in him, and thereby subjected to the penalty of death. And so it happens that all descended from him [and Eve] ... was condemned at the same time with him — being the offspring of carnal lust on which the same punishment of disobedience was visited — were tainted with the original sin, and were by it drawn through various errors and sufferings into that last and endless punishment which they suffer in common with the fallen angels, their corrupters and masters, and the partakers of their doom.” Cf. Augustine, “The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Love,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, trans. J. F. Shaw, First Series, vol. 3, ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), Ch. 26.

³¹⁴ Cheng, p. 71, emphasis added.

³¹⁵ Holly Morse “examine[s] the ways in which female writers and protesters have appropriated the Bible’s first woman in their challenges to female subordination in patriarchal culture, and in their own articulation of what it

classical system, humanity is tainted *ab ovo* through sexuality. It is no wonder, then, that Christian theology has been obsessed with policing sexuality. To control sex “correctly” is to overcome our inherent flaw, which is necessary for this understanding of salvation. As Foucault’s discussion on the “repressive hypothesis” illustrates, Christianity’s obsession with controlling sex has not silenced talk of sex but has instead – and intentionally – forced much of the Western world to speak of sex constantly, and to do so through “appropriate” channels governed by churches and their representatives.³¹⁶ Prohibition does not silence or repress sex; it forces sex into highly regulated discourses. With the construction of a doctrine of original sin as part of the classical theological system, the church’s oft obsession with the sexuality of its members appears justified: to re-surface Reichel, seeking to control Christians’ sexuality is not a bug but a feature of Systematic Theology.

However, something happens in the modern period where it is not only the church curating the discourse on sex, but a dispersion of sexual discourses across institutions. I quote Foucault at length on this development:

The Middle Ages had organized around the theme of the flesh and the practice of penance a discourse that was markedly unitary. In the course of recent centuries, this relative uniformity was broken apart, scattered, and multiplied in an explosion of distinct discursivities which took form in demography, biology, medicine, psychiatry, psychology, ethics, pedagogy, and political criticism. More precisely, the secure bond that held together the moral theology of concupiscence and the obligation of confession (equivalent to the theoretical discourse on sex and its first-person formulation) was, if not broken, at least loosened and diversified: between the objectification of sex in rational discourses, and the movement by which each individual was set to the task of

is to be “Woman” without perpetuating the problematic pursuit of surfacing the “real” or “original” meaning. Rather, Morse integrates feminist readings of Eve into the diverse perspectives of biblical studies so as to avoid the erasure of “women writers who have employed Eve’s story as a means of self-reflection and self-liberation.” Cf. Holly Morse, “The First Woman Question: Eve and the Women’s Movement,” in, *The Bible and Feminism: Remapping the Field*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³¹⁶ Cf. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I (London: Penguin Random House, 2020 [1978]), Part II.I “The Incitement to Discourse,” pp. 17 – 35.

recounting his own sex, there has occurred, since the eighteenth century, a whole series of tensions, conflicts, efforts at adjustment, and attempts at retranscription.³¹⁷

No longer is the Church the primary site for such ~~speech~~ (inciting a particular discourse about sex but only in the closets of the confessional). For Foucault, this dispersion and diversification of discourses on sex does *not* seek to hide or repress sex, but is rather “a regulated and polymorphous incitement to discourse” through the increasing variety of techniques and technologies across disciplines and institutions.³¹⁸ The pathologization and erasure of trans persons in the current political discourse of the U.S. is the latest display of how diverse institutions – such as the Executive, Judicial and Congressional Branches of the U.S. government, Health and Human Services, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, National Institute for Health, Department of Defense, Department of Education, Department for Veterans Affairs, and even the U.S. Agency for International Development – form an insidious network of control whereby multiple “centers” are promulgating and coordinating anti-trans/anti-queer/anti-Black/anti-Latin American/ableist initiatives. The effectiveness of this diffuse network of discourses on sex, in their targeting of trans and LGBTQIA+ persons, includes the withholding of HIV medications around the globe, the erasure of trans, queer, and Black historical figures from U.S. historical sites (such as the Stone Wall riot of 1969),³¹⁹ the censoring of terms such as “diversity,” “equity,” “inclusion,” “LGBTQ,” “Latinx,” “BIPOC,” “disability,” and even “sex” by government agencies,³²⁰ banning LGBTQIA+ persons from the military, the forced relocation and imprisonment of Latin Americans in Guantanamo or to El Salvadore where they are chained, shaved, and thrown in cells or tents. A diverse and diffuse

³¹⁷ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I, pp. 33 – 34.

³¹⁸ Foucault, vol. I, p. 34.

³¹⁹ Elizabeth Wolfe, “‘Transgender’ and ‘queer’ erased from Stonewall Uprising national monument website,” *CNN*, February 13, 2025, <https://edition.cnn.com/2025/02/13/us/stonewall-inn-national-monument-transgender/index.html>.

³²⁰ Karen Yourish, Annie Daniel, Saurabh Datar, Isaac White and Lazaro Gamio, “These Words Are Disappearing in the New Trump Administration” *The New York Times*, March 7, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2025/03/07/us/trump-federal-agencies-websites-words-dei.html>.

web of centers are policing bodies, inciting sex into discourses under the guise of returning to “natural facts,” “common sense,” and the protection of the “[U.S.] American way of life.”

What we are witnessing presently in the U.S. is what Foucault describes through the concept of “biopower”: the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations through the numerous centers and their new techniques.³²¹ Therefore, while some might regard Systematic Theology as *only* one form of communication among others in contemporary Western cultures – and therefore making no demands, either for or against bodies – within classical theological Systems sin has functioned as an essential element of Christian colonial biopower. This is, after all, Althaus-Reid’s indictment of Western Christian theology generally, and Systematic Theology specifically: That Systematic Theology is “decent” insofar as it produces and predetermines what constitutes proper theology and correct relationships; it does not learn from or even see the lemon vendors or unhoused women on the streets of Buenos Aires walking without underwear.³²² But this omission is not accidental – it is a feature of classical Systematic Theology. Whether among the lemon vendors, bisexual towns and mountains, trans priests, or salsa bars, Systematic Theology refuses to recognize the value of these locales because they are deemed beyond its purview – they are not properly, or decently theological.³²³

But why? On the one (seemingly innocuous) hand, because they are outside the realm of what is considered theology – lemon vendors and bisexual mountains fall outside the recognized sources of theology (the Bible, denominational traditions and/or church canons). On the other hand, LGBTQIA+ persons and the sexual practices of the poor around the globe are deemed outside the realm of Systematic Theology because its core logic (Coded by Augustine) deems sex the root of sin. These locales, as explicitly and subversively sexual, are not necessary

³²¹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I, p. 140.

³²² Cf. Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology* (London: Routledge, 2000).

³²³ In her discussion of kneeling before priests, Althaus-Reid distinguishes between location and locale as follows: “The locale is the event of kneeling and the spatial configuration of it; it is also the affectivity model (or lack of it) presented in the church. The location is theology as a type of knowledge which orders these spaces of determination for the theologian and for her love life.” Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, p. 11.

and even counterproductive for the reproduction of “good” (white) Christian (heterosexual) relations.³²⁴ These queer relations and queer bodies cannot obtain salvation as they are or in “those” places. Two heterosexual married persons of opposite sexes must engage in intercourse for the purpose of reproduction in order for the Salvation Machine™ of classical Systematic Theology to function properly: it takes in tainted sexual humans, heats and refines them, places them into the sanctified molds of heterosexual marriage, and spits out trophies of Christian virtue. – But trophies are too static a metaphor for this phenomenon. Rather, the Salvation Machine™ of classical Systematic Theology produces a heterosexual army of disciplined “Christian soldiers, marching as to war.”³²⁵ Because “all political theories are sexual theories with theological frames of support” – *sin* can be seen in its fullness as a theo-political mechanism, an explicitly sexual doctrine within the history and present of Christian theology.³²⁶ Sin, and therefore, sexuality, is the necessary defect that sends persons to the Salvation Machine™ for correction in the first place. Defining sin is instrumental for controlling bodies and curating populations – and not just hypothetical “pure” theological bodies – no, the fleshy, sweaty bodies of an ever-growing (i.e., heterosexual) and submissive workforce, which are its end product. In other words, *sin functions as an essential element in a Christian nation’s ability to exercise biopower.*

ii. The Profit of Sin. This makes biopower an “indispensable element in the development of capitalism” since capitalism “would not have been possible without the controlled insertion

³²⁴ “The paradigm is an indecent paradigm, because it undresses and uncovers sexuality and economy at the same time. Not only do we need an Indecent Theology which can reach the core of theological constructions, insofar as they are rooted in sexual constructions, for the sake of understanding our sexuality, we also need it because theological truths are currencies dispensed and acquired in theological economic markets. In Latin America, the exchange of work for the reward of the afterlife, salvation for bread and subservience for divine grace started when the Grand Narratives of the Original Nations disintegrated. And it is a sexual exchange: not only salvation as a symbolic exchange commodity for bread, but for a type of heterosexual mode of living and producing which is expected too.” Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, p. 19.

³²⁵ Cf. Sabine Baring-Gould, “Onward, Christian soldiers, Marching as to war” (1865). This nineteenth-century hymn expresses the (insidious) wedding of Christianity and British imperialistic triumphalism as one example of the deployment of Christianity for reproductive ends, here reproducing a Western Christian order through militarism and other modes of imperialistic expansion.

³²⁶ Althaus-Reid, p. 177.

of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes.”³²⁷ Within this critical analysis then, it is no mere coincidence that the current U.S. administration is supported vocally by Christian nationalists, who seek to establish an exclusivist version of Christianity as the dominant moral and cultural order³²⁸ – and that this regime is funded by the benefactors of capitalism, billionaires. The car show outside the White House in March 2025, which was arranged by the president to support the business of a billionaire who was illegally granted government authority, is just the latest evidence of this phenomenon.³²⁹ Heterosexual reproduction is as essential to capitalism as it is to classical Systematic Theology: it is the hierarchical relations through which a large workforce is created and maintained for the power and prestige of contemporary capitalist nation-states. Althaus-Reid addresses the tension one might feel while reading this exposing theo-political content by reminding us that this paradigm is indecent precisely “because it undresses and uncovers sexuality and economy at the same time” and simultaneously undresses (reveals) the heteropatriarchal God often used to prop up this system.³³⁰ Thus, sin as a negative theological concept has positive economic and theological effects for Capitalist Christianity. To paraphrase the feminist Catholic theologian Elizabeth Johnson, the machine and its concept of sin is “never neutral in its effects, but expresses and molds a community’s bedrock convictions and actions.”³³¹ Sin cannot be said to have an innocuous function within systematic theology as a self-referential form of communication (i.e., as a *Wissenschaft*) because this function has shaped and been shaped by other interests. Differentiated forms of communication risk essentializing themselves so completely that they would fail their *modus operandi*, which is

³²⁷ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. I, pp. 140 – 141.

³²⁸ Joseph O Baker, Samuel L Perry, Andrew L Whitehead, “Crusading for Moral Authority: Christian Nationalism and Opposition to Science” *Sociological Forum* (August 6, 2020), **35** (3): 587–607, [doi:10.1111/socf.12619](https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12619).

³²⁹ David Ingram, “Trump turns the White House lawn into a Tesla showroom” *NBC News*, March 11, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/elon-musk/trump-musk-tesla-white-house-showroom-buys-car-rcna195905>.

³³⁰ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, p. 19.

³³¹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Female Symbols for God: The Apophatic Tradition and Social Justice,” *International Journal of Orthodox Theology*, 1:2 (2010), pp. 41.

nothing other than describing as accurately as possible the ongoing communication of their sphere. A differentiated system of interpretation, which is still regarded here as necessary for social life, risks failing to observe the very dynamism it claims to be constituted by.

Given this context, a doctrine of sin simply cannot be neutral. Systematic theology must respond to this reality for it is only by responding to the context-dependent uses of Christian communication that systematic theology continues as a *Wissenschaft*.³³² Systematic theology cannot speak of a universal or absolute theory of sin; it can only speak of the religious use that is made of religious concepts by religious persons. And today, this includes Christian nationalists who use Christian religious symbols to perpetuate their self-asserted Christian agendas as a twisted form of capitalist-Christian religious devotion. And a systematic theologian – as a systematic theologian – cannot deny the Christian nationalist’s claim to be acting as a Christian. To do so would be to perpetuate the problematic notion of an absolute, universal Christian essence, which one either does or does not participate in and/or have access to. A systematic theologian can, as this work seeks to demonstrate, identify how such actions – committed in the name of the Christian God – transgress the parameters of certain theological norms, such as the doctrines of God and Christ within those systems, and in Methodist/Wesleyan theology, as transgressions of our General Rules. A systematic theologian can also name and identify the harmful innerworkings of these oppressive Systems and can therefore work to construct alternative possibilities in-line with the “abundant life” ethic pursued here. Now that sin has been exposed in its insidious theo-political operations, how might this recognition expose other harmful operations of the Machine?

B. Conversion, Justification, and Redemption; or, The Salvation Machine™

If humanity begins, as Augustine asserts, in a state of original sin, which is passed along sexually – a Sexually Transmitted Doctrine (STD) – then how does one even begin the process

³³² See the Introduction, Part I.A “Systematic Theology as Wissenschaft.”

of sanctification? For most Christians across denominational lines, the beginning of Christian life is marked by conversion. For Methodist/Wesleyan theology, conversion is not synonymous with a one-time event (“asking Jesus to enter one’s heart”) as it is in many other evangelical movements.³³³ For Wesley, *conversion* is not only instantaneous conversion but is rather *a way of life, the total restoration of the image of God in humanity*.³³⁴ It is in this tension with the Moravians’ theology and his own lived experience that “Wesley [began] to work out the relationship between *justification* (what God does *for* us, forgiveness of sin) and *sanctification* (what God does *in* us, holiness of life).”³³⁵ The assurance of salvation often experienced in the moment of justification does not guarantee perfection or holiness. For Wesley, then, assurance alone is insufficient evidence that one is a Christian. It is only by the grace of God, which is continually at work within humanity (sanctifying grace), that one matures and grows in holiness and is perfected in love. Humanity is continually converted; it is an ongoing process, not a one-time event.

i. Conversion© & Trauma. While this understanding of conversion and sanctification can be used for liberative ends, which will be addressed in the next chapter, it can also be used to perpetuate the heteropatriarchal Salvation Machine™ of classical Systematic Theology, which forms and labels as deformed certain bodies. For Althaus-Reid, Conversion© functions “as a reproduction of a decent or proper order,” as the one way to love and be loved, the only way to be saved and live a holy life.³³⁶ Revealed in this light, Conversion© is “the negation of the redemptive act of recovering the memory of love in our lives” because when we pray “forgive us our sins” in the Lord’s Prayer, we are alienating and attempting to forget the love – even and especially the queer relations – that have been deemed non-redemptive within the

³³³ I discuss this at greater length in Chapter one “Being the Church” in J.J. Warren, *Where Two or Three are Connected: Being the Church in This New Era* (Knoxville: Market Square Press, 2024), pp. 23 – 48.

³³⁴ John Wesley, *John Wesley's Sermons*, p. 13.

³³⁵ Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*, second ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013), p. 115.

³³⁶ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, p. 134.

(reproductive) System.³³⁷ Conversion©, then, is a practice of coercion whereby one is required to augment and even discard parts of oneself in order to be saved. It is a practice of forced forgetting and dissociation.

Forgetting can be a practice of violence and an effect of trauma, but it can also be a tool in coping with trauma. In an article on dealing with collective trauma, Ciano Aydin at the University of Twente in the Netherlands, asserts that “[a]ctive forgetting,” referring to Nietzsche, “enables selective remembering; it defuses and neutralizes past experiences that are not beneficial for present and future life.”³³⁸ For Nietzsche, active forgetting is seen as a positive act, one that frees humanity – like the animals he observed – from the shackles of their past.³³⁹ Aydin goes on to describe the complex potential of this practice with regards to mnemotechnologies and the healing collective traumas, particularly as a response to genocide. For Aydin, however, recovering the ability to actively forget “requires at least three types of efforts: recognition, (symbolic) processing, and sublimation” as a way of healing collective trauma. To heal from genocide, for example, the genocide must be named and recognized as such. “Only then can a victimized group employ efforts to assign the trauma a proper place in its cultural identity.”³⁴⁰ This recognition, which marks the first step towards personal and collective healing, involves carefully “reconstructing conditions and circumstances” of a traumatic event, and this “provide[s] a way to work with, adapt, and modify what has happened in such a way that it becomes potentially identifiable (which is important to our second phase). It is a first endeavor to banish the *monstrum* and make it manageable.”³⁴¹ Gaining the tools to recognize and reconstruct the event through smaller, more manageable components will not itself lead to healing. The second step in Aydin’s process, symbolic processing, builds upon the

³³⁷ Althaus-Reid, p. 134.

³³⁸ Ciano Aydin, “How to Forget the Unforgettable? On Collective Trauma, Cultural Identity, and Mnemotechnologies.” *Identity* 17 (3, 2017): 125–37, p. 125.

³³⁹ Cf. F Nietzsche, *Untimely meditations*, D. Breascale, Ed., & R. J. Hollingdale, Trans. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

³⁴⁰ Aydin, “How to Forget the Unforgettable?,” p. 133.

³⁴¹ Aydin, p. 133.

first. Specifically, rituals, as a form of symbolic processing from within a community's already existing traditions, "are not intended to capture the trauma or make it comprehensible. Their purpose is to banish its monstrous dimensions and make it manageable." And this is why Aydin describes communal processing through rituals as symbolic, because "they refer to something that cannot be grasped completely," which is itself "a kind of catharsis, as a kind of emotional cleansing or purgation."³⁴²

I quote Aydin at length on this step because of its clear relevance for a (queer) systematic theology and its potential for healing in religious communities:

In this context, these mnemotechnologies fulfill a double function. On the one hand, through customs, habits, or rituals, the trauma is remembered in the strongest sense of the word; namely, by making it part of the identity of the victimized culture. On the other hand, through the very same practices of culturally incorporating it, the trauma is also forgotten. Characteristic of customs, habits, and rituals is their automatic routines of behavior that are regularly repeated. By repeating it in a proper setting, the traumatic event is remembered and given the required significance. By appropriating it and making it an automatic part of cultural identity, it is banished and forgotten. It is remembered and forgotten at the same time. It is actively forgotten.³⁴³

As the third chapter will elucidate in greater detail, Christianity is a process of communal remembering – and forgetting – specifically through the memory of Jesus the Christ, the embodied appropriation of which constitutes Christianity as a religion today. For the present purposes, it is the healing potential of active forgetting that is of importance as we explore and de/(re)construct concepts of conversion and their material effects. Through liturgy, as a communal ritual, traumatic events can be simultaneously and thoughtfully commemorated in community and therefore also, and paradoxically, forgotten. The repetition becomes an automatic one, meaning that it loses the paralyzing power it once derived, in large part, from

³⁴² Aydin, p. 134.

³⁴³ Aydin, p. 134.

overwhelming one's ability to process the trauma.³⁴⁴ This brings us to the third step, *sublimation*, meaning "the transformation of negative and destructive emotions or instincts ... into positive and constructive emotions, actions, and behavior."³⁴⁵ Processes of reinterpreting traumatic events, such as those of ritual and liturgy creation and participation, are components that enable the transformation of destructive emotions or instincts not only for individuals but as communities. While a list of other healing techniques is beyond both the scope of Aydin's article and this work, a general structure for processing and healing collective traumas has been briefly described.

So the dynamics of conversion could be positively reinterpreted within a Wesleyan/Methodist lens as both the recognition of a traumatic event and a process of healing forward from it. Althaus-Reid's theology describes the harmful effects of active forgetting *when it is required for admission into the System/the community defined by the System*. A (queer) systematic theology, naming the varying and very different doctrines of conversion, disrupts the Salvation Machine™ in which bodies are lured in (*prevenient ~~grace~~*), labeled as inherently broken, and thrust upon the heteropatriarchal *Ordo Salutis* Conveyor Belt®. These bodies – through traumatic forced forgetting – are "cleansed," heated and purified (*justifying ~~grace~~*), cast into new molds of sexually and economically productive Christian citizens, and shipped off around the globe to increase a nation's Gross Domestic Production and Christianity's Gross Doctrinal (re)Production (*sanctifying ~~grace~~*). Within this System, which claims to be the only system, sin functions to assert an inherent sexual flaw, as a mechanism to label, "correct," and reproduce a productive Christian population (biopower).

But there is another way, or rather, there are many. This is what a (queer) systematic theology does: it describes the System's operating procedures, which were once said to be the

³⁴⁴ L. A. Pearlman & K. W., Saakvitne, *Trauma and the Therapist* (New York, NY: Norton, 1995), p. 60. Cited from Aydin, "How to Forget the Unforgettable?," p. 125.

³⁴⁵ Aydin, p. 134.

only ones available and to be neutral, having no relation to and bearing no responsibility for its effects. As a *Wissenschaft*, systematic theology turns the critical analysis upon itself, to the System/Machine it constructed and its demonic claims of ultimacy. Taking up the work of Althaus-Reid, a (queer) systematic theology looks to the sources of wisdom and ways of being that were previously rejected by the heteropatriarchal theo-capitalist System as “un-theological” with appreciation and honor as necessary components for constructing life-giving alternatives. These alternatives do not then seek to replace the Salvation Machine™ but to show that it is not, despite its own claims, the only possible or currently active religio-cultural means of production. The process, presented here as (queer) systematic theology, is akin to what is described by Marcella Althaus-Reid as *demonology*, “the starting point of which is the knowledge of rebellious spirits, a theology that exposes and accuses the legal sacred order of being constructed and not natural.”³⁴⁶ And it is from this starting point that the classical doctrine of Conversion© and its effects are exposed. Furthermore, this project proposes that attending to the persons and traditions harmed by the System is not only an ethical requirement placed upon conscientious systematic theology, but is fundamentally an internal impetus of systematic theology as a *Wissenschaft*, which is constituted as a discipline through reflection on the religious use that is made of religious symbols by religious persons, be that for harm or for justice. Only in this way does systematic theology continue its anti-dogmatic Protestant principle.

ii. Redemption or Retention? Furthermore, within the Salvation Machine™, “doctrines of **redemption** have become doctrines of retention” since they reproduce an imperial past, “based on imperial knowledge of expansion and strategies of acceptance, such as re-territorialization and processes of identity unification which include the erasure of the past (redeeming the past by changing it).”³⁴⁷ It is, therefore, not only hamartiology that is a central

³⁴⁶ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, p. 134.

³⁴⁷ Althaus-Reid, p. 135.

element of the Machine, but soteriology and its theories of redemption as well. Indeed, it is the *Salvation Machine*TM for a reason. As Cheng notes, “it is only through the three goods of marriage (fidelity, procreation, and sacrament) that sexual acts can be redeemed” and “only through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus [the] Christ – who is the second Adam – that the punishment for original sin is reversed.”³⁴⁸ Womanist theologian and the former Paul Tillich Chair of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York, Delores S. Williams, reminds theology that it has always sought to express its concepts – particularly its concepts of atonement and redemption – through the language and thought of particular times and communities. “Thus most theories of atonement, classical and contemporary, are time-bound (as well as ideologically bound with patriarchy) and do not respond meaningfully to the questions of people living beyond the particular time period.”³⁴⁹ Williams goes on to detail the evolution of theories of atonement within the history of Christian thought. Atonement and redemption here are considered as synonyms insofar as both describe the role of the Christ in overcoming the condition of humanity and restoring communion with God.³⁵⁰

Williams, citing Alan Richardson, begins with Origen (c. 183 – 253 CE) as the articulator of a *ransom theory* of atonement, which “capitaliz[es] on people’s belief in devils and spirits... claiming that the death of Jesus on the cross was a ransom paid by God to the devil for the sins of humankind.”³⁵¹ After several centuries, the socio-politico-theological contexts continued to change, and new theories were required in order for the ministry of Christ to be intelligible in these contexts. Thus, in the eleventh century, Anselm the bishop of

³⁴⁸ Cheng, *Radical Love*, pp. 71 – 72.

³⁴⁹ Delores S. Williams, “Black Women’s Surrogacy Experience and The Christian Notion of Redemption,” in *The Strength of Her Witness: Jesus Christ in the Global Voices of Women*, Elizabeth A. Johnson, ed. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2016), p. 136.

³⁵⁰ The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms defines redemption as “(Lat. *redemptio*, from *redimere*, “to redeem”) A financial metaphor that literally means ‘buying back.’ Used theologically to indicate atonement, reconciliation, or salvation wherein liberation from forms of bondage such as sin, death, law, or evil takes place through Christ.” Therefore, redemption may be considered one theory or type of theories of atonement among the others that will be discussed below. Cf. Donald K. McKim, *The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 2nd ed, revised and expanded (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014).

³⁵¹ Williams, “Black Women’s Surrogacy Experience and The Christian Notion of Redemption,” p. 136.

Canterbury articulated a *satisfaction theory* in which humanity had dishonored God and had no means to satisfy this debt against their Lord in this feudal-theological order. “According to the codes of chivalry in Anselm’s time, one atoned for a crime either by receiving punishment or by providing satisfaction to the injured person.”³⁵² God, being the example *par excellence* of chivalry, satisfied the dishonor against Godself by sending the Son. Citing Richardson once more, Williams describes *moral theories* of atonement that were put forth around this time by the French philosopher-theologian, Peter Abelard (1079 – 1142). These theories “emphasized God’s love in the work of atonement and claimed that, when humans look upon the death of Jesus, they see the love of God manifested.”³⁵³ Gazing upon the cross, humanity simultaneously realizes God’s deep love and their own transgressions against that love through sin.

Williams follows the threads of atonement on into the Renaissance, “a time of great interest in the revival of ancient law. So it was reasonable to expect the reformers to work out their theories of atonement in legal terms grounded in the new political and legal thought of the sixteenth century.”³⁵⁴ Thus, Williams concludes, it is logical that the Reformers articulated theories of atonement that reflected back the sensibilities of this time through concepts of God as both just and merciful – “the divine law of punishment that could not be ignored” and “the infinite character of human sin ... deserved infinite harsh punishment,” but because God is also merciful, “God provided a substitute who would bear the punishment for human sin.”³⁵⁵ Hence these theories can be referred to as *substitution theories* of atonement. Whether redemption is made possible through a ransom paid by God to the devil, God’s own satisfaction of the dishonor against God, the moral influence exerted over humanity through the Cross, in which recognition of God’s “love” leads to penitence, or the substitution of Jesus’ body as the cosmic punching bag for all of humanity’s sins once and for all, Williams assists us in recognizing that

³⁵² Williams, “Black Women's Surrogacy Experience and The Christian Notion of Redemption,” pp. 136 – 137.

³⁵³ Williams, p. 137.

³⁵⁴ Williams, p. 137.

³⁵⁵ Williams, p. 137.

each theory – and the jumbled mess of their often uncritical conglomeration today – responds to the needs of certain context. Therefore, to ask, as Willaims does, what the redemption brought about by Jesus the Christ means Black women today is not a “woke” or periphery, inherently tangential question that leads one astray from “real” theology. Rather, this question and those like it are a necessary feature – not a liberal bug – of theology itself as the ongoing reflection, articulation, and transformation of Christian contents through which Christianity itself is constituted today.

C. Christology as Contextual Interpretation

By reexamining Christology through Michel Foucault’s concept of power/knowledge, it is clear that power is at work in complex and diffuse ways in (re)producing and maintaining the hegemony of certain articulations of doctrines over others. In Williams’ chapter entitled “Black Women’s Surrogacy Experience and the Christian Notion of Redemption,” she names how a substitutionary theory of atonement, in which “Jesus represents the ultimate surrogate figure standing in the place of someone else: sinful humankind,” attaches an “aura of the sacred” to surrogacy.³⁵⁶ *Surrogacy*, sanctified by substitutionary theories of atonement, has perpetuated the abuse of Black women through the coerced and voluntary roles of surrogacy that “rob African-American women of self-consciousness, self-care, and self-esteem, and put them in the service of other people’s desires, tasks, and goals.”³⁵⁷ Through Foucault’s concept of biopower, which was used to describe the material effects of these doctrines, it becomes clear that doctrines of redemption and their theories of atonement often operate as part of a System of coerced control whereby a heterosexual and racialized means of reproduction serves the expanding power and prestige of capitalist Christian nations. This critical analysis is akin to what Marcella Althaus-Reid has done through *demonology*, which names and honors the sexual practices of those deemed deviant in order to expose the constructed nature of the “natural”

³⁵⁶ Williams, p. 136.

³⁵⁷ Willaims, p. 136.

theological order, which purports to be original, universal, and absolutely true. In this way, queer theology as demonology is and must consciously continue to be a decolonial practice, unsettling racialized colonial claims to universal epistemic justification. Rather than describing absolutely the meaning of Jesus as the Christ for *all* of humanity for *all* time, Christology is revealed as a contextual constellation of meaning that emerges through the often-insidious relationship between white, heteropatriarchal imperial institutions and their claims of exclusive access to “natural”/universal knowledge, which are supported by Christologies, since it is in Christology that God is made visible, and therefore, most “obvious.”

From this analysis, the classical *ordo Salutis* by which one is saved has been exposed not as a natural or neutral description of things as they are, but rather as the religious and political System that is constructed to uphold imbalanced relations for specific purposes; namely, the reproduction of this order itself and the Christian capitalist nations it undergirds. The classical *ordo Salutis* was revealed as the *Ordo Salutis* Conveyor Belt®: the heterosexual means by which a productive population is perpetuated for the glory of a Christianity that is faithful to the capitalist nation-state. The STD of original sin was revealed as necessary for the proper functioning of this system, and its sexual dimension justifies the coerced and imbalanced heterosexuality of classical Systematic Theology. The Salvation Machine™ does harm because it requires the forced forgetting of loving, equitable relationships that fall outside the only relations that can redeem sexuality: heterosexual, monogamous, reproductive marital intercourse. Sanctification or *theosis*, then, was revealed as a continual lifestyle of forced forgetting and reproduction – the perpetuation of the decent order itself through its model products.

But we have also witnessed alternatives. Because a (queer) systematic theology recognizes both the historically contingent nature of all systems and their ontologies, within which their participants live or struggle to, there exists the possibility of transformation. The

components of the Salvation Machine™, doctrines of (original) sin, conversion, redemption, and salvation can be subverted – a central practice of a queer methodology – and repurposed to bring life rather than death disguised as life. The shifted focus of Christology from death to life, which began with the doctrine of the Incarnation and continues through a reexamination of sanctification, will follow in greater detail in the next section. For now, I quote Williams at length to demonstrate how this emphasis on life within Christology can construct a different, more wholistic means of theological (re)production:

The resurrection does not depend upon the cross for life, for the cross only represents historical evil trying to defeat good. The resurrection of Jesus and the flourishing of God's spirit in the world as the result of resurrection represents the life of the ministerial vision gaining victory over the evil attempt to kill it. Thus, to respond meaningfully to black women's historic experience of surrogacy-oppression, the theologian must show that redemption of humans can have nothing to do with any kind of surrogate role Jesus was reputed to have played in a bloody act that supposedly gained victory over sin and/or evil... Rather, it seems more intelligent to understand that redemption had to do with God, through Jesus, giving humankind new vision to see resources for positive, abundant relational life—a vision humankind did not have before.³⁵⁸

What follows in Part II of this chapter is but one of many possible reinterpretations of Christology in the hope of offering new vision and new, abundant experiences of life. This symbolic reinterpretation will utilize a (queer) systematic method to reimagine Christology and its ontological implications as historically and culturally contingent concepts by weaving together the onto-Christology of Paul Tillich with the gender theory of Judith Butler and the life of nonbinary performance artist ALOK. What emerges from this weaving is, I hope, a basket to carry the fruit of whatever comes forth from the community garden of LGBTQIA+ experiences, desires, and hopes. May it provide food for the hungry and unsettle economic logics that place profit over persons – as the synoptic accounts of Jesus describe when he fed

³⁵⁸ Williams, "Black Women's Surrogacy Experience and The Christian Notion of Redemption," p. 138.

the masses with fish on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, thereby protesting the imperial taxes on the local fishing economy.³⁵⁹

II. The (Queer) New Being: Healing Existential Estrangement

If a (queer) systematic theology is a practice of involved analysis and (re)articulation, whereby the religious use of Christian contents by religious persons is constitutive for the very systems the discipline reflects upon and (re)constructs, then attention to the embodied practices of Christians – particularly those that are forcefully forgotten or closeted by the System – takes on renewed importance. How is Christology and its doctrine of the Incarnation made tangible within Christian communities, and how do the diverse members of these communities reshape these doctrines? Particularly, in what ways do LGBTQIA+ Christians challenge and/or expand Christology simply by our visible presence within Christian communities? Part I demonstrated why our nonreproductive relations clog up the Salvation Machine™ since our lives and loves must be forcibly forgotten in order to enter and exit the Machine. So what could it mean to assert that our bodies and their diverse knowledges are, rather than clogging the Machine, *necessary* for Christian salvation?

For Tillich Christ is the *telos* of existence and, therefore, Christ represents a *qualitative* end of history.³⁶⁰ Something about history – for Christians and from a Christian perspective – is fulfilled. Christ is not the end of chronological time, but in the symbol of the Christ [Christian] history has been fulfilled and transformed in some way. Namely, the strict ontological separation between God and humanity is transformed through the presence of Jesus the Christ, which Tillich calls the “New Being.”³⁶¹ To be clear, the New Being is *not* an empirical fact about a man who was crucified and then resurrected in the first century of the Common Era.

³⁵⁹ K. C. Hanson describes the complex embedded economy of Galilean fishing during the first century CE and the abusive tax system that benefitted the wealthy. Cf. K.C. Hanson, “The Galilean Fishing Economy and the Jesus Tradition,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 27 (1997), pp. 99 – 111.

³⁶⁰ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Volume II (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 119.

³⁶¹ Cf. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. II. II, “The Reality of the Christ.”

The New Being, which Jesus as the Christ symbolizes, is both an *event* and the *reception* of that event by religious communities such that both the event and its reception are necessary components of this qualitative transformation, i.e., the New Being. For Tillich it does not necessarily matter whether a man named Jesus in the first century actually lived and was murdered – what matters for Tillich, and arguably for the Gospel accounts, is that Jesus’ followers “received him as the Christ,” as the “anointed one” through whom their estrangement is overcome.³⁶² So, as with Butler’s theory of gender, Tillich is not describing a Christ *before* or after the Passion, but rather the way in which this story becomes central – constitutive – for a community. As Butler critiques gender as the apparatus through which sex is constructed and then purported to be original, so Tillich critiques Christology as the meaning-making construction through which Jesus of Nazareth is said to be the fact upon which it is founded. Rather, it is in the meaning that communities make of Jesus *as* the Christ that Christology’s salvific power is performatively realized. The realization of this theological construction is a very real event, and it is in no way meant to convey artificiality but rather seeks to describe more honestly and perhaps more accurately, the internal functioning of Christology for fundamentalists as well as whatever this work might be classified as.³⁶³

An example of this is the Last Supper.³⁶⁴ There is no *first* “Last Supper” until there is a second. That is to say, until a community gathered and created a liturgy, a symbolic interpretation of this meal and understood it as having rich theological significance, it was simply the final meal that Jesus of Nazareth may or may not have eaten with the disciples. But when this story is interpreted and received as a central component of sacramental salvation history, it becomes more than a meal among friends, it *becomes* THE Last Supper, a doctrine full of significance and meaning reprojected into history. Again, I find that Tillich’s theory

³⁶² Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. II, p. 97.

³⁶³ See the Introduction above, II.A “A Primer: Performativity & Gender Theory.”

³⁶⁴ Danz, *Gottes Geist*, pp. 301 – 303.

becomes clearer today by using queer theory's critique of concepts (Foucault's genealogical inquiry and Butler's performativity theory) to translate his thought. That is, the seemingly "natural" theological significance of the meal that theology seeks to "describe" is regarded instead as a theological construction and assignment of meaning that then purports to be original. But this recognition does not deny the meaning that is made of the meal – only the tyrannical claim that one particular meaning was and will always be the *true* one. The event is significant when it is received as such – and this theological performativity is what Tillich describes through his language of the New Being. And this theologically constructed meaning has deep ontological significance for Christians for it is through the New Being and the Last Supper that we participate in Christ, and therefore, in God.

Tillich defines the New Being in the following way:

New Being is essential being under the conditions of existence, conquering the gap between essence and existence. For the same idea Paul uses the term 'new creature,' calling those who are "in" Christ "new creatures." [...] It is new in two respects: it is new in contrast to the merely potential character of essential being; and it is new over against the estranged character of existential being. It is actual, conquering the estrangement of existence.³⁶⁵

Though shackled by an essentialism, Tillich's New Being already possesses the beginning of a hermeneutic ontology. With the postmodern critique of Tillich's theology in mind, this qualitative end of history can be regarded as an interpretative one for Christian communities as we reflect on history from a Christian perspective without imposing this view upon others as universally valid. In the New Being, "[t]he estrangement of [our] existential from [our] essential being is conquered in principle, i.e., in power and as a beginning. The term 'New Being,' as used here, points directly to the cleavage between essential and existential being – and is the restorative principle of the whole of this theological system" – "in him has appeared what

³⁶⁵ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. II, pp. 118-119

fulfillment qualitatively means.”³⁶⁶ The New Being is Tillich’s hermeneutic solution to the symbolic ontological problem raised by his contemporaries, which was discussed in Chapter One.

Tillich proffers that in the New Being the estrangement of humanity from the ground of being is overcome, though only partially because of the conditions of existence (to exist is to be, fundamentally, estranged).³⁶⁷ Rather than the STD of Augustine’s original sin, Tillich proffers that “the fall” is a matter related to the ontological polarity of freedom and destiny: In humanity’s actualization of finite freedom, we step outside the divine life; to be a unique person – to have the autonomy to make decisions and to act – is the destiny of humanity, which means no longer being united with our essence.³⁶⁸ In exercising our freedom to act we actualize human destiny, a destiny which entails the separation that is brought about by our freedom. The fall, as discussed above in the first chapter, is not a description of a primordial event, but is rather a description of the condition of human existence; “It is the actualization of ontological freedom united with ontological destiny.”³⁶⁹ The fall does not function as a moral/value judgement against humanity – one that the Machine is then positioned to fix (since the retrojection of this concept is a function of the Machine itself) – it merely seeks to describe what it means to be human: to exist is to be estranged. Now, with the postmodern reading of Tillich undertaken in Chapter One, we can and must move beyond Tillich’s essentialism, which problematically asserts a universal [Christian] essence that all humanity, regardless of whether they realize and/or consent to participate in it – either do or do not actualize. If instead of essential estrangement we understand this estrangement as a fear of the unknown or, more precisely, as

³⁶⁶ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. II, p. 119.

³⁶⁷ For a complete union, we must look to eschatology, but that is beyond the purview of the current question of ontology. Tillich writes, “But, quantitatively considered, the actualization of the New Being within history is drawn into the distortions and ambiguities of man’s historical predicament. This oscillation between ‘already’ and ‘not yet’ is the experience which is symbolized in the tension between the first and second comings of Christ,” Tillich, vol. II, p. 120.

³⁶⁸ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, pp. 255 – 256.

³⁶⁹ Tillich, vol. I, p. 256.

“gender grief,”³⁷⁰ then something about the human conditioned can be considered from a Christian perspective without positing an absolute and universally valid Christian concept onto all other cultures and persons.

A. ALOK: “Gender Grief” & Ontological Healing

“Gender grief” is a newly articulated concept by ALOK, an internationally acclaimed gender non-conforming transfeminine poet, comedian, public speaker, and actor with over 1.6 million followers on Instagram and often sold-out shows in over forty countries that weave an accessible approach to gender theory with comedy.³⁷¹ After watching all of their available Instagram videos and Reels, in most of their content ALOK refuses to engage in debates about trans rights from the perspective of defending the right of trans and queer persons to exist. Rather, they dedicate their life to demonstrating how queerness generally, and transness in particular, enables a fullness – a “magnificence”³⁷² – of being that is shamed and silenced by the gender binary, which harms “cisgender” and “heterosexual” persons as well as queer and trans persons. Reflecting on this condition, ALOK shares,

When I speak about the harm of the gender binary, people often think that I’m just referring to discrimination against non-binary people. I’m not. *Everyone, regardless of their gender, is hurt by the gender binary – it just looks different.* Being coercively gendered causes grief. It’s a form of grief that isn’t recognized as legitimate by our societies. It’s disenfranchised grief where the original loss of agency is compounded by the fact that no one around you thinks that you even have a right to your pain.³⁷³

This is the gender grief ALOK articulates, which is a condition of existence. In a *Guardian* article, in which ALOK describes why they forgave the man who punched them on a tram in

³⁷⁰ Sian Cain, “Alok Vaid-Menon: ‘I was too much, too feminine, too hairy, too brown. I have been cruel to myself’” *The Guardian*, September 15, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/16/alok-void-menon-i-was-too-much-too-feminine-too-hairy-too-brown-i-have-been-cruel-to-myself>.

³⁷¹ For information and resources, visit their website, <https://alokvmenon.com/#about>, and their Instagram, which will be referenced throughout this section, <https://www.instagram.com/alokvmenon>.

³⁷² ALOK, March 11, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DHEnBYGxx5K/?igsh=OXE3ZTQyaTd3Mnlz>.

³⁷³ ALOK, March 4, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DGyRt3ERmtT/?igsh=bWQ2Y21reWdyeDd0>. Emphasis added.

Australia for being “too much,” they further clarify that gender grief is “a manifestation of the lifelong pressures to meet gendered norms that can, in those who don’t process their pain, result in feelings of anger and rage.”³⁷⁴ When asked in several interviews why they have such compassion and grace towards persons who have actively done them harm physically and online, their response returns to a place of compassion for the shared condition of gender grief.

The *Ordo Salutis* Conveyor Belt®, which perpetuates heteropatriarchal relations through particular, hegemonic constructions of Conversion© and Sanctification®, operates upon the exclusion of LGBTQIA+ bodies and all those attributes and tastes that seep out of the binary mold, gunking up the otherwise effective Salvation Machine™ and its GDP of STDs. But these molds are artificial, and therefore, even those who consider themselves cisgendered heterosexuals are never fully at home in their gendered bodies. There is always something that does not fit – and legal apparatuses and public opinion will continue to be weaponized to maintain the Machine’s absolute and universal infallibility, which will be further elucidated in the next section. For now, as ALOK says, this forced and coerced gendering causes grief, but not only that. Because this gendering is hidden – is said to be “natural” – the Machine operators argue that there is nothing to be grieved. They will vehemently assert that there is no machine at all! And so ALOK is right to describe gender grief as “disenfranchised grief,” a grief that is not even given space to be grieved. Because, if space were made to grieve our coerced gendering, such space would admit that harm had indeed been done. Shame and control thrive on silence – which is perhaps why Jesus’ words continue to ring uncomfortably true: “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (Jn 8:32).

With this interpretation of the estrangement caused by gender grief as a condition of human existence – in *this* time and in the globalized cultural-economic imperialism of the U.S. and other Western nations – Tillich’s New Being continues to provide a prescient reimagining

³⁷⁴ Cain, “Alok Vaid-Menon: ‘I was too much, too feminine, too hairy, too brown. I have been cruel to myself.’”

of Christology today. The New Being, for Tillich, is an experience of healing and reunion. “In this sense, healing means reuniting that which is estranged, giving a center to what is split, overcoming the split between God and man [sic.], ~~man~~ and ~~his~~ world, ~~man~~ and ~~himself~~. Out of this interpretation of salvation, the concept of the New Being has grown.”³⁷⁵ The New Being offers salvation – not Salvation® – that is, a reunion of the estranged, which is love itself.³⁷⁶ The New Being overcomes the divide between humanity and God, or between the ontic and the ontological, because it occurs within a system in which God is the ontological ground itself. Rather than overcoming humanity’s ontological condition of estrangement between essence and existence, Tillich’s New Being can alternatively be understood as overcoming the condition of estrangement between persons with persons, persons with themselves, and persons with God, which is experienced as gender grief. The “lifelong pressures to meet gendered norms,” and the shame that accompanies the inevitable inability to perfectly reproduce these phantasmatic constructions, “can result in feelings of anger and rage” towards others, God, and self.

In a sermon under the same name (“The New Being”), Tillich cites 2 Corinthians 5:17 with his slightly modified translation from the RSV as a summary of the Christian message: “If anyone is in union with Christ, [they are] a new being; the old state of things has passed away; there is a new state of things.”³⁷⁷ With the writings of Paul, Tillich’s particular concept of the New Being finds its biblical foundation – Tillich was, after all, a Lutheran pastor and theologian, and therefore scripture remained a primary source of his theology.³⁷⁸ Following the logic of Paul, Tillich asserts that

Christianity is the message of the New Creation, the New Being, the new reality which has appeared with the appearance of Jesus who for this reason, and just for this reason,

³⁷⁵ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. II, p. 166.

³⁷⁶ For more on Tillich’s concept of love, cf. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, “The divine love and the creature,” pp. 279 – 289.

³⁷⁷ Paul Tillich, *The New Being* (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), p. 15.

³⁷⁸ Cf. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, “The Sources of Systematic Theology,” pp. 34 – 40.

is called the Christ. For the Christ, the Messiah, the selected and anointed one is He who brings the new state of things.³⁷⁹

The New Being is Tillich's Christology: it asserts that through the doctrine of Jesus *as the Christ* (event and reception) salvation is made possible. Christology remains the solution to the problems of the System/Machine – but both the problem and the solution are understood differently. Jesus as the Christ, as the religious symbol capable of overcoming the existential estrangement of persons with persons, self, and God, brings about a “new state of things” in which ontological healing takes place. Accordingly, Tillich can assert that revelation “is not information about divine things; it is the ecstatic manifestation” of the ground of being, which has “transforming” and “healing power.”³⁸⁰ But what happens to this healing experience of the New Being if God is no longer a static, universal essence or ground of being and is instead a theologically and socially constructed religious symbol? And what can this symbol do in the midst of the estrangement described by gender grief?

B. LGBTQIA+: The Site of the New in History

As discussed in the first chapter, Christian discourse continues to have ontological significance for its participants for it determines whose being matters, whose embodied identities – or actualized potentialities – are revelatory expressions of an onto-theological structure that is itself produced, reproduced, and transformed in history. Within this context, the (Queer) New Being is the revelation (the revealing) of the System's internal functioning, which overcomes the estrangement perpetuated by the Salvation Machine™ insofar as it makes the constructed-ness of humanity's original sin known and creates space, through the act of naming and identifying, to process gender grief. Christian Salvation® can be overwhelming, a cosmic series of collective traumas from the “fall” to the Crucifixion to the queer and trans youth facing homelessness this very moment because they refuse to forget who they are in order

³⁷⁹ Tillich, *The New Being*, p. 15.

³⁸⁰ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. II, pp. 166 – 167.

to enter the Machine. Breaking soteriology down into its component doctrines, and detailing how each functions as a part of the Machine, can assist communities today in the first step of processing the ongoing collective trauma of Salvation®.

Following Aydin's proposal above, symbolic processing through reinterpretation can further assist communities in transforming destructive responses – such as despair, untreated depression, and even fits of rage on a tram – into healthy ones, including alternative ways of being. Therefore, the continual proliferation of gender and sexual identities – the fact LGBTQIA+ is an ever-growing acronym – is hereby interpreted as “the site of the new in history,” in other words, as the (Queer) New Being. In one's queerness, one exposes the myth of ontological essentialism as an assertion disguised as a natural fact (as Butler's work reveals), and therefore, one reveals something not only about the nature of gender identity, but about the nature of God – namely, that God, too, is a construction rather than a static essence. But this is not a postmodern claim thrust upon systematic theology; it is a result of the method of correlation itself in which “the contents of the Christian faith” are interpreted “through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence.”³⁸¹ The (Queer) New Being overcomes the division between essence and existence that persists in Tillich's theology by naming the constructed nature of both – refusing this bifurcation altogether and positing in a systematic way the following: because God, the ground of Christian ontology, is a theologically socially constructed symbol, then human *beings*, too, are hermeneutically constituted. Our understanding of what it means to be human is not a natural fact, but is rather an ongoing process of collective interpretation through the traditions we inherit and/or choose to participate in. By revealing the inner workings of the Machine, the (Queer) New Being frees Christians from our religion's imperial, absolute and universalizing claims, while acknowledging the ontologically constitutive function of doctrinal norms.

³⁸¹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 60.

Because queer bodies refuse to forget in order to enter the Machine, they show that alternatives are possible – for everyone – and this in turn creates space for naming and processing gender grief. If the New Being is the Christian message, and the Christ embodies this message, representing a new way of being, then within this (queer) systematic theology, it is not only ethically advantageous but the methodological next step to assert that the New Being must be queer. Only if the New Being is queer can the healing and estrangement described by gender grief be overcome because queerness – and therefore also transness, as explicitly challenging the “natural” gender binary – enables everyone to grieve the collective trauma of gender grief and to explore themselves with greater freedom, to encounter one another with deeper compassion, and to experience God in a more just relationship as the theo-socially constructed ground through which we live and move and have our being. As Buechel writes, the body of the Christ is queer: it “reveals the fluidity of bodies, standing in solidarity with all those bodies that find themselves marked as queer today. Similarly, it interrogates those other bodies which fear such a designation.”³⁸² This is not to say that LGBTQIA+ persons are somehow substantially set-apart and inherently godly (such a claim would be antithetical to the framework of this system), but rather that because our identities disrupt claims to “natural” identities/static essences, we reveal the constructed nature of these claims, which coercively separate humanity from one another and from God.

i. Queering Sin. As ALOK clarifies, it is not merely a “curtesy” to LGBTQIA+ persons for “straight” persons to learn about gender and sexuality “as if they don’t have gender and sexualities too”; rather, “straight and cisgender people benefit so much from the kind of knowledges that LGBTQIA+ people are saying. The language we’re giving, that actually *you* get to tell people who you are on your own terms... So the expansiveness, the sense of possibility that LGBTQ people give – it’s something that enriches everyone.”³⁸³ The body of

³⁸² Buechel, *That We Might Become God*: (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015), p. 17.

³⁸³ ALOK, March 1, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/DGqkVJBxcTc/?igsh=bXo0Y3M3ZDBhZmZ0>.

the Christ, specifically through the doctrine of the Incarnation, is a queer reality insofar as it defies the binary separation between humanity and divinity³⁸⁴ and because of this fluidity Christ's body makes possible what queer and trans bodies do: it creates an expansiveness and sense of possibility that liberates participants from the sin of essentialism³⁸⁵ that keeps humanity from experiencing the radical love of God. Cheng describes the "sin of essentialism" in the following way:

if radical love is understood as a love so extreme that it dissolves existing boundaries, then the rejection of radical love is *essentialism*, or the reinforcing of the boundaries that keep categories separate and distinct from each other... Put differently, sin can be understood by queer theology to be sexual and gender essentialism. That is, whenever we understand sexuality and gender identity to be fixed and unchangeable (that is, by limiting sexuality to only homosexual and heterosexual, or by limiting gender identity to only female and male), we commit the sin of essentialism by failing to recognize the constructed nature of these categories. In creating and perpetuating these false dichotomies, we reinforce-rather than erase-sexual and gender categories. By contrast, whenever we challenge the essentialist nature of these categories, we experience the grace of constructivism.³⁸⁶

In other words, the essentialism that is fundamental to the Salvation Machine™ and its heteropatriarchal *Ordo Salutis* Conveyor Belt® is sinful because it actively harms humanity by denying and disenfranchising gender grief, exacerbating the estrangement experienced by persons. Through the (queer) systematic theological act of naming the constructed nature of essentialism, as undertaken in Chapter One, grace can be experienced as the space to grieve and live into the expansive and magnificent possibilities that queer and trans bodies reveal as possible. This interpretation is in keeping with Tillich's description of the Christ as sinless insofar as "he has conquered the forces of existential estrangement within existence,"³⁸⁷ and it

³⁸⁴ Cheng, *Radical Love*, p. 79.

³⁸⁵ Cheng, p. 74.

³⁸⁶ Cheng, p. 74.

³⁸⁷ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. II, p. 127.

continues the apologetic task of theology, whereby its content is constituted as Christians take up and make religious meaning of Christian symbols in our various contexts.

Sin must be further clarified however since the current paradigms do not adequately describe the functioning of the sin of essentialism. As Rebecca L. Copeland, professor of theology at Boston University School of Theology, describes, “traditional treatments of sin as either original (universal and congenial) sin or actual (individual and intentional) sin fall short” the goal of helping us “understand our own involvement in harmful systems,” showing us how to “take responsibility for the harms they cause, and help[ing] us discern what we must do to repair those harms.”³⁸⁸ Therefore, Copeland offers an alternative, “unoriginal sin.” Copeland describes this concept in the following way:

First, it should be distinguished from original sin in that it is neither inherent nor inevitable. It does not lie at the foundation of human nature, but is the result of human agency, choices, and action. Second, it is unoriginal because it precedes the willing of the individual human agent – it does not originate in the intentional choices of those who must address it now. It is *sin* because it reflects the ways in which we stray from our divinely ordained purposes and harm one another.”³⁸⁹

The sin of essentialism is better understood as an unoriginal sin because, as queer theory's postmodern analysis of identity demonstrates, essentialism is neither inherent nor inevitable. Both gender essentialism and original sin are said to be natural but have been shown to be constructions that are retrojected into history. The sin of essentialism is unoriginal because it precedes the individual; we are thrust into heteronormative societies from birth, gendered by a doctor on an “official” piece of paper, swaddled in a blanket with gender-specific color, and must live within these norms or risk ostracization and death. Unoriginal sin more accurately describes the condition in which most of us in the West live: it is “the unintentional, communal, and multigenerational harms we do through our enmeshment in distorted human systems” and

³⁸⁸ Copeland, *Entangled Being*, p. 7.

³⁸⁹ Copeland, p. 8.

it provides the possibility of developing an understanding of repentance that is able to repair these complex harms. Through the (Queer) New Being an expansiveness of humanity is revealed, which creates space to process the *unoriginal sin* of essentialism that causes gender grief and demonically concretizes images of God.

ii. New Being as New in History. Furthermore, “[w]ithout the element of openness, history would be without creativity. It would cease to be history.”³⁹⁰ For Tillich, history – which today includes historically constructed identities and theologies – requires an openness toward new possibilities in order to be history. This is akin to what Butler identifies with regards to gender and sexuality: identities are always open to resignification.³⁹¹ In a postmodern theology, one is freed to recognize the social and historical constructions of both God and human identities not as static essences, but as “an ongoing discursive practice [that is] open to intervention and resignification.”³⁹² The New Being, as the site of the new in history, is also referred to by Tillich as the *nunc eternum* or “eternal present.”³⁹³ The *nunc eternum* neither conveys simultaneity nor the dissolution of the distinctiveness of past and future;³⁹⁴ both past and future are open to the entrance of the new – to new interpretations, interpretations that discursively produce new pasts and futures, and which occur in the present. The present interpretations are made meaningful both because of the potentialities they actualize from the past and because they anticipate others that could be actualized in the future.

This is what Jesus the Christ as the New Being represents: the Christ is the Christ because he is received as such.³⁹⁵ It is because he is situated within the tradition of messianic Judaism that the followers of Jesus of Nazareth received him as the Messiah and the Christ, with the religio-cultural meanings that title entails. This ongoing religious communication and

³⁹⁰ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 276.

³⁹¹ Cf. Butler, “Language, power, and the strategies of displacement” in *Gender Trouble*, pp. 34 – 46.

³⁹² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 45.

³⁹³ Cf. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, p. 276.

³⁹⁴ Cf. Tillich, vol. I, p. 276.

³⁹⁵ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. II, p. 99.

interpretation of Jesus as the Christ describes nothing other than the structure of history as such, i.e., the generative tension between directedness and openness. For Christians, Jesus the Christ as the New Being is the aim of history.³⁹⁶

Applying the insights of queer theory, the (Queer) New Being entails a queering of time. Neither the past nor the future are static; both past and present remain fluid, and their meaning remains both open through interpretative communities in the present and directed by the criterion of the New Being in Jesus as the Christ. For this reason, theological attention must be given to the “+” in LGBTQIA+, for it symbolizes the fluidity and openness of gender and sexual identities. Queer and trans identities continue to produce and critically reproduce/subvert static forms and understandings of what it means to be human – which are formed by gendered norms –, and the + perpetually opens new possibilities in the present. These possibilities not only reinterpret and re-open the past (one can look to the sexuality of ancient Greece, for instance, and through the + recognize sexualities that diverge from today without projecting modern sexualities back upon them), but also open and anticipate future potentialities. The ambiguity of the + paradoxically opens experiences and reflections on human experiences beyond the gender binary and also directs experience. By asking the question of gender and sexual identity within a postmodern systematic context, new theological responses emerge.

In the interrelation between postmodern concepts of God and of the human, the (Queer) New Being functions as the salve for the system. Both heteronormative essentialist concepts of the human as well as modern substantive concepts of a God who, in many cases determined LGBTQIA+ persons to be ontologically other – removed and cut off from the grace and love of Christian communities – are overcome by the presence of the (Queer) New Being. The (Queer) New Being brings about an end to the ontological policing (essentialism) discussed in

³⁹⁶ Tillich, “The Quest for the New Being and the Meaning of the ‘Christ’” in *Systematic Theology*, vol. II, pp. 78 – 96. Tillich interprets the New Being as universal, though such a claim has been dismissed within this work of postmodern theology.

Chapter One, and it overcomes the gap perpetuated by the unoriginal sin of coerced gendering between God and the diverse realities of humanity by opening both to creative reinterpretation in history. Or rather, by naming that conceptions of God and humanity are both historically constructed social constellations of meaning, the (Queer) New Being dissolves the ontological gap that was theologically inserted to keep God and humanity apart and which has been insidiously naturalized within Christian worldviews.

With the revelation of the (Queer) New Being, neither God nor the human are tethered to an objective substance or essence; both are recognized as theo-cultural constructions with *real* impacts on the lives of persons and communities. The reality of God is experienced and located in the embodiments of those who act in God's name. So, too, socially constructed and experienced gender identities are perpetuated and subverted by those who claim them (i.e., what it means to be a woman or a man or queer is constantly evolving and open to resignification). Through the existential question of gender identity, the socially constructed nature of ontology itself is the theological response, otherwise known as *hermeneutic ontology*, which was the topic of Chapter One. The (Queer) New Being, with its apophatic insistence on creative reinterpretation for both God and humanity, anticipates a new onto-theological paradigm in which being's meaning is perpetually (re)constructed and (re)constituted within interpretative communities, and it therefore anticipates the third part of the system. The (Queer) New Being is an interpretative path for Christians to understand and affirm the diversity of humanity from within our own symbolic systems and the traditions that shape them. In this way, the (Queer) New Being is a central aspect of healing the collective trauma of gender grief, which is to say: through Jesus the Christ as the (Queer) New Being, healing and salvation can be experienced in Christian terms.

C. Reclaiming Salvation; or, Queer Grace

In the Salvation Machine™ of classical Systematic Theology, the *Ordo Salutis* Conveyor Belt® forcibly re-forms persons through the essentialist gender binary for

reproductive ends. Conversion©, as Althaus-Reid critiques, becomes the reproduction of a decent – that is, heterosexual and patriarchal – order. Prevenient Grace© lures persons to the Machine with the promise of life – to perform the gender properly is to live a life less shackled by pains of marginalization (but of course, there is a price). Once before the Machine, a threshold must be crossed: One must recognize that they are fallen – receive the inevitably positive result of the STD test that states they are in fact in a sinful state that is passed on through intercourse. After crossing this threshold one enters the Machine through Justification© – and the Conveyer Belt is already moving. What God has done for “us”, *Justification*, is to slam our messy being into the heteropatriarchal mold. *Clang* *Sssssss* The new creature steams as its released from the mold, alongside a thousand others on the Belt. But that is not enough, one must continue to reproduce this order and can only grow in godliness through monogamous, heterosexual marital relations (how this has anything to do with Christ is confounding...). Sanctification/*theosis*© entails ontological policing, or the enforcement of essentialism. One must be a “good” heterosexual in order to be godly, and this means one must forget or confess with shame to a religious authority all sexual desires that fall outside the three goods of marriage (fidelity, procreation, and sacrament). Repentance© here means repression and coerced forgetting, and it therefore fails to enable the repairing of harm that it claims to offer.

But as we have seen, this is not the only way. As Tillich himself notes, there is a difference in Lutheran and Methodist soteriologies concerning the order of salvation. This difference, whether *regeneration* comes before *justification* (as it does for Tillich and Lutheran theology) or after (as it does for pietistic and Methodist/Wesleyan theologies), boils down to differing definitions, and therefore, doctrines of regeneration. For Methodists, as Tillich keenly observes, “Regeneration can be defined as actual transformation. If this is done, it is identical with Sanctification and must definitely be put in the second place.” The official United Methodist doctrine of “Justification and Assurance” reads as follows:

In justification we are, through faith, forgiven our sin and restored to God's favor. This righting of relationships by God through Christ calls forth our faith and trust as we experience regeneration, by which we are made new creatures in Christ.

This process of justification and new birth is often referred to as conversion. Such a change may be sudden and dramatic, or gradual and cumulative. It marks a new beginning, yet it is part of an ongoing process. Christian experience as personal transformation always expresses itself as faith working by love.³⁹⁷

Justification, as discussed earlier in this chapter, is part of a process that begins with God's *prevenient grace*, "the divine love that surrounds all humanity and precedes any and all of our conscious impulses," and describes how the "decisive change in the human heart can and does occur under the prompting of grace and the guidance of the Holy Spirit."³⁹⁸ Justification, as an act of God, begins the process of regeneration, "by which we are made new creatures in Christ." Regeneration, therefore, can rightly be regarded as a synonym for sanctification since both describe the process by which – "through the power of the Holy Spirit" – "we are enabled to increase in the knowledge and love of God and in love for our neighbor."³⁹⁹

For Tillich, however, regeneration is defined "as participation in the New Being," and therefore must precede justification since "Justification presupposes faith, the state of being grasped by the divine presence." This order, however, is problematic in a pluralist society since it is built upon the inclusivistic presupposition that the New Being is present in all religions and comes to its fulfillment in Christianity when it is referred to as the Christ.⁴⁰⁰ Describing a similar issue, Bryan Stone, a Wesleyan systematic theologian and dean of Southern Methodist University's Perkins School of Theology, writes that "the problem of some pluralistic theologies of religion in relation to Christian evangelism is that they are not pluralistic enough,

³⁹⁷ *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), ¶ 102, p. 52.

³⁹⁸ *The Book of Discipline*, ¶ 102, p. 52.

³⁹⁹ *The Book of Discipline*, ¶ 102, p. 53.

⁴⁰⁰ Cf. Danz, *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, Chapter IX "Christianity and the Encounter of Religions: Paul Tillich and the Question for a Theology of Religions," pp. 166 – 182.

and so impose a false theological or philosophical unity onto religious plurality.”⁴⁰¹ Tillich’s model of pluralism, as the critiques of both Danz and Stone describe, is untenable today since it would maintain the hegemonic position of the Christian Salvation Machine™ even as it tries to include the contributions of other traditions. Rather, Stone proposes a theory of “Wesleyan deep pluralism,” which “is able to preserve the importance of evangelistic witness without accepting the terms of competition intrinsic to the kind of religious absolutism that characterizes exclusivist Christian soteriologies and the theologies of evangelism associated with them.”⁴⁰² Christians will of course come into contact with and learn from other religions and cultural traditions, but we need not – we *must* not – project in colonial practice a unified epistemological ground from which the practices of each are to be assessed and within which they are to be understood. Regeneration, therefore, as an explicitly Christian interpretation of the telos of humanity, cannot precede Justification.

i. Prevenient Grace. With these considerations in mind, a Wesleyan/Methodist doctrine of regeneration has the potential to overcome the pitfalls just named – though that does not mean it always does, neither does it restrict Wesleyan/Methodist theologies from interpreting this doctrine for similar universalizing ends. Within the present (queer) system – and this qualifier is a reminder that no claim herein should be regarded as absolutely true/universally valid – ***prevenient grace*** can be reinterpreted as *an initial awareness of gender dysphoria*, that is, of the reality that one will inevitably fail to perform their “assigned gender” perfectly. Rather than the specialization and pathologization of gender dysphoria as something wrong in need of treatment, this experience can be positively interpreted since it begins to reveal the coercive system of binary gendering that is a base component of the Machine. As ALOK writes, “This false choice of boy or girl, man or woman, male or female is not natural – it is political. The

⁴⁰¹ Bryan Stone, *Evangelism after Pluralism: The Ethics of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), p. 112. I have previously discussed Stone weaving together Stone’s and Danz’s approaches to pluralism in Warren, *Where Two or Three are Connected*, pp. 26 – 28.

⁴⁰² Stone, *Evangelism after Pluralism*, p. 112.

real crisis is not that gender non-conforming people exist, it's that we have been taught to believe in only two genders in the first place.”⁴⁰³

Prevenient grace describes a condition of existence within Systematic Theological terms, and therefore, it describes the condition of gender dysphoria as a condition of human existence without positing one, Christian binary answer. While seeking to describe a condition of existence is a universal claim, it is undertaken here to reveal the effects of the Machine and its self-imposed universality. Oil, methane, lead, smog and plastic from “first world” nations have affected not just those nations, but all the earth – and especially the nations impoverished by the extraction of resources by the U.S. and its allies, which bear the brunt of disasters exacerbated by the climate crisis.⁴⁰⁴ So, too, the universalizing claims of heteronormativity have spread to many cultures around the globe through Christianity. Alternatives that are able to name the universalizing effects of these systems are, therefore, necessary to adequately protect life. This is what gender grief offers, a way of describing the lingering pollutants of heteronormativity. Stone’s Wesleyan deep pluralism also reminds us that God’s prevenient grace is never coercive and is necessarily nonviolent – otherwise it would not be grace.⁴⁰⁵

ii. Justifying Grace. Returning to Tillich within a Wesleyan reading, justification continues to be an act of grace that cannot be reduced to human action:

Justification is first an objective event and then a subjective reception. Justification in the objective sense is the eternal act of God by which [God] accepts as not estranged those who are indeed estranged from [God] by guilt and the act by which [God] takes them into the unity with [Godself] which is manifest in the New Being in Christ.

⁴⁰³ ALOK, *Beyond the Gender Binary* (New York: Penguin Workshop, 2020), p. 5.

⁴⁰⁴ Bethany Tietjen, “Many of the world’s poorest countries are the least polluting but the most climate-vulnerable. Here’s what they want at COP27,” *PBS News* (November 2, 2022), <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/many-of-worlds-poorest-countries-are-the-least-polluting-but-the-most-climate-vulnerable-heres-what-they-want-at-cop27>.

⁴⁰⁵ Cf. Stone, “A Wesleyan Understanding of Grace and Deep Pluralism” in *Evangelism after Pluralism*, p. 112 – 116.

Justification literally means “making just,” namely, making man [sic.] that which he essentially is and from which he is estranged.⁴⁰⁶

Justification describes the paradox of faith, namely, that despite humanity’s existential estrangement from God, we are united – fragmentarily – with God through the New Being in Jesus as the Christ. Or in Tillich’s words, God “accepts him who is unacceptable.”⁴⁰⁷ However, within the present reframing, the condition of existence need not be read as a value judgement, which “unacceptable” seems to convey. Rather, justification is the fulfillment and transcending of the law of modern essentialism, or the gender binary; it is the recognition that, despite humanity’s best efforts, we will never perfectly perform the binary.

Therefore, rather than interpreted negatively as a condemnation of the human condition, justification is positively experienced as the liberation that comes from affirming that we were never capable of fulfilling the laws in the first place – the match was rigged all along; the Machine requires a fundamental failure in order to offer Salvation™. Rather than an injunction, justification becomes a release. To subvert the Machine, it is *because* of our inability to perform heteropatriarchal conceptions of essentialized gender *that* we experience a fundamental affirmation and acceptance of who we are in our expansiveness beyond the binary. In other words, justification is an experience of God’s grace – not an abusive reminder of God’s wrath. This is not to say that the gender binary is an inherent or absolute ontological problem, for such a claim would perpetuate the coercive logic of the Salvation Machine™. Rather, to repeat the appropriation of Copeland, the coerced gendering of the essentialist binary is an *unoriginal sin*, meaning it “does *not* lie at the foundation of human nature” but that “it precedes the willing of the individual human agent.”⁴⁰⁸ It is, in other words, a constructed condition which implicates

⁴⁰⁶ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. II., p. 178.

⁴⁰⁷ Tillich, p. 178.

⁴⁰⁸ Copeland, *Entangled Being*, p. 8.

all of humanity and requires complex responses to be in right relationship with one another and all creation.

In contrast to the punitive legalism of the classical Systematic Theology, the justifying grace that is experienced in the recognition and acceptance of one's inability to live by the rules that were intended to entrap us is grace *as* grace: "It marks a new beginning" and is "experience[ed] as personal transformation [which] always expresses itself as faith working by love."⁴⁰⁹ For this reason, Althaus-Reid centers as holy experiences and bodies that have been deemed *unholy*. Althaus-Reid reminds Systematic Theology that it often "forget[s] that it is real people who participate in Christologies and also make them real. The aim of theological and economic reflection should not be a new system of distribution, but a different system of production."⁴¹⁰ This alternative system of production is formed through *disruption* rather than reproduction. Holiness is attributed to the bodies that disrupt systems of economic oppression for it is in this disruption that the "soul stealing" and exploitation of globalized Christian capitalism are prophetically challenged. Therefore, Althaus-Reid asserts that "Redemptive practices are those which let the memories of bodies that have been loved outside the limits of heterosexual ideologies to become sacred."⁴¹¹ This is why the New Being is considered queer, because in re-interpreting the body of Christ as queer, trans, and nonbinary, the bodies of LGBTQIA+ persons become just as sacred as the rest of creation and disrupt exploitative practices.

iii. Sanctifying Grace, or Regeneration. Now we return to the concept of regeneration and sanctification, not as the process of perpetuating a "decent" order and not taking place before the consent to participate in the ongoing event of Christian communication. Tillich's remarks on sanctification are comparatively short, spanning just two paragraphs, or less than

⁴⁰⁹ *The Book of Discipline*, ¶ 102, p. 52.

⁴¹⁰ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, p. 148.

⁴¹¹ Althaus-Reid, p. 134.

one full page. This topic concludes the second volume of his *Systematic Theology* and explicitly points to the third, on pneumatology, which will further develop sanctification. Tillich's treatment brings to light the queer location of sanctification as, on the one hand, a doctrine within Christology and soteriology and, on the other, a doctrine that is embodied and clarified within ecclesiology and its relation to soteriology. The present (queer) system will, therefore, also address sanctification in greater depth in the next chapter in its interrelationship with ecclesiology. However, within the present discussion of grace within Christology and doctrines of redemption, a few initial remarks can be offered. Since regeneration, in Wesleyan/Methodist fashion has been recognized as synonymous with sanctification, I will return to Tillich's discussion on regeneration.

First and fundamental to Tillich's concept of regeneration is that it is, according to the title of this section of his work, "salvation as participation in the New Being."⁴¹² Regeneration for Tillich, and therefore also sanctification for Wesleyan/Methodist theology, is an active and consenting participation in the new reality that the Christ represents – it is here understood as a healing of the ontological separation that is a condition of existence within binary essentialism. The individual "enters" this "new state of things" – the (Queer) New Being – and, "in so doing, [they] participate in it and [are] reborn through participation."⁴¹³

For United Methodists, "regeneration" is this process "by which we are made new creatures in Christ."⁴¹⁴ Furthermore, the "new birth" of regeneration is also considered the

first step in this process of sanctification. Sanctifying grace draws us toward the gift of Christian perfection, which Wesley described as a heart "habitually filled with the love of God and neighbor" and as "having the mind of Christ and walking as he walked."⁴¹⁵

⁴¹² Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. II, p. 176.

⁴¹³ Tillich, p. 177.

⁴¹⁴ *The Book of Discipline*, ¶ 102, p. 52.

⁴¹⁵ *The Book of Discipline*, ¶ 102, p. 53.

What it means to love God and neighbor – and self – today is to bear witness to the complexity, expansiveness, and the magnificence of being that cannot be contained by essentialism. As ALOK writes, “We should not hold ourselves back for the sake of convention. Instead, we should embrace ongoing transformation as a necessary part of what it means to be alive.”⁴¹⁶ Sanctifying grace, therefore, is the ongoing transformation that results from our growth in godliness – which means the religious act of living ever-more-fully as one’s expansive self, which is made meaningful through reference to Christian religious norms (alternatively constructed), and embraces the holy mystery of this often-disruptive process. Sanctifying grace entails living beyond the essentialism of the gender binary because to do so is to participate in the (Queer) New Being, which is nothing other than the presence of God.

III. A Conclusion

Through the doctrine of the Incarnation, the early church theologians overcame the division between God and humanity through Christology. The Cappadocians’ articulated a unique emphasis on the Incarnation as the soteriological linchpin for a doctrine of *theosis*. Later picked up by Anglican and then Wesleyan/Methodist theology, *theosis* has been reinterpreted in these contexts as sanctification, and this becomes the telos of Christian life. Existing within Christian discourse there has been an emphasis of soteriology since the early church up to today, specifically as it relates to Christology, which prioritized not the violent death and Resurrection of the Christ, but rather the communion of God and humanity that the Incarnation made possible, and which *theosis*/sanctification continues. This historic Christian emphasis provides another norm for Christians today, which is necessary for the ongoing construction of alternative systems of production that follow the three general rules of Methodism: (1) Do no harm, (2) Do good, and (3) attend to the ordinances of God (commonly simplified to, “stay in love with God”).

⁴¹⁶ ALOK, *Beyond the Gender Binary*, p. 63.

A Christology that glorifies or even requires violence for the satisfaction of its theory of atonement or redemption does harm. It justifies violence as salvific, even necessary, to the accomplishment of God's purposes. The effects of such theologies are evident across the North American continent, from the church-sanctioned genocide of Indigenous persons under the "doctrine of discovery" to the kidnapping and enslavement of persons from the continent of Africa as part of the growing capitalist agricultural enterprises ravaging the Americas. Violence begets violence, and it is therefore antithetical to this (queer) systematic theology as a theology of abundant life. Furthermore, if Christians are to fully and truly embrace the radical Christological reality that the norms of the Incarnation and sanctification produce – which is that humanity is created to be in communion with God – then this reality is only possible if an essentialist distinction between God and humanity is rejected. Only if God is performatively realized through embodied acts – that is, only if we begin with a hermeneutic ontology rather than with a transcendental metaphysics – are God and humanity capable of communion. Christian self-understanding is, therefore, religious content, which is engaged religiously by religious persons. Accordingly, systematic theology as a *Wissenschaft* cannot ignore the constitutive ontological function of identity or the ways in which other spheres – such as economics – continue to affect the construction of these theologically performative identities.

Only by recognizing that we Christians are ontologically constituted through hermeneutic practices informed by the norms of our traditions are we able to strive toward full communion with ourselves, God, and neighbor. By bringing to light the constructed nature of identity itself – both of God and humanity – the (Queer) New Being overcomes the estrangement perpetuated by the heteropatriarchal Salvation Machine™. It is through this recognition that disenfranchised gender grief is named and healed, which overcomes the unoriginal sin of essentialism. Now that an alternative Christology has been articulated, and doctrines related to the body of Christ have been discussed along with their consequences, it remains necessary to attend more fully to the physical bodies of those who consent to participate

in this ongoing embodied form of communication that is the Christian religion. So, what is the body – particularly within the present framework of a Christian hermeneutic ontology? How is the body defined? Who creates this definition? What are its boundaries? How do Christians of diverse identities live together as one body? What makes this communal, religious body intelligible in non-universalizing ways? These questions and others like them inform the content of the next chapter, specifically as it relates to the queer ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter Three: Being Together; Being Re-membered

As I have tried to bring to the surface of awareness, a hermeneutic turn within theology as a *Wissenschaft* parallels Judith Butler's theory of performativity in which conversations on gender are removed from debates that are grounded in essentialized conceptions of gender or sex. Gender studies becomes a science in the twentieth century, developing its own method; rather than merely operating as a reflection on gendered experience, it sought to clarify, expose, and subvert the very means of production through which gender emerges and is maintained. The "Theology Without Walls" (TWW) movement is beginning to challenge the conception of theology as *Wissenschaft* – and by extension within my argument, of gender studies – as a third-order reflection on texts and traditions, as opposed to a first-order reflection on experiences of the Ultimate (or a gendered sense) itself.⁴¹⁷ I deem this approach to be similar to that of Tillich's border position between the modern quest for universality and a postmodern turn to contextualized hermeneutics. In their quest to experience and learn about the Ultimate from the variety of religious and spiritual practices that exist, this movement's adherents risk presupposing a singular end ("Ultimate reality") that can be reached not by any means necessary, but equally validly by the many means available.

Of course there are different approaches within the TWW movement, and one of their leading proponents, John J. Thatamanil (also a Tillich scholar), has commented that while the "elephant" of Ultimacy (from the in/famous parable for describing pluralism) does exist within this movement, it is too large to circle.⁴¹⁸ It remains, in this sense, an abysmal ground. I remain within the third-order *Wissenschaftlich* approach for the reasons already named throughout – namely the imperialistic tendencies of such an approach to insert a concept such as "the

⁴¹⁷ Cf. Jerry L. Martin, *Theology without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative* (London New York: Routledge, 2020). In this work, transreligious spiritual practices are taken to be a condition of life in a globalized world where differing practices can be found and tried through the internet.

⁴¹⁸ Cf. John J. Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).

Ultimate” as somehow universal and transcultural, and methodically because theology and religion, while intimately interconnected, are distinct. Theology, as a discipline, is the critical reflection and rearticulation of the sources that constitute religious traditions, which is necessary for religions as religions. It is within meaning-making systems that our experiences and actions are coded as religious and self-consciously understood as such.

Therefore, in this chapter I assert that memory performs a special and constitutive function in the construction of social identity (whether that be gender or Christian identities) in both a post-modern reading of Tillich and in Butler’s early work. I further contend that memory takes on an ontological function – tradition shapes one’s understanding of being – one that can free Christian communities from the gender essentialism of heteronormativity, which problematically concretizes not only the gender binary but also essentialist conceptions of God. By re-framing identity through a queer-memory model of ecclesiology, this chapter builds on the previous ones in proffering that through memory both gender/sexual identity and Christian identity are constructed in communities that orient us through tradition, and it locates agency within the theological discourse of churches.

I. The “Cultural Memory” of the Christ

A queer memory model can illuminate possibilities for liberative communal life through the construction of a queer ecclesiology. As I begin this construction, I draw upon the theology of Christian Danz who, building upon the proposition of Jan Assmann, asserts that tradition can be understood as a form of *cultural memory*.⁴¹⁹ Accordingly, this section begins with a brief introduction into Assmann’s theory, taking seriously the ontological implications of memory by integrating the work of the previous chapters. The section then elucidates Danz’s

⁴¹⁹ Christian Danz, *Gottes Geist: eine Pneumatologie* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), p. 291. The translations of this text are my own.

pneumatology and seeks to enrich his concept of the Spirit as embodied appropriation through, which is the subject of the second section.

A. Assman's Theory: Identity, Memory, Continuation

After his retirement from the University of Heidelberg in 2003, Egyptologist and scholar of religion Jan Assmann took up a post as Honorary Professor of Cultural Studies at the University of Constance. Describing the Seder practice where four questions from Exodus are asked by four children ("the clever, the bad, the simple, and the one who does not yet know how to ask questions"), Assmann sets the stage for what follows in his book, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*.⁴²⁰ He writes that this ritual conveys the three main themes the book explores:

identity ("we," "you," and "I"), *memory* (the story of the exodus from Egypt that provides the basis and the substance of "we"), and *reproduction and continuity* (the relationship between father and son). During the feast of Seder the child learns to say "we" because he is drawn into a story and a memory that form and fill the concept of the first-person plural. This is, in fact, a problem and a process that underlies every culture, but it rarely comes so sharply into focus as it does here.⁴²¹

Specifically, Assmann explores the interconnection between *memory* as "reference to the past," *identity* as "political imagination," and *cultural continuity* as "the formation of tradition."⁴²² This interconnection describes the "connective structure" that is constitutive for each culture (though he is clear that each culture develops this structure differently), and which draws a community together socially and temporally. That is, through the deployment of a shared mythos or "symbolic universe," "a common area of experience, expectation, and action ... provides [a community] with trust and with orientation."⁴²³ This social orientation through a

⁴²⁰ Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁴²¹ Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, p. 2. Emphasis added.

⁴²² Assmann, p. 2.

⁴²³ Assmann, p. 2. Assmann references Berger and Luckmann's term "symbolic universe," which they develop in their book, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989 [1966]).

shared symbolic universe involves a collective conception of time, linking “yesterday with today by giving form and presence to influential experiences and memories,” such as the Exodus narrative, “incorporating images and tales from another time into the background of the onward moving present, and bringing with it hope and continuity.”⁴²⁴ Thus memory, identity, and cultural continuity are intertwined in the ongoing and constitutive process of cultural identity formation. While a detailed engagement with Assmann’s work is beyond the scope of this project, I will identify a few further concepts that are central to his theory of cultural memory since we will explore how this is taken up within the pneumatology of Christian Danz.

i. Repetition/Iterability. Assmann’s contribution to a general theory of culture seeks to establish “the links among (collective) memory, written culture, and ethnogenesis.”⁴²⁵ As with Butler’s performativity, Assmann identifies repetition as the underlying principle a culture’s connective structure. Repetition “guarantees that the lines of action will not branch out into infinite variations but instead will establish themselves in recognizable patterns immediately identifiable as elements of a shared culture.”⁴²⁶ Butler’s theory of performativity is built upon a similar principle, *iterability*. “Performativity,” they clarify in *Bodies That Matter*, “cannot be understood outside of a process of *iterability*, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms.”⁴²⁷ Furthermore, “this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject.”⁴²⁸ The gendered subject emerges only through – and not before or even beyond – the repetition of gendered norms for behavior. Assmann and Butler both recognize the “regularized and constrained” nature of this repetition, which establishes “recognizable patterns” that identify a shared culture/regulatory framework. Repetition generates and constitutes identity, be that religious or gender identity. For Assmann, the child learns to speak in “we” language through the Seder,

⁴²⁴ Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, p. 2.

⁴²⁵ Assmann, p. 5.

⁴²⁶ Assmann, p. 3.

⁴²⁷ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 60.

⁴²⁸ Butler, p. 60. Author’s emphasis.

and through this process of repetition is made part of the community through the interplay of memory, identity, and cultural continuity. This is also in line with White's weak ontology discussed in Chapter One, in which "we claims" participate as a necessary component of his "Circuit of Reflection, Affect, and Argumentation."⁴²⁹

In religious settings, liturgy provides the repetition/iterability function by ordering and orienting a community's ritual performance and commemoration of certain events. Butler's theory describes a similar structural phenomenon, whereby "'performance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a *ritualized production*, a *ritual* reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not," Butler adamantly asserts, "determining it fully in advance."⁴³⁰ Gender, as a secular liturgy of sorts, is the repetition of stylized acts through which we emerge as members of a community – or fail to – and are recognized as such. As the previous chapter discussed through the work of Aydin, liturgical repetition can also be central to a community's practices of managing and healing from collective traumas. Liturgical repetition can be both coercive and harmful and also a practice of collective healing. For Assmann, this repetition involves not only the ordered and "internal, temporal, organization of the ceremony," which provides "ritual coherence,"⁴³¹ but also the citationality (to use Butler's language) that constitutes the repetition – that is, the fact that each repetition refers back not only to some content (be that an ideal of gender or the Exodus narrative at the Seder meal) but also to the previous repetitions of this liturgy – "we" have done this for generations, which is part of what defines us as *us*. We are not only citing norms – be they gendered and/or doctrinal – but also the previous repetitions of these norms, which constitute the very "stability" that the norms claim to provide.

⁴²⁹ Cf. Chapter One, Part III.A.ii, "The Practice of Weak Ontologies & Tillich's Theological Ontology."

⁴³⁰ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 60.

⁴³¹ Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, p. 3.

ii. *From Liturgy to Hermeneutics*. But rituals require not only repetition but also re-presentation – or “presentification” or *Vergegenwärtigung* as Assmann calls it,⁴³² that is, a present interpretation of the rituals themselves in order to integrate new members. Rituals are “far more than an ornamental structuring of time” for Assmann; “Ritual also realizes a meaning.”⁴³³ Repetition is the form through which rituals’ meanings are carried and conveyed in the present re-presentations, that is, in the realizations of cultural memories as such (as dynamic, community-forming narratives rather than static essences or mere routines). However, this dynamic changes when a shift occurs from ritual to textual repetition:

The element of repetition recedes, as ritual changes to textual continuity; now we have a different container for meaning. The question arises, however, as to whether this meaning that provides the basis for a group’s *connective structure* does not actually have a much firmer and more secure foundation through rituals than through texts. Meaning can only retain its life through circulation, and that is provided by the shared communication of rites. But texts in themselves do not automatically circulate – they must *be* circulated– and if this ceases to happen, they become a grave for, rather than the bearer of, meaning. Only an interpreter, with all the arts of hermeneutics and the skills of communication, can revive that meaning.⁴³⁴

This is not to say that rituals and liturgy do not entail hermeneutics, but that the interpretation occurs in an embodied way in community; it is a cultivation of identity through the (re)presentation memory in community. Texts, on the other hand, while they may appear more “stable” – this book is in your hands or on your device – actually challenge the connective structure of a community because without their embodied appropriation, their meanings do not exist. A text is only meaningful when meaning is made of it – that is, when it shapes a person’s

⁴³² Assmann explains in a footnote in Chapter two that presentification is developed by J.P. Vernant and is the most similar to *Vergegenwärtigung* in Assmann’s native German: “The French term ‘présentification’ as coined by J. P. Vernant, “De la présentification de l’invisible à l’imitation de l’apparence,” in *Image et signification*. Rencontres de l’École du Louvre (Paris: Documentation française, 1983), 25–37. It seems to provide the most adequate rendering of what is meant by “Vergegenwärtigung” (literally, “making something present”). Assmann, p. 73.

⁴³³ Assmann, p. 73.

⁴³⁴ Assmann, p. 74. Author’s emphasis.

life, and the person, in turn shapes the text through this appropriation. This is the self-reflexive structure through which meaning is performatively realized.

And if a text participates in the connective structure – as a productive constraint – of a community’s identity, then it must be appropriated or embodied in a community that recognizes the appropriations as such through their shared symbolic universe and patterns of repetition. The Lectionary calendar shared by most Christian denominations around the globe is one example: it unites Christians by creating a shared identity (“we” who use the lectionary), built upon a shared memory (the stories conveyed by the scriptures) that has formed a tradition. Assmann concludes that “[a] new connective structure emerges out of this [shift to texts], which consists not of imitation and preservation but of interpretation and memory. Instead of liturgy we now have hermeneutics.”⁴³⁵ This shift also affects the time-structure of cultural memory: rather than waiting for festivals to participate in the ritual realization of the meaning(s) of religious texts, one can simply read the text.⁴³⁶ *Cultural memory*, then, “is the handing down of meaning”⁴³⁷ through rituals and symbolic figures that seek to condense and re-present the past, but which are inevitably “unable to preserve the past as it was.”⁴³⁸ It is *cultural* “because it can only be realized institutionally and artificially, and it is ‘*memory*’ because in relation to social communication it functions in exactly the same way as individual memory does in relation to consciousness,”⁴³⁹ that is, it provides an “otherwise unconscious image of the self” both individually and collectively.⁴⁴⁰ Cultural memory for Assman describes the regulatory scheme through which one’s personal and collective identity emerges. Like Butler, no essential subject pre-exists the webs of citationality through which identity formation takes place for identity

⁴³⁵ Assmann, p. 4.

⁴³⁶ Assmann, pp. 74 – 75.

⁴³⁷ Assmann, p. 9.

⁴³⁸ Assmann, p. 37.

⁴³⁹ Assmann, p. 9. Emphasis added.

⁴⁴⁰ Assmann, p. 111. Assmann expounds the meaning of consciousness specifically in relationship to identity and political imagination in Chapter Three, “Cultural Identity and Political Imagination,” pp. 111 – 141.

only emerges as the *product* of these institutional processes and their generative constraints, be they ecclesiastical or governmental.

Continuing with this entanglement, Assman asserts that:

It seems that we can never extract ourselves from the network of normative, formative values, and thus the task of the historian can no longer be seen as deconstructing or “undermining” (Gadamer) the barriers of the canon; instead it analyzes their structure and brings the processes to light that have put them in place.⁴⁴¹

So too is the tenuous task of the Butlerian gender theorist: to recognize the constitutive constraint of norms that construct and demarcate the very possibility of social existence; to analyze and bring their structure to light, since it is through this revelation of the self-reflexive structure and ontological effects of norms that their hegemonic claims are destabilized. They are not destroyed, but they are dethroned from their claims of absolute objectivity and their transcendental foundations.

B. Danz’s Pneumatology: Re-Membering Jesus (Memory & Media)

Christianity, as a form of cultural communication, shapes individual and collective identity through the processes of cultural memory – that is, through institutional commitments that shape who, what, and how certain events are remembered (through repetition) as central for the collective identity of a community. It is within the processes of cultural memory that an image of the self and its communal entanglement emerges. For Christian Danz, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit represents this process in and for Christianity. Christianity is the religious communication of the memory of Jesus the Christ, which happens through and is thematized by the Spirit:

⁴⁴¹ Assmann, p. 110.

In and with the Spirit, faith as a conscious performative act (*Vollzug*) represents its integration and dependence on the always concrete tradition of Jesus the Christ. The Spirit reminds us of him; the Spirit is the cultural memory of Jesus the Christ.⁴⁴²

As with Tillich's theological circle and theory of religious symbols, Danz's pneumatology takes as its foundation a methodological circle through which concrete elements are taken up by religion to create symbols that both depend upon and transcend these elements. "Every religion is always also a component of a culture, through which it is shaped and formed and on which it has an impact," and it is because of the mutual influence and interdependence between cultures and religions that "[t]radition cannot be passed on without the symbolic media that are present in a culture."⁴⁴³ The artistic cultural styles of certain periods and contexts are taken up by religions in order to symbolize their contents. Take for instance Antoni Gaudí's combination of Gothic and curvilinear Art Nouveau styles in the architecture of the *Basílica de la Sagrada Família* in Barcelona as one example and the Italian High Renaissance style of the Basilica of St. Peter in the Vatican as another. Both Basilicas are constructed to pass on the Christian tradition through the symbolic media of Gothic/Art Nouveau and Italian High Renaissance architectural styles.

Pneumatology, therefore, is inherently also a theory of media.⁴⁴⁴ Whether it be through burning bushes, tongues of fire, the printed texts of the Bible, stained glass, icons, church architecture, or – and necessarily – Christians' bodies, the Spirit is and has always been only realized through media. This is why pneumatology and ecclesiology are often explicitly developed together since the church – as the gathered community – becomes a medium of the Spirit. Therefore, as Danz concludes the introduction to Part IV of his pneumatology, "a religious tradition only comes about through individual acts of appropriation or embodiment

⁴⁴² Danz, *Gottes Geist*, p. 204.

⁴⁴³ Danz, p. 204.

⁴⁴⁴ Cf. Danz, p. 205, footnote 4: "This was rightly emphasized by Moxter, 'Medien – Medienreligion – Theologie,' 465 – 488. 'For it [i.e. pneumatology] is the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in that it is both a theory of mediation and a theory of media.' (ibid., 487) Cf. also Stoellger, 'Die Medialität des Geistes,' 139 – 174; Idem, 'Gott als Medium,' pp. 333 – 375.

(*Aneignung*), which are themselves always embedded in diverse cultural horizons.”⁴⁴⁵ There is no essentialized or “pure” Christian faith devoid of culture. On the contrary, *Christianity only exists because its participants are able to reflexively make meaning out of the cultural materials available to them*. The Spirit, as a media theory, is the representation of the structure of faith: it is “the giver of the gift, the gift itself, and its recipient.”⁴⁴⁶ The remaining parts of this section will explore how Danz develops each aspect of this tri-polar communicative event of faith.

Faith happens through the repetition and transformation of the memory of Jesus the Christ, which becomes real and is transformed in each act of appropriation or embodiment. “In this memory, the Christian religion presents itself not only as religion and as an image of religion, but also as dependent on a certain tradition that is passed on through creative appropriation.”⁴⁴⁷ Asserting that Christianity is not a monolithic set of beliefs that is passed, as if in a sealed sacred container, from one generation to the next without changing,⁴⁴⁸ but is, rather, the diverse and repeated embodiment of the memory of Christ is a queer claim for (at least) two reasons. First, methodologically I regard this memory model as queer because, as with gender identity in Butler’s theory, it challenges the essentialist notion of a stable Christian tradition by revealing its socially constructed and temporally sustained nature. That is to say, *Christian tradition is performative*: it is a set of acts that are repeated in time, which give the illusion of a stable and prediscursive substance, namely, the immanent presence of Trinity through the activity of the Spirit. Secondly, as Chapter Two demonstrated through Christology, this memory model is queer insofar as LGBTQIA+ persons consciously participate in and embody the memory of Christ, which is then appropriated and transformed through our queer bodies. Christianity as cultural memory is queer because it resists the unoriginal sin of essentialism and because it is constituted through the embodiment of LGBTQIA+ Christians.

⁴⁴⁵ Danz, *Gottes Geist*, p. 205.

⁴⁴⁶ Danz, p. 292.

⁴⁴⁷ Danz, p. 175.

⁴⁴⁸ “The tradition phenomenon cannot be grasped according to the model of a transmission from a sender to a recipient, in which, as in a container, the thing to be transmitted is preserved and retains its identity” Danz, p. 187.

We now turn to a brief overview of each component of the communicative structure that the Spirit symbolizes within Christianity.

i. Spirit as Giver.

In and through religious communication, the Holy Spirit allows the absent Christ to be present. Faith's image of itself, in its dependence on the Christian tradition, which means nothing other than the memory of Jesus the Christ, is the topic to be discussed under the guiding concept of the Giver of the Spirit.⁴⁴⁹

As a theory of media, the Holy Spirit describes the process of "cultural memory" within Christianity. This is so because, "[b]y representing Jesus the Christ, the Spirit refers to itself, namely to the Christian religion as a prerequisite for the performative act of faith, which is itself a component of it."⁴⁵⁰ Simply put, the Spirit describes the structural process whereby Christianity arises from itself and is performatively constituted. In this way Christianity continues to assert both the transcendence and immanence of God and is not reducible to individual beliefs or actions. The Spirit is the giver of the gift of faith because the gift is the memory of the Christ. And the memory of the Christ is only realized when it is received as such – which can only occur when the memory of the Christ is understood as a cultural memory. This understanding can only happen through the triadic event of the Spirit as giver, gift, and appropriation. This is what it means for the Spirit to be the giver of the gift of cultural memory, because – to reiterate Assmann – cultural memory "is the handing down of meaning"⁴⁵¹ through rituals and symbolic figures that seek to condense and re-present the past, but which are inevitably "unable to preserve the past as it was."⁴⁵² If the Spirit is the memory of Christ, then the Spirit queerly functions as both the gift and its giver. It is both the process through which

⁴⁴⁹ Danz, p. 206.

⁴⁵⁰ Danz, p. 207.

⁴⁵¹ Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization*, p. 9.

⁴⁵² Assmann, p. 37.

the stories of the Christ give meaning to our being (“we claims”) and the condition within which we are able to receive (understanding appropriation).⁴⁵³

For Danz, “The memory of Jesus the Christ is a self-description that is itself already embedded in a concrete religio-cultural context, which it takes up and modifies. With his memory, for which a rupture is constitutive, Christianity first emerges as an independent religious family that establishes its identity with the *memoria* of Christ and maintains it in history.”⁴⁵⁴ Change, discontinuity, and transformation – rather than impediments of or threats to tradition – are necessary components thereof. The Spirit is a response to disruption – to the absence of Christ – which is transformed through the ministry of the Spirit and re-presents the Christ through media and embodied repetition. Furthermore, Danz makes clear that the continual emergence of Christianity not only depends upon its own tradition, but also “is always dependent on the religious forms already given to it,” such as Judaism and its conception of a Messiah, “which are adopted and reshaped in the process of appropriation.”⁴⁵⁵ Thus, Danz asserts, the Spirit makes “the exalted Christ present in and for the congregation and uniting them in community.”⁴⁵⁶ The Spirit is not only the giver; it is also the gift itself.

ii. Spirit as Gift. Continuing with his application of Assmann, Danz asserts that the Spirit represents the “connective structure” of Christianity as a form of cultural memory, which affects both the social and temporal dimension of the community’s identity (discussed above in Section A). “The Christian religion,” therefore, “is not a ready-made substance that can be drawn upon

⁴⁵³ Cf. Danz, p. 127: “The Christian religion represents a communicatively produced world view that comes about through the interrelationship of *religious tradition*, *understanding appropriation* (*verstehender Aneignung*) and its *representation*. Christian communication is constituted as its own form of meaning in culture through all three elements in their context. A reduction to one of the structural elements in order to justify Christianity is out of the question. With the structural elements discussed, the theoretical basis has been created from which the further explanations are based.” Emphasis added.

⁴⁵⁴ Cf. Danz, p. 207, footnote 11, where he cites Assmann: “This is quite rightly emphasized by Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis*, 88: ‘The past does not emerge by itself, but is the result of cultural construction and representation; it is always guided by specific motives, expectations, hopes and goals and shaped by the frame of reference of a present.’”

⁴⁵⁵ Danz, p. 209.

⁴⁵⁶ Danz, p. 210.

and transported through history. Rather, both the Christian religion's identity and continuity only emerge in the process that is articulated in it with the Holy Spirit."⁴⁵⁷ The Spirit is both the giver of the gift and the gift itself for it is through the Spirit that the cultural memory of Jesus as the Christ is performatively constituted by Christian communities. Thus, churches become necessary sites of the Spirit's activity. Churches "are bearers of the cultural memory of Christianity in that they not only remember but also regulate its foundational history in a counter-representative way."⁴⁵⁸ For this reason institutionalization, which must remain open to critique (Tillich's "Protestant principle"), is also necessary for Christianity to maintain the efficacy of its cultural memory. As with Butler's gender theory and Zabala's ontology, these constraints or remains are also *generative* for Danz for it is through institutions, such as churches, that Christianity the memory of the Christ is not only passed on from one generation to the next, but also regulated, "and in this way create[s] the identity of the Christian religion anew each time."⁴⁵⁹ Repetition always entails transformation, and it is only through transformation that tradition is kept alive.

As the Christian message is received and taken up in new contexts it necessarily means the message itself evolves, and only through this contextual evolution it remains "the message." If Christianity was not adapted, it would not be understood and there would be no message at all.⁴⁶⁰ This is where pneumatology and ecclesiology take on renewed importance, particularly in relationship to memory. Danz notes that Christian communication is pluralizing through the use of social media and new technologies, challenging churches' monopolies on interpretation.⁴⁶¹ Nevertheless, "the passing on of the memory of Jesus the Christ must be determined by its content," which is "the function of the church and its reference to the Bible.

⁴⁵⁷ Danz, p. 227.

⁴⁵⁸ Danz, p. 227.

⁴⁵⁹ Danz, p. 227.

⁴⁶⁰ Cf. Danz, p. 223: "The Spirit of God recalls the story of Jesus the Christ. Remembering the absent Christ is, and all New Testament texts make this clear in their own way, always a varying and transforming retelling. This is the content of the Holy Spirit. In the Christian religion, it represents a treatment of the Other as the Same."

⁴⁶¹ Danz, pp. 240 – 241.

However, the church only becomes the giver of the gift, i.e. the historical realization of the Holy Spirit, if the religious appropriation of its communication is successful.”⁴⁶² The gift only comes to be if it is received as such, which depends upon a community that is prepared (oriented by tradition) to receive it as such.

Furthermore, the gift of the Spirit itself “is not a prerequisite of faith, but a component of the Christian religion, namely the memory of Jesus the Christ, which is appropriated and passed on in it as religion.”⁴⁶³ The gift, as the cultural memory of the Christ, is not an essence or object that pre-exists Christian discourse. The gift happens – is performatively constituted, that is, *comes to be* – in and as the embodiment of this narrative. The gift occurs in each consenting act of participation through which the Christian faith is continually cultivated and in which the Christ is re-presented among us. Once again, the Spirit is bound to media. “Sacraments, but not only sacraments, are transmission media through which the Christian religion reproduces itself in history.”⁴⁶⁴ Only through the sacraments and other symbolic media is the gift of the Spirit performatively realized among us. In this way, it could be said that the gift is dependent upon hospitality: the symbolic media “house” or make space for the Spirit – not in an anthropomorphic way, but in meaning-making processes whereby the ordinary meaning of glass, grains, and goblets gives way to re-presenting Christ.

So too, we who embody – and, therefore, performatively constitute the cultural memory of the Christ – are hospitable insofar as we make space to receive and welcome this message that will radically reorient our lives. And the relational lines are fluid and queer, for the Spirit, too, hospitably receives us through the liturgical practices of Christian communities as bearers

⁴⁶² Danz, p. 241. Furthermore, Danz clarifies that “With scripture, dogmatics thematizes the dependence of the Christian religion on concrete, historical content. The form of reflection in which this bond in Christianity is dealt with and discussed by dogmatics as a media theory is the doctrine of Scripture,” p. 282.

⁴⁶³ Danz, p. 257.

⁴⁶⁴ Danz, p. 261.

of the gift.⁴⁶⁵ We are received through the sacrament of baptism, which for Danz is “a medium of the Spirit that serves to transmit and pass on the memory of Jesus the Christ” whereby the “sign of water and the words of interpretation [...] become media of the Spirit of God in their religious use. Every medium is bound to a form through which a substance (*Gehalt*) or meaning is revealed that is transmitted through the sign.”⁴⁶⁶ The Spirit represents the liturgical context within which water and words become a gift of new life, of incorporation into the cultural memory of the Christ.

*iii. Spirit as Appropriation/Embodiment (Aneignung).*⁴⁶⁷ Because the Spirit is the giver, the gift, and the appropriation or embodiment of the cultural memory of the Christ, each element of the communicative process has already been discussed within the context of the others. Protestant theology typically deals with appropriation in relation to faith, which, as discussed above in Chapter One, entails historically contingent conceptualizations of the self:

Dogmatic descriptions of faith as the appropriation of salvation always contain an image of humanity as persons, their identity and their origin. Self-images are just as subject to cultural change as theology. Not only the answer, but even the question of what a self is, what characterizes it and how it is to be defined more precisely, is shaped by a culture that has become historical, its norms and orders. Theology, even where it distances itself from the culture of its own present and turns to its ‘cause,’ is always an expression of its time. This is reflected in the theological descriptions and constructions of the concept of faith.⁴⁶⁸

⁴⁶⁵ Cf. Danz, p 267: “The religious use or religious view of signs thus presupposes a religious horizon in which the signum is understood and used as religious. Thus, the Lord’s Supper is celebrated in memory of Jesus, but precisely this, its specifically religious meaning, is not based on the signs, but on their use in the context of the divine service. [...] The respective horizon, here the Christian worship service, always determines how signs are understood.”

⁴⁶⁶ Danz, p. 293.

⁴⁶⁷ Danz and I translate the German *Aneignung* as both “appropriation” and “embodiment.” The verb, *eignen* conveys a process of making something suitable or fitting. The prefix *an-* implies directionality, that is, of something being made suitable *for* someone or something. The suffix *-ung* changes the verb to a noun, conveying the action or result of the verb. Thus, *Aneignung*, as the act of making something suitable for oneself takes on material, embodied meaning when applied to a theory of the Christian faith as performativity. This is precisely what Danz’s pneumatology describes.

⁴⁶⁸ Danz, p. 315.

Through the concept of faith systematic theology constructs and thematizes conceptions of the self. Since all theology is historically contingent, influenced by and influencing philosophical and other cultural theories and contents, the changes in conceptions of the self in postmodern philosophies must necessarily be taken up by theology, which this project has attempted to do. Danz recounts once more that twentieth-century theology developed a concept that dissolved “constructions of religion that were based on the theory of faculties of consciousness and thus universally valid in Protestant theology,” and replaced them with “religion bound to its performative act, which represents its reflexive structure in its content.”⁴⁶⁹ However, even these reconceptualizations continued universal/essential qualities of humanity that come into being through the act of faith.⁴⁷⁰ This concept of a universal and true self that is realized in religion depends upon a conception of the self that Danz rejects in postmodern theological fashion, though he often dismisses my emphatic affirmation that he is a postmodernist.

Far from disappearing, conceptions of the self today have changed, as discussed throughout this project with reference to Foucault, Butler, Anderson, Warren, White, Vattimo, Zabala, and Assmann. For this reason, Danz asserts that the Holy Spirit must be understood “in such a way that the necessary performative act of appropriation” is regarded neither “as a justification nor as an actuality. Although appropriative faith has its justification and validity in itself, its performative act cannot be asserted as universally valid...”⁴⁷¹ Rather, the religious subject/self and the religious content “emerge together with the Christian religion” as a symbolic production through the “individual appropriation of the memory of Jesus the Christ.”⁴⁷² Therefore, “[i]n the individual appropriation of the memory of Jesus the Christ,

⁴⁶⁹ Danz, p. 316.

⁴⁷⁰ Danz cites Schleiermacher and Bultman on this point, cf. Danz, pp. 316 – 317, footnote 465: “This was already Schleiermacher’s thought in the speeches: religion is the individual realization of a universally valid self-relation. Cf. also Bultmann, “Wahrheit und Gewißheit,” 201 f.: ‘This means that in faith I do not understand God as something existing for itself, a supernatural being with these and those characteristics, but - as the Reformation and Ritschl quite rightly saw, and as Erlangen theology at least intends - I understand God by understanding myself anew.’”

⁴⁷¹ Danz, p. 321.

⁴⁷² Danz, p. 323.

appropriation is received as an image of faith itself.”⁴⁷³ The Spirit, as appropriation, symbolizes the self-reflexive structure of a postmodern faith whereby identities are hermeneutic-ontologically constituted by conscious participants within a tradition that shapes how we understand ourselves and the world. And the image of the self that emerges is not a universal essence but is, rather, a content of Christianity itself that only arises through the ongoing and historically contingent embodied form of communication that is the Christian faith. In other words, the religious self only emerges through the Spirit. And because the Spirit is this triadic structure of communication – giver, gift, and appropriation – the religious selves that emerge through the Spirit do not preexist Christianity or the act of faith but arise in faith as faith.

Within this theory of cultural memory and the thematization of the Spirit as the self-description of the performative constitution of faith, Christianity itself is a queer construction: it cannot be reduced into separate parts/partners but is itself the interplay of three components (giver, gift, appropriation), which cannot be delineated in a linear way. As Danz notes, the binary of active and passive participants is overcome in this model. The giver is given in the gift which only exists through understanding appropriation – and this depends upon the gift itself, which in turn depends upon the giver, who is only known through the gift as appropriation, and so on. Christianity itself is a queer act, the communal embodiment of the memory of Jesus the Christ, the re-presentation of someone who is not here and yet is among us in the full diversity of persons who take up and appropriate this memory in Christian communities. Memory, therefore, takes on an ontological function, making meaning of our being – meanings that are structured by the norms of the biblical canon and tradition but remain opened because of the nature of the queer communicative event of faith. But what do queer theologians have to say about these doctrines (pneumatology and ecclesiology), and how might

⁴⁷³ Danz, p. 323.

the present project's theory of theological performativity – with its explicit attention to the ethical-ontological component of a postmodern faith – critically further my mentor's?

II. Queerly Constituted: Pneumatology & Ecclesiology

It is perhaps in the doctrines of the church and of the Spirit that the queer constitution at the heart of theological performativity is most evident. Systematically, there is no church without the Spirit and there is no Spirit without the church – they only exist together. Furthermore, because doctrines constitute Christianity, and Christianity is only constituted through the ongoing event of its embodied communication, the effect of pneumatology and ecclesiology on the bodies of Christians will be further examined. To begin this examination, I return once more to the theology of Tillich, this time taking up his conception of the Spirit and its relationship to the church in the final volume of his *Systematic Theology*. The first section concludes with a practical application of Tillich's ecclesiology for supporting the affirmation of LGBTQIA+ persons within my own tradition. From this framework, Patrick Cheng's discussion of pneumatology and eschatology forms the subject and design of Section B below, interwoven with the works of other queer and womanist scholars, namely, my mentor and queer ecclesiolgist colleague Brandon T. Crowley, fellow UMC clergyperson Pamela Lightsey, and Marcella Althaus-Reid. Section C briefly examines the question of embodiment in theology through the systematic theological works of the Swedish professor Ola Sigurdson and the Danish professor Johanne Kristensen. This cursory sketch is undertaken to orient us to the concept of intercorporeality and its effects within the framework of the Spirit as the cultural memory of the Christ.

*A. Tillich's Ecclesiology: A Paradox*⁴⁷⁴

This brief section examines the practical application of two interdependent Tillichian ecclesiological claims: Firstly, Tillich claims that “[t]he struggle of the Kingdom of God in history is, above all, [a] struggle within the life of its own representatives, the churches,”⁴⁷⁵ and secondly, that “[t]o the degree in which the dynamics of the Spiritual Community is effective in a church, the conflict is transformed into a living tension.”⁴⁷⁶ The key to understanding these claims, which will be explored in the first subsection, is the paradoxical nature of churches: on the one hand they participate in the Spiritual Community, the unambiguous power that undergirds them all (and is latent in communities of other faiths), and on the other hand, they are a sociological reality, participating in the ambiguities of life.⁴⁷⁷ When discussing the tensions created by the ambiguities of life in the churches, Tillich describes three polarities of principles: *tradition and reformation*, *verity and adaptation*, and *form-transcendence and form-affirmation*.⁴⁷⁸ This section will examine the relationship between the polarities and their corresponding functions: *constitution*, *expansion*, and *construction* (respectively). These polarities and functions will then be correlated to the current situation of The United Methodist Church (hereafter referred to as The UMC) and its decades-long division over human sexuality. Within a Tillichian paradigm, it will be argued that the human sexuality debate represents an underlying issue: an imbalance of the polarities within The UMC as it seeks to exercise its functions as a representative of the Kingdom of God. I will conclude by suggesting that conflict transformation practices – specifically by addressing the systematic and drelational aspects of

⁴⁷⁴ This section builds upon the final essay I submitted for a course on the theology of Paul Tillich: J.J. Warren, “Representing the Kingdom of God in History: A Tillichian Examination of The United Methodist Church’s Impending Schism and the Necessity of Conflict Transformation” (Essay, The Theology of Paul Tillich TT 832, Boston University School of Theology, 2021).

⁴⁷⁵ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Volume III (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 381.

⁴⁷⁶ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. III, p. 185.

⁴⁷⁷ Tillich, vol. III, p. 165.

⁴⁷⁸ Tillich, vol. III, pp. 182-188.

the conflict – offer one way for The UMC to fragmentarily overcome the estrangement of its members from one another.⁴⁷⁹

i. The Paradox of Churches. Before examining the functions and polarities in detail, it is necessary to begin with a key concept that unlocks the understanding of the churches that Tillich constructs. As briefly mentioned above, Tillich sees the Spiritual Community “not [as] a group existing beside other groups but rather a power and a structure inherent and effective in such groups, that is, in religious communities.”⁴⁸⁰ The Spiritual Community is not the “ideal church” or some other invisible entity that exists beside the visible church; it is the Spiritual essence that is present in both churches and communities of other faiths – so long as they are determined by an ultimate concern. Revealing his modern presuppositions once more, the Spiritual Community undergirds and directs them all as a universally valid abysmal ground. However, this openness leads one to ask, *What is unique about the particular manifestation of the Spiritual Community within churches*, and furthermore, *is the church even necessary?* Tillich answers these questions by restating his thesis: that Jesus as the Christ is the New Being, and that if groups are consciously determined by this event as their ultimate concern, then these groups are churches.⁴⁸¹ In this way, both the inherent value of other faiths is affirmed for Tillich, and the uniqueness of churches is maintained. This is one side of the paradoxical nature of the churches: churches’ participation in the unambiguous reality of the Spiritual Community – in the power of the Spirit.

The other side of the paradox is that churches exist as sociological realities, and they therefore participate in the ambiguities of life. Tillich cautions that these two aspects of the paradox must not be seen as two distinct churches, otherwise churches risk losing their ultimate

⁴⁷⁹ While this project does not permit me to explore conflict transformation in depth, Victoria Hart Gaskell’s thesis examines this topic in relation to The UMC. See Victoria Hart Gaskell *Holy Spirit, Holy Conflict: Toward Wesleyan Pneumatological Leadership in Conflict Transformation*, doctoral thesis, Boston University School of Theology, 2012, retrieved from <https://open.bu.edu/ds2/stream/?#/documents/356053/page/1>.

⁴⁸⁰ Tillich, vol. III, p. 162.

⁴⁸¹ Tillich, vol. III, p. 162.

concern on the one hand and becoming social charities – in which case they could easily be replaced by other groups.⁴⁸² On the other hand, Tillich warns that one must be careful not to deny the significance of the sociological aspect of churches; if one denies the social reality, which Tillich sees the Roman Catholic Church as doing, then one is led to defend the institutional church against all critique because an attack on the institution is seen as an attack on the Spiritual Community itself.⁴⁸³ Therefore, one must remain within the paradox of the churches: one must understand that as social realities, the estrangement of churches from the ground of being prevents them from absolutely or completely manifesting the Spiritual Presence, and one must also recognize that the Spiritual Community provides their underlying power and structure – it is fragmentarily realized within them.⁴⁸⁴

This understanding helps unlock Tillich's ecclesiological claim that churches are the representatives of the Kingdom of God in history – that the Kingdom of God is fragmentarily realized when churches recognize their paradoxical nature and, consequently, the need for self-critique. While churches must recognize that their existential estrangement means they cannot realize the Spiritual Community absolutely, they must strive toward such a realization because it is their *telos* – even though it can never be fully realized. Given this situation, the functions of the churches are themselves ambiguous, and they operate within the tensions of certain pairs of polar principles – the separation of which results in demonic consequences. This leads to the second ecclesiological claim in which Tillich asserts that, “[t]o the degree in which the dynamics of the Spiritual Community is effective in a church, the conflict is transformed into a living tension.”⁴⁸⁵ The challenge for churches generally, and The UMC in particular, becomes navigating the inherent tensions of their existence as they seek to perform their functions as

⁴⁸² Tillich, vol. III, p. 166.

⁴⁸³ Tillich, vol. III, p. 167.

⁴⁸⁴ Tillich uses the terms “Spiritual Community” and “Spiritual Presence” interchangeably through volume III.

⁴⁸⁵ Tillich, vol. III, p. 185.

representatives of the Kingdom of God – without transgressing one principle, such as verity, in favor of the other, such as adaptation.

ii. The Functions and Polarities of Churches. The functions of the churches correspond to the functions of life generally. Therefore, since the first function of life is self-integration, manifested as centeredness, the first function of churches is constitution. Tillich writes that constitution is “related to the foundation of the churches in the Spiritual Community,” which provides their center.⁴⁸⁶ The churches’ constitution is informed by the polarity of the principles of tradition and reformation, with tradition understood as the link between the churches’ foundation (the New Being manifested in Jesus as the Christ) and every new generation; “it expresses the unity of historical mankind [sic.], of which the appearance of the Christ is the center.”⁴⁸⁷ The challenge for churches, as representatives of the Kingdom of God, becomes living into the tension between the continuation of tradition and the necessary, prophetic critique that keeps churches oriented toward their ultimate concern. This continual process is understood as the principle of reformation, which is the “the corrective against the demonic suppression of the Spirit by a tradition which is vested with absolute validity, in practice or by law.”⁴⁸⁸ Reformation seeks to protect tradition from itself by challenging its absolute claims, and this relationship demonstrates the interdependence and creative tension between all the polar pairs generally. It is for this reason that Tillich can confidently claim “[t]here is no reformation without tradition;” they are interdependent.⁴⁸⁹ This is in line with Danz’s use of Tillich in his pneumatology as discussed above, whereby variation and diversity are recast as necessary components of continuity.

The prophetic critique of tradition’s claim to be absolute is necessary because the churches’ existential estrangement from the unambiguous life of the Spiritual Community as

⁴⁸⁶ Tillich, vol. III, p. 167.

⁴⁸⁷ Tillich, vol. III, p. 184.

⁴⁸⁸ Tillich, vol. III, p. 185.

⁴⁸⁹ Tillich, vol. III, p. 184.

social realities is never totally overcome. In a postmodern reading, this means nothing other than the fact that churches have no recourse to an objective, transcendental ground. While it is necessary for churches to identify some doctrinal core to maintain the cultural memory of the Christ, their claims become demonic if they deem their particular interpretations of doctrines as absolute. This situation continues in the polarity of verity and adaptation, under which the function of expansion takes place. Tillich warns that the “danger of the pronouncement of verity without adaptation... is a demonic absolutism which throws the truth like stones at the heads of people, not caring whether they can accept it or not.”⁴⁹⁰ On the other hand, adaptation without verity risks becoming “an unlimited accommodation,” in which case “the message’s verity is lost, and a relativism takes hold which leads to secularism...”⁴⁹¹ Again, the task of churches, as representatives of the Kingdom of God – that is, as the site of the Spirit’s presence, which overcomes binaries and the estrangement of essentialism – is the transformation of the conflict that arises between these principles in the exercise of the function of expansion into a creative tension. This tension cannot not favor one principle over the other, otherwise the self-reflexive structure of faith collapses. Verity and adaptation are interdependent and must remain so.

The situation of the previous polarities and functions leads to the third function, construction, and the polar principles of form-transcendence and form-affirmation. Since construction uses “the different spheres of cultural creation in order to express the Spiritual Community in the life of the churches,” the other functions and polarities are logically present within this function.⁴⁹² One must construct from a foundation (constitution), which is constantly being refined through the polarities of tradition and reformation. In order to justify the use of cultural forms, churches must claim universality (expansion) as a mode of affirming the

⁴⁹⁰ Tillich, vol. III, p. 186.

⁴⁹¹ Tillich, vol. III, p. 187.

⁴⁹² Tillich, vol. III, p. 187.

inherent goodness of all creation,⁴⁹³ but this universality must navigate the relationship between the claims of its ultimate concern (verity) and the particularities of cultural creations that are used to express this concern (adaptation). As part of their universality, churches create out of the styles and cultural forms that exist in the societies in which they find themselves, and in this way, the form-affirming principle is evident. But, as previously stated, the power that undergirds the churches, the Spiritual Community, conquers the ambiguities of history, which are present in the cultural forms. Therefore, while the churches' universality entails an affirmation of cultural forms, the presence of the Spirit transcends them.⁴⁹⁴ In the midst of their construction, churches must transform the conflict between the cultural forms they affirm and incorporate with the transcendent nature of the Spirit (as cultural memory) into a creative tension. The principles of form-affirmation and form-transcendence are interdependent and must remain so.

iii. Correlation to The UMC. In The UMC, as in many denominations, a core of doctrine has been identified as absolute, against which clergy are held accountable. For The UMC, this core is detailed in the *Book of Discipline*, which, since 1972 until 2024, has stated that “[t]he practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.”⁴⁹⁵ With Tillich’s framework of the functions and polarities of churches in mind, one begins to see how this doctrinal statement represented a fundamental imbalance of the polar principles, an imbalance that has evidently failed to transform conflict into creative tension. One interpretation of the verity of Christian tradition has been regarded as absolute (the view that “homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching”), and it therefore resists the reform or adaptation that any absolute claim must

⁴⁹³ I have developed elsewhere a reconceptualization of the church’s universality/catholicity within a Tillichian paradigm as a “ministry of affirmation.” Cf. Warren, *Where Two or Three are Connected*, Chapter Three “Catholicity as Affirmation and Inclusion.”

⁴⁹⁴ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. III, p. 187.

⁴⁹⁵ *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church*, ¶ 304.3.

undergo. To explore this imbalance further, we must return to the first side of the paradox: that the Spirit is the “power and structure” effective in churches, which are founded upon the claim that Jesus as the Christ is the New Being. Tillich asserts that in this central event, the two manifestations of the Spiritual Presence, faith and love, are united this unity becomes the criterion of the churches.⁴⁹⁶ The question becomes, then, how does this criterion shape how the tensions between tradition and reformation, verity and adaptation take shape in the life of churches, and how might it be used as a corrective for the decades of imbalance that The UMC in only beginning to address?

Tillich writes that, “Christ’s self-sacrificial love is the center of the Gospels,” and that, “[t]his center is the principle of *agape*.”⁴⁹⁷ Earlier in this section of the *Systematic Theology*, Tillich defined *agape* as “the state of being taken by the Spiritual Presence into the transcendent unity of unambiguous life.”⁴⁹⁸ In this postmodern reading, this principle of *agape* can be understood as the unity in diversity that is experienced through the recognition of the constructed nature of the estrangement that heteronormativity perpetuates. The love of Christ, understood as the principle of *agape* (as euphoria beyond the binary), is the criterion of Christian spiritual experiences, which in the Spiritual Community entails the “union of being with being.”⁴⁹⁹ The application of this criterion to the present situation of The UMC can be examined in the following way: if The UMC is constituted by the central event of Jesus as the Christ, then this constitution necessarily involves the principle of *agape*, which includes the union of being with being, of a mutual participation such that each individual is enabled to flourish.⁵⁰⁰ Such flourishing and union is possible through the (Queer) New Being. Wherever this principle is absent, the union of being with being disintegrates and the social reality of the

⁴⁹⁶ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. III, p. 145.

⁴⁹⁷ Tillich, vol. III, pp. 152-155.

⁴⁹⁸ Tillich, vol. III, p. 134.

⁴⁹⁹ Tillich, vol. III, p. 156.

⁵⁰⁰ This understanding of Tillich’s ethics as dealing primarily with human flourishing comes from the work of Nimi Wariboko. For a brief introduction to his approach, see Nimi Wariboko, “Emergence and ‘Science of Ethos’: Toward a Tillichian Ethical Framework,” in *Theology and Science* 7, no. 2 (2009): 189-206.

churches as institutions is divided. The criterion of *agape* ought to offer a corrective to the tradition (“Christian teaching”) that The UMC claims to represent, but the denomination’s exclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals has led to a reactive movement toward tradition’s polar pair, reformation. Reformation judges tradition against the criterion of *agape*, and it therefore deems the exclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals a hinderance to the transcendent union of being with being, which is inherent to the Spiritual Community. In the present situation, tradition and verity violently oppose reform and adaptation, and reform and adaptation, in turn, violently attack tradition. The interdependence between the principles is denied and/or undervalued, and churches are no longer able to perform their functions effectively.⁵⁰¹

The exclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals is defended by this imbalance of principles where a favoring of tradition and verity leads to the absolutizing of doctrine in such a way that the principle of *agape* is rendered irrelevant. This demonic elevation of doctrine leads to the situation Tillich described earlier, in which churches throw “the truth like stones at the heads of people,” as many LGBTQIA+ members of The UMC have experienced.⁵⁰² Those who favor verity and tradition within the denomination view the *Book of Discipline* as absolute, and they lament that its prohibition of LGBTQ+ clergy has been ignored and disobeyed.⁵⁰³ Many of these individuals viewed the splintering of some from the denomination as necessary because of the transgression of verity and tradition in favor of what they see as mere adaptation or empty critique. This sentiment is expressed through the condemnation of The UMC as a “lawless denomination,” and by the charge that “[w]hen a body abandons her defining standard, there is

⁵⁰¹Ashely Dreff provides a detailed overview of The UMC’s division over human sexuality and its mirroring of U.S. politics. The book details the almost five decades of General Conferences that have been hindered in their functioning due to the time and energy devoted to implementing and enforcing anti-LGBTQ+ policies. See Ashley Boggan Dreff, *Entangled: A History of American Methodism, Politics, and Sexuality* (Nashville, TN: New Room Books, 2018).

⁵⁰²For more on the experience of church exclusion, see Warren, *Reclaiming Church: A Call to Action for Religious Rejects* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020).

⁵⁰³A commentary published by United Methodist News lists a disregard for the Book of Discipline as one of its five theses against The UMC as it is. Cf. Stephen Mannion, “5 Theses for The United Methodist Church,” *United Methodist News* (November 23, 2021), <https://www.umnews.org/en/news/5-theses-for-the-united-methodist-church>.

no body.”⁵⁰⁴ The “defining standard” here is taken to be law – specifically anti-LGBTQIA+ law – which replaces the principle of *agape*.

A similar sentiment is expressed in another self-identified “traditionalist” magazine in an article pondering the fate of traditionalists who remain in The UMC after the departure of LGBTQIA+ exclusionary churches. The author claims that,

Once traditionalists adopt the position that the clear biblical teaching on marriage and sexuality is only one acceptable viewpoint among many, they may find themselves unable to maintain other distinctive traditionalist understandings of Christian doctrine and practice.⁵⁰⁵

The fear expressed in this article is that any amount of adaptation relativizes one’s interpretation of tradition and destabilizes its absoluteness and verity. One might fear that there is no longer one constitutive truth, but many truths amenable to the tides of culture. However, the underlying question is not whether there is one truth or many truths; it is the question of how one interprets the truth that they have received through tradition – a truth that has been adapted through an institution that has been continually reformed throughout the centuries. Both articles demand allegiance to the primacy of verity and tradition, but rather than demanding The UMC elevate one side of the principles over the other, Tillich’s framework encourages churches to transform this conflict into creative tension by embracing both – for it is within this tension that the Kingdom of God, which the churches represent, is able to fragmentarily overcome estrangement and is able to perform the function of the self-creativity of life. Rather than being forced to choose between absolutism and relativization, one is freed to uphold their faith in the central event of Jesus as the Christ while judging tradition against it through the criterion of *agape* – the effective use of which ensures that reform is always as present as tradition. The

⁵⁰⁴ Stephen Mannion, “5 Theses for The United Methodist Church.”

⁵⁰⁵ Thomas Lambrecht, “Traditionalist Apprehension about a Post-Separation UMC,” in *Good News Magazine*, published October 23, 2020. <https://goodnewsmag.org/traditionalist-apprehension-about-a-post-separation-umc/>.

interdependence of the polar principles is salvaged, and the tension need not lead to schism, though that is still a reality of ambiguous life.

Rather than an unnecessary choice between verity and adaptation, the tension between them creates new opportunities for the church and for the union of being with being—even of “traditionalist” being with “progressive” being in The UMC. Given time and this Tillichian framework, “traditionalists” might begin to see that LGBTQIA+ individuals are not relativizing truth, but rather that we are seeking to faithfully interpret the Christian message through the criterion of *agape*. In this way, tradition overcomes its demonic distortion as absolute; it is continually reformed by the principle of *agape*, and reformation overcomes the demonic distortion of becoming “emptying criticism” because it understands its dependence on tradition. Progressives in the church could come to value the content and necessity of tradition that the traditionalists claim to defend. While conflict will inevitably continue to arise between them, the interdependence of these principles demands that dialogue take place if The UMC is to be a faithful representative of the Kingdom of God – that is, of the embodied presence of the Spirit – even if this dialogue produces new denominations, which will inevitably undergo the dynamics of history as well.

For the denomination to actualize the Spiritual potentialities that are part of its nature, it must construct new ways of being the church through the use – and transcendence – of cultural forms. One such form that will continue to aid the denomination is the use of conflict transformation practices, which “goes beyond resolution, settlement, and management to the process of discernment and participation in the transformative work of the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁰⁶ Conflict transformation itself both affirms and transcends traditional modes of conflict management so that positions are not simply reframed, but rather that the relationships of those in conflict, and the structures that have led to the conflict, are transformed so that they are no

⁵⁰⁶ Gaskell, *Holy Spirit, Holy Conflict*, p. 41.

longer violent or disempowering.⁵⁰⁷ It is part of The UMC's nature as a church to work to overcome the ambiguities of existence that create estrangements between persons and between persons and God. Therefore, this brief section sought to reframe the current division within the denomination through Tillichian language and concepts with the hope that the mutual interdependence between the principles and factions within the denomination will be seen and honored as necessary components of the ongoing event of Christianity. Conflict transformation practices ought to be embraced by the denomination as a way forward as The UMC seeks to actualize the Spirit and represent the Kingdom of God in history. I now turn to the works of queer theologians in addressing these same doctrines in different ways in order to open further possibilities for our communal life as the cultural memory of Jesus the Christ.

B. The Queer Ministry of the Spirit

For Queer theologian Patrick Cheng, one reason the Holy Spirit is perhaps the queerest member of the Trinity is because it occupies a “marginalized position” within Christian theology, creeds and discourse.⁵⁰⁸ The explicit thesis of *Radical Love* is that both “queer experience[s] and Christian theology are fundamentally about radical love,”⁵⁰⁹ which Cheng defines as, “a love so extreme that it dissolves our existing boundaries.”⁵¹⁰ The nuances of this love were discussed in Chapter Two. As we begin to assemble ingredients for our final course – or is it the first? – it is necessary to orient us once more through Cheng's argument that queer theology, as “the place where Christian theology and queer theory meet,” is a discourse of/about radical love.⁵¹¹ In queer theology the essentialized binaries and barriers that keep us apart from one another and from God are not entirely dissolved but are made porous and dethroned from their position within the fantastic hegemonic imagination through practices of counterhegemony. Such practices include, as the first and second chapters sought to

⁵⁰⁷ Gaskell, p. 42. See footnote 65 for further clarification of Gaskell's use of the term “violent.”

⁵⁰⁸ Patrick Cheng, *Radical Love*.

⁵⁰⁹ Cheng, p. 100.

⁵¹⁰ Cheng, p. x.

⁵¹¹ Cheng, p. x.

demonstrate, the use of images that depict biblical characters in the very bodies that are often discarded by these systems – Black, Brown, Asian, Latinx, Indigenous, disabled, Queer, Trans, Intersex and nonbinary bodies. In Methodist/Wesleyan language, then, queer theology can be seen as *a means of grace* since it is through queer theology that we are able to encounter God beyond the separations erected by heteropatriarchal traditions and structures.

For Marcella Althaus-Reid, this is precisely what queer theology does – it shows us the Other side/backside of God and is, therefore, “the path of God’s own liberation, apart from ours, and as such it constitutes a critique to what Heterosexual Theology has done with God by closeting the divine.”⁵¹² Through queer theology, we encounter as holy that which was previously hidden or denied. And this liberation happens in our bodies through the queer work of the Spirit(s) – that is, through transgressive acts that disrupt the imperial Salvation Machine™ and generate new possibilities of being. This disruption occurs when we recognize as holy “the memories of bodies that have been loved outside the limits of heterosexual ideologies.”⁵¹³ Thus, the second chapter built upon Althaus-Reid to demonstrate how reconfiguring doctrines of *redemption* not as retention or (re)production of a heteropatriarchal order, but rather as disruption opens new possibilities as a practice of counterhegemony.

The Spirit is also, as many remark, perhaps the queerest member of the Trinity because it simply refuses definition and singular imagery. The Spirit is *fluid* – it is represented in the Gospels as a dove (Mt 3:16; Mk 1:10; Lk 3:22; Jn 1:32), as tongues of fire (Acts 2:3-4) as a flame (Ex 3:2; Ex 13:21; Ps 29:7; Lk 3:16), and as the wind (Gen 1:2; 1 Kgs 19:12; Acts 2:2). Its identity has been normatively determined to constitute a “person” of the Trinity with unique attributes, but its relation to the other members has been the source of great debate: does the Spirit proceed from the ~~Father~~ through the Son (Origen; Cyril), from the Son alone, from the

⁵¹² Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, p. 4.

⁵¹³ Althaus-Reid, p. 134.

~~Father~~ alone (Gregory of Nyssa; Eastern/Greek Churches), or from the ~~Father~~ and the Son (*filioque*; Augustine; Western/Latin Churches)?⁵¹⁴ Indeed, determining the right relationship of the Spirit with the other members of the Trinity was so charged a topic that it eventually contributed to the split between the Latin West and Greek East Churches in 1054. The relational identity of the Spirit matters. The Spirit, like many LGBTQIA+ persons, has been the subject of fierce debate – it has been relegated, marginalized, blamed for much wider divisions, and accused of simply being “too much,” too queer, too transgressive, too fluid and dynamic for its own good. Because the Spirit refuses to be a “good” queer, one palatable to and categorizable by heteropatriarchal cultures, it is marginalized.

It is, however, precisely because of this queer fluidity that the Holy Spirit is capable of dissolving the boundaries that keep us from experiencing the radical love of God. Cheng asserts that the Spirit is “all about the return to radical love.”⁵¹⁵ In this way the biblical account of the Spirit as “paraclete” (Jn 14:6) or “helper” is continued since the Spirit “always leads us to our final destination ... the return to radical love, or the dissolving of all boundaries that divide us from God and neighbor.”⁵¹⁶ It is for this very reason that Cheng’s queer theology links pneumatology with ecclesiology, since the Spirit guides us toward radical love, which is experienced in Christian community, i.e., in the church (ideally, though often not practically). The church, as an “*external community of radical love*,” is the manifestation of the Spirit insofar as it “dissolve[s] traditional boundaries that kept people apart such as biological relationships, social class, and physical attributes.”⁵¹⁷ By making the Trinitarian outcast our guide, queer theology continues its quest for the Other side of God – in salsa bars, night clubs, bedrooms, and even churches where concepts of God are constituted beyond the confines of “decent,”

⁵¹⁴ In *The Shape of Pneumatology: Studies in the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 1997), John McIntyre sets out to describe the development of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit from biblical texts, sources from the patristic period, and the theology of John Calvin and Karl Barth. McIntyre discusses patristic interpretations in Chapter Four, “The Trinity and the Classical Trinitarian Mould,” pp. 74 – 108.

⁵¹⁵ Cheng, *Radical Love*, p. 100.

⁵¹⁶ Cheng, pp. 100 – 101.

⁵¹⁷ Cheng, p. 106.

heteropatriarchal theology. It does not seek out *a being*/transcendental God who is in these places, but the God who is constituted by the communicative structure of the Spirit. As such, the Holy Spirit is intimately involved in the continual creation of the church through the dissolving of boundaries – or the opening of possibilities. Cheng identifies four binaries that the Holy Spirit dissolves: sexuality vs. church, private vs. public discourse on sexuality, unity vs. diversity, and law vs. lawlessness. The queer work of the Spirit in overcoming these binaries will structure the remainder of Part II of this chapter.

i. Sexuality & the Church. It is often the case that in churches sexuality is confined to the closets of the confessional or to shame-saturated whispers about others around the coffee tables or in the hallways. Or at least this is the narrative that the heteropatriarchal fantastic hegemonic imagination would like us to believe. However, sexuality is present in everything we do as the church – even in the denial thereof – because *we* are the church, that is, the church only happens in and as our gendered embodiment of the cultural memory of Christ. Marcella Althaus-Reid makes the sexuality of church practices explicitly clear. “The ritual of confession,” she writes, “signifies positions of power [and] sexual positions too.” Specifically, Althaus-Reid reflects on the “girl’s way” and “boy’s way” of confession in Argentina in the 1960s, which reflected not only the church’s phallocentrism through kneeling before the genitalia of the priest but also the “the position of women in Argentinian society.”⁵¹⁸ With bold clarity she asserts that the “angle your body was positioned in relation to the priest’s penis was also the angle you took in relation to the church’s phallus and its authority.”⁵¹⁹ Every aspect of the church’s life and liturgy is coded with hierarchical gendered relations – from the images of God’s masculinity painted or stained into glass in sanctuaries around the world, to the very practices of kneeling for prayer, confession, or Holy Communion.

⁵¹⁸ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, p. 17.

⁵¹⁹ Althaus-Reid, p. 17.

Queer theology not only dissolves the falsely imposed dichotomy of church and sexuality by (1) revealing the inherently gendered and sexual nature of our liturgies and communal practices (for a religious subject only *comes to be* through the constitutive constraints of gendered norms through which a subject is hermeneutically (re)produced), and (2) by revealing that in their explicit rejections of sexuality as a topic of conversation, churches are actually hiding the fact that a phallogentric heterosexuality is already in place. This is why queer theology can be called “indecent,” as Althaus-Reid does,

because it undresses and uncovers sexuality and economy at the same time. Not only do we need an Indecent Theology which can reach the core of theological constructions, insofar as they are rooted in sexual constructions, for the sake of understanding our sexuality, we also need it because theological truths are currencies dispensed and acquired in theological economic markets. [...] And it is a sexual exchange: not only salvation as a symbolic exchange commodity for bread, but for a type of heterosexual mode of living and producing which is expected too.⁵²⁰

Chapter Two discussed this at great length in relation to conversion as the (re)production of a decent order.

One more word on this boundary, which the Spirit dissolves/dislodges. In his recent manuscript, *Queering Black Churches: Dismantling Heteronormativity in African American Congregations* (2024), queer theologian and Black Baptist pastor Bradon Thomas Crowley further dissolves this boundary.⁵²¹ He does so by calling historically Black churches to the work of dismantling heteronormativity as a matter of reclaiming their traditions. He prophetically critiques homophobia within Black churches as “whiteface,” as a departure from Black church and West African traditions and is instead a repetition of white, racist heteropatriarchal Christianity. Furthermore, Crowley nuances that “Black churches were not created as institutions to queer white churches;” however, “Black ecclesial structures do exist as queered,

⁵²⁰ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, p. 19.

⁵²¹ Brandon Thomas Crowley, *Queering Black Churches: Dismantling Heteronormativity in African American Congregations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

nonracist inversions of white Christianity.”⁵²² Black churches embody the reality that alternatives to the colonial “objective” transcendental claims of white Christianity are not only possible but already exist. Black churches are not functionalized as foils or responses to white Christianity, but rather they can be regarded as participants in Townes’ group project of counterhegemony. Furthermore, Crowley’s method of “Black ecclesial queering” can be regarded as a work of the Spirit insofar as it dissolves the divide between sexuality and the church by “center[ing] on the Black Queer body as an ecclesiological site of sacred worth.”⁵²³ Sexuality is, therefore, a necessary component of the Spirit’s work in creating communities of radical love.⁵²⁴

ii. Private-Public Discourse. A Second queer act of the Spirit is its dissolution of the boundaries between public and private discourse where sexuality is concerned. Cheng cites a gay Catholic theologian, James Alison, as framing queer coming out stories as the work of the Spirit, gently lifting the shame and toxicity many LGBTQIA+ persons feel regarding our sexualities and enabling us to live more fully as ourselves.⁵²⁵ Within the theory of this (queer) systematic theology we can go one step further in asserting that the division between public and private is queerly overcome by the Spirit because it is only through socially sustained constructions of gender and sexuality (acting as cultural memory) that a private sense/identity of sexuality even emerges. The Spirit reveals this hidden structural process and the contingency and mutual interdependence of these categories. That is, private and public discourses on sex only emerge together through the effective policing of heteronormativity through diverse and diffuse centers of power across various institutions. Within Danz’s theory, the Spirit as a symbolic representation of the ongoing performative process of Christian faith (the Spirit as

⁵²² Crowley, *Queering Black Churches*, p. 71.

⁵²³ Crowley, p. 2.

⁵²⁴ In the Conclusion, Crowley further develops an affirmative approach to Black Queer sexualities within churches. Cf. Crowley, “The Sacred Eroticism of Black Queer Men and Other Black Queer Spaces,” pp. 212 – 215.

⁵²⁵ Cheng, *Radical Love*, p. 103; citing James Alison, *Undergoing God: Dispatches from the Scene of a Break-In* (New York; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2006), pp. 208 – 13.

giver, gift, and appropriation/embodiment) dissolves the binary of private-public discourse on sexuality insofar as Christian discourse is always a communal process (communication only happens if/when *someone* shares a message with *someone else*). The Spirit only arises within this tri-polar/three-way structure of the memory of the Christ, within which a religious self emerges as part of a communal process of meaning-making.

iii. Unity through Diversity. Cheng cites Thomas Bohache, an openly gay theologian and ordained minister in the Metropolitan Community Churches, who reflects on the role of the Spirit in the story of Pentecost when the group of disciples were given different gifts and able to communicate in many different languages “according to the hearer’s individual needs.”⁵²⁶ For Bohache, the Pentecost, as the queer arrival of the Holy Spirit in and through a great diversity of persons and languages, calls LGBTQIA+ persons to embrace diversity within our communities and to resist the uniformity demanded by heteronormativity.⁵²⁷ In *Rainbow Theology: Bridging Race, Sexuality, and Spirit* (2013), Cheng provides the first book-length treatment that centers the writings of LGBTQIA+ people of color.⁵²⁸ “Rainbow theology,” as Cheng develops, “takes seriously the unique position of queers of color with respect to the LGBTIQ community and communities of color, and it challenges *all* theologies to reflect upon the intersections of race, sexuality, and spirit.”⁵²⁹ In *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* (2015), Black lesbian womanist theologian Pamela Lightsey asserts that “Queer theology is the Church’s piece de resistance of the twenty-first century in that it offers an opportunity to include rather than exclude more voices within our various communities.”⁵³⁰ Amidst rising (public) police brutality against Black persons in the U.S., Lightsey weaves together queer and womanist theologies to affirm the sacred value of Black queer women

⁵²⁶ Cheng, pp. 103 - 104; citing Thomas Bohache, “Pentecost Queered” in Guest et al, *The Queer Bible Commentary* (London: SCM, 2006), p. 568.

⁵²⁷ Cf. Bohache, “Pentecost Queered,” *The Queer Bible Commentary*, p. 568. Cited from Cheng, p. 104.

⁵²⁸ Patrick Cheng, *Rainbow Theology: Bridging Race, Sexuality, and Spirit* (New York: Seabury Books, 2013).

⁵²⁹ Cheng, *Rainbow Theology*, p. xix.

⁵³⁰ Pamela R. Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer theology* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2015), p. 27.

specifically and all creation generally: “Womanist Christian queers understand God as the Divine Creator of all that is, the Cause of All Being.”⁵³¹ Furthermore, “[a]s queers, we declare that God cannot be limited.”⁵³² The womanist ethic of collective survival/wholeness (drawn from Alice Walker’s definition of womanism) informs Lightsey’s inclusive affirmation that womanists are “concerned about Black communities in particular but Creation in general.”⁵³³

Embracing diversity is theologically understood as a necessity in order to reflect as best we can the reality of the Spirit, the postmodern hermeneutic-ontological process. The cultural memory of Jesus the Christ depends upon disruption (Althaus-Reid) and difference (Danz) for its continuation. Every time the Christian message is embodied through the repetition of the norms of scripture and certain interpretations (traditions) is it re-presented and becomes real, that is, meaningful. And meaning here has ethical-ontological implications, which will be further discussed in Part III. Regardless of which level of theological engagement, the narrative (diversity reflects God’s presence) or the structural (the continuation of tradition is constituted by diverse appropriations), the unity and continuity of Christianity depends upon diversity, which happens through the Spirit.

iv. Beyond the Lawful. Overcoming the division between law and lawlessness, the Spirit does not create a situation in which “anything goes.” Cheng, referencing gay theologian Eugene Rogers Rather, asserts that “the Holy Spirit dissolves the artificial boundary between law vs. lawlessness in that it manifests itself in both fidelity and freedom.”⁵³⁴ The Spirit operates according to the rule of faith, which queers the binary of law vs. lawlessness. For this reason,

⁵³¹ Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter*, p. 36.

⁵³² Lightsey, p. 46.

⁵³³ Lightsey, p. 13. Cf. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), definition 2: A womanist is “Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans.: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”

⁵³⁴ Cheng, *Radical Love*, p. 105; citing, Eugene F Rogers, *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), pp. 247 – 248.

the Spirit is rightly described as a gift; it refuses to conform to legal/contractual logic of exchange. As Danz puts it pithily, “The gift of the Christian tradition is not something ready-made that merely has to be absorbed, but as the Christian religion it is itself a complex process of interpretation.”⁵³⁵ The Spirit does not demand its exchange through legalistic requirements; it dissolves this paradigm through its manifestation as “fidelity and freedom” – in other words, through consenting participation in the cultural memory of the Christ. Therefore, the ministry of the Spirit beyond this binary can be described as a ministry of grace. For Tillich, grace “does not destroy essential freedom; but it does what freedom under the conditions of existence cannot do, namely, it reunites the estranged.”⁵³⁶ If law hinders freedom and enacts estrangement, the Spirit overcomes this situation not through antinominalism but through a grace that reunites the estranged through acts of love and justice.

C. Queer Bodies: Intercorporeality & Eschatology

What does it mean to be embodied or for some concept or theological position to be an embodied one? In the last few years, the concept of embodiment has begun to receive a great amount of attention including several books and hundreds of publications. Therefore, an attempt to provide a comprehensive survey of the development and trajectories of theories of embodiment, which transgresses disciplinary boundaries and engages them all, is beyond the scope of this (queer) systematic theology. What this section offers is a brief overview of the development, dialogue, and application of theories of embodiment within theological discourse, furthering Danz’s elaboration by attending to the material effects of this discourse. Ola Sigurdson, professor of religious studies and systematic theology at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden, works to integrate the method and insights of phenomenology into theology in order to approach the question of embodiment. In “How to speak of the body?: Embodiment between phenomenology and theology” Sigurdson uses phenomenology to assist

⁵³⁵ Danz, *Gottes Geist*, p. 206.

⁵³⁶ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. II, p. 79.

theology in articulating a counter narrative to Nietzsche's critique that Christianity is nihilistic.⁵³⁷ Continuing Nietzsche's critique, Sigurdson describes how Christianity's nihilism, in "denying this world for the benefit of another, better world," disregards and devalues "such phenomena as desire, embodiment, and even life itself."⁵³⁸ Christian eschatology has effects on embodied existence.⁵³⁹

i. Ola Sigurdson: Bodies as an Existential Category. Considering Nietzsche's own context, Sigurdson argues that Nietzsche's critique is perhaps not levied against Christianity altogether but specifically against the "Protestant, puritan conceptions of embodiment [that] were close to a modern, secular view of the body as an object, as something that is a mere tool of the soul or consciousness, something more like a machine."⁵⁴⁰ With the Enlightenment's reduction of the real to the empirically verifiable, "the lifeless body [became] the paradigmatic body, and no longer, as [in] much pre-modern philosophy and theology, conceived of ... as a mirror of the larger cosmos with an inherent *telos*."⁵⁴¹ In a cursory overview of Christianity's conceptions of the body throughout history, Sigurdson concludes that this history can be summarized as the "individualization of the body."⁵⁴² Using the philosopher Gail Weiss' description of "intercorporeality," that is, "being embodied is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other human and nonhuman bodies," Sigurdson asserts that early Christianity shared such a notion. "The body of Christ, the social body, was originally understood as a visible and temporal entity," but sometime during the Middle Ages this intercorporeal conception was replaced by a more "institutional" and

⁵³⁷ Ola Sigurdson, "How to speak of the body?: Embodiment between phenomenology and theology," *Studia Theologica* 62 (2008): pp. 25 – 43. For Nietzsche's critique, Sigurdson cites Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ*, trans. R.J. Jollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1968).

⁵³⁸ Ola Sigurdson, "How to speak of the body?," p. 25.

⁵³⁹ Johanne Kristensen engages the thought of Paul Tillich, Jürgen Moltmann, and Wolfhart Pannenberg in her fascinating exploration of eschatology and the role of the body, which I will return later in this chapter. Cf. Johanne Stubbe Teglbjærg Kristensen, *Body and Hope: a Constructive Interpretation of Recent Eschatology by Means of the Phenomenology of the Body* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

⁵⁴⁰ Sigurdson, p. 26.

⁵⁴¹ Sigurdson, p. 27.

⁵⁴² Sigurdson, pp. 27 – 28.

“invisible” concept of the social body.⁵⁴³ And therefore, “[w]hen Christianity loses sight of its social body, embodiment becomes reduced to the body of the individual and, moreover, this individual body gradually became more and more insignificant for the understanding of Christianity that was defined as a ‘faith’, i.e., a mental state rather than, as earlier, something like a practice.”⁵⁴⁴ Furthermore, Sigurdson asserts that the “history of the privatization of faith also meant the individualization of the body, which, together, with the philosophical and cultural paradigm shift, had as an effect the objectification of the body.”⁵⁴⁵ What is described is a gradual process of objectification through which conceptions of the body and their theological importance shifted from theologically-rich material to a conceptually-rich communal concept, though the latter diminished the former.

If, however, one contends that the body is not a static object or surface but rather a phenomenon with a history that both “transcends speech, but [is] not independent of speech,” which will be further explored below, then Sigurdson offers the following strategies for reconceptualization.⁵⁴⁶ Reexamining the doctrine of the incarnation, and the function of doctrine generally today, Sigurdson argues that “What is lacking [...] is the reception of Christology and anthropology in tangible, historical practices.”⁵⁴⁷ Since the Middle Ages Christian theology has failed to take embodiment seriously because it has largely neglected the ways in which its doctrines manifest – are actualized and embodied – in the communities for whom these doctrines are supposedly articulated. Turning to phenomenology, Sigurdson notes that a key concept for phenomenological approaches to the body is Edmund Husserl’s “distinction between the body as a lifeless, physical object (*Körper*) and the body as living and

⁵⁴³ Sigurdson, p. 27. For this claim Sigurdson cites Henri de Lubac, *Corpus mysticum: L’Eucharistie et l’Eglise au Moyen Âge, étude historique* (2d rev. and en l. ed.; Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1949).

⁵⁴⁴ Sigurdson, pp. 27 – 28.

⁵⁴⁵ Sigurdson, p. 28.

⁵⁴⁶ Sigurdson, p. 29.

⁵⁴⁷ Sigurdson, p. 32.

animated (*Leib*).”⁵⁴⁸ The living body cannot be reduced to an object, it is the entire experience of “*being* a body” as opposed to simply *having* one. “What phenomenology offers is the possibility of speaking of the body in a manner that strives beyond both an instrumental attitude and an epistemic pessimism.”⁵⁴⁹ In other words, the body is not merely a vehicle through which we experience the world, neither is it a concept that exists prior to discourse nor a separate object observable from an outside position. Rather, “the body is an existential category” – “the intermediary of the world as the repertoire of our possibilities, from the simplest gestures to the highest expressions of art.”⁵⁵⁰ The body is not an object but a mode of being, the condition through which we experience the world.

Furthermore, Sigurdson clarifies that,

The body is not only or not primarily an entity that can be objectified and focused upon before, beside or independently of the particular manner of being-in-the-world that could be exemplified by a particular version of Christianity (or any other religion). Rather, embodiment is focused upon as a particular mode of relationality towards both other human beings and God – and even towards the rest of creation and towards one’s own self.⁵⁵¹

If being human involves being embodied, meaning at minimum that we experience the world not as brains *in* bodies but *as* bodies, and our bodies are not only the layers of skin I see typing this text on the keyboard, but are relationally constituted – my fingers being fingers in this moment in relation to the plastic keys of the keyboard that are numbing their tips – then theology must not only engage bodies as theological contents but rather, as Sigurdson writes, “an existential category.”

⁵⁴⁸ Sigurdson, p. 34. Here Sigurdson cites Edmund Husserl, *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie. 2, Phänomenologische Untersuchungen zur Konstitution* (Husserliana: Gesammelte Werke, vol. 4; ed. Marty Biemel; Haag: Nijhoff, 1969).

⁵⁴⁹ Sigurdson, p. 34.

⁵⁵⁰ Sigurdson, p. 35. Sigurdson also clarifies here that “the point is not to deny any possibility or necessity to treat the body as an object, but this must be seen as a

⁵⁵¹ Sigurdson, p. 38.

ii. *Johanne Kristensen: Bodies & Eschatology*. In her 2013 book, *Body and Hope: A Constructive Interpretation of Recent Eschatology by Means of the Phenomenology of the Body*, Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Copenhagen, Johanne Kristensen, creatively weaves together the theologies of Paul Tillich, Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg with the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.⁵⁵² The book opens by engaging the seeming contradiction of the title: “The body appears to die, while hope concerns life.”⁵⁵³ Is hope for the body found only in bodily resurrection? What happens in the intervening period, does the soul or consciousness exist apart from the body? While hope can often be conceived of as a way of relating to the future (what one hopes will happen/hopes to achieve), however in Christian discourse the focus shifts from humanity to God through the central event of the resurrection of Jesus the Christ: “As the one who resurrects the dead, God is the God of hope.”⁵⁵⁴ This theological shift has temporal effects: while the future orientation of hope is not abandoned it is differently conceived; the future is “integrated into the present as a decisive aspect of hope” and can be considered “as the condition for the experienced present.”⁵⁵⁵ The resurrection of the Christ provides eschatological (future-oriented) hope for Christians, which is itself the condition within which – and frame through which – our experiences of the present find meaning. Only within the religiously-specific narrative of the future, which both shapes and is shaped by claims of/about the past – is the present theologically conceptualized and onto-hermeneutically constituted.

This conception of hope is consistent with the interpretations of faith presented thus far, specifically with Tillich’s New Being (Discussed in Chapter Two) and Danz’s integration of Assmann’s theory of cultural memory within his pneumatology. Tillich describes the New Being as the “eternal present” and as the telos of existence, both of which convey a queering of

⁵⁵² Johanne Stubbe Teglbjærg Kristensen, *Body and Hope: A Constructive Interpretation of Recent Eschatology by Means of the Phenomenology of the Body* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

⁵⁵³ Kristensen, *Body and Hope*, p. 3.

⁵⁵⁴ Kristensen, p. 5.

⁵⁵⁵ Kristensen, p. 5.

linear time whereby the meaning of the past(s) and future(s) is only realized through the creative action of the Spirit in the present. However, hope for Kristensen and faith for Tillich are not reducible to the present; they remain an ongoing process of interpretation.⁵⁵⁶ This creative act happens in and as the diverse embodied appropriations of the cultural memory of the Christ (Assmann; Danz). Furthermore, this project has sought to explicate the ontological significance of the Spirit; that in the act of appropriation being finds meaning, which is historically and communally constituted. In this sense, Kristensen's framework of hope as the condition for the experienced present can be said to describe the activity of the Triune God. Kristensen's phenomenological grounding for discussions of the body within theology are, therefore, in line with the theory of theological performativity presented in this text. Within the presuppositions of a postmodern theology, no theological/religious contents can be said to preexist the Christian faith: the Christian God arises (is understood religiously) only within Christian religious discourse, and hope is the horizon of meaning that shapes our embodied existence. To weave in Zabala, to know God is to interpret God, which entails participating in a community that forms this knowledge through their embodied way of life/liturgy.

This is why salvation, for Danz, is the continuation of the Christian religion – the continued communication of the Christian message – its prevailing over failures in communication – is salvation.⁵⁵⁷ While this description describes the structural function of salvation, it demands further explication if it is to be narratively meaningful. Part III of this chapter seeks to tend this soil with Wesleyan/Methodist tools to enrich it. Soteriology is intimately interconnected with eschatology, and the body poses a challenge for both. Drawing

⁵⁵⁶ Kristensen, p. 6: "The process of transformation continues without termination and suggests that it would be inappropriate to give the present as the time of hope, just as it would be wrong to call hope faith without reason or to view reason as being in opposition to faith and so forth. The movement of hope means that it is necessary to include all facets of hope in hope." Cf. also Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, pp. 275 – 276 in which Tillich describes the eternal as a process of creativity between past, present, and future.

⁵⁵⁷ Cf. Danz develops this theme through *Gottes Geist*.

from Marcus Mühling and Gerhard Sauter,⁵⁵⁸ Kristensen describes three eschatological types that often overlap:

(1) *Classical Eschatology* (last things): “primarily claims to concern events that take place *after death*, in which an emphasis is put upon the *individual*, its future completion and eternity.”

(2) *Historical Eschatology*: “concerns history coming to a close [...]. Unlike the classical explication, it has a more *collective* and *temporal* perspective since it is directed at a common future before death or when the events of history come to a close.”

(3) *Radical Eschatology*: “concerns *the Coming One* (Christ), understood as the entrance of eternity into time [...]. It is more concerned with the *constitution of the present* than the other types, and also emphasizes the individual.”⁵⁵⁹

For Kristensen, eschatology today is influenced by all three types, and hope can be seen as a category that “contain[s], express[es] or unite[s] several dimensions at once.”⁵⁶⁰ The blending of these types in the category of hope presses the problem that theology often makes of the body: within the first, the death of the body is an inevitable precursor to eschatological hope; within the second, the body participates in the eschatological hope of constructing a better world together, here and now; within the third, the body is reimagined through the presence of the Christ, which has reoriented the present through and as eschatological hope itself in the body as communally/relationally constituted, that is, as intercorporeal. A further explication of Kristensen’s elaboration of these types is beyond the scope of this study. This cursory sketch merely highlights the complex relationship between the body, eschatology, and soteriology that Kristensen brings to light. A further engagement of Kristensen’s work would provide fruitful possibilities for affirming LGBTQIA+ bodies and all bodies within the cultural memory of

⁵⁵⁸ Cf. Markus Mühling, *Grundinformation Eschatologie: Systematische Theologie aus der Perspektive der Hoffnung* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007); Gerhard Sauter, *Einführung in die Eschatologie* (Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchges., 1995); cited in Kristensen, *Body and Hope*, pp. 11 – 12.

⁵⁵⁹ Kristensen, pp. 11 – 12. Emphasis added.

⁵⁶⁰ Kristensen, p. 12.

Jesus the Christ. I look forward to engaging Sigurdson and Kristensen thoroughly in future projects.

iii. Trans Bodies/Theologies. Joy Ladin, the first openly transgender professor at an Orthodox Jewish institution, describes the intimate relationship between her childhood experience of being and her understanding of God: “Being trans gave me a sense of kinship with God. I had a body that concealed who I was; God had no body at all. Both of us were stranded in the wilderness beyond human categories, invisible and incomprehensible to human beings who mistook bodies for selves.”⁵⁶¹ Ladin begins with powerful parallels between the story of the prophet Jonah, which is read each year during Yom Kippur, and the experiences of trans persons. Like Jonah, religious trans persons often experience being called by God to be someone they know themselves to be but which they have been taught to fear, then running away, and when the storm/difficulties become so overwhelming, asking to be cast into the sea/committing self-harm to appease others (Jonah 1:12). And so, Jonah is thrown over and sinks, and as many children’s books illustrate, is swallowed by a large fish.

Like Jonah, I knew I couldn’t live as who I was without being stared at, treated as an embarrassment or public menace, and risking violence and ridicule; and like Jonah, I couldn’t imagine what good could come of living a truth that would mark me, publicly and permanently, as other.⁵⁶²

The purpose of this reading, for Ladin, is not to queer or “trans” the text, but rather to surface through transgender experiences the fundamental crisis we all face: “either we live what makes us different or we cannot live at all.”⁵⁶³ This practice of engaging religious texts seeks to enrich the tradition itself by naming and recognizing the fullness that these texts possess when the diversity of their embodiments is recognized.

⁵⁶¹ Joy Ladin, “In the Image of God, God Created Them: Toward Trans Theology,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 34, no. 1 (2018): 53–58.

⁵⁶² Joy Ladin, “In the Image of God, God Created Them,” p. 55.

⁵⁶³ Joy Ladin, p. 56.

This approach is part of their articulation of trans theology, that is, “the use of transgender perspectives to develop ‘a new understanding of God’” which “is based on the sense that the difficulties transgender people face in being visible and intelligible in a world based on binary gender offer useful analogies for understanding God’s difficulties in being visible and intelligible in a world based on human categories that God does not, and cannot, fit.”⁵⁶⁴ Transgender experiences reveal something about God. As Chapter Two sought to develop through the videos and writing of ALOK, trans, nonbinary and intersex persons reveal the constructed nature of the systems of (heteronormative) identity-formation. God both represents this self-reflexive system and is a content thereof. The God fashioned by heteronormative Christianity has “grounded” gender essentialism, but the participation of trans, nonbinary, and intersex bodies in these communal meaning-making systems not only challenges – and therefore liberates – concepts of God from heteronormative theologies’ closets, they also demonstrate the structural contingency of (God) the system of cultural identity formation. The disruption of LGBTQIA+ bodies is salvific insofar as it reveals the hope and presence of God that are already present in the intercorporeal constitution of our bodies (Kristensen).

Kai Daniel Moore, a Visiting Scholar at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkley and an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church (USA), rereads Martin Luther’s theology of the cross through an epistemology of early transition. Beginning with conceptions of the body, Moore summarizes that they regard the material body as

essentially polyvalent and transitional, always in process and pointing beyond itself to an identity that emerges in relationship, gesturing forward and backward in time, which can only be encountered fully through an attitude of faithful trust.⁵⁶⁵

⁵⁶⁴ Joy Ladin, p. 56.

⁵⁶⁵ Kai Daniel Moore, “Bodies Now and Otherwise: Theology of the Cross and Trans Experience,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 48:3 (July, 2021): 8 – 12.

Moore draws upon Luther's *theologia crucis* from the Heidelberg Disputation, which insists that God is best known through the cross, to pause and bear witness to the suffering flesh. There is an embrace of the tension of apparent opposites, which both challenges and furthers Luther's own writings. Moore asserts that "trying to make something signify directly and unambiguously is to do violence to it and to miss the way God works in the world, according to Luther, always operates in this tension of apparent opposites." God is both revealed and hidden in the cross.

Drawing a parallel between seeming opposite of the cross and the experience of embodiment for transgender persons, Moore critiques that trans experiences have "been reductively understood as one of 'being in the wrong body,' positing a male brain in a female body or vice versa, which must be 'fixed' by surgical interventions to create a normatively sexed body in the target gender."⁵⁶⁶ Moore calls attention to the fact that the very ways in which trans persons articulate their experiences have been shaped by a heteronormative conceptualization of the body, and so this description should rather be seen "as a concession to essentialized notions of gender as a static, given fact of bodies and to medical standards which have made accessing surgical or hormonal interventions contingent on articulating a life story that conformed to doctors' limited expectations."⁵⁶⁷ Rather than external assessments and procedures to determine the heteronormative "truth" of the body (are you male or female?), Moore calls for an embrace of the multidimensionality of the body. In such a model, transitioning "becomes a process of learning to feel and see one's own embodied self differently, trying out new clothes, hairstyles, hormones, and seeing what it feels like to be seen in different ways."⁵⁶⁸ Thus the experience of euphoria and dysphoria that trans persons often experience while transitioning demonstrates the paradox that on the one hand identity cannot be reduced to the body and, on the other, that the body itself matters in identity formation.⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁶⁶ Moore, "Bodies Now and Otherwise," p. 9.

⁵⁶⁷ Moore, p. 9.

⁵⁶⁸ Moore, p. 10.

⁵⁶⁹ Moore, p. 11.

For this reason, and building once again upon Luther's embrace of apparent opposites, Moore concludes with the proposition that

Learning to see our own embodied selves and the selves of others both in and beyond the specific shapes of our bodies, trusting our own felt sense and, in faith, accepting and looking toward the revealed selves of others, both visible and not-yet-visible, may be its own kind of spiritual discipline.⁵⁷⁰

By challenging static notions of God and humanity, trans persons and theologies invite all Christians into the ongoing creativity of God that happens through the work of the Spirit – that is, through communal practices of identity formation through the reception and embodiment of certain memories as fundamental to a community's identity. For Christians, this means receiving and appropriating the Good News of Jesus the Christ, which is re-presented in and through our diverse bodies. And not only that, trans theologies teach us new ways of conceptualizing our own bodies as socially constituted, as *intercorporeal*, and regarding this process as theological.

If humanity is created in the image of God, and God is revealed in the (Queer) New Being as the overcoming of heteronormative gender essentialism that estranges us from God, one another, and ourselves – and if God is not a static essence but is, rather, the dynamic communal process of “cultural memory” through which our identities emerge (find meaning), that is, if God is indeed to be worshipped in Spirit – then trans theologies are necessary to teach us to how to embrace the pneumatological processes by which our bodies are constituted. It is not only trans bodies, but all bodies, that are more than meet the eye. We are all more than we seem, and the Spirit is our helper and guide in this process of continual becoming, which does not rest upon static heteronormative foundations (since such foundations are themselves historically contingent). Trans theologies, then, are necessary for the group project of counterhegemony. While the objectivized body poses an eschatological problem, as

⁵⁷⁰ Moore, p. 12.

intersubjective and intercorporeal, Kristensen asserts that the body “offers a unique access to a different understanding and conceptualization of the inner eschatological dilemmas of hope.”⁵⁷¹ Therefore, it is fitting to close with Kristensen’s conclusion that the body – “being not only mine or yours, but ours and God’s – thus turns out to carry the basic eschatological continuity we initially sought.”⁵⁷² Our bodies are constituted through the communal process of theological performativity, which depends upon difference for the realization of the Spirit.

III. Toward Collective Salvation

As Part II established, it is both a practice of classical theological texts and of recent works of queer theology to discuss the Spirit and the church together. What this brief overview sought to demonstrate is that the Spirit and the church are also interdependent because, within the theory of theological performativity, they are mutually constitutive. That is to say, the Spirit depends upon media and the active reception and embodiment of the memory of Christ – which can only happen in settings where the memory of Christ is a cultural memory, part of the connective structure of a community. The church, as the setting where a community is shaped in order to receive the Spirit as such, is therefore necessary for the Spirit. Knowing always involves and depends upon interpretation. The church is constituted by the Spirit, which is constituted in and as the church. This is the reflexive structure of faith that Danz elucidates. Neither is derived from the other – both arise together in liturgical/religious practices of the Christian faith. So, too, Part II demonstrated how the body itself is constituted intercorporeally, and how trans theologies guide us toward this recognition. When we embrace the mystery of being beyond essentialism, we experience hope here and now in the self-reflexive act of faith – in the consenting participation in a community that is defined by Jesus the Christ and which

⁵⁷¹ Kristensen, *Body and Hope*, p. 267.

⁵⁷² Kristensen, p. 269.

embodies his memory. Now, (at least) one question remains: How does this reconceptualization of the church, the Spirit, and the body as communally constituted affect soteriology?

In another book I have developed at great length the relationship between ecclesiology and salvation by drawing upon the work of Bryan Stone.⁵⁷³ I will only briefly reiterate these points as they relate to the present project of a (queer) systematic theology. As stated in Chapter Two, salvation for Wesleyan/Methodist theology is an ongoing process, which is not synonymous with justification or the experience of assurance. This is what we describe as the process of sanctification, which can be considered synonymous with the early Eastern doctrine of deification. Furthermore, I drew upon Althaus-Reid to assert that becoming like God must entail disruption of heteronormativity and an embrace of the queer. Now, I will briefly reflect on Stone's ecclesiology as a communal vision for this process of sanctification and its interdependence with the church. Stone describes the connection between ecclesiology and soteriology in the following way:

Salvation is impossible apart from the church, not because the church has received salvation as a possession and is now in a position to dispense it to or withhold it from others. It is instead because salvation is, in the first place, a distinct form of social existence. To be saved is to be made part of a new people and a new politics, the body of Christ.⁵⁷⁴

Salvation is participation in a distinct community, which develops and maintains a unique way of life that forms the community into a new people, a body called the church. In postmodern fashion, salvation is not an essential concept that preexists or transcendently supports the truth claims of Christianity; salvation is, in accordance with Wesleyan/Methodist and the Cappadocians, a way of life. To be saved is to become like God. But what does that mean for a postmodern theology and a theory of theological performativity?

⁵⁷³ Cf. Warren, *Where Two or Three are Connected*, specifically Chapter One "Being the Church."

⁵⁷⁴ Bryan Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), ProQuest Ebook Central, p. 142. Page numbers match the eBook.

Stone's theory is compatible with the weak ontology of White and the cultural memory model of Assmann insofar as they all understand identity to be socially constituted; it is the cultivation of a distinct way of life. Assmann highlights the element of memory, drawing attention to the processes by which communities determine what is remembered and how as constitutive for collective identity. Incorporating Sigurdson, embodiment is a "mode of relationality," and our bodies, too, are constituted by practices of cultural memory. Moore and Ladin's trans theologies demonstrated this reality as constitutive of all humanity and as deeply meaningful for reflection on God as well. Folding in Kristensen, it becomes clearer that by recognizing our bodies as relational/intercorporeal, we experience eschatological hope – that is, something which transcends the object-subject, something we both long for *and* already experience.

I believe that fundamentally we each long to be known in the multiplicity of who we are/are continually becoming. This desire is terrifying, and can and often does lead to violence, as ALOK describes through the concept of "gender grief." Because of the imposition of the heteronormative gender binary as the objective universal essence that we must all express/replicate, humanity in heteronormative cultures is in a state of estrangement. Our bodies are binary sexed objects that are defined for us at birth and which will one day die. We are our bodies. We are estranged from ourselves – from our bodies –, from one another, and for Christians, we are estranged from God. We are estranged from God because we do not know God beyond the closet of heteronormative theology. We are estranged from God because God became a body and yet we are estranged from our own bodies. We are estranged from God because God is present through the Spirit, which is realized through embodied appropriation, which requires us to be embodied together. We are not embodied because our bodies are socially constituted – we are bodies together – but so many bodies, specifically Black, Brown, Latinx, immigrant, Indigenous, Asian, disabled, queer, Trans, intersex, nonbinary bodies have

been excluded. We need each other to be bodies. That is what it means to be intercorporeal beings.

We must be willing to embrace the paradox of the Cross, *not* as a sign of redemptive violence – this theology is a theology of abundant life – but as a symbolic representation of the multiplicity of our being interpreted. We must recognize our mutual interdependence, and that only through our collective cultivation of the memory of Christ, our bodies and his are constituted by the Spirit. Together, we can find meaning in interpretive communities. Together we experience God.

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