CHRISTIANITY IN RELATIONSHIP:
THE LURE OF SUPERIORITY IN A WORLD OF MULTIPLICITY

By

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Dedicated to

my parents and my sister
who have supported me the entire way

and

my undergraduate friends and professors
who are collectively the reason that I'm still here,
especially the S.O.R. Women's Roundtable and
Dr. Susan Rogers and Barb J. Searcy,
mentors who passed too soon
but now have "the courage of stars"

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Rachel A. Heath

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Preface

On March 15, 2019, I was preparing for my doctoral exams. That particular morning I was reviewing three Christian theologians: Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Bartolomé de Las Casas. All three share an expressed distaste for traditions outside Christianity – but this is not unique in the history of Christian theologies.

Sometime around mid-morning, reports of the Christchurch mosque massacre were circulating across the globe. Though the shooter was more a white nationalist than a religious fanatic, he did refer to Christianity in his manifesto to justify his violence; and this mention of Christianity prompted immediate responses across social networks. So I sat at my kitchen table, with Luther's, Calvin's, and Las Casas' writings open in front of me, watching my social networking feeds. Christian friends were denouncing the shooter's actions, Muslim friends were sad and not surprised. Many, both religious and not, were calling for interfaith peace and understanding.

Yet on that day, as I was reading the words of Luther, Calvin, and Las Casas – all Europeans from the era of colonial expansion—alongside the social media posts of contemporary theologians, peers, public leader, and friends who rejected the violence at Christchurch as somehow unconnected to real, or pure, Christianity—a poignant theological dissonance surfaced for me.[1] All three historical figures include some kind of contempt toward other traditions in the architecture of their theological visions; this contempt was typically directed at Jews, or Jewish traditions, but Islam also makes appearances in their writings. Las Casas is more of a peripheral figure in Christian theologies, but Luther and Calvin, at least for Protestant Christianities, are not. Their theological writings have influenced generations of Christians. In view of this reality, it seems strange, and perhaps deeply incongruent, for me to agree with the perspective that the violence at Christchurch could be somehow separated from the tremendously influential theological legacies—or affective residue, or resonance—of those like Luther and Calvin, for which there is little to no legitimate room for traditions and practices beyond Christianity.

This dissertation exploration is, in part, a response to the dissonance that emerged for me on that day: what if what the world witnessed on March 15, 2019, is inextricably entangled, or part of, Christian traditions and theologies? How are ideologies of power (such as white nationalism and/or violence against religious others) *profoundly compatible* with Christianity – or might even be a logical end of Christian theological conceptions and imaginings? What if there is no pure or abstract Christianity that can be separated from the kind that inspires violence against those peacefully gathering to offer their weekly jumu'ah prayers?

[1] For a grouping of public Christian responses, see: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/march/new-zealand-mosque-shooting-christchurch-christians-muslims.html>.

Introduction:
Christianity and Its Others[2]

I realized how the presumption of our own criticality can be a way of protecting ourselves from complicity.[3]
Sara Ahmed

In our own time a new challenge to the structure of Christian belief has come from our awareness, not merely of the existence of the other great world faiths – there is nothing new about that – but of their spiritual and moral power. The challenge is to the traditional assumption of the unique superiority of the Christian gospel, or faith, or religion…this will certainly mean a considerable restructuring of Christian theology.[4]
John Hick

Christianity as America's "Common Ground"

In the fourth quarter of the 2021 Superbowl, a commercial sponsored by Jeep called "The Middle" aired. It begins with a voiceover from musician Bruce Springsteen: "There's a chapel in Kansas. Standing on the exact center of the lower-48. It never closes. All are welcome, to come meet here: in the middle."[5] The phrase "come meet here" is juxtaposed with the visual of a wall, inside a chapel building, where a wooden cut-out of the geographical United States hangs conspicuously

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[2] I considered various ways to refer to religious others in this dissertation. I have chosen "religious others" to underscore the "othering" that happens between Christianity and other traditions; this is also a gesture toward Rosemary Radford Ruether's thesis that Christian self-affirmation (the formation of Christian identity and theological architecture) relied on defining itself against the "other" of Jews and Jewish traditions. Overall, this choice is to draw attention to the "othering" that occurs repeatedly in the construction of Christian theologies. John J. Thatanamil uses the phrase "Christianity and its others" in (*Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity,* 2020); as does David R. Brockman in *No longer the Same: Religious Others and the Liberation of Christian Theology* (2011). I have also been influenced by various conversations with peers at Vanderbilt, namely Zachary T. Settle, Kelly Stewart, and Debbie Brubaker, in connection to Ellen T. Armour's chapter "Man and His Others" in *Signs and Wonders: Theology After Modernity* (2016). Toni Morrison's *The Origin of Others* (2017) and Lauren Berlant's *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (2022) were instructive as well.

[3] Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 5.

[4] John Hick, "The Theological Challenge of Religious Pluralism," in *Christianity and Other Religions: Selected Readings*, ed. by John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, (Oxford, UK: Oneworld Press, 2001), 156. Emphasis mine.

[5] The permanent sponsored link for this commercial is not included here because Jeep took it down in the week after the 2021 Superbowl took place. This action was not related to criticism of the ad's centering of Christianity, but was a response to the report that Springsteen had been arrested for a DWI at a National Park in November 2020, an unfortunate revelation given that "the ad [features] Springsteen driving in Kansas, Colorado, and Nebraska" (https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/jeep-bruce-springsteen-super-bowl-ad-dwi-1126740/). As recorded by *Rolling Stone*, a Jeep spokesperson commented, even with the disappointing event of Springsteen's arrest, that the commercial's "message of community and unity is as relevant as ever." A non-sponsored link to the commercial can be found here (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gPOPLrUfyw).

behind the pulpit. Candles adorn the corner to the left. The pattern of a United States flag is emblazoned across the cut-out, with a white cross superimposed across the center. The voiceover resumes: "We need the middle. We just have to remember the very soil we stand on is common ground." As the voiceover continues, Springsteen himself is shown visiting the chapel to light a candle. A few scenes later, the visual is the chapel at sunset, crowned by a steeple and a cross, with Springsteen's silhouette.

The commercial is awash with emotion: it is meant to make us feel that we need each other, that we need unity, not division. Differences that divide Americans can be resolved in the middle, as long as we can get there together. The narrative arc tugs at the heart-strings and hearkens to a nostalgic, unified American past, present, and future. What is left unarticulated, however, is that Christian imagery and symbols permeate this vision of political unity, even though the term "Christian" is not used.

Religious Diversity, Christian Normativity

Whether or not there's an actual Christian chapel in the geographical center of the United States that inspired Jeep's commercial seems beside the point. The question I will ask, instead, is what it means that a Christian space is imagined to be the "common ground," or "the middle," where all are welcome to meet together for purposes of unity and belonging. Bruce Springsteen does not visit a gurdwara, synagogue, or mosque in the commercial—he lights a candle in a Christian space. This imaginative projection, thus, should prompt questions related to the "ordinariness" of Christian normativity in the context of a religiously plural political context like the United States.[6] What *collective feelings* are being evoked or inculcated by imagining a Christian space as the center?

[6] Sara Ahmed's assertion that the "ordinary is fantastic" appears in several of her works. See "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 117–139; and "Collective Feelings; or, The Impressions Left by Others," in *Theory, Culture, and Society* 21, no. 2 (2004): 25-42.

How are Christians supposed to *feel* about the message of the commercial? And how should those from traditions beyond Christianity feel?

Christianity is currently in decline in the United States, as it has been for decades. Fewer adults are identifying explicitly with Christianity as their chosen religious tradition, and fewer adults are attending Christian communities from week to week. Though 65% of Americans still identify -- at least when asked in a survey – with some version of Christian community or practice, what seems significant, for our current historical context, is that as recently as 2007, the percentage of Americans that identified with Christianity was 77%. In 1976, this figure was 81%.[7] These numbers seem to indicate not just a decline, but a rapid decline in the last decade, and one which hypothetically launches US-based religious understandings and practices into new territory.[8] If critical mass of a certain population is what we use to measure power and significance, then Christianity is indeed losing its place of prominence in the hearts and minds of those coming from American communities. The grip is loosening, in a way.

The narrative of Christianity's decline, however, is grounded in the sense that Christianity is, was, or should be the majority tradition in the United States. Despite the decline, 65% is still a majority; and this percentage may not even accurately depict the number of people, such as the "religious nones," that were anchored partially in Christian stories, practices, and traditions during their formative childhood and adolescent years, yet have now shifted their beliefs and practices.[9]

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[7] This study from PRRI focuses on "America's Changing Religious Identity," 2017: https://www.prri.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/.
[8] Statistics and interpretation are from the Pew Forum, "In US, Decline of Christianity Continues at a Rapid Pace," 2019 (https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/).
[9] For research on America's religious "nones" from the Pew Research Center, see: "Nones" on the Rise, 2012 (https://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/); Why America's "Nones" Don't Identify With a Religion, 2018 (https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/08/why-americas-nones-dont-identify-with-a-religion/); Is Religion's Declining Influence Good or Bad? Those Without Religious Affiliation are Divided, 2014 (https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/09/23/is-religions-declining-influence-good-or-bad-those-without-religious-affiliation-are-divided/). Khyati Y. Joshi discusses "'nones' of Christian origin" in *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America* (New York: NYU Press, 2020), 25.

Whether or not these "nones" still identify with Christianity as teenagers and adults, it is significant (culturally, and perhaps theologically) that their involvement in a religious tradition, even in the past, may have centered at one time on Christianity.[10]

Yet even if numbers were the entire story, then we must ask why—*though Christianity is still the majority tradition in the United States at 65%*, even in the midst of its decline—a significant number of Christians expressed during the 2016 election cycle that they feel threatened, persecuted, or discriminated against.[11] Why would a majority religious group express that they face discrimination? Is the threat real or imagined? Who or what is the source of the threat? And if there is a threat, what is the appropriate theological or theo-ethical response?

Superiority as the "Soft Religious Vibe" of American Christianity

As recently as 2016, then-presidential candidate Donald Trump announced in his speech at Dordt University, a small, Christian college in the reformed tradition, that if elected, "Christianity will have power," with the underlying implication being that Christianity will have the power to which it is entitled.[12] As journalist Elizabeth Dias reports for the *New York Times*, recounting Trump's speech:

> Christians make up the overwhelming majority of the country, he said. And then he slowed slightly to stress each next word: "And yet we don't exert the power that we should have." If

[10] We could argue something similar about language acquisition: we work with what we know in order to learn something new, just as a native speaker of English will learn Spanish by its relation to (similarity, difference, etc.) to English terminology and grammar. In other words, it is difficult to measure the difference between an explicit religious identity and an implicit imaginative landscape that was formed with Christian language, stories, and images. Explicit membership and identity mean something—but they do not and cannot mean everything. What this means in a Christian majority country is that minority traditions may be understood through the filter of Christian terminology and theological visions; Christians might understand what Passover is in its relation to Easter, the Bhagavad Gita is compared to the Bible, and so on. In *Monopoly on Salvation?,* Jeannine Hill Fletcher discusses cultural-linguistic theories of religion (language, cultural patterns, etc.) to emphasize particularist approaches to religious diversity (69-76).

[11] This PRRI study focused on how cultural issues, such as immigration, were affecting the 2016 election. The PRRI study can be found here: https://www.prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/PRRI-Brookings-2016-Immigration-survey-report.pdf. The article interpreting this data, which lead me to the study itself, is from Emma Green, "Most American Christians Believe They're Victims of Discrimination," *The Atlantic*, June 30, 2016. This will be discussed in connection to John Corrigan's research in a subsequent section of this Introduction.

[12] Elisabeth Dias, "Christianity Will Have Power," The New York Times, August 9, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/09/us/evangelicals-trump-christianity.html.

> he were elected president, he promised, that would change. He raised a finger. "Christianity will have power," he said. "If I'm there, you're going to have plenty of power, you don't need anybody else. You're going to have somebody representing you very, very well. Remember that."[13]

Again, soon-to-be President Trump was speaking at a Christian college, in a Christian-saturated town, presumably to an audience of those who identify as Christians. And a political candidate hoping to be elected to the highest office possible delivered a speech enticing Christians to cast their vote so that Christianity will "exert the power we should have." Christianity is large, it contains many multitudes, so the Christian community in Sioux City, Iowa, does not represent all Christian orientations toward power, or all Christian manifestations of superiority—but the composition of Christians in the Dordt audience cannot be easily dismissed as anomalous or an aberration in the larger Christian affective economy: they are part of the whole.[14]

Trump's presumed brand of superiority is immediately obvious, leveraging a nostalgic Christian-American past and explicitly promising a return to wielding a kind of hegemonic power and religious supremacy to which, he asserted, Christianity is entitled. Tracing the lineage of this desire for religious superiority is complex, especially when this desire is entangled with political contexts that herald seemingly contradictory democratic and pluralistic visions for society. Returning to Trump's rhetoric, however, the idea that Christians should have dominant, even hegemonic power is correlated with a loss—perhaps ambiguous—of an imagined America in which pluralism is an encroachment of Christian territory rather than a mark of pluralistic success.[15] As scholar and historian of American religion John Corrigan suggests:

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[13] Elisabeth Dias, "Christianity Will Have Power," The New York Times, August 9, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/09/us/evangelicals-trump-christianity.html.

[14] The assumption of superiority that emerges in speeches like Donald Trump's might be easier to identify than more subtle, neoliberal manifestations.

[15] "Ambiguous loss" is a reference to Pauline Boss' work on grief, trauma, and loss. In my estimation, if Christians in America are concerned about general decline in critical mass, then this term could be a generous way to refer to this gradual loss, especially in its unresolved nature. Pauline Boss, *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

> The history of religious intolerance in America has proven less fascinating to Americans. Except for the protests of those who have suffered it, or the occasional critical observer, fewer have recognized it. It has not been the topic of speeches or the stuff of textbooks. Americans have labored, instead, to forget the national history of religious intolerance. It interferes with faith in a past characterized by religious harmony. It is a painful and messy history which, if taken seriously, opens a Pandora's box of trauma.[16]

Corrigan goes on to suggest the 2016 election of Donald J. Trump as president of the United States "brought the issue of religious intolerance into the foreground of national discussion," in part by converging with the decade-long rising tide of Christians' complaints that they were in fact the most persecuted group in America."[17]

In line with Corrigan's assertion, a study from the Public Religion Research Institute on Immigration, Change, and the 2016 Election indicates that many Christians—even as the majority tradition in the United States—feel that they are victims of various kinds of religious discrimination.[18] In relation to other traditions, one of the questions in the PRRI study asks respondents whether Islam is "at odds with American values and way of life." This question already seems to imply that Islam is, to some extent, exterior to American values, American traditions, and even American religion, so the language used to pose a question like this must be critically evaluated. Still, as journalist Emma Green articulates in her Atlantic article that interprets the PRRI data:

> …Especially to those who believed that America was once a Christian nation, the question [of American values] may have seemed to refer to Christianity—the soft religious vibe that has often been in the background of American politics and popular culture. For many of the people who believe Islam is "un-American," it seems likely that they see those beliefs and practices in tension with Christianity—and perhaps a threat to it, as well.

Listening to and measuring whether America had, does, or should have a Christian heartbeat is beyond the boundaries of this project. But what I will focus on is the ways in which Christian

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[16] John Corrigan, *Religious Intolerance, America, and the World: A History of Forgetting and Remembering.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020: 1.
[17] John Corrigan, *Religious Intolerance, America, and the World*, 1.
[18] As stated in an earlier footnote: the PRRI study can be found here at https://www.prri.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/PRRI-Brookings-2016-Immigration-survey-report.pdf. The article interpreting this data, which lead me to the study itself, is Emma Green, "Most American Christians Believe They're Victims of Discrimination," *The Atlantic*, June 30, 2016.

theological imaginings[19] emerging from American contexts may function, at least in part, with an entitled sense of superiority and dominance, even if this superiority feels more "soft" than hard. And beyond assumptions of Christian superiority and normativity, religious diversity and pluralism as sociological facts and theological realities, disrupt and recapitulate a sense that Christianity is or *should be* the "soft religious vibe"[20] at work in the background of American society and culture. A critical issue for Christian theological imaginings, then, from my perspective, is that religious diversity presents a theological problem that must be accounted for in some way, shape, or form.

The implication is that wherever Christianity is placed or located, the deeply rooted assumption of superiority is a theologically pressing and significant matter that operates according to certain Christian logics and embodied practices that reinforce each other, particularly in religiously plural contexts. Superiority, in this sense, is affectual: it is a "vibe."[21] Identifying this "vibe," and how it might resonate Christian theological imaginings, is part of the overarching quandary presented in the following chapters. As will be continually stated throughout this project, an overarching theme and contention is that interaction with difference—such as in interfaith and multifaith contexts—illuminates Christian emergences of superiority, as compellingly argued by scholars such as Khyati Y. Joshi, whose work will be discussed in the first chapter.

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[19] I primarily use the term "imaginings" (rather than imagination) because I think it indicates the ongoing, continual process of theologizing. Willie James Jennings and Emilie M. Townes, as well as Rosemary Radford Ruether and Sara Ahmed, each refer to the imagination in their theoretical discussions. See Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and Cultural Production of Evil*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006; and Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010. Ahmed and Ruether are discussed in chapters 2 and 3 of this project.

[20] Green, "Most American Christians," *The Atlantic*.

[21] Green, "Most American Christians," *The Atlantic*. In their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth write: "It is no wonder too that when theories have dared to provide even a tentative account of affect, they have sometimes been viewed as naïvely or romantically wandering too far out into the groundlessness of a world's or a body's myriad inter-implications, letting themselves get lost in an over- abundance of swarming, sliding differences: chasing tiny firefly intensities that flicker faintly in the night, *registering those resonances that vibrate*, subtle to seismic, under the flat wash of broad daylight, dramatizing (indeed, for the unconvinced, over-dramatizing) what so often passes beneath mention" (4, emphasis mine). Gregg and Seigworth, "Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

Christianity in Relationship

In discussing whether dialogue or mission is called for in the context of religious pluralism, Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann states:

> Without the religious and cultural dialogue between religious communities, no one will be able to understand anything—no Christian, no Jew, no Muslim, and no Hindu or Buddhist…*It is only from the other that we become aware of what we ourselves are, and sure of our identity*.[22]

Moltmann's emphasis, through the rest of his discussion, is on stabilizing Christian identity and purpose in a world of religious difference, wherein a Christian is caught between acknowledging the beauty (and perhaps truth) of other religious traditions, yet is still firmly attached to Jesus Christ as the revelation of God's spirit for a life-affirming and life-generating future that includes all.[23] For Moltmann, this is a positive future in which there are "Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, each with their own dignity."[24] What it means to name religious others as "Christians" without their consent, as Moltmann casually does in his contribution to *Christianity and Other Religions*, should be—from my perspective—a theologically pressing issue.[25]

Sara Ahmed, feminist and affect theorist, makes a similar point as Moltmann does about the entanglement of others with self or group knowledge, asserting that others (imagined, in the phenomenological sense that otherness can never be fully known, accessible, or communicable) are affectively created in the movements between and among the individual, social, and collective. She argues, specifically, that "it is through the movement of emotions that the very distinction between

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[22] Jürgen Moltmann, "Dialogue or Mission? Christianity and the Religions in an Endangered World," in *Christianity and Other Religions: Selected Readings*, Ed. by John Hick and Brian Hebblethwaite, Revised Edition, Oxford, UK: Oneworld Publishing, 173-174.
[23] I use the term "attach" intentionally. Ahmed discusses the affectual emergences of attachments, impressions, and investments in the accumulations of affect (history, tradition) that circulate in affective economies.
[24] Jürgen Moltmann, "Dialogue or Mission?", 187.
[25] This issue will be discussed throughout my project, but most pointedly in chapter 5.

inside and outside, or the individual and social, is effected in the first place."[26] In other words, Ahmed's position is that there is an affective dimension to the advent of "others," such that "affective responses are readings that not only create the borders between selves and others, but also 'give' others meaning and value in the very moment of apparent separation, a giving which temporarily fixes an other, through the movement engendered by the emotional response itself."[27] For Ahmed, then, the manifestation of different religious traditions—and relationships of difference among religious entities does not necessarily have a substantial or positive value.[28] It is affective, processual, and accumulative, wherein otherness is created or effected in the moment of encounter. We do not encounter others, per se; rather, the surfaces, boundaries, and borders of otherness—and the histories of these repeated encounters—engenders materializations of (religious) others and materializations of patterns of encounter.[29]

A question with significant implications, then, is whether Christian theological superiority is a byproduct of interaction(s) or encounters between Christianity and other religious others, or whether superiority is a criterion endemic to Christian theological imaginings—such that Christian theological frameworks have had, from the beginning, a pattern of postulating others in order to reify Christian conceptions. If the latter, the implication is that Christianity will always-already attempt to position itself as theologically superior to others, and that this superiority is supported by key elements that are crucial to the very construction of Christian theologies. If superiority is endemic to Christian theological construction, then naming or creating others would be necessary for a Christian logic of superiority to work: just as queer theory argues that heterosexuals need

[26] Ahmed, "Collective Feelings," 28.
[27] Ahmed, "Collective Feelings," 30.
[28] Ahmed's account is phenomenological, not ontological (or *a priori*).
[29] Ahmed, "Collective Feelings." footnote 5, pg. 39.

homosexuals, and critical race theory underscores how whiteness needs blackness.[30] Accordingly, if superior needs inferior by definition, then conceivably Christian superiority requires the creation and presence of religious others in order to define its boundaries and *feel* its way into political and theological dominance.

What is Christianity?

To take Christianity into account, as well as hold Christian traditions and the trajectory of Christian theologies accountable in some way, it is necessary to briefly articulate what I mean by "Christianity," for the purposes of this project as a whole. This question—what is Christianity?— is briefly addressed in the first chapter, but further explication is necessary as I move toward describing Christianity as an affective economy in the second chapter. In our current global context, Christianity is pervasive and ubiquitous. This prevalence is largely related both to the era of European colonial expansion[31] and to the Christian theological focus on conversion.[32] The United States alone has hundreds of denominations and thousands of Christian churches scattered across its political and geographical landscape. Roman Catholic, mainline, evangelical, nondenominational, emergent—these are all ways to describe entities, or in Whiteheadian terms, actual occasions—that self-identify or affiliate in some way with the Christian traditions and theological imaginations that

[30] I have in mind the work of James Baldwin (https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1962/11/17/letter-from-a-region-in-my-mind); Toni Morrison, *The Origin of Others*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017; and from queer theory, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990.
[31] David Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014; Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism,* New York: Seabury Press, 1974; also, see Kwok Pui-Lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology,* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005.
[32] There are various theological perspectives on conversion, each with their different emphasis. Some Christian denominations and traditions focus on missionary efforts encouraged by the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20), while other traditions may emphasize early baptism strategies, which perhaps more readily underscore enculturation. There are, of course, traditions within Christianity that do not emphasize conversion; but the centrality of soteriology (related to, or apart from, conversion) to Christian theological imaginings remains relatively consistent across denominations, sects, traditions, and practices.

can be traced both to the figure, historical and political, of Jesus of Nazareth, and to the communities that emerged from Jesus's appearance and presence.[33]

Christian theologies and Christianities, for the purposes of this project, are those that in some way focus on or continue to center the figure of Jesus Christ as essential, significant, salvific, and/or universally relevant. This does not mean that all theologies agree on the theological definitions or interpretations of essential, significant, salvific, or universally relevant; these categories, though, will be a way of the describing the boundaries of an entity that lay practitioners, and perhaps even some theologians, may take to be obvious and perfunctory. But the basic understanding with which I will operate throughout is that there is no cohesive understanding of Christianity (what it includes, what it excludes) without the stories, theologies, and imaginative landscapes that speak to who the person of Jesus Christ was, is, and will be, even if there is no ultimate or binding agreement among those construct theological artifices with these claims. An assumption of this project is that there is no Christianity without Jesus Christ.

Identifying Christianity as the tradition that focuses on the figure of Jesus Christ, however, does not mean that the question of who Jesus is or what Jesus means to Christian traditions is any less complex. Neither does it clarify the theological meanings derived from focusing on the person of Jesus or interpreting the meaning of the honorific title "Christ." Interpretations of the person and work of Jesus vary from Protestant to Catholic to Orthodox to nondenominational,[34] as well as between and among the various books that comprise the Christian canon of sacred texts.[35] Jesus Christ is variously incarnate divinity and resurrected savior, most often understood to be the second

[33] There are, of course, other traditions, such as Islam, that acknowledge Jesus Christ as a significant figure. I have in mind here, though, how Christianity and Christian traditions have centered on the person of Jesus Christ and understand Jesus to be a crucial, and even divine, figure—ritually, theologically, relationally, ontologically, and so on.
[34] Nondenominational is most often associated with Protestant iterations of Christianity, but I am using this term to also denote diverse forms of these "main" streams of Christian traditions.
[35] This is just a basic acknowledgement that, just as an example, even key early Christian sacred Scriptures, such as the Synoptic Gospels, presented Jesus' person, ministry, sermons, etc. differently. There is not one version of who Jesus is or was.

person of the Triune godhead, a "son" who was "begotten not made." Jesus is considered by most Christian traditions, communities, and theologies to be worthy of worship. Though what makes Jesus, the person and god-human, worthy of worship may be interpreted differently across the centuries, the centrality of Christology to Christianity cannot be overstated.[36] Often Jesus Christ is positioned as the key revelation of God to humanity, as the pivotal mediator of a salvation history that is relevant to all, across and beyond religious traditions and boundaries. As theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether writes, "The most fundamental affirmation of Christian faith is the belief that Jesus is the Christ. He is that Messiah whom the prophets 'foretold' and the Jews 'awaited.' On this affirmation, Christian theology is built."[37]

Chapter Overview

Christian theological superiority and its implications for Christians in a religiously plural world is the focus of this project. This topic arises in a context of Christian theologians in North American communities, who are writing and imagining in era of increased attention to multiplicity, fluidity, process, porosity, and quantum entanglement. As such, the philosophy of Alfred North

[36] In the Patristic Era, and perhaps in response to the diversity in interpretation of the nature of Jesus, men in positions of power and influence met to discuss and agree upon aspects of emergent Christologies, among other theological themes. The themes that were agreed upon were systematized into creeds, serving theological, ecclesial, liturgical and political purposes. Ultimately, these Creeds became important theological touch-points—methods of solidifying theological foundations for mainstream Christian belief and practice and for identifying heretical ideas, persons, and communities. The Apostle's Creed, for example, identifies Jesus Christ as the only Son of God, "the Father Almighty," and the one who will judge the living and the dead. The Nicene Creed, recited at most Eucharistic or Mass gatherings in Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Episcopal churches, identifies Jesus Christ as the only son of the one God whose "kingdom will have no end." Theologically, the Nicene Creed is less a deviation from the Apostle's Creed and more of a deeper articulation of its far-reaching statements of belief. Both are variously considered by scholars, institutional churches, and practitioners alike to be representative and constitutive of Christian beliefs. I would argue that they participate in formation by inculcating certain Christian logics, prompting certain embodied practices, and generating particular affects. This is not to be reductionist and assert that the multiple agreed-upon Creeds in Christian tradition are directly responsible for theological imaginings and embodied practices—but it is to acknowledge their influential reach, or affective resonance, over the centuries.

[37] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1974): 246.

Whitehead along with process theologians and scholars who write in this lineage of thought provide the metaphysical framework for some of the ways in which I approach themes of religious diversity and multiplicity. In light of a renewed attention to multiplicity, some scholars and lay religious leaders alike are forecasting a future in which religious boundaries will dissolve and the lines that trace traditions and religious identities will blur.[38] This unbounded future is often envisaged with reference to parallel conversations in philosophical science, in which scientific discoveries associated with quantum interrelatedness are interpreted as existentially and ethically significant.[39] Yet if Christian traditions have developed with embedded logics of superiority or assumed primacy, *then even in an era of language and practices that invoke fluidity, multiplicity, inclusivity, and interfaith understanding*, the danger is that these logics of superiority are not likely to dissolve: rather, they may well shape-shift into new forms.[40]

To evaluate this shape-shifting nature, the first chapter provides a taxonomy of superiority and argues that central Christian theological themes largely assume a framework of Christian ascendancy. To make my use of the term superiority more explicit, I invoke cultural examples (American sports, politics) and briefly discuss the concept of a "superiority complex," as theorized and popularized by psychologist Alfred Adler. One of the goals of this chapter is to make distinctions between superiority and supremacy, so that my analysis of Christian traditions—and the feelings of dominance that these traditions may inculcate—is more precise. At the end of this chapter, I construct a typology of superiority and argue that Christian theological imaginings (another way of describing *theology*) are affected by a logic of superiority.

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[38] See Franciscan priest and lay spiritual leader Richard Rohr's most recent published volume (*The Universal Christ*, 2019) for an example outside of academia; within academia, see the work of Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Roland Faber, and especially the "Theology Without Walls" project (https://theologywithoutwalls.com).
[39] Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Duke University Press, 2007.
[40] Joerg Rieger, *Christ & Empire: from Paul to Postcolonial Times,* Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007; Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public,* New York: Columbia University Press, 2018.

The second chapter moves from logic to feeling. I contend that superiority is more than a logical problem that can be solved; it is a feeling that extends in Christian theological imaginings and in Christian embodied practices toward religious others. I draw on the affect theory of Sara Ahmed to describe how Christian superiority is affectual and embedded in a Christian affective economy of power and relation. Ahmed's work helps to address how superiority might be inculcated, even unintentionally, in Christian theologies, practices, and communities, such that Christian relations with religious others may be always-already governed by conceptions of Christianity (and the figure of Jesus Christ) as having ultimate significance and universal relevance.

The third and fourth chapters begin to demonstrate that superiority, in its affective capacity, has been circulating in Christian theological constructions from the beginnings of Christianity's emergence as a tradition.[41] I rely on the historical work of feminist scholar Rosemary Radford Ruether to show how theological justifications for anti-Semitism are pervasive in early Christian theological constructions. Beyond Ruether, I move to analyzing one such key text in the development of Christian traditions: Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*. This text is significant because it not only reflects the theological feelings of an early era of Christian traditions, but it also influences the formation of creeds that are regularly recited in Christian communities, even to this day. I analyze how Athanasius uses a method of comparison to construct the argument for Christ's, and thus Christianity's, religious supremacy over Jewish and pagan religious others. Specifically, Athanasius' argument would fall flat without negative reference to religious others. This prompts the question of whether key Christian concepts require religious others to achieve a logical flow, or consistency. After analyzing *On the Incarnation*, I survey representative medieval and modern theological texts to show later historical emergences of a similar trend in theology.[42] In brief, this

[41] I do this, in part, by following Ahmed's example of examining the "emotionality of texts." Ahmed engages in this method of analysis in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.
[42] Texts discussed include *The Only Way* (Bartolomé de las Casas) and *The Christian Faith* (Friedrich Schleiermacher).

trend is that key theological texts are written for "insiders" but are reliant on conceptions of and superiority over "outsiders" (religious others) to make "insider" (Christian) theological claims. These "insider" claims have material consequences for relating with and to religious others.

In the fifth chapter, I examine the work of three contemporary American scholars who center questions of religious diversity in constructing their theologies: Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Willie James Jennings, and John B. Cobb, Jr. These constructive theologians are representative of feminist thought (Fletcher), critical approaches to race (Jennings), and process-oriented metaphysics (Cobb, Jr.). While my project highlights the constructive benefit of these theologies for promoting peace and greater understanding among diverse religious traditions, all three theological perspectives, in different ways, argue for a relational intimacy with religious others that borders on absorption, that imaginatively enfolds religious others into Christianized frameworks. The stated intentions of these theologians are to maintain religious difference and highlight the need for mutuality and reciprocity rather than eradication of, or power over, religious others. But in accordance with the overarching argument of this project, there seems to remain a covert Christian superiority or ascendancy presumed in the construction of their arguments. The affectual resonance of superiority functions in a more subtle, shape-shifted form than the overt Christian theologies of superiority from past centuries, but remains affectually present nonetheless.[43]

To conclude, I turn to the question of whether there are any creative, non-coercive trajectories that are possible from within Christian theological traditions, given the overwhelming imaginative attachments to power and superiority in Christian orientations toward religious others. I return to the affect theory of Sara Ahmed and the critical theological perspective of Rosemary Radford Ruether to ask what inroads there could be, if any, for decentering affects of superiority—

[43] The aim with this chapter is to clarify a particular moment in progressive Christian thought in North America, as Christians come to terms with the tradition's complicity in European imperial and colonial expansion, as well as late neoliberal global capitalism and the surfacing of various white supremacies across the globe.

or, as a way for embodied practices and feelings of love (using Ahmed's affect theory) to counter feelings of superiority, hate, disgust, or ambivalence toward the flourishing of religious others. The project concludes with more of an ellipsis rather than a sense of finality, in the hopes that any "definiteness" is an ongoing process rather than an ultimate arrival.[44]

[44] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, Corrected Edition, Original publication 1929, ed. by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 255.

Chapter 1

The Problem of Christian Superiority: Or, "Staying With The Trouble"

Everybody needs somebody to make themselves feel superior.[1]

Lulu Ferocity

We need to be far more rigorous in investigating the cellular structure of our religious ideas.[2]

Rachel S. Mikva

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me.[3]

John 14:6

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.

Ephesians 1: 18-21

Introduction

This chapter will begin to build the case that Christianity[4] and Christian theological imaginings are tilted toward affectual thought patterns and responses of superiority, on the one hand, and defensive energies in support of that superiority on the other. A question lurking in the background is whether this affectual orientation is related to logics and practices of superiority that

[1] Lulu Ferocity/Evangelista (formerly House of Abundance) is a character on the television series *POSE*. The quotation is from the first season. Pose, "Access," written and directed by Ryan Murphy, 2018.
[2] Rachel S. Mikva, *Dangerous Religious Ideas: The Deep Roots of Self-Critical Faith in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2020): 195.
[3] All references to the New Testament will use the New Revised Standard translation.
[4] As discussed in the Introduction, Christianity has several different denominations, versions, and iterations, most fitting somewhere under the broad rubric of Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox. I will primarily use the singular "Christianity" throughout the following chapters, but this use is in no way to erase the reality that Christianity is not one entity, nor does it have one common theology or practice. However, there are things that distinguish Christianity from other entities, making "Christianity" something legible; this is what I will attempt to focus on throughout this project.

are inculcated, and perhaps incentivized, by the very theological constructs and imaginings that form the heart of Christian traditions. In other words, this project probes whether Christian theological imaginings—marked by their relationship to the figure of Jesus Christ, understood as a unique, divine, incarnate being who has no equal, being "far above…every name that is invoked"[5] —may be *inherently* tainted by fantasies of superiority that find their theo-logical[6] conclusions in the implementation of covert and overt Christian supremacy.[7]

Thus, this project begins with the following premise: that in the context of religious difference, Christianity attempts to establish, maintain, and sustain superiority over other traditions.[8] In this chapter and beyond, I will approach superiority as an internal theological problem with implications that extend beyond the boundaries of Christianity: theology follows practice, but practice follows theology as well. If this premise and the following chapters are persuasive, then this project may ultimately suggest that superiority—or, the potential for superiority as an affect, ideology, orientation, posture, and logic—*affects* the way that Christianity perceives and orients itself toward religious others. A potential danger, essentially, is that theological imaginings and constructs

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[5] Ephesians 1:21 (NRSV). See the epitaph (above) at the beginning of Chapter 1.

[6] On occasion I will use the terms *theo-logic* or *theo-logical* rather than theology or theological. When I employ *theo-logic* or *theo-logical*, I am drawing attention toward the ways that thoughts about God are presumed to play by Western rules and assumptions about what is reasonable, rational, and so on. This includes whole histories of what is typically included in the 'logical' (rationality, rules of logic, fallacies) and what is excluded (feeling, story, narrative, dreams, etc.). I am indebted to my PhD student predecessors at Vanderbilt (Amaryah Shaye Armstrong, Hilary Scarsella, Peter Capretto) for introducing me to the term at monthly theology colloquiums. See also Laurel C. Schneider's *Beyond Monotheism*, especially the Preface, Introduction, Chapter 10, and Chapter 11 for various uses of logic (logic of the One, logic of the Many, logic of multiplicity). I am not referring to von Balthasar's use of the term theo-logic.

[7] I will keep in mind throughout that correlation does not mean causation. Determining that certain theological imaginings may have dreams of superiority does not necessarily mean that these theologies/theo-logics are always-already directly related to practices of superiority, and even harm, toward religious others. Christianities are too diverse to be reductionist in such a proposal and conclusion. At the same time, however, the question of this project has manifold political implications, especially at this particular moment in an increasingly religious plural American context, to jump too quickly to the safer conclusion that anything unsavory related to Christianity is an external problem, rather than an internal one.

[8] Wilfred Cantwell Smith is known for suggesting that we use "tradition" rather than "religion." This is in part to acknowledge both the conserving and changing nature of these traditions, as well as the diversity of ways in which people connect to these entities. I am familiar with Smith's terminology suggestion through the work of Hindu scholar (and religious pluralism advocate) Diana L. Eck. Kwok Pui-Lan also mentions this same reference to Smith in *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology* (chapter 8, footnote 56). Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A Revolutionary Approach to the Great Religious Traditions* (1963; reprint, New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 50-51.

of superiority may color the way that Christians think, feel, and act both individually and collectively, as embodied intra-actors in our shared, entangled, relational world.[9]

Grammar of Superiority: Or, Why Superiority?

There is a grammatical difference in the English language between definite and indefinite articles. The former indicates a noun that is known, the latter is a bit more mysterious, with room to move or at least room to reveal something that has not yet been disclosed. There is a difference, then, between saying that one knows "the" biblical perspective on human sexuality and claiming that one knows "a" view on human sexuality; or, between saying "the" way, "the" truth, and "the" life, and "a" way, "a" truth, and "a" life.[10] We could imagine, then, that definite articles have a hint of the universal and either lose in translation or obscure in interpretation the possibility of the provincial or particular.[11] When the definite becomes the only, when universal becomes necessity, when a religion becomes the required, or better, path—either now or in the future. If Christianity, and the incarnated god-man Jesus Christ, offer "the" way, not "a" way, then Christianity and Christian theologies will likely always be implicated in questions related to universality, necessity, and theological superiority.

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[9] I have in mind, here, Karen Barad's discussion of intra-action in the context of entanglement. Intra-action specifically is a way of acknowledging the relationality of causality. See *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 138-141.

[10] I write as a theologian, not as a scholar in Biblical languages. My point is related more to translation and how theology can be constructed from seemingly minor grammatical or linguistic differences, such as with the *filioque* in Trinitarian discussions. In the case of translating John 14:6, what is exceedingly interesting is that *koine* Greek does not have an indefinite article, only definite. Context, as well as grammatical rules and practices used in both languages, helps a translator determine how and whether indicate definite or indefinite article. There are differences, for example, between Greek and English in using definite or indefinite articles with abstract nouns. This is not to say that English translations of this passage are inaccurate. The translations are overwhelming in their agreement, or similarity, in translation. But I still find it interesting in relation to theological construction—sometimes a definite article is left untranslated.

[11] I especially have in mind here Dipesh Chakrabarty's Introduction (pgs. 4-23) to *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

Christianity's establishment of superiority and dominance in relationship with religious others is not a new, or even a surprising, premise. In recent decades, scholars of religion across various disciplines have engaged in arguments and methods for naming how and whether Christianity may operate with a logic or orientation of superiority. In the search for a genealogy of Christian superiority, some scholars point to Christianity's particular emphasis on conversion, while others point to theological elements such as Christology.[12] As with other genealogical methods, tracing the origin of a particular theological idea, logic, orientation, mode or practice is complex, and rarely with definitive conclusions. Because Christian theology, for better and for worse, variously relies on both on mystery (God is beyond our imagining) and concrete affirmations (God sent God's son Jesus to save the world), tracing the origin or history of a particular theological idea to prove definitively its contemporary effects and affectual resonances—such as superiority—is a difficult or, arguably, impossible task.[13] As Rabbi and interreligious studies scholar Rachel S. Mikva writes, "The precise relationship between rhetorical and actual violence, or polemic and discriminatory legislation, is difficult to discern."[14] But perhaps it is a worthwhile endeavor nonetheless. I say this with the hopes that Christians and Christian theologians are, and will continue to be, concerned with the historical legacies and current ethical impact that our theological imaginations may have, intentionally and unintentionally, both within Christian communities and without.[15]

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[12] This is a recurring theme in Theology of Religions. See the work of S. Mark Heim, Paul Knitter, Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Raimon Panikkar, among others.

[13] I want to note that other scholars are less hesitant to make the claim that "there is a causal link between claims of religious superiority and calls to religious violence." Paul Knitter, Introduction, in *The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005): ix.

[14] Mikva, *Dangerous Religious Ideas*, 128.

[15] This is a response, in part, to a question I have received about establishing the nature of (Christian) theological superiority: why bother, if correlation does not mean causation? And why is this important if we cannot definitively trace the origin or cause of the negative impacts of Christian theologies? There are, of course, theologians who are deeply concerned with the impact of Christian theologies, and I will set this dissertation project within that conversation (just to name a few: Willie James Jennings, Laurel C. Schneider, Catherine Keller, Ellen T. Amour, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Kwok Pui-Lan, Marcella Althaus-Reid, Monica A. Coleman, John J. Thatanamil, etc.). Our theologies matter not just to the 'insider' communities of Christian faith (Schleiermacher) – our constructs matter to 'outsider' communities as well, and not just in the way Christians may try to bring those outsiders in (conversion, absorption, etc.). Quantum physics, global economics, and even common sense tell us that we do not live, move, and

Encountering the Problem: Theology of Religions

Christian scholar Paul F. Knitter, known for initiating and participating in a stream of academic conversations now referred to as the Theology of Religions, names religious superiority in general (not just Christianity's version) as a mythic construct.[16] The naming of religious superiority as a construct to decenter or neutralize is likely in response to the reality, noted by Mikva, that "interreligious understanding is undermined by suspicions that people want to persuade everyone that their faith is superior, or that they stand closer to God's own truth."[17] Mikva, Knitter and John Hick, along with other scholars in Theology of Religions and Interreligious Studies,[18] variously engage in philosophical and theological explorations in support of religious diversity and harmony. These scholars do not typically dwell exclusively in the abstract, but often pose practical applications of their explorations, such as the potential for interfaith dialogues, multifaith theological education, and other potential pathways for mutuality and creative peace-making.

The Myth of Religious Superiority: A Multifaith Exploration, for example, is a volume intended to "call upon specialists and practitioners…to reinterpret for our age whatever myths or claims of superiority or exclusivity they might have made in the past."[19] This call is interpreted, especially by Knitter and Hick's contributions to the volume, as necessary to encouraging peace between and

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breathe in vacuums, which may mean—theologically speaking—that theologians must continue to speak to what "loving one's neighbor" means in a globalized, religiously plural planet in which we live shared, entangled lives in community.

[16] Paul F. Knitter, *The Myth of Religious Superiority: Multifaith Explorations of Religious Pluralism*, edited by Paul F. Knitter. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005.

[17] Mikva, *Dangerous Religious Ideas*, 101.

[18] There are various fields, subfields, and disciplines related to this line of thought: history of religion, comparative religions, comparative theologies, and theologies of religion. In the past few years, scholars have proposed a new field of interreligious studies to encourage the more explicit intersection between academic inquiry and practical wisdom, knowledge, and experience. For example, this field puts comparative religions and theologies into conversation with practices of multifaith chaplaincy and/or interfaith activism. See Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah J. Silverman, *Interreligious-Interfaith Studies: Defining a New Field, e*dited by Eboo Patel, et al. Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2018.

[19] Knitter, "Introduction," *Myth of Religious Superiority*: viii. The volume was compiled after a conference held in 2003 that aimed to bring together pluralists—both academics and faith practitioners—to discuss the possibilities for dismantling superiority in their own traditions.

among the religious and spiritual traditions of the world. As Hick states, "there will be no real peace among the world religions so long as each one thinks of itself as uniquely superior to all the others."[20]

Superiority may be mythic, at least in an abstract sense; yet we must continue to ask, individually and collectively, whether we think or feel that our tradition is superior to another tradition, and if we do, how those thoughts and feelings find purchase in our embodied practices. So if we answer yes—that our tradition is theologically superior—then it seems necessary to critically reflect the nature of this superiority and its affective resonance in our material realities. Naming religious superiority as a "myth" is important to some extent, but it may not address the competing nature of these paradigms that arguably, more often than not, attach an ontological and even eschatological significance—or priority, or superiority, of a kind—to particular theological imaginings and narrative constructs over and against others. This is in no way to dismiss the important work of Knitter, Hick, and many other scholars who have contributed thoughtfully to the Theology of Religions discourse, but is more of a next step to probe deeply into what Christianity's version of superiority entails. Changing Christian relational logics—the way Christians think toward (religious)—is crucial, certainly, but perhaps attention to logic alone does not deeply consider how entrenched affective resonances of theological superiority may be.[21]

The Lure of Purity, the Lure of Superiority

Following theologians who trace how Christianity and Christian theologies have been historically complicit in material evils such as European colonial expansion and the Mid-Atlantic slave trade, a logical question to ask could be whether there is something internal to Christianity and

[20] John Hick, "The Next Step Beyond Dialogue," *Myth of Religious Superiority*: 12.
[21] For a comprehensive study of the Theology of Religions, including reference to key ideas and influential scholars, see Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions,* London: SCM Press, 2010.

Christian theologies that may continue to catalyze, repeat, and produce these kinds of material evils that surface in our relational, shared world. Some Christian theological schemes approach these atrocities, in which Christianity is implicated, as problems that exist, to some extent, outside of Christianity itself—and Christianity being understood, here, largely in abstract terms.[22] A typical rationalization that follows this line of thought could be: perhaps Christian theological imaginations and machinations have been utilized to justify genocide or land theft, but these are just utilizations of inaccurate or incorrect interpretations of Christianity *per se*. True Christianity, pure Christianity exists outside of material evil, even if Christians are complicit in evils or if Christian theologies are utilized as either catalyst or justification. If the problem involves Christianity but can ultimately be located outside Christianity-in-itself, then internal theological constructs, essentially, can be absolved. This kind of reasoning assumes that Christianity's internal theological constructs lure us toward a pure, true version of Christianity.[23] In this logical flow, Christianity is saved by removing its theological imaginations and constructs from the possibility of (self) criticism via abstracting true Christianity from complicity or ultimate responsibility for material harms.[24]

A further concern, with regard to Christian theologies, is that in an era of intellectual attention to multiplicity, fluidity, process, porosity, and quantum entanglement, identifying the nature, affect, and effects of superiority is perhaps more entangled. Scholars and lay religious leaders alike are forecasting a future in which religious boundaries will dissolve and the lines that trace traditions and religious identities will blur.[25] Some scholars even understand the phenomenon of

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[22] Another variation is to distinguish Christians from Christianity (against, an abstract or immaterial version of "Christianity"), arguing that Christianity (and Christian theological schemas or imaginings are a tool that can be used for positive or negative change, depending on who is wielding the tool for the purposes of power, control, or (in a more positive light) social equity or justice.

[23] This is a case made compellingly by Mary Daly in *Beyond God the Father*.

[24] Kwok Pui-Lan notes in her chapter on Pluralism in *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* that theologians have rarely engaged in self-criticism of their own discipline. She states this in a chapter on the formation of the field of comparative religions (and its connection to the colonialism).

[25] One example of this is Roland Faber's forecasting of a "transreligious" future (*The Ocean of God*, 2019).

Multiple Religious Belonging (at least its Western forms), for example, as a concrete manifestation of this new era of blending and religious multiplicity.[26] Yet if Christianity has embedded logics of superiority or assumed primacy, then even in an era of language and practices that invoke fluidity and multiplicity, the danger is that these logics of superiority do not just dissolve: rather, they shape-shift into a new forms.[27]

A potential pitfall is that too often and too quickly, those invested in preserving Christianity and Christian theologies from anything unsavory—theologians, ecclesial hierarchy, laypersons, and anyone who has a stake or investment in Christianity—might make the claim that aspects of Christian texts, treatises, creeds which emphasize Christianity's rightness or prominence do not represent true, or pure, Christianity. This preserving effort is hypothetically focused on separating the authentic from the false: identifying true or real Christianity with what is authentic, and anything politically incorrect or repugnant with a false entity that they claim was never really Christianity in the first place. With this strategy, Christianity is only (or primarily) be identified with 'the good' or with its good effects; complicity in evil belongs to another version, a different entity, a falsified imposter that always fails to be the pure, good, authentic form.

Part of "staying with the [Christian] trouble," then, is to explore the possibility that there is no Christianity that can be parsed or disaggregated from itself, such that most goods are identified with an abstract, pure, or idealized—or *superior*—version of Christianity, while most harms can be attributed to erring humans who embody a substandard, or *inferior*, version of Christianity.[28] As queer

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[26] For a few examples, see the work of Catherine Cornille, Monica A. Coleman, and Duane R. Bidwell.
[27] This sense appears in Joerg Rieger's *Christ & Empire* (2007) and Catherine Keller's *Political Theology of the Earth* (2018).
[28] Donna J. Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016. "Our task is to make trouble, to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places. In urgent times, many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe, of stopping something from happening that looms in the future, of clearing away the present and the past in order to make futures for coming generations. Staying with the trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future. In fact, staying *with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic of salvific futures, but as moral critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings*" (1, emphasis mine).

theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid declares, "Theology cannot clean itself enough of *le visqueaux*."[29] For Althaus-Reid, this viscosity is connected to both the promise and tyranny of Christian theologies, as they have been constructed in context. The promise of this messiness, this viscosity is that it ever-always grounds Christian theologies to their material, embodied emergences; the tyranny is how Christian theologies consistently present "decent" constructs to clean the mess (viscosity) and that do more to reify abstract (oppressive) norms than connect with the realities of embodied existence. What if Christianity cannot be absolved or saved through this method of disaggregation? What if the disaggregation, rather than encouraging deeper internal theological criticism, might in reality operate to "cover a multitude of sins"?[30] And further, how do (or should) Christian theologians deal with the possibility that some of us who identify Christianity's shameful participation and complicity in historical atrocities, might also move—unintentionally, perhaps—to preserve and absolve Christian theological constructs from that evil? What do we do with the potential that we, as Christians, benefit or have benefitted historically, in some way, from its political and theological power and ascendancy?

This latter concern would be akin to asking those who profit from the factory farm meat industry why eating meat is necessary, and not harmful, to a healthy diet; or expecting those who profit or benefit directly from the American military industrial complex to have neutral or unaffected responses to how much of the annual United States' Federal Budget is allocated to funding military technology and weaponry. These examples are not meant to be reductive, but to draw our attention to the potential for Christians, and Christian theologians, to experience

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[29] Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics,* (London: Routledge, 2000), 110. Althaus-Reid's concept of *le visqueaux* is her way of identifying the unsavory aspects of humanness that Christian theologies generally ignore or deny (in order to deny the body, to deny human material experiences), or keep separate from theological constructs, like the concept of God or the divinity of Jesus Christ. This also keeps Being separate from becoming (or body, materiality, and change).

[30] This idiom, relatively common at least in the United States, comes from 1 Peter 4:8: "Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins."

something like unconscious or implicit bias when it comes to evaluating how our theological constructs affect religious others.[31] The implication is that it may be somewhat dubious to expect Christians (especially white Christians), who benefit or have benefitted in substantial ways from the material effects of Christian theologies of superiority, to have neutral or uncomplicated stances with regard to salient features of Christian theology that may potentially perpetuate Christian (theological) superiority. This complication is similar to a conflict of interest, defined as "a situation in which a person is in a position to derive personal benefit from actions or decisions made in their official capacity."[32] In more explicitly theological and philosophical terms, this is akin to a Christian theologian engaging Christian theological constructs as *sui generis* in nature, rather than as apologetic.

I highlight this dilemma at the beginning of this project, and at the beginning of this particular chapter, to raise the concern that when it comes to how Christian theological imaginings may potentially impact (or have impacted) religious others, Christians—even those with the best intentions, who want to respect the space of religious others and create room for a diverse religious eco-system—may occupy a questionable positionality with regard to evaluating whether and how Christianity, with its concomitant theological imaginings and constructs, is salvageable. I say this as a theologian grounded in Christian traditions, who grew up with the stories and theological imaginings of Christian traditions, and who feels an impulse to articulate how Christian theological traditions have the potential to lure humans, and all creation, toward wholeness and goodness. This is to say, explicitly: I have personal experiences within Christian traditions that in some way might prompt me to try to "save" it, or to defend it from a reductionist claims; yet, as a feminist, I am wary of jumping

[31] The term *implicit bias* was coined by Mahzarin R. Banaji and Anthony G. Greenwald in *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People*. New York: Delacorte Press, 2013. I am grateful to L.J. Allen for reminding me of this concept in a conversation about the themes of this chapter.
[32] Angus Stevenson and Christine A. Lindberg eds., *New Oxford American* Dictionary, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, 2010.

to a hasty defense of "not all Christians" or "not all of Christianity" when faced with the accumulation of its historical harms.[33]

There is no pure or neutral position: those from outside a particular religious tradition could arguably evaluate quantitative impact,[34] but may miss some of the implicitly understood or practiced aspects of a tradition that contribute to meaningful qualitative goods, or wholeness.[35] This is to hold the importance of internal theological criticism, with conscientiousness concerning the messiness involved in both asking and trying to answer these questions. Thus, regardless of the reality that there is no neutral stance, engaging in internal theological criticism[36] seems necessary in order for Christians to evaluate the possibilities and limits for interreligious dialogue and understanding which makes space for ontological pluralism,[37] rather than supporting theo-ontological hierarchies catalyzed by both overt and covert ideologies of superiority and, ultimately, embodied practices of supremacy. Naming this as a "necessity" reveals my presumptions that interreligious dialogue and understanding can be desirable and good; that ontological pluralism and a logic of multiplicity[38] are compatible with Christian theology; and that ideologies of superiority may instigate logics, practices, and affects that belie certain Christian theological ideals such as loving one's neighbor.

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[33] This cultural reference is anecdotal in nature, but also seems apropos to the discussion at hand. The reaction of "not all men" during the #metoo movement operates as a linguistic sleight-of-hand to seemingly detract attention from the critiques being leveled against rape culture. For general information about the #metoo movement, see "Me Too founder Tarana Burke: Movement is not over" (https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-53269751). For general information about the "not all men" response, see "Not All Men: A Brief History of Every Dude's Favorite Argument" (https://time.com/79357/not-all-men-a-brief-history-of-every-dudes-favorite-argument/).

[34] I have in mind the data compiled by Khyati Y. Joshi for her book *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America* (2020).

[35] The field of Interreligious Studies is beginning to be defined as an academic space interested in how practitioners understand and embody their religious logics, beliefs, practices, and so on. This contrasts with methods in Religious Studies that emphasize religion (and religious practitioners) as objects of study.

[36] I use terminology of theological criticism in connection to the work of historical theologian Willemien Otten. See Willemien Otten, "Nature as a Theological Problem. An Emersonian Response to Lynn White," in G. Thomas and H. Springhart (eds), *Responsibility and the Enhancement of Life. Essays in Honor of William Schweiker* (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2017), 265-280; and "Theology as Searchlight: Miracle, Event, and the Place of the Natural," in *Religion in Reason. Metaphysics, Ethics, and Politics in Hent de Vries*, eds. Tarek Dika and Martin Shuster (New York: Routledge, 2022), 92-107.

[37] The concept of ontological pluralism comes from philosopher Thomas Norton-Smith, *The Dance of Person and Place: One Interpretation of Indian Philosophy*, New York: SUNY Press, 2010), 26-27; 40ff.

[38] Laurel C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), 142.

Rather than saving Christianity, then, my aim is to "stay with the trouble," in the words of theorist Donna J. Haraway: to explore at face value whether and how superiority toward religious others manifests in Christianity, without immediate recourse to defending Christianity and Christian theology by reference to an abstract, purified notion of what Christianity is or should be.[39] The point is to "stick"[40] with the possibility that justifying Christianity's complicity in historical atrocities, whether small or large scale, may be more about maintaining power and superiority and less about preserving this abstract, pure, and good version of Christianity—though the question is whether maintaining the latter paves the way for the former. The theo-ethical norm for internal theological criticism which undergirds this project, that I will return to as a touchstone throughout subsequent chapters, is whether Christianity's theological structures affect Christian thinking, acting, and/feeling toward religious others in a way that creates room for unexchangeable difference rather than for a (universalizing) lure toward absorption, exclusion, or eradication.[41]

In the following sections, I will take a few steps back from theology to discuss generalized notions of superiority. This is in the hopes that clarifying a typology of superiority as an ideology will help us distinguish superiority from discernment: an attitude, posture, or logic of 'being better' versus the practice of identifying a particular preference for one thing over another. This involves clarifying distinctions, at least for the time being, between ideologies of superiority and manifestations supremacy. Broadly, to ground this project in what Christian theological superiority is and how it might operate, I will discuss logics, theo-logics, and embodied practices of superiority in this chapter as a way of laying a foundation for chapter two, in which we will turn to superiority's affective resonance within a Christian affective economy of power and relation.

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[39] Donna J. Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.
[40] In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed uses metaphors of "sticking" to describe how emotional responses (anger, hate, love, etc.) attach to particular things/people/groups. This sticking is what I am beginning to refer to as affective resonance.
[41] Laurel C. Schneider (*Beyond Monotheism*) uses French sociologist Jean Baudrillard's concept of "impossible exchange."

Logic(s) of Superiority:
The "Superiority Complex" and Other General Notions

In this section, I will begin to delineate what I mean by superiority, and subsequently what a logic (or logics) of superiority might resemble. In brief, by logic I am simply referring to a line of reasoning or thought that leads us to draw certain conclusions. Logic, more often than not in this project, is a way of referring to the ways we think, or our epistemological structures. On occasion, logic may more specifically refer to the rules of Western logic that determine fallacies in our thought processes and/or conclusions, such as false equivalence, begging the question, or ex post facto fallacies. This discussion helps to lay a foundation, ultimately, for elucidating Christian logics this project attempts to discern: identifying how certain conceptions of God in Christianity might logically lend themselves to a theology of superiority vis-à-vis religious others. But before moving to Christian logics, the aim of this section is primarily focused on discussing what we might mean, generally speaking, when we use the term *superiority*, as well as how a logic of superiority might operate in everyday contexts.

Not surprisingly, there has been significant research on superiority in the field of psychology. Psychological theories and research, focusing broadly on why humans think and act the way that they do, address questions such as: what makes individuals or groups of people assert or imagine themselves to be better than others? Why, in relationships of difference, does there tend to be disparity, such that one person (or group) is understood to be better than another group?

The term "superiority complex" has entered common parlance.[42] The superiority complex, as an example, is a concept most closely associated with early twentieth century Austrian

[42] This brief discussion is meant to emphasize that superiority is a concept that has traction, and perhaps a kind of common understanding in everyday life. We understand that some things are superior to other things, by which we indicate a kind of preference: better, higher, or 'more above' others, i.e., this wine is better than that wine, organic fruit is better than GMO fruit, the Premier League is better than Major League Soccer. We work for superiors, we assert that we live in countries that are superior to others, we think our political views are superior.

psychotherapist Alfred Adler. Though this project will not delve heavily into psychotherapeutic theories,[43] briefly highlighting what Adler refers to as a "superiority complex" might be useful for understanding its more common, everyday use. Essentially, Adler's view of the individual psyche is that all persons have senses of their own inferiority and superiority, and that their experiences of themselves in the world are related to these interconnected senses. Superiority is described by Adler as a "striving," as a feeling related to "progress" toward what is "useful" in society: superiority is always, for Adler, goal-oriented away from a "state of inferiority or inadequacy" that "all of us share" and are "trying to overcome."[44] Superiority becomes a "complex", rather than just a natural state of being, when it tends toward an extreme—or "exaggerated condition"—of self-aggrandizement.[45] Adler connects superiority and its "exaggerated" manner of thinking, feeling, and behavior largely to "expressions" of laziness, criminality, or neuroses.[46] But because inferiority and superiority are universal anthropological-psychological conditions for Adler, there is the possibility of a healthy expressions stemming from feelings of inferiority and superiority, which manifest in a "movement" toward attaining goals and becoming more useful to society. Superiority, in this sense, is an affective response to the "lack" or gaps that we all feel in our movement toward life goals; superiority, then, can be a catalyst that provokes us to be and do better over the course of our lifetimes and pushes us to find meaning in this process. In contrast, it is a superiority complex, rather than this striving for superiority in general, that problematically materializes in covert or overt dominance over others.

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[43] Adler was influenced and trained by Sigmund Freud, though Adler departed from Freud on some therapeutic theories and practices. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, whose work in affect theory will be discussed in chapter 2 and beyond, draws on some of Freud's psychotherapeutic theories in writing about feeling, thinking, and affect. Because this project gestures toward the ways theological constructions and imaginings might influence how we think, feel, and act, psychology and psychotherapy theories are necessarily in the background, occasionally surfacing in the foreground.
[44] Alfred Adler, *The Science of Living,* First Edition, 1930, (London: Routledge, 2013): 78; 83; 94.
[45] Adler, *The Science of Living*, 79.
[46] It is interesting that Adler ties criminality to a superiority complex and not to an "expression of fundamental and original viciousness" (*Science of Living*, 81).

Adler's theory has been critiqued both for its assumption of universality and its insistence that superiority always emerges from a sense of inferiority. The universality of Adler's assumptions are tenuous, and the critiques justifiable. But what could be of import about Adler's sketch of superiority is the assertion that senses of inferiority and superiority are sometimes deeply embedded with one another. What this suggests, generally speaking, is that superiority may not be possible without an established scale of difference, a hierarchy of inferior to superior. In theological or philosophical terms, we could map Adler's theory along a chain of being, in which there are lower (inferior) and higher (superior) potentialities of being(s).[47] Adler's theory as whole may not be as commonly utilized as his term "superiority complex" is, but his theory is intriguing insofar as it suggests, based on his qualitative research, that (attaining) superiority requires establishing inferiority of some kind.[48] In terms of this project, this could suggest that an entity like Christianity requires (inferior) religious others in order to establish theological superiority, ascendance, and dominance.

Beyond Adler's theories related to the psyche's inclination to strive for superiority in society, it seems apropos to ask how superiority might manifest politically, not just psychologically or internally. A 2018 study from the University of Michigan shows that those who think their political views are superior—especially intellectually superior—are less likely to consider sources from those who hold opposing viewpoints.[49] In particular, this study focuses on liberals, or those who identify with the political left; the findings indicate that liberals generally assume their beliefs to be superior, intellectually and otherwise, to those on the political right. According to the study, those on the left

[47] I have in mind, here, feminist critiques of dualisms and binaries, Foucauldian and queer theories of epistemology and power, and religious taxonomies categorized by difference and relation.
[48] Adler posits superiority and inferiority as a universal feature of the self. The superiority complex is what compels aggressive and dominant behavior toward others in society. Where Adler's theory is difficult to translate to larger entities (like religious traditions) is in the individual vs. the political/social. There can be an internal superiority (a striving that makes one, or perhaps a tradition) better, or the best version of Christianity possible; in this scheme, inferiority suggests Christianity-in-relation to itself. Yet there can be no superiority without an inversion, without inferiority.
[49] Michael P. Hall and Kaitlin T. Raimi, "Is Belief Superiority Justified by Superior Knowledge?", in *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 76 (May 2018): 290–306.

believe the gap between left and right is one of knowledge, not orientation. Simply stated, if the political right were presented with the same information as those on the political left, then surely they would agree with and then identify with the political left. Social scientists refer to this phenomenon as "belief superiority." The underlying current is that more knowledge equals less ignorance, or that more knowledge means that political viewpoints will cohere. Disagreement or deviation is a consequence of a certain kind of ignorance, a lack of diversified knowledge or logics that lead to political beliefs that are presumed to be wrong.[50] The implication is that problems would find solutions and political unity would advance if all persons operated according to these superior logics. The provisional conclusion from these researchers is that some logics are perceived to be better than or superior to others, and in this study on belief superiority, those surveyed on the political left assume that their logic is superior in such a way that a switch in logic from political right to left would be a *natural consequence* of increased knowledge. More knowledge, or the same knowledge, would lead to the political orientation presumed to be superior. In this sense, what is assumed to be the superior logic is understood to be an undeniable lure: when we are faced with the right information, we will yield to superior beliefs. Though the focus of the Michigan study was American politics, researchers suggest that other aspects of American belief and practice, including religion, could follow a similar trajectory of belief superiority.

Without overestimating the universal applicability of one study's research conclusions, what the University of Michigan research illustrates is the reality that superiority is comparative, which indicates that superiority is essentially about relationship.[51] Superiority has no practical purchase

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[50] See: "Superiority complex? People who claim superior beliefs exaggerate their own knowledge," *NewsRx Health*, 6 May 2018, p. 109. <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/04/180412130756.htm>. Accessed October 9, 2020.
[51] I have in mind how Jonathan Z. Smith concludes his well-known lecture-turned-essay "In Comparison a Magic Dwells," from *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), by prompting readers to consider in what ways comparison is about identity. He also questions the means and methods for comparison itself, such as why we compare at all (in the field of religious studies).

unless there are entities interacting with one another, with the result being that orientations and verifications of quality or rank (of best or better, then better or worse) can be determined. Thus, arguably the concept of superiority also has no purchase without its inverse relationship to inferiority, or the practical and affective dimensions of establishing inferiority. Imagine a basketball league with only one team: it would be nonsensical to deem that team the best or superior to anything else. There must be at least one other team to determine positions of superiority and inferiority, to crown a champion.

Analogies from the sports world will only take us so far, though. Religious practices, beliefs, and theological imaginings map differently from sports practices and affiliations, despite convincing arguments that practices and beliefs of sports fanatics and those of religious practitioners intersect closely among some subgroups.[52] What I am not trying to argue here is that a common understanding of superiority vis-à-vis others means that all parties are in agreement about the norms and standards by which these relationships of comparison are judged. For example, Americans seem destined to be in endless conversations about whether New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago is the better city. How do we determine superiority in such a relationship? Population size? Success of locally-owned businesses? Affordability? How many people are moving to (or away from) that city in a given year? The employment rate? Housing costs? Happiness factor? Public opinion, both from those who live in those cities and from those who do not?[53] Essentially, different norms, standards, and priorities tend to determine different conclusions about the assumed superiority of one city or region over another.

[52] For an in-depth discussion comparing the affective experience of being a fan of a sports team and a religious practitioner, see: https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/15/opinion/revelation-of-a-liverpool-soccer-fan.html.
[53] This brief article represents mainstream conversations comparing the three largest cities in the United States: https://www.nbcchicago.com/news/local/chicago-vs-new-york-vs-los-angeles-which-is-best-for-business/121739/.

As with sports analogies, comparing regions and cities in the United States is both mundane and particular. What these analogies perhaps best illustrate is that notions of superiority may rely on nonlocal or universal import, even though determining what is superior often pivots around local or particular perspectives, contexts, and assumptions. As will be discussed in later chapters, this dream of universality, or ideologies of belief, practice, or truth that apply to all times and places—and must thus exclude, include, absorb, appropriate, or eliminate religious others—is potentially the crux of the issue, or the foundation for a logic of superiority. A norm that calls for a theological commitment to the flourishing of both religious diversity and particularity will likely yield different ethical priorities than a norm that rests on the theological superiority of a particular tradition in the context of religious difference.

Yet, if we can temporarily abstract away from superiority's problematic relationship with universality, a question arises: is superiority always negative? Is there a possibility that discerning between better and worse can be a good thing? Is establishing a hierarchy—theologically, philosophically, practically—always a bad practice? In a world in which many religious traditions have notions of better and best, does critiquing superiority take away one's ability to discern between options? Can we invest in "a scale of quality, status, rank, or greatness" without this investment, or this logic, manifesting in ideological or pathological outcomes?[54] Returning to sports and regional analogies, is there anything wrong with crowning a champion or determining the best place to live?

Typologies of Superiority

Crowning a champion or determining the best region or city expresses a temporary reality: presumably a new champion will be crowned in the successive season, and it is possible that another

[54] Angus Stevenson and Christine A. Lindberg eds., *New Oxford American* Dictionary, 3rd ed., Oxford University Press, 2010.

city or region will someday eclipse its competitors. Superiority, in these examples, is contextual, contingent, and provisional.[55] Grammatically, we could argue that this kind of superiority modifies a temporary state (noun) that can change, or has the possibility of change: a temporary but superior path, moment, group, and so on. A basketball team can always refer to itself as champion of a particular season at given moment in chronological time, but never as universal champions for all of time, eternally[56] and unchanging; likewise, each year various outlets publish lists of the best cities or states to live in or move to in America, often reshuffling the order.[57] Change is expected and

[55] Rather than being universally normative, ontological, or immutable.

[56]In the world of sport, there is a debate called the G.O.A.T. phenomenon: Greatest of All Time. This designation more often refers to the ongoing discussion regarding which teams or which athletes are the greatest in their sport. Occasionally there will be an argument for the greatest athlete among all sports – but this is less common. A current example of this G.O.A.T. debate comes from international football: Cristiano Ronaldo versus Lionel Messi. They are broadly considered to be generational players by critics and fans alike, and each of them has won various trophies for their respective teams and countries, not to mention numerous individual trophies. However, even though for several years they played in the same league (La Liga, Spain), comparison between the two athletes, to establish who is the greatest of all time, is tenuous at best. They play different roles on their teams and have different athletic skills and styles. What determines the G.O.A.T.? The most goals scored? What about assists? The number of team trophies? A world cup victory? Because consensus on the terms of comparison cannot be generally agreed upon, there is no universal agreement on whether Ronaldo or Messi is the G.O.A.T.; and this is not even to mention Pele, widely considered the greatest footballer before the advent of Ronaldo and Messi. I would venture to suggest that one of the differences the sports world offers us, then, is a debate of who or what is the greatest, with the understanding that the greatest can always be eclipsed *in time*: there is always the possibility, as with Pele, that another generational player will come along to dazzle us with their prowess. This is more complicated, I think, in a current American sports context: current G.O.A.T. Tom Brady, in American football, has no peers of his generation, at least if determining the G.O.A.T. is related to number of Superbowl victories. Brady had to compete against and then eclipse Joe Montana, a quarterback who played in the 1980s and 1990s; this competition is somewhat unfair in one sense, of course, because so much was different in the league just a couple decades ago. American basketball fans will understand the complicated nature of factoring in differences related to league expectations and historical context in weighing whether Michael Jordan, Kobe Bryant, or LeBron James is the G.O.A.T. And this is not even to mention Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Wilt Chamberlain, Bill Russell, and so on—or to debate how other differences such as gender or ability should be factored into a debate. All this to say: the G.O.A.T. is debatable in sports—but is Jesus as the G.O.A.T. debatable in Christian theologies? Joking aside, as the latter article from Goal.com slyly suggests, the G.O.A.T. debate is an "eternal argument," not an argument of finality for all times and places; there is always potential for a greater athlete. For a history of the term G.O.A.T., as well as discussion of its current usage in the world of sport, consult: Sports Illustrated (https://www.si.com/more-sports/2018/07/23/goat-vs-greatest-of-all-time-debate-history) or this article from Goal.com (https://www.goal.com/en/news/cristiano-ronaldo-vs-lionel-messi-who-is-the-goat-football-stats-/ual7d33i8hjz14plhwkf2yvkr). For a discussion of whether Lebron James or Michael Jordan is the better player, consult: https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/lebron-james-michael-jordan-goat-debate-is-asking-the-wrong-question/2018/05/08/97e524b0-52d5-11e8-9c91-7dab596e8252_story.html.

[57]An example of this is a 2021 Milken Institute report, which lists Nashville, TN, where I live and write, as part of the top ten "best-performing cities index." This list is not about music performance (Nashville, TN, is known as "Music City"), but about overall quality of life related to cost of living, housing costs, job growth, and so on. Nashville was in the top 20 in 2020, yet has eclipsed the likes of Denver and San Francisco for inclusion in the top ten for 2021. The Milken Institute describes itself as a "nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank that helps people build meaningful lives" (https://milkeninstitute.org). A local news outlet reporting on the Milken index can be found here:

optimal, especially for whomever aspires to be the next champion or whichever city or region desires to top the next "best city" list. Going back to an analogy of English grammar: superiority, instead of being a modifier like *superior*, is its own state (noun) and an ideology of best, better, and/or worse that seeks universal dominance and resists re-imaginings or re-orientations of the state that is already considered normative, ontological, or immutable.

In this section, with an eye toward identifying permutations of Christian superiority that are oriented toward fixed hierarchies, I will offer a brief typology of superiority. This typology moves the discussion from everyday uses of the term superiority, toward the philosophical and theological, and is intended to clarify the distinctions between discernment of value (preference, perhaps temporary) and a Christian logic of ontological value (ideology, perhaps permanent). This is meant as a gesture toward manifestations of Christian superiority nourished by what Laurel C. Schneider refers to as "the logic of the One."[58] The logic of the One, as Schneider develops this concept in *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (2008), nourishes and enables religious postures and practices that position Christianity as superior to anything else that the religious and spiritual traditions of the world offer. Within this logic, as Schneider states, "the Christian faith becomes ideologically monotheistic (regardless of its doctrinal Trinitarianism) and superior even to rival monotheisms (Judaism and Islam) in the larger project of European cultural hegemony and colonial expansion."[59] And like the concept of God in most Christian traditions, this superiority is often understood as or assumed to be eternal, unchanging, fixed, and stable. I want to mention, here, that variations of Christian theologies and practices may mean that the hierarchy looks different in

https://www.wkrn.com/news/nashville-2021/nashville-claims-spot-in-top-ten-best-performing-cities-in-new-prestigious-report/.

[58] Schneider notes the philosophical, cultural, and theological history of the logic of the One in Western culture, which is deeply connected to monotheism "as the rational goal or *telos* toward which human programs aims" (24). From *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity*, New York: Routledge, 2008.

[59] Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 23.

different contexts: perhaps in fundamentalist circles, the logic of the One would mean the complete cancellation of all religious others, while in liberal circles the logic of the One might mean a scale of religious preference, to some extent, in which the focus is on inclusion in the present and proleptic absorption of all religious difference in the future (eschaton). Though the hierarchies in these contexts are quite different, and these differences are important, I will stay attuned to the concern that hierarchies constructed by a tradition that centers or pivots on the uniqueness of a divine figure who saves all of creation may always-already be entangled with inherent senses of superiority that find their logical completion in the dominance of that divine figure and all those related to that figure, either now or in a projected and imagined eschatological future.[60]

This following typology of superiority is not meant to be comprehensive. Rather, I imagine this typology as more of a tool that allows for greater precision for the argument as a whole. Often terms like superiority and superior are invoked without definition, which suggests that there are common sense notions of what these terms mean. For this project, it is important to leverage greater precision regarding the manifestations of superiority that could foment theological or ethical concerns in the process of relationality, or in the context of Christianity (or Christians) interacting—even in thought, or logic—with religious others. The types of superiority I will sketch include: *contextual/situational, experiential, epistemological, moral/ethical, aesthetic, theological, and ontological*. Not all of these manifestations of superiority, or of deeming something to be superior to something else, lend themselves to dominance, or to a causal relationship with violence—such as in the thought of John Hick mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. This typology is intended to nuance the various ways we may use this term, with the aim of distinguishing the types of superiority that could be the

[60] I am influenced by Audre Lorde's concise yet provocative definitions of racism, sexism, and heterosexism at the beginning of "Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving" in *Sister Outsider*. For each term, she states: "The belief in the inherent superiority of one (race, sex, pattern of loving) and thereby its right to dominance." In *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*, (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007): 45.

most pernicious or harmful, theologically speaking. My primary concern with distinguishing these types is attunement to how or whether they may be nourished by the logic of the One and by universal, exclusivist inflections; or, following the pattern of Audre Lorde's definitions for racism, sexism, and heterosexism, "The belief in the inherent superiority of one [religious tradition] and thereby its right to dominance."[61] My intuition is that this kind of superiority, and how it may manifest in the types below, is more than just a problematic for the ways that Christians think (Christian logic): superiority may transcend logic, extending into the ways we feel (affect) and influencing the ways we act toward religious others (embodied practices).

The first type is *contextual/situational superiority*, which is less about the fixed nature of a hierarchy and more about what happens in a given context, in specific moments in time. The analogies of sports championships and city comparisons fit this type. A team is superior because they win on a particular day or are crowned champions during a particular season; a city is commonly understood to be better than other cities because of the context, or situation, that determines the standards by which "best" is being measured, in relationship. Contextual superiority might have positive resonance in environments like multifaith college and university chaplaincies, when the topic of discussion is akin to: which meditation programs connect the most with participants, in a particular place and time? The answer to this question might be less about the inherent superiority of a particular meditation program over another, such as whether a Buddhist form of meditation is universally better than a Christian form. Rather, *contextual/situational superiority* might be more about what meditation practice connects with particular persons in particular places at particular times. Another example of contextual superiority might be as innocuous as determining quantitatively which traditions have the most constituents in a particular city, county, or state. In

[61] Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 45. These definitions also appear in "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde*, (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007): 114-123.

these examples, the relationships establish an order or hierarchy of a kind, but the hierarchy is understood to be impermanent and contextual, and not attached to notions of ultimate goodness, truth, or value. Theologically, speaking of a "preferential option" is one way of situating a person or community's context or situation in a hierarchy of value: in Gustavo Gutierrez's case, God's preferential option for the poor works to upend the traditional hierarchy posited by those within Christian traditions who hold power based on circumstance and experience—economically secure Christians from the First World who are privileged in a number of ways. What this example demonstrates is that a *contextual/situational superiority*—a preferential option, of a kind—could have negative or positive effects, depending on who or what is connected in the comparison whereby a relationship of superiority, preference, or preferential is established, in contrast to what is construed as ideologically superior.[62]

The next type is *experiential superiority*, wherein a certain kind of experience is universalized and then applied hierarchically. Some experiences are simply understood to be superior to others. A statement by a person embodying this type could be along the lines of: My experience has taught me the best way, so if you have had experiences the same as or similar to mine, you would think, feel, believe, and/or act like I do. Superiority, in this case, is reliant on circumstance and context as with *contextual/situational superiority*, but leans toward universalizing that experience toward an absolute claim. Yet the relationship that determines the standard of measurement is more obviously localized and particular than other types of superiority (i.e., a Christian's experience of Christianity forms the standard of measurement or comparison). An example might be a Christian comparing their individual experience as a Christian to the experiences of those from non-Christian traditions: Christianity, in this sense, would be superior because that person, who identifies with Christian traditions, has experienced it as better than an alternatives, whether or not that person has actively

[62] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1971.

or deeply experienced another religious tradition.[63] But even if that person has experienced difference and chosen Christianity as their preferred religious paradigm, the point here is whether that evaluation ultimately makes room for difference. Making room for difference could mean that the hierarchy would be mobile in such a way that a personal evaluation does not create a fixed, ontologized Christian logic of superiority. The collective aspect of this superiority might be centered on group-based Christian experiences, such as services, conferences, retreats, and so on, with the assumption that all persons would benefit from having such a collective Christian experience. A presumption of this type is that the way that that person or Christian group experiences Christianity is communicable and transferable, meaning that regardless of circumstance, Christianity would be experienced by all, regardless of context or tradition, to be the best. This type understands and accepts that there is diversity in the world but seeks to establish hierarchies related to the differences emerging from that diversity of experience.

Epistemological superiority—in which knowledge or access to knowledge is what determines higher from lower, best from adequate—might most the most obvious when discussing a "logic" of superiority. This type intersects heavily with the "belief superiority" referred to in preceding sections, in which superior knowledge leads to, or coheres with, superior belief and superior positionality.[64] Here, I am more interested in the ways that epistemological superiority maps onto the logic of the One, as described by Schneider, in which knowledge is connected to the *telos* of (Christian) monotheism and progress in the West; or, on a scale of pathways to better kinds of knowledge, there is one conduit or entry point to superior levels of knowledge, divine or otherwise.[65]

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[63] This is not to say that a person cannot experience multiple traditions and then choose one (or several) that resonate deeply with what they deem to be the best for their life. But there is a difference between claiming that 'this has been superior in my experience' and 'this has been superior in my experience so therefore if everyone had my experience, they would feel or think the same way that I do.'

[64]Michael P. Hall and Kaitlin T. Raimi, "Is Belief Superiority Justified by Superior Knowledge?," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 76 (2018): 290-306.

[65] Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 20; 24.

Further this superior knowledge leads to other types of superiority. An example, as expressed theologically, comes from the second chapter of the Epistle to the Colossians:

> …So that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments…See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority.[66]

This is an example of epistemological superiority leading to a kind of political-theological superiority (see below in this typology). According to this passage, if "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" are "hidden" in Christ, then the implication is that one must find their access-point to a superior knowledge and wisdom in and through Christ, and Christ alone. The writer, putatively the Apostle Paul, allows that arguments from those who acquire knowledge outside of Christ may be plausible, in terms of Western logic: these arguments could be "plausible." But Paul cautions that Christians must be wary of these kinds of philosophical arguments, because they are ultimately misleading in how they ignore the true, universal entry point to "all" knowledge. This kind of knowledge is superior, and according to the Epistle to the Colossians, Christ is the gatekeeper to this kind of understanding. Epistemological superiority, in this sense, might be troubling to those who do not want to automatically exclude or belittle religious others because the implication is that all must accept Christ's prominence affectually (bodily), theologically, and politically. And coupled with Christ's positionality as the entry point to wisdom and knowledge is the notion that everything outside of Christ, namely "philosophy and empty deceit," operates on a lower epistemological level. The fullness of knowledge and wisdom is found in and through Christ exclusively.

[66] Colossians 2: 2-4; 8-10.

A person or group expresses *moral/ethical superiority* when they presume that their moral/ethical values and behavior are better than other individual choices or collective systems; this could include a hierarchy of moral/ethical superiority possible among different religious traditions. Research by social psychologists on group dynamics and moral superiority suggests that identifying with a group with higher values *feels* good because it not only "provides a positive image," but also may "carry concrete advantages such as respect and rewards; one example is the competitive advantage held by socially responsible corporations."[67] The competitive advantage is that a socially responsible corporation can sell its ethical superiority, particularly in contexts where consumers care deeply about purchasing products and aligning with business practices that aim to cause less harm. One implication is that there are gradations of harms and goods, and that a consumer can invest in the ethical superiority of one business over another. In other words, what this research finds is that establishing moral superiority may be connected to both intangible and tangible advantages for those who claim higher ground regarding their values and practices, in comparison to others. Apart from social scientists' examples of social responsible corporations, a more religiously-inflected example of tangible advantages stemming from the presumed position of *moral/ethical superiority* of Christianity over (religious) others could include the overwhelming history of appropriation of indigenous lands in Africa, the Caribbean, the Americas, and other places across the world. As narrated by several Christian theologians and scholars of religion, Christians involved in both political and religious hierarchies justified colonization by asserting Christianity's moral obligation to steward lands that were occupied by peoples understood to be morally inferior.[68] Intangible advantages of moral superiority, on the other hand, include privileged access to the divine, via a relationship with Jesus

[67] Aarti Ayer, et al. "Sugaring o'er the Devil: Moral Superiority and Group Identification Help Individuals Downplay the Implications of In-Group Rule-Breaking." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 42 (2012): 142.
[68] See the works of David Chidester, Willie James Jennings, Kwok Pui-Lan, Khyati Joshi, among others.

Christ—characterized by some Christian theologians as the most perfect and blameless exemplar.[69] How Christians establish *moral/ethical superiority* vis-à-vis religious others is a different topic. What I am pinpointing with regard to the *moral/ethical superiority* of Christian traditions is how these traditions may be logically, affectively, or practically positioned as the most capable of moral judgment or behavior. This superior *moral/ethical positionality* may be established, in part, through an intimate connection to Jesus Christ, as "the" way to the divine or as the blameless exemplar. This hierarchical positioning of Christianity as the pinnacle of morality or ethics would be crucial, or difficult to maintain, in religiously plural contexts: no other tradition can compare to Christianity's privileged access to the moral.[70]

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[69] The concept of Jesus as blameless exemplar is attributed to Peter Abelard in his *Commentary on Romans*. Contemporary theologians, such as John Cobb (*Christ in a Pluralistic Age*) and Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, (*Divinity & Diversity*), connect to Abelard's portrayal.

[70] For example, this excerpt from the Papal Bull "Inter Caetera: The Legal and Spiritual War Against the Native People", issued by Pope Alexander VI on May 4, 1493: "Moreover, as your aforesaid envoys are of opinion, *these very peoples living in the said islands and countries believe in one God, the Creator in heaven, and seem sufficiently disposed to embrace the Catholic faith and be trained in good morals. And it is hoped that, were they instructed, the name of the Savior, our Lord Jesus Christ, would easily be introduced into the said countries and islands.* Also, on one of the chief of these aforesaid islands the said Christopher has already caused to be put together and built a fortress fairly equipped, wherein he has stationed as garrison certain Christians, companions of his, who are to make search for other remote and unknown islands and mainlands. In the islands and countries already discovered are found gold, spices, and very many other precious things of diverse kinds and qualities. Wherefore, as becomes Catholic kings and princes, after earnest consideration of all matters, especially of the rise and spread of the Catholic faith, as was the fashion of your ancestors, kings of renowned memory, you have purposed with the favor of divine clemency to bring under your sway the said mainlands and islands with their residents and inhabitants and to bring them to the Catholic faith" (https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/inter-caetera/). Emphasis mine. For a contemporary perspective on this papal bull, consult the firsthand account of Steven Newcomb (Shawnee/Lenape), co-founder of the Indigenous Law Institute, who met with Pope Francis in 2016 to petition him to nullify "Inter Caetera": <https://originalfreenations.com/face-to-face-with-pope-francis-to-get-the-inter-caetera-papal-bull-revoked/>. Newcomb writes: once such ideas and behaviors have been institutionalized in laws and policies, the Church cannot simply invoke Vatican II, for example, and not look back and take responsibility for the wreckage left in the wake of those papal bulls of domination. As far as the Indigenous Law Institute is concerned, this work is not about "reconciliation," a euphemism for the domination language system which furthers the colonizers' goal of our assimilating and incorporating us into the body politic of the state. The papal bulls and the boarding and residential schools of domination were intended to incorporate us and absorb us into their colonial system. The papal bulls demonstrate a basic untruth found in the concept of 'truth and reconciliation': The historical record shows no 'good relations' or 'prior friendship' with the oppressors which needs to be 'restored.' Thus, below the surface is the hidden meaning, 'truth and untruth.'" Newcomb has written a book on the subject, titled *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Discovery*, Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2008. For an article published by the *National Catholic Reporter*, in conversation with Steven Newcomb, that places "Inter Caetera" in the context of other papal bulls of that historical time period, consult: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/justice/disastrous-doctrine-had-papal-roots>.

Aesthetic superiority, perhaps more than the other types delineated in this section, has a deep connection to the Platonic tradition, surfacing in various Christian theologies and philosophies, from the process thought of Alfred North Whitehead to the theology of Hans Urs Von Balthasar. This type of superiority centers on conceptions of beauty, truth, and goodness that transcend the particular to touch the universal. Fidelity to the Platonic tradition means that these ideas are understood to exist perfectly only as abstractions from impure, impermanent material realities. The process thought of Alfred North Whitehead, for example, is arguably tied to a schema of aesthetic beauty and goodness that has lower and higher versions of aesthetic unity, and these higher unities are to some extent superior—though perhaps not ideologically or ontologically. Process thought is known for including more than just humans in its metaphysics, but there are still distinctions between the higher unities embodied by humans, for example, and the lower unities exhibited, for example, by trees. Higher unities, which achieve this unity through greater intensity, is felt or experienced as gradations of sentience (not ontological priority, but a priority toward a more developed perception). These unities are expressed aesthetically, and each entity expresses predisposed limit to the possibilities for its concrescence, but again, on a scale of greater or lesser sentience. Though Whitehead's metaphysics are more nuanced than asserting a simple chain of being, process thought nevertheless relies on aesthetic hierarchies that translate into greater potential for being lured toward the good—the highest aesthetic unity possible. In the first lecture of his essay *Religion in the Making*, Whitehead maps this scale onto religious traditions of the world; he makes more space in his philosophy for Eastern thought and traditions than his contemporaries do, yet he still somewhat uncritically positions Christian traditions and theological constructs as being more capable than other traditions of the highest goods, toward the Good in itself.[71] The danger of aesthetic superiority being allied with Christian traditions, especially when following the trajectory of

[71] See Whitehead's *Process and Reality* and *Religion in the Making*.

Platonic thought in the West, is that it begins to gesture toward the ontological, perhaps even more so than epistemological and moral/ethical superiority.

Ontological superiority occurs when what is assumed to be better or worse, superior or inferior, becomes attached to states of being, rather than material contingencies or contextual experiences that have the capacity to change. In the trajectory of Platonic thought, this is the dualistic opposition between being and becoming, wherein the former's substantial qualities are preferred to the latter's contingent qualities. As Mary Daly, feminist theologian and philosopher, famously states: "If God is male, then male is God."[72] Daly argues that 'male' becomes synonymous with God and is more closely aligned with God's being; female, on the other hand, is ontologized as lesser than male, always failing to achieve this privileged state of being, stuck in the state of lesser-than being. This is the slide of superiority that occurs when what is arguably a contingent, or changing, aspect of material experience is bathed, sacralized, naturalized, and ontologized as eternal and unchanging, both physically and metaphysically. Following Mary Daly, in contexts of religious diversity, *ontological superiority* emerges in a similar Christian logic: if God is Christian, then Christian is God. Religious others will always fail to ascend to the top of the hierarchy, in which Christianity is advantageously positioned. Beyond material relations and experiences of religious diversity, this difference becomes ontologized: to achieve the highest level of being, one must identify with Christianity and with the Christian god. All other traditions and gods will ultimately fail.

Theological superiority is the ultimate expression of Christian theological imaginings, insofar Christianity is argued to be superior via an internal logic, with vast external implications. Ontological superiority intersects with and undergirds theological superiority precisely on this point: Christianity will always win, other traditions will always lose.[73] Both winning and losing are ontological realities,

[72] Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 19.

[73] Metaphors of winning and losing seem appropriate here for a couple reasons. First, I use sports analogies to talk about the differences between provisional superiority and an ideological superiority of dominance that works to cancel or

not circumstantial or contingent ones. Winning is a metaphor that gestures toward any theo-logics that position Christian paradigms as superior, either now or "in the world to come." This is a reality in which Christian theological futures are ascendant and universal.[74] Overt winning, in this sense, is when a Christian logic of superiority calls for the eradication of religious others and all religious difference; covert winning would be when a Christian logic to strategically include or absorb religious others, in the mysterious, universal future or Ultimate Reality that encompasses all, knowing no strangers.

From Typology to Logic(s): Imagining Christian Superiority, Maintaining Power

This typology of superiority is meant to be a gesture toward the kinds of thinking that intentionally or unintentionally leads Christian theologians to monolithic theological conclusions and monochromatic theological futures. Consequently, in view of paradigms that forecast an Ultimate Reality of some kind, and yet awash in an era saturated with theories and theologies of plurality and multiplicity, it will be important to assess how Christian theological superiority might continue to manifest or emerge. This is even as we herald the acknowledgment that boundaries that begin to blur or deconstruct as soon as we try to delineate or categorize material reality.[75] In this section, I will suggest that Christian logic (the ways that Christian conceive of the relationship between God

control difference. James H. Cone uses a metaphor of winning as an aim of white supremacist versions of Christianity in *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970) and further critiques the "Western concept of winning" (43; 81); likewise, Emilie M. Townes uses winning as a way to describe triumphalist Christianity in *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (2006).

[74] This is a play on words with Emilie M. Townes' article "The Future of Religion is Ascendant" in *The Wall Street Journal* (April 26, 2015).

[75] See Karen Barad's discussion of an "apparatus" and the fuzziness, or indeterminacy of boundaries, in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (pgs. 114-115; 140-148).

and the world) is connected to our ways of imagining and creating Christian paradigms for existence.[76]

In light of this potential connection between Christian logics and imagination, it is important to initially to identify certain Christian imaginings that might more readily nourish logics, feelings, and practices of religious dominance.[77] Christianity's particular strain of superiority is compounded by the notion of Jesus Christ as the central revelation of God to humanity, as the pivotal mediator of a salvation history that is relevant to all, across and beyond religious traditions and boundaries. If Christians know the beginning, middle, and end of the story of creation[78] —and if Jesus is understood theologically as God's central act of incarnational revelation,[79] culmination of humanity and history,[80] and/or purveyor of redemption[81] for all—then a logical implication is that all traditions must be eventually be *absorbed* into Christianity's metanarrative or *eradicated* as anomalous. A theological issue, then, in view of Christianity's relations with religious others, is associated with power: asserting the superiority of the Christian paradigm, either in the present or in the future is connected to the all-encompassing power of God, and Christ in God. The salvific and redemptive power of a unique divine incarnation, coupled with the defeat of death through the resurrection, perhaps yields too much power to Christianity, or to the God of Christian traditions. As other theologians have already suggested, this power is compounded when God is imagined to be one.[82]

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[76] Edward Farley, *Deep Symbols*: *Their Postmodern Effacement and Reclamation*, Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996.
[77] I have in mind Marcella Althaus-Reid's discussion of Antonio Gramsci's Historical Hegemonic Block in *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2000): 94-95.
[78] Naming material reality as "creation" is already a theological statement. "Creation" here is a reference to Christian theological assumptions that reality is, in some sense, created and in the process of continuing creation. "Creation" can also refer to the material reality of our shared, entangled world, in contrast to whatever metaphysical reality or experience that is beyond or transcends.
[79] See the theological works of Karl Barth (*Humanity of God, Epistle to the Romans, Church Dogmatics*).
[80] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (see chapter 4 of this project).
[81] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, original publication 1974, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014.
[82] See Laurel C. Schneider's *Beyond Monotheism*.

In the 21st century, theologians and ethicists such as Kwok Pui-Lan, Willie J. Jennings, and Emilie M. Townes explicitly refer to the (Christian theological) imagination, as a faculty or mode of thinking that is haunted by patriarchal, colonizing, and racist specters. Notably, the thesis that our imaginations, or imaginings, are crucial to forming our theological and theological horizons is a departure from an Enlightenment epistemology. This epistemological standpoint positions theological truth, or certainty, with mind or Reason, which is portrayed as being beyond the pitfalls of perception, sensuality, context, or experience.

In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, René Descartes famously separates the imagination from pure intellection and understanding. Imagination, in his philosophical argument, is related to the senses, to knowledge gained through the material world. Imagination relates to bodily knowing and material sensuality. Though it can yield a kind of knowledge that is useful, such as when the mind is trying to conceptualize the abstract, ultimately imagination's connection to materiality and empirical knowledge means that it is separate from pure mind, reason, and intellection: it does not lead to the kinds of unassailable truth and certainty available through reason, which is not hampered or weighed down by materiality. A human's sense of sight, for instance, can certainly show them a tree. But where this tree is located, or whether this human actually knows the tree in its substantial, ideal form is unclear, and dependent upon existential contingencies like perception. Perception, and differences among human perception, causes doubt through its potential for producing a plurality of tree-perspectives and thus a plurality of potential tree-truths. Plurality, in this paradigm, would produce inferior forms of knowledge because of its composite nature; superior forms of knowledge are simple, unified, and undivided—which is how Descartes characterizes the mind, or reason. The imagination is connected to the mind as a mode of thinking, to be sure, but it is a mode that includes the possibility of deception precisely because of its connection to material reality. And this

possibility of (sensual) deception means that the knowledge which imagination generates is always suspect, never indubitable.[83]

Descartes is dependent upon and aligned with philosophical and theological lineages that favor ideas and ideal forms over matter and materiality. Subsequent Enlightenment thinkers, namely John Locke, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, and others, provide variations on this Cartesian bifurcation and similarly separate the imagination (and thus the body) from superior forms of knowledge connected to the mind alone.[84] Descartes' connection of imagination with feelings, or our senses, is certainly an intriguing argument—if we can separate it from his overarching mind-centric conclusions with regard to the validity of the kinds of knowledge or understanding that the imagination yields. Philosophers and theologians alike have complicated Descartes parsing of reason and the lesser modes of thinking to which imagination belongs in his system, but the legacy and potency of his epistemological assumptions remain resonant, at least in the West.

Yet, in a tenuous agreement with Descartes, we could say that imagination might operate differently than reason, logic, and/or Christian logics—or at least presumptions in Western epistemologies about what reason and logic do, apart from the body. Imagination, in a broad sense, connects knowledge (logics or Christian logics) with our perception, with the added potential for creativity or novelty. Imagination is a mode of thought that helps us dream what might not be and envision what could be. This, again, is why Descartes characterized the imagination as unreliable, fictive, or even deceptive. What is of note for our purposes here, however, is how imagination is used in theological and ethical arguments both to ground hopes for creating new ways of thinking, acting, and being and also to critique imperialisms, colonialism, and multiple forms of hegemony.

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[83] See René Descartes, Meditations 3 and 6 in *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

[84] John Locke, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant all had different ways of parsing mind from body in relation to knowledge, and defining what knowledge is, how humans have access to it, and which forms or modes connect to *a priori* truths.

Simply put, we can *imagine* change: for our theological constructs and for our shared, entangled world. We can imagine "all things new" and we can, likewise, critique the imaginings that produce theological superiorities that manifest in embodied practices of hegemony or supremacy. Imagination, in other words, is deeply connected to the logics that have been constructed and that Christians continue to construct. Theologian Gordon D. Kaufman, in his work *The Theological Imagination: Constructing a Concept of God*, states

> Theology is (and always has been) essentially a constructive work of the human imagination, an expression of the imagination's activity helping to provide orientation for human life through developing a symbolical 'picture' of the world roundabout and of the human place within that world.[85]

Kaufman's argument that constructive Christian theology is related to imagination and creativity is instructive. Theology, in this line of thought, is not just a product of Western structures of logic that separate reason from imagination, body from mind; and neither is theology *sui generis*. Theology is always-already in the process of construction and (re)interpretation. The imagination, then, is crucial to shaping and creating these theological visions.

The imagination's creative potential for reorienting our theologies, in context and place, is epistemological, related to what we know, and how we know what we know. In this way, imagining is not a neutral or unbiased activity, as emphasized heavily by postmodern scholars and critical theorists. Theologian Kwok Pui-Lan, for example, in her landmark text *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, defines "postcolonial imagination" as "desire, a determination, and a process of disengagement from the whole colonial syndrome, which takes many forms and guises."[86] Kwok then distinguishes three "critical movements" of the imagination—historical, dialogical, and diasporic—to explore how postcolonial feminist theologians can confront the legacy of colonialism

[85] Gordon D. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981): 11.
[86] Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 2.

in the effort to re-interpret Christian theological constructs beyond Eurocentric logics and paradigms. In a similar vein, theo-ethicist Emilie M. Townes has developed the concept of the fantastic hegemonic imagination to pinpoint ways in which oppressive powers of domination—the cultural production of evil, stitched into the fabric of our mundane experiences—creates or masks societal constructs, such as racial stereotypes, as truth, rather than as the products of intertwined memory, imagination, and historical particularity that they are.[87]

Both Kwok and Townes acknowledge the issue of Christianity's orientation toward religious others and religious pluralism in their critical perspectives. Kwok calls for a postcolonial theology of religious difference grounded in critiquing why "Western Christian theological discourse about religious difference is constructed in such a way as to justify a hierarchal ordering of religious traditions, which always puts Christianity on the top."[88] A key problem, for Kwok, is not the prevalence of religious diversity, which is a given; the problem is the "power differentials"[89] that are created and sustained in the face of this religious diversity, differentials that, in view of Christianity's complicity with global colonial projects, work to sustain Christianity's superiority and dominance. This kind of theological dominance is identified by Townes as Christian triumphalism, which she construes as ideological in nature:

> In the background of Christian triumphalism is an appeal to the victory over sin, evil, and death by Jesus Christ [and] through our baptism, Christians share this victory with Christ and triumph becomes ours as well. This extension then proceeds to go too far when it suggests that this triumph includes victory over non-Christians, who are deemed evil if not satanic.[90]

If constructive theology is in some foundational sense a product of what we imagine, then who or what we imagine to be powerful, superior, good, and/or right makes a difference. The

[87] Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 3.
[88] Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 205.
[89] Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination*, 205.
[90] Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 90.

potential for harm is significant, particularly in the way that Townes describes the imaginative "extension" between the theological victory of Jesus Christ and thus, the triumph of Christians over non-Christians. It is not a far epistemological leap between imagining one's God is superior to imagining that you—that Christians, and Christianity in its varied forms—are superior as well. Townes separates this kind of triumphalism from Christianity *per se*, writing that this kind of triumphalism is "baptized with Christian language": it is ideological and does not represent (true) Christianity-in-itself.[91] Though I might disagree with the separation of triumphalist ideology with any sense of a (true) Christianity, I find Townes' identification of the embodied practices of triumphalism helpful. And it is to these embodied practices of supremacy toward religious others that I will now turn.

Embodied Practices: Confluences of Privilege, Superiority, and Supremacy

Context is everything; all theology is contextual.[92] In the continued historical fallout of the Capitol riots on January 6, 2021—the pivotal moment when a sitting United States President ostensibly incited a mob to storm government building in order to stop the certification of the Electoral College vote in the Senate and the House of Representatives—a term like supremacy has acquired a heightened usage and meaning in the United States, at least for the time being. In August 2019, after visiting the site of a gun-massacre at an El Paso Wal-Mart, in which the shooter declared he purposefully targeted Mexican persons, even then-President Donald J. Trump condemned "racism, bigotry, and white supremacy," though he later retreated from the perceived extremity of

[91] Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 97.
[92] A claim from theology professor Barb J. Searcy during my undergraduate studies at Lee University, for her course Christianity and Culture. She was drawing from the work of Reinhold Neibuhr (*Christ & Culture*) and from a key observation of feminist theories and theologies.

his comments by stating that he is "concerned about the rise of any type of hate…any type of supremacy, whether it's white supremacy or antifa [sic]."[93]

Equivocation, or linguistic slippage, of the kind exhibited by the now former-President Trump is not a novel strategy, nor is it creative. It is arguably a manipulative attempt to lodge a false equivalence in the minds and hearts of those witnessing and experiencing such events; an affective diversion, so to speak. White supremacy is not the same as other kinds of supremacies, and neither is it the same thing as Antifa. Antifa, rather, is a loose coalition of anti-fascist activists and organizations, which renders it a movement ideologically opposed to all kinds of supremacy.[94] These differences are important, not just to shared, relational life, but to the ways we dissect and engage what terms like hate, supremacy, and white supremacy mean. Equivocations such as this, particularly in the public-political sphere, perhaps should beckon Christian theologians to engage in critical intersectional analysis, to recognize how white supremacy is connected to—but not the same as—other kinds of supremacies, including Christian supremacy.

White supremacy is a term that describes a racist ideology that seeks to position whiteness as ontologically superior, such that those of the "white race" should dominate society.[95] Essentially, it is an ideology that creates a racial hierarchy with vast social and political implications. Those identifying its key features, whether scholars, organizers, or journalists, connect this racial ideology to historical outcomes, from the mid-Atlantic slave trade to the expansion of European-American settler colonialists into Native American and Indigenous lands. Many scholars suggest that white

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[93]"Trump Visits Dayton and El Paso," in *The New York Times*:
https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/07/us/politics/trump-el-paso-dayton-visits.html. Also, from CNN:
https://www.cnn.com/2019/08/09/us/el-paso-shooting-friday/index.html

[94] This definition is from the Southern Poverty Law Center. See:
https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2020/06/02/designating-antifa-domestic-terrorist-organization-dangerous-threatens-civil-liberties

[95] For an accessible treatment of definitions of white supremacy, see Vann R. Newkirk II, "The Language of White Supremacy," *The Atlantic*. October 6, 2017. Accessed February 2021.
https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/10/the-language-of-white-supremacy/542148/>.

supremacy is an ideology that formed and continues to form the imaginations of the American people in significant and deleterious ways.[96]

Naming various manifestations of supremacy—apart from, but connected to, white supremacy—seems necessary, as we interrogate the intersectionalities of oppressive and repressive societal forces that cut across gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, nationality, and age. The concern with naming other kinds of supremacy, though, is that this naming could become more like the equivocation of a politician like Donald J. Trump than a serious treatment of *specifically* Christian manifestations of superiority and supremacy. With eight of ten people worldwide identifying with a religious group,[97] the question of religious supremacy, and specifically the potential for Christian supremacy, could be lurking in the background of any current Christian theological study. Though numbers of adherents continue to shift, just over 30% of the global population identifies with Christianity in some way, which is roughly 6% more than Islam—the next closest to Christianity, in terms of global population. As the United States continues to maintain the most Christian adherents of any country in the world, according to a recent study by the Pew Forum.[98] Perhaps some of these connections to Christian traditions are cultural, perhaps some are ritual or belief-based. And these numbers are likely apt to change and shift more significantly in the next decade, as Generation Z comes of age and in the residue of a global pandemic that has affected group religious participation.[99] Yet regardless of the fine lines that separate what is Christian and what is not, or who is Christian, and who is not: the numbers are significant enough for Christian

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[96] As noted elsewhere, see especially the work of Willie James Jennings (*The Christian Imagination*) and Emilie M. Townes (*Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*).
[97] Pew Forum Global Religious Landscape (https://www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-exec/).
[98] See Pew Forum research here: https://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/. There are countries with small populations as whole that have higher percentages of Christian adherents, but the United States as the largest population of Christians.
[99] This assumes that church membership and identification with Christianity are parallel. There are issues with this assumption regarding Christianity, but the numbers are still significant, especially in the context of the coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic (https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/03/29/church-membership-fallen-below-majority/).

theologians to continually acknowledge for a project concerned with how Christianity relates to other religious traditions, in terms of Christian logics and embodied practices. And perhaps these numbers, and how they are related to the potential for belief superiority and/or socio-political life, may be important to acknowledge for any Christian theological project.[100]

Yet percentages do not always indicate how supremacist attitudes or behaviors are being felt or implemented: during the apartheid era in South Africa, for instance, black South Africans accounted for a majority (84%) of the population, yet were made to suffer under the minority Afrikaner regime that held legislative, judicial, military, and executive power. The key difference was not the population percentage but who held certain forms of political power. In the case of South Africa, the difference was also an ideology (or logic) of racial supremacy advocating for an ontological hierarchy of color, an affect of racial superiority, and the political will (embodied practices) to enforce white supremacy into its social and political fabric.[101] In a similar vein, to claim that Christianity generates Christian supremacy purely because of numbers would be too reductive for this current project. Part of the question, then, is how Christianity's global reach—represented by a significant percentage of adherents globally—should perhaps catalyze critical assessments of the ways in which Christianity and Christian communities are (and have been) subject to logics, affects, and embodied practices that lend themselves to manifestations of religious supremacy.

In her book *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America*, Khyati Y. Joshi, a Hindu-American scholar and educator, asserts that in the formation of the modern United States, whiteness and Christianity became entangled in such a way that neither can be separated from the other. To embody the pinnacle of the American hierarchy, which includes whiteness, one must also be Christian, or at least "look Christian" while embodying assumptions and practices that are

[100] I think this is significant for any Christian theological project, but that claim entails a universalization that I cannot make at this point.
[101] Leonard M. Thompson. *A History of South Africa,* 3rd ed. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001.

interpreted as culturally and socially acceptable. Joshi describes the American reality as one of Christian normativity:

> The Christian norm often functions in tandem with the racial normativity of Whiteness to generate structures and ideas of White Christian supremacy, such that Whiteness and Christianity are read as American, while everything else appears foreign.[102]

Joshi argues, essentially, that those who are non-Christian and those who are non-white are incapable of summiting the pinnacle of this social hierarchy: they either do not look the part, or they do not act or believe the part. Discrimination based on religious identities, just like racial bias, happens on individual and collective levels. Joshi's goal is to specifically interrogate the overarching assumptions about who or what is deemed American, with non-white and non-Christian persons always falling short.

Even though the priorities of my project are less about interrogating what is included or excluded in the making of an American identity, Joshi's arguments are pertinent and timely regarding Christianity's political effect(s) in a religiously plural context like the United States.[103] She names, for instance, the subtle reality of Christian normativity, as well as its connections to Christian privilege, superiority, and supremacy. She states:

> Christianity's normative power in US culture reflects *the assumption by Christians that their own belief system is universal, or ought to be rendered universal without question or critique*…a norm can be expressed in violence or expressions of prejudice, but more often it exists simply as one group's ideas or characteristics coming to be understood as *universal, true, and ordinary*.[104]

Universality, or the assumption of universality, is deeply connected to Christian privilege, superiority, and supremacy, in that it sustains a paradigm of Christian normativity. In this paradigm, Christian beliefs and practices are confused with what is normative in wider culture, meaning that Christians

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[102] Joshi, *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America*, 22.
[103] My focus in this project is on Christian superiority vis-à-vis other traditions, as in manifests in American contexts. Thus, my argument is less concerned about American identity, but obviously these aspects of superiority, normativity, privilege, and supremacy are interrelated.
[104] Joshi, *White Christian Privilege*, 22.

can live, move, and breathe with more ease than those who are non-Christian. Christian privilege includes never questioning why Christmas is a national holiday or why 'omnivore' is typically assumed to the lowest common denominator for communal meals.[105] And this failure to question Christian privilege catalyzes the notion that what is Christian and what is normal are parallel, creating and constructing an artifice of Christian supremacy.[106]

Christian privilege, normativity, and supremacy are created and reinforced by cultural constructions. Superiority for Joshi is largely "internal/attitudinal" and directly connected to experiencing privilege: when "beliefs and thought patterns…reify the idea that members of the dominant group have some specific right to their position and its advantages."[107] Christian superiority specifically materializes because "Christians have consciously and unconsciously internalized the message that Christianity is superior…abetted by the idea that Christianity is the ordinary and natural way of things."[108] Superiority, for Joshi, is different from supremacy because it is largely internal and individual, whereas supremacy is external and societal. In this way, Joshi's description of superiority, as largely individual, maps onto Alfred Adler's theory of superiority. I will depart from Joshi in this respect, but her distinguishing of these terms, as well as her identification of superiority as attitudinal, is helpful.

Joshi keeps the political ramifications of Christian superiority, supremacy, privilege, and normativity, as experienced in the United States, as the focal point throughout her argument. Identifying the internal and attitudinal dimensions of superiority that go hand-in-hand in constructing a society in which "Christian" and "normal" slide into each other is critical to ultimately shifting this pattern. Joshi, however, is not a Christian theologian; her powerful critiques are

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[105] See discussion of "omnivore" in Jonathan Safran Foer's *Eating Animals*, New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 2009.
[106] Joshi, *White Christian Privilege*, 63.
[107] Joshi, *White Christian Privilege*, 130.
[108] Joshi, *White Christian Privilege*, 62ff; 130.

therefore focused on how Christians can shift their understanding and behavior such that more equitable practices become the norm for America's socio-political context. Identifying and critiquing Christian theological constructs that might reinforce supremacy—Christian logics that might work against the kind of equity for which Joshi calls—is beyond her purview. In light of Kwok Pui-Lan's call for Christian theologians to engage in self-criticism of their own discipline, should perhaps be more the concern of Christian theologians than the work of non-Christian scholars.

Thus, beyond Joshi's argument, the next step, arguably, from *within* Christianity, is to discern how Christian theologies potentially cannot be disentangled from the histories of Christian superiority. The challenge is to determine whether these theologies (and Christian logics) might create, reinforce, and repeat the social constructions of Christian normativity across time and place. As already noted, Joshi's project emphasizes the intersectionality of supremacy, wherein what is "White" and what is "Christian" work together to create White Christian Supremacy. I agree with Joshi that supremacies are intersectional: race, ethnicity, gender, and so on cannot be disaggregated when diagnosing the problem or proposing solutions. However, to "stay with the [Christian] trouble," for the purposes of this project, I will abstract Christianity in order to focus on the Christian logics that might create, produce, and sustain Christian superiority and normativity. This abstraction is temporary and provisional, for the purpose of spotlighting what it is, exactly, about Christian theologies or Christian theological imaginings that inculcate this superiority. Further, this abstraction follows Alfred North Whitehead's perspective about the fallacy of misplaced concreteness; for Whitehead, abstraction is only useful in relationship to, and emerging from, material reality.[109] This abstraction is not an attempt to discover Christian origins or establish an abstract, pure version of Christianity, an ideal form that eclipses material experience. With this abstraction, however, we cannot lose sight of the reality that *there are different affects and effects based on*

[109] Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 16-17.

where one fits or does not fit into Christian normativity, in relation to power and to one's intersectional identities and communities. A black Christian in America, for example, will have a different experience of the benefits and incentives of a Christian affective economy than a white Christian in America, with the latter benefiting from both their race and their religion; women-identified-women, LGBTQ+ persons, and non-Americans will also experience complex and entangled layers of privilege and exclusion.

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, to argue that Christianity is one thing, or that Christians are in agreement, theologically, is somewhat of a nonstarter for any comparative methodology which aims to put Christianity, phenomenologically speaking or otherwise, in conversation with another religious tradition. Speaking only of North American Christianities, we can imagine that there are as many iterations of Christianity as there are denominational churches, non-denominational churches, and other liminal entities identifying with Christian traditions.[110] However, despite the difficulty of identifying and solidifying the bounds that make comparison between and among religious traditions possible, what should not be denied is that there are boundaries of some kind that make the term "Christianity" a significant or meaningful term, as Joshi shows in her discussion of white Christian privilege.[111] In short, neither Christianity's diverse global permutations nor its internal theological differences, from Protestant to Catholic to Orthodox, exempt Christianity or Christian logics from critique and accountability.

Though I cannot and will not argue that Christianity is one thing, I do assert that there is a sense of "Christianity" or "Christianities" that at the very least makes an impression.[112] This impression can move us toward describing a practical, meaningful phenomenon that has captured

[110] To reiterate what has and will be clarified in other sections, this dissertation focuses primarily on North American versions of Christianity.
[111] Similarly, to invoke the city analogy again, there are delineations that mark the difference between New York City and not-NYC, Chicago and not-Chicago, Los Angeles and not-Los Angeles.
[112] I use "impression" in relation to Sara Ahmed's affect theory, which will be discussed in chapter 2 of this project.

hearts and theological imaginations for over two thousand years. What designates Christianity from its "others" and Christianity from "Christianities" will blur as we get closer to the boundaries,[113] but at the same time, there is arguably a common sense understanding of Christianity that provides an avenue for comparison and relationship(s) —relationships and logics that may inevitably tend toward establishing Christianity as superior to all difference that it encounters.

Toward Feeling: Prehending Superiority

Because defining Christianity and establishing what superiority is, along with its theological derivations and manifestations, is a complex endeavor that require nuance, I will approach these entities and concepts throughout this project as moving targets. These moving targets are not just epistemological, and neither are they exclusively abstract or metaphysical: superiority is connected to various Christian logics, but is also connected to embodied practices, and affects, that emerge or disappear depending on context. As noted in the Introduction, delineating the bounds of "Christianity" and "Christian traditions," then, is complex: the boundaries are simultaneously stable and elusive, fixed yet moving.[114] Thus, in the next chapter, I will begin to demarcate these boundaries by describing Christianity in terms of affect—its affective resonance in an economy of individual and collective feelings and emotions that flow in and through "the ordinary and the fantastic," the local and the global, the particular and the universal.[115]

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[113] I have in mind, here, Karen Barad's distilling of quantum physics research in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007. Entities have boundaries, but the stability of these boundaries blur as you get closer to their demarcation, or to the boundary that seems apparent, fixed, and stable. I am suggesting that Christianity is similar: from a bird's-eye vantage point, it seems that Christianity is easy to distinguish from other entities. However, when we move closer, defining the bounds of Christianity—and what makes something Christian or not—is much more complex (*Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 161ff). See also Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity," in *Qui parle* 19:2 (2011): 121–158.

[114] See Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway* with regard to determining the boundaries of entities or objects.

[115] Sara Ahmed, "Affective Economies," *Social Text* 22, no. 2 (2004): 118.

If establishing superiority is at least partly related to determining the bounds of inclusion and exclusion, so as to determine who or what is better or worse in a given religious paradigm or hierarchy, then it is important to discuss how these delineations and boundaries are made and sustained. Sarah Ahmed's concept of affective economies, as part of her broader work in affect theory, may prove helpful to identifying the feelings that might be inculcated for those who live, move, and have their being within a Christian system of value. What if superiority is an affect within this Christian affective economy, an affect for which there is value, with regard to power and dominance, and incentive(s) for sustaining that power both materially and theologically?[116]

[116] In her last publication, affect theorist Lauren Berlant posits "inconvenience" as an affect. I had already begun describing superiority as an affect in my own research for this project, but Berlant's approach to "inconvenience" is very helpful and further grounds my approach. Lauren Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022.

Chapter 2

Feeling Superior:
Christian Feelings in an Affective Economy of Power and Relation

Life is complex in its expression, involving more than percipience, namely desire, emotion, will, and feeling.[1]
Alfred North Whitehead

I don't know what most white people in this country feel,
I can only conclude what they feel from the state of their institutions…[2]
James Baldwin
Interview for the Dick Cavett show (1968)

Cultural theorists of affect are interested in how certain feelings and emotions come to be associated with certain bodies and with what consequences.[3]
Karen Bray and Stephen D. Moore

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart… 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'
Mark 12:30-32

Introduction

Superiority is not just a theological concern that permeates the ways that Christians think or imagine. Arguably, superiority extends into the ways that Christians act, or operationalize, *theo-logics* or Christian logics in an entangled, relational world of multiplicity and difference.[4] The question of

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[1] Alfred North Whitehead, *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge*, 197.
[2] James Baldwin, interview, in the documentary film *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016), directed by Raoul Peck.
[3] Karen Bray and Stephen D. Moore, eds. "Introduction: Mappings and Crossings," in *Religion, Emotion, Sensation: Affect Theories and Theologies*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).
[4] As stated differently elsewhere, on occasion I will use the terms *theo-logic* or *theo-logical* rather than theology or theological. Alternatively, I will use the phrase "Christian logic(s)." When I employ these terms, I am drawing attention toward the ways that Christian theologies often play by Western rules and assumptions about what is logical, reasonable, rational, and so on. This includes whole histories of what is typically meant by 'logical' (rationality, rules of logic, fallacies) and what is typically excluded (feeling, story, narrative, dreams, etc.). Theo-logic is an attempt to draw attention to the discursive effects of Christian divine imaginings. I am indebted to my doctoral student predecessors at Vanderbilt (Amaryah Shaye Armstrong, Hilary J. Scarsella, Peter Capretto) for introducing me to the term at monthly theology colloquiums. See also Laurel C. Schneider's *Beyond Monotheism*, especially the Preface, Introduction, Chapter 10, and Chapter 11 for various uses of logic (logic of the One, logic of the Many, logic of multiplicity). I am not using this term in the way that Hans Urs von Balthasar does in his three volume *Theo-Logic* series.

how this superiority extends is both philosophical and practical—and for this project, theological. To discuss how superiority might manifest in Christian theological constructs, I now turn from Christian logics of superiority to its affective and embodied possibilities: superiority as an affect.[5]

Affect brings to the fore questions of relationality: how we think, feel, and act toward those with whom we are relating. Christianity as a tradition, arguably, is in regular relationships with other traditions implicitly and explicitly. Implicitly because being a Christian usually means that you are not a Muslim;[6] and explicitly because Christian traditions not only historically emerged from another religious tradition, but also has a well-known and formidable conversion impulse that marks relationships with other traditions.[7] Conversion practices are explicitly relational because the sense is that one must leave one tradition (or no tradition) to join a different tradition. Thus, in a project like this, conversion presents a problem in the case that conversion is tied to Christian traditions being understood and accepted as superior to all traditions that are not-Christianity.

This chapter will follow trajectories sketched by contemporary affect theorists, primarily Sara Ahmed and Donovan Schaefer.[8] If the first chapter is a way of delineating ways in which Christianity may always-already (theologically) be positioned as superior to religious others as an extension of traditional Christology, then this second chapter is a way to move from the assumption that superiority only (or primarily) encompasses the ways Christians are taught to think about God—or, the logical flow of Christian theological imaginings and narratives. Following Sara Ahmed and other

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[5] See footnote 116 in chapter 1.

[6] The boundaries of religious identity are a complex phenomenon. Religious identities as mutually exclusive is an assumption, as noted by scholars exploring facets of multiple religious belonging and participation, religious hybridity, etc. Mainstream interfaith engagement largely assumes singular religious identities, while those who identify explicitly with more than one tradition continues to be small in number – though this could be an issue with current survey tools. For further exploration, see the work of Catherine Cornille; or the study of current trends in religious affiliation measured by the Pew Research Center.

[7] This impulse is often tied to sacred texts such as "The Great Commission" (Mark 16: 15-18; Matthew 28: 18-20); or to other texts such as John 14:6.

[8] Other affect theorists will be discussed, but primarily in the ways they interact with lineages of thought espoused by Sara Ahmed and Donovan Schaefer.

affect theorists, the goal of this chapter is to posit a Christian affective economy that influences how we feel. In the words of affect theorist Kathleen Stewart, "Events, relations, and impacts accumulate as the capacities to affect and be affected. Public feelings world up as lived circuits of action and reaction…here, affect is a gathering place of accumulative dispositions."[9] In Christian traditions, superiority is "in the water," so to speak, one of the "accumulative dispositions" that potentially permeates Christian frameworks, experiences, and theological imaginations regarding religious others and/or strangers.[10]

Following contemporary affect theory, feelings are powerful and are inclusive of emotions but not bounded by individual emotional states as such. The focus, rather, is how feelings and affects are deeply related to movement, circulation, and to formations or assemblages of power, such that certain feelings sustain particular forms of power. Because superiority is typically related to hierarchical dimensions of power, a potential implication of this circulation could be that both Christian theologies and practices are affectively entangled with superiority—or, feeling superior to religious others, either overtly or covertly, is theologically constituted in a Christian affective economy. In this way, superiority would not just be a logic of deeming one's group or tradition as better than another, but may also operate as both an individual and collective feeling.[11] A theological implication is that this feeling of religious superiority could potentially catalyze other effects in a relational, shared, entangled world, such as creating theo-ontological hierarchies in which Christianity and Christians represent the pinnacle of religion.

Moving on from delineating a Christian logic of superiority, the present chapter will turn toward discussing superiority as an affect, or emotional practice, circulating within a Christian

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[9] Kathleen Stewart, "Afterword: Worlding Refrains," 339. In the *Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Gregg and Seigworth, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.
[10] Sara Ahmed's approach to theories of stranger and other is instructive (*Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality,* London: Routledge, 2000).
[11] Ahmed, "Collective Feelings; or, The Impressions Left by Others," in *Theory, Culture, and Society* 21, no. 2 (2004): 25-42.

affective economy. I will first delineate trajectories of affect theory that emerge in religious studies and other critical fields, and then I will discuss Sara Ahmed's concept of affective economies as a way of describing Christianity for this project. Part of the reason that Ahmed's concept of affective economies is compelling is the way in which imagines how emotions and feelings circulate, accumulate, form boundaries, and create norms; again, for my project, this is a way to imagine that superiority is "in the water" of Christian traditions. Next, to illustrate how a Christian affective economy might work in a religiously plural society, I will then briefly discuss a phenomenon identified by sociologists and historians of religion called the Christian persecution complex, to show how Christian logics of superiority might accumulate affective resonance with powerful deleterious effects. Last, I will return to this question of superiority as a feeling within a Christian affective economy, as a way to connect to chapter three which begins to discuss how superiority might be endemic, rather than peripheral, to Christian theologies and embodied practices vis-à-vis religious others.

Affect and Causality

As powerful as it may be, affect is not necessarily causal; or, at least tracing affects is more complicated than just following breadcrumbs back to an original moment, event, or text. Even as I try to confront the material possibilities of Christian superiority, I am aware that manifestations of superiority cannot necessarily be reduced to a formula or to a chain reaction, as if logics and their effects follow lines of simple causality. For despite any hope we might have for a simple consonance between thought and feeling, or between logic and action, there is no guarantee that a particular action will demonstrate a particular theological perspective or belief, and vice versa. Establishing superiority as a theological concern is not an effort to claim a reductive, easily traceable causality between orientations of superiority and its affective and embodied permutations, especially between

Christians and religious others. That is to say: knowing, believing, or assenting to a particular theological claim does not always translate into a predictable action or effect. Christian traditions claim, for instance, that God is love, yet Christians and Christian churches or communities might act in decidedly unloving ways toward religious others. Acting in particular ways—for example, Christians embodying a theology of inclusion and welcome by showing up at a protest against Islamophobia—may not be *just* about translating thought, or logic, into action. And conversely, there remains the possibility that Christians who welcome or include Muslims might still maintain a functional theology that rests on the superiority of the Christian tradition, however subtle or covert those logics and feelings may be.[12]

If translating thought into action were simple, then eradicating social ills such as racism, white supremacy, xenophobia, homophobia, and Christian supremacy could be as uncomplicated as changing minds via a convincing, persuasive, air-tight logical argument. Likewise, we could assume that shifting Christian logics might directly translate into actions that are more consistent, or properly aligned, with the logical flow of that particular theological horizon (God is love translates into loving actions toward others).[13] But as continual resurgences of the social realities of racism and white supremacy in America indicate, there is often more at work in these deeply ingrained orientations than just logics and subsequent embodied action(s). Understanding causality is complex in a post-Newtonian world, which is perhaps why some philosophers and theologians in the latter half of the twentieth century have a renewed focus on how theology and ethics are embedded in a world of process, movement, and quantum entanglement. In short, shifting deeply entrenched

[12] Some LGBTQ+ Christians have experienced a similar dynamic, wherein a rhetorical welcome of some variation does not always translate into a shifting of theological foundations. For an example of a Christian theological text that rhetorically includes but practically excludes LGBTQ+ Christians, all while employing an ethic of love, see Stanley J. Grenz, *Welcoming but Not Affirming: An Evangelical Response to Homosexuality,* Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998.

[13] I am aware that some Christians would interpret certain conversion tactics, or other questionable actions, as "loving" religious others. I am trying to identify actions that would be interpreted as loving by both parties, Christian and non-Christian, and that likely includes a mutual consent of some kind.

realities and imagining different theological horizons may require more than just convincing a person of their error; it may involve attending to individual and collective emotion and feeling.[14] Or, imagining and acting otherwise includes what we colloquially refer to as the heart, as well as the mind.[15]

Contemporary Christian theologians may not refer to the "heart" so much as they refer to emotions, feelings, and dispositions that are commonly associated with the heart. Catherine Keller and Laurel C. Schneider, for example, both discuss love as a crucial theological theme that attends to difference and diversity in an entangled world of multiplicity.[16] Likewise Kathryn Tanner, a theologian known for her work related to Christology, culture, and economy, asserts that "religious beliefs, whether of obviously practical import or not, are meant not just to be believed but to be lived, to orient behavior, *attitudes*, and actions toward oneself and others."[17] In order to address emergences of theological superiority, then, we must address more than ideas, more than the ways that we think and imagine; we must address ways that we feel. And perhaps more significantly, we must also be attentive to the ways in which those within Christian traditions, porous and elusive as those group boundaries are, might learn to feel in ways that become attitudes, orientations,

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[14] See prior discussion (chapter 1) of Michael P. Hall and Kaitlin T. Raimi, "Is Belief Superiority Justified by Superior Knowledge?", in *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 76 (2018): 290–306.

[15] This is not to claim that the meaning of "heart" is universally understood. In the Introduction to the *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Emotion*, scholar John Corrigan asks several questions about how to interpret "the heart" in the context of religious experience and practice. These questions range from identifying the "vocabularies of feeling" related to the heart, to evaluating whether the "heart" is gendered. He writes, "The short answer to questions such as these is that the way to making sense of what is happening when a person pledges the heart is through the investigation of social relations, family dynamics, physical states, conceptions of self, local epistemologies, and other factors. Emotion taken for granted as something that 'everybody knows,' or universally experiences or conceives in the same way, discourages exploration into the personal and cultural bits and pieces that lie behind the scene of an emotional event. Emotional life is to a certain extent culturally constructed, and it is through the examination of elements of cultural that we can uncover the meanings of enacted emotion." (Corrigan, *Religion and Emotion*, 8).

[16] See Laurel C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (New York: Routledge, 2008): 202-207; Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018): 154-158; and Catherine Keller, "In Questionable Love," *Cloud of the Impossible: Negative Theology and Planetary Entanglement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

[17] Kathryn Tanner, *Christianity and the New Spirit of Capitalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019): 5. Emphasis mine.

accumulative dispositions, and/or emotional practices that have significant influence regarding how we imagine ourselves in relationships with, and to, religious others.[18]

As such, this chapter explores how Christian logics may be connected to embodied practices, or actions, and to posit that these actions are deeply entangled with feeling. This is to continue to pose the possibility (from the prior chapter) that a Christian logic of superiority is endemic to Christian traditions, and that they may not always manifest as the easily identifiable forms more often than not associated with Christian exclusivists. Christian superiority of this kind is certainly overt, and likely uses language of conversion (of religious others) or eradication (of religious difference). This overt form is concerning, but I am also attentive to the covert, subtle ways in which a Christian logic of superiority manifests as an imagined orientation of universal absorption or mysterious inclusivity of religious others, expressed as a loving act of a (Christian) divinity, and often by Christian theologians who are directly engaged in questions of religious difference and pluralism.[19] With both overt and covert forms of superiority in mind, turning toward affect is a way to explore whether and how these overt and covert logics may be inculcated, and to explore how Christian logics of superiority may not just be about traceable causality or identifiable intention(s) that consciously presume a hierarchical ordering of religious traditions or the eradication of religious difference through references to universal concepts.[20]

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[18] Monique Scheer, "Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (And Is That What Makes Them Have a History?) A Bourdieuian Approach to Understanding Emotion," *History and Theory* 51 (May 2012), 193-220.

[19] This phenomenon will be discussed in the final chapter of this dissertation, with reference to contemporary theological approaches to religious difference, such as transreligious theology (see *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, Special Issue: 34, "The Spiritual But Not Religious and Theology Without Walls," https://irstudies.org/index.php/jirs/issue/archive).

[20] In trajectories of Christian theologies, this is often styled as the "universal Christ" or "cosmic Christ."

Affect Theory, Broadly Speaking

Affect theory is a critical field of study that takes emotions, feelings, and senses into account. The supposition is that, as humans, we are more than just "talking heads" who exist because we think, or reason; rather, we are embodied creatures with senses, emotions, and feeling(s) that are connected to, but also exceed, rational thought.[21] Thus a basic assumption of affect theory is that thought and feeling are interconnected in ways that we cannot always know or discern fully. Descartes' well-known claim of *cogito ergo sum* is dubitable precisely because thinking cannot be so easily bifurcated from perception, sensibility, and feeling. It is not that Descartes is wrong, it is that Descartes' centering of reason—as something separate from perception, emotion, bodily experience, and so on—simply does not tell a full story.

In contrast, affect theory can be understood, at least in part, as a counterpoint or intervention into liberal and postliberal frameworks that continue to over-emphasize knowledge, knowledge-production, rationality, and reason as key features that determine humanness and (even) human superiority or uniqueness vis-à-vis other sentient (animals) and non-sentient (plants, rocks) entities.[22] Affect theory is also best contextualized in relation to postcolonial and decolonial studies, critical race theory, feminist and queer theories, as well as in a global political context of late neoliberal capitalism that take power and oppression into consideration. At heart, affect theory addresses the affects and effects of relationality.

Situating affect theory in this way is important because it helps to show two key trajectories that affect theorists often follow in their critical and constructive work, as helpfully mapped out by

[21] As with many critical theories, it might be best to think of affect theory as "affect theories." Affect theory (in the singular) will be used throughout this project, as that is the currently accepted way of referencing this theoretical lineage in academic settings. Gregg and Seigworth, in their introduction to *The Affect Theory Reader*, affirm that there is no singular lineage or trajectory of affect theory.

[22] I want to note here that these are human assumptions about sentience of other entities beyond humanity.

religion scholar Donovan O. Schaefer.[23] Put simply, one trajectory Schaefer identifies as more Deleuzian, in which affect is understood in relationship to concepts like becoming and intensity. An emphasis in this line of thought is on the unconscious way that affect constructs history and experience, a becoming of individuals and collectives that is not always predicated on consciousness or awareness of what is happening in a given moment of process, or transition. Emotions, in this trajectory, are distinguished from affect while at the same time being derived from affect—but affect, in a sense, is prior. According to Schaefer, one pitfall of the Deleuzian trajectory is that embodied experiences can potentially slip too far into the ideal or the abstract; bodies can get lost if notions of "becoming" are too vague or veer too much toward metaphysics rather than phenomenology. The focus is on the process (becoming) rather than the embodied effects of these affective processes.[24]

A second trajectory, aligned more with theorists such as Sara Ahmed and Mel Y. Chen, among others, emphasizes the relational, material, and embodied aspects of affect.[25] As Schaefer notes, Ahmed, Chen, and others are purposefully "less committed to the differentiation of affect and emotion," such that feeling, affect, and emotion refer to the same phenomenon.[26] Establishing affect as prior to (conscious) emotion is less important than addressing the complexities and practical effects of affect, emotion, and feeling in general. This focus on both affect and emotion is, for Ahmed especially, connected to critically appraising how emotions and emotional states such as

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[23] Two texts of Donovan O. Schaefer's will be discussed in this chapter: *The Evolution of Affect Theory* (2019) and *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (2015). Though there is a growing number of religion theorists and theologians turning toward affect, Schaefer is notable for initiating connections between the fields affect theory and theology. The former text primarily maps affect theory and forges connections among fields; the latter is Schaefer's longer theoretical treatment.

[24] Schaefer, *Evolution of Affect Theory*, 13. In Schaefer's words: "The focal point of becoming is the modality of change as such, rather than what one changes into."

[25] Though I primarily focus on Sara Ahmed's work in this dissertation, Mel Y. Chen's *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Duke University Press, 2012) has been influential to my thought processes as well, particularly Chen's treatment of toxicity and affect.

[26] Schaefer, *The Evolution of Affect Theory*, 7-8. Schaefer refers here to Ahmed's text *Promise of Happiness* (2010).

happiness, fear, anger, and disgust may be part of the process of forming and maintaining powerful political bodies, such as nation-states or for my purposes here, religious traditions.[27]

Schaefer argues that a key question undergirding affect theory centers on confluences of feeling and power. He phrases this question as:

> How do felt or sensed dimensions of power—not just surrounding political leaders, but throughout the field of politics—fuel the vast machines making and unmaking societies?[28]

The latter part of this question attends to the possibility that the combined affect of feeling and power contribute to the "making" of social worlds. What Schaefer is helpfully points to is that affect theory is not just intended to parse our imaginative constructions (the worlds we want to create), but is oriented toward identifying how we make worlds together. Applying this to specifically to a religious tradition such as Christianity, for instance, we could likewise ask how "felt or sensed dimensions of [Christian theological] power—not just surrounding [Christian leaders or theologians]…" contributes to theological constructions and embodied practices that affect how worlds are made and unmade, in the context of religious diversity and difference.

After offering this key question, Schaefer then defines affect theory as "an approach to history, politics, culture, and all other aspects of embodied life that emphasizes the role of nonlinguisitic and non- or para-cognitive forces. As a method, affect theory asks *what bodies do*—what they want, where they go, what they think, how they decide—and especially how bodies are impelled by forces other than language or reason."[29] Schaefer's definition is expansive, identifying

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[27] In the Introduction to *Religion, Emotion, Sensation: Affect Theories and Theologies,* Karen Bray and Stephen D. Moore, like Schaefer, suggest that there are two trajectories of affect theory. They identify Tomkins-Sedgwick and Deleuze-Massumi as the two trajectories, and then refer to Seigworth and Gregg's *Affect Theory Reader* as a text that offers even more orientations or "approaches" to affect theory. Bray and Moore acknowledge Schaefer's framework in the process of presenting their own version; I want to note here that Schaefer's framework can also map nicely along the Tomkins-Sedgwick (leading to Sara Ahmed, etc.) and Deleuze-Massumi (leading to Kathleen Stewart and others.) offered by Bray and Moore (pgs. 1-6).

[28] Schaefer, *Evolution of Affect Theory*, 1.

[29] Schaefer, *Evolution of Affect Theory*, 1.

affect theory as an approach that does not assume a starting point of language or articulated rationality. This is important, for affect theory to account for the ways in which attitudes, feelings, and emotions—as well as other "non- or para- cognitive forces"—are socially compelling and effectual.[30]

The "bodies" that Schaefer describes are both individual and collective, and though different theories might emphasize one over the other, a consistent aspect of affect theory is that interpretations of ourselves and the world around us extend beyond cognition, turning to sense and feeling as a way to paint a more holistic picture that takes matter, and bodies, into consideration. As Patricia Clough, critical affect and gender theorist similarly suggests, "The turn to affect points… to a dynamism immanent to bodily matter and matter generally—matter's capacity for self-organization in being informational."[31] For Clough, and other theorists who follow what Schaefer outlines as the Deuleuzian trajectory of affect, this "self-organization" is not just related to an individual's emotion or feeling (and their consciousness or awareness of how they feel), but to the "discourses of affect" that compose and produce powerful bodies, such as institutions.

What is essential to underscore is that affect theory is attentive to power—how it operates, what it does, its affect(s) and effect(s). This focus on power is why it is important to understand the emergence of affect theory, at least in part, in its relationship to the emergence of other critical fields, such as feminist theories and queer theory, that are also highly attuned to both small and large-scale power formations. Feminist theories and theologies, for instance, interrogate patriarchal forms of power, and specifically how patriarchy is imagined and solidified through social logics, constructions, and practices; heteronormativity and the heterosexual matrix, for instance, are not just

[30] One of Schaefer's main arguments in *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* is to expand definitions of religion to include animals.
[31] Patricia Clough, "The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedia, and Bodies," in *The Affect Theory Reader,* edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigsworth, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 207.

casual social translations of thought into embodied actions, rather they are felt and performed.[32] Likewise, queer theory attends to how power is consolidated and substantiated through ideas and practices of normativity (heteronormativity) that are repeated. What affect theory adds is that forms of social power, expressed in practices and assumptions of normativity, do not always operate according to logic of which we are consciously aware: power is also a consolidation of individual and collective feeling(s), or orientation(s), toward others in a shared, entangled world of multiplicity and difference. Feminist theories might helpfully delineate how superiority extends from dualistic relationships of better or worse, higher or lower, superior or inferior—as applied on a scale, or chain, of being that defines, differentiates, and compares male-female, human-animal…Christian-nonChristian. Queer theory might help us articulate how Christian traditions might be dependent upon all that is not-Christianity, in similar ways that heterosexuality is dependent upon (deviant) others, like homosexuals; yet in this dependence, Christian traditions (like heterosexuality) are understood or assumed to express a norm, making all that is not-Christianity non-normative and inferior. Affect theory, though, helps us conceive of ways that power and normativity is felt, creating moments perhaps that Christians might feel superior to religious others, and that these feelings can compose and produce powerful bodies.[33]

This is not an altogether surprising connection or possibility: religious and theological narratives often imagine ultimate, total, and/or cosmic divine power. We could ask subsequent questions, then, such as how such ultimate, cosmic divine power arises? Do we think or feel it—or both? Are some more connected to this power than others? And what feelings might arise in relation to religious others, who might have competing imaginations or feelings vis-à-vis cosmic, divine power?

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[32] See Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* for their theory of performativity.
[33] Patricia Clough, "The Affective Turn: Political Economy, Biomedia, and Bodies," in *The Affect Theory Reader,* edited by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigsworth, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 207.

Affect Theory, Religiously Speaking

As noted above, tracing what affect is and does is a complex endeavor. There is perhaps no simple, causal connection that can be drawn between a theological assertion and the arising of particular feelings or affect. "Affectivity, it seems, is no less elusive a concept than divinity," write theologians Karen Bray and Stephen D. Moore in their introduction to *Religion, Emotion, Sensation: Affect Theories and Theologies*. A theorist like Sara Ahmed, for example, embraces this ambiguity, while at the same time, brings into focus the material effects that affect might contribute to the formation of bodies, assemblages, desires, and power. Despite acknowledging affect theory's slippery nature, Bray and Moore helpfully articulate that

> Affect theory, on this account, might be considered the critical exploration both of what types of acts, knowledge, bodies, and worlds are produced in the capacious, intensely charged spaces of in-betweenness, beneathness, and alongsideness *and* of how we might better attend to affect's roles in such productions.[34]

Subsequently, Bray and Moore name four ways that affect theory might generatively intersect with religious and/or theological studies. First, they note that affect theory provides a way to move beyond privileging the linguistic aspects of religion. Religion is not necessarily just the embodied effect of sacred texts and their articulated interpretation; religion and theology can be posited as affectual, as having the effect of inculcating or eliciting certain affects, feelings, and/or emotions, regardless of explicit articulation.[35] Donovan Schaefer's work (discussed in later section of this chapter) is key in highlighting nonlinguistic aspects of religion—and how linguistic-centered theories

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[34] Karen Bray and Stephen D. Moore, eds. "Introduction: Mappings and Crossings," in *Religion, Emotion, Sensation: Affect Theories and Theologies*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), 2.

[35] This would somewhat contradict the work of religious studies scholar Clifford Geertz and Christian theologian Charles Lindbeck, each for their reliance on language as the primary force in forming religious traditions and communities. What is shared between affect theory and Clifford Geertz, however, is the focus on the motivations and dispositions that are related to religious traditions. Like other theorists in religion in his time, Geertz is known for tying this to metaphor and symbol.

and theologies tend to privilege human concerns over and against other forms of animality and sentience. In brief, affect theory offers theologians a way to conceptualize how "nonrational encounters with both the sacred and the mundane have epistemological force."[36] Affect theory, then, offers a way for theologians to attend to the power of the Christian theological imagination, beyond just what is stated or written in a sacred text, for instance; what is felt moves, which makes the potentialities of affect a powerful force.

Second, for Bray and Moore, affect theory helps us consider materiality as vital to any study of religion or theology. This is to diverge from philosophical lineages that deny or downgrade the body in favor of the mind. With an eye toward new materialism, affect theory might suggest that every aspect of Christian traditions, from sacred texts to collective rituals, should be considered in its entanglements and relationships with the material world—human, vegetable, mineral, and beyond. My interpretation of a sacred text might depend upon how it makes me feel—and perhaps how it makes me feel is related to the hermeneutical strategies of the communities in which I participate, as well as whether my gut microbiome is balanced, or not.[37]

Third, affect theory helps us reconsider the lines theologians have drawn between the secular and sacred, or the sacred and profane. This is not to make everything religious, necessarily, but to "[recognize] within [secular protest movements] religious sensibilities in certain affectual modes."[38] This point might be akin to asking how neoliberal capitalism could be a religion, or religious in nature. Or, in similar vein, claiming that a dedicated Tennessee Titans football fan participates in rituals, chants, and other embodied practices that verge on what we might name as religious if or

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[36] Bray and Moore, *Religion, Emotion, Sensation: Affect Theories and Theologies*, 6.
[37] This is not to favor balance over imbalance: it is to acknowledge that our bodily states in a given moment, or occasion of experience to use a Whiteheadian notion, might affect interpretation. An interesting example of this could be the well-known text where the Apostle Paul writes of his "thorn in the flesh." An affect theorist might ask: how does this "thorn," embodied in some way, affect the Apostle Paul's interpretations of his own spiritual and religious experiences? These texts have a long history of interpretation and effect(s), so asking a question like this could be significant to conversations about affect and effect.
[38] Bray and Moore, *Religion, Emotion, Sensation: Affect Theories and Theologies*, 7.

when these practices happen within the confines of a recognizable sacred building. Last, Bray and Moore propose that affect theory leads us back to experience as a critical source of theological construction and to the body as a primary actor in that experience. "The body leads, then, and thought follows in wonder.[39] The body leads and theology also follows—or should follow—in awe. But what the body is always leading thought toward is affective encounters with other bodies, both human and nonhuman."[40] This is to underscore the critical notion that theology follows practice.

Beyond tracing parallel but differing trajectories of affect theory, Bray and Moore note that Donovan Schaefer's *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (2015) is a key text because it is the first monograph that connects affect theory with religious studies and religious practices specifically. As such, if not field-defining, *Religious Affects* speaks to a trajectory wherein religious concerns intersect with questions of power, emotion, group formation, and collective belonging. I will briefly rehearse central pieces of Schaefer's text to connect his arguments to the themes and questions of this chapter. Overall, Schaefer contends that academics influenced by the work of historian of religions scholar Jonathan Z. Smith—in trying to depart from any *sui generis* assumptions about religion—have privileged language (and belief) in defining the parameters of what counts as "religion."[41] Simply, religion from this perspective is defined as what happens when our biological drives, emotions, community rituals, and whatever else is happening in a given moment rises to cognition, consciousness, and articulation. While noting Smith's importance in influencing the overtures of *Religious Affects*, Schaefer nonetheless argues that what is lost in a linguistic-cognitive approach is a kind of expansiveness of religion. Making conscious articulation the primary determiner of religion has the effect of construing humans as separate from the rest of the world

[39] Experience as an important source of critical (theological) reflection and construction is widely underscored by feminist, womanist, mujerista, queer, and liberation theologians and ethicists, along with many others.
[40] Bray and Moore, *Religion, Emotion, Sensation: Affect Theories and Theologies*, 8.
[41] Schaefer uses the chimpanzee waterfall dance, catalogued in the research of Jane Goodall, as an entry point for his overall argument for "animal religion" in *Religious Affects: Animality, Evolution, and Power* (2015).

and displaces the possibility of unarticulated religion, as might be present in non-human entities such as animals. Schaefer, while acknowledging the importance of cognition and articulation in the formation of religious traditions, seeks to depart from privileging conscious articulation as the determinant of what comprises religion and religious practices.[42] Or, for the purposes of this project, what comprises theology.

Schaefer convincingly argues that a likely outcome of any linguistic-cognitive approach is the relatively common practice of distinguishing human and animal activity. Dualistic relationships such as these, whether rooted in reality or not, can create a scale of enlightened to ignorant, with human beings aligned with the former while animals slide to the latter.[43] As a result, religions and/or religious practices that fail to fit into our assumptions of how and whether its concepts and practices should be articulated might slide more to the animal categorization of the scale. Thinking in terms of Sara Ahmed's emphasis on the flows of power in social interaction, whomever or whatever (be it traditions like Christianity, or groupings of people such as Europeans) has the power to name or what counts as "enlightened" is critical to determining (potential) relationships of inequality, superiority, and oppression. Schaefer, like Ahmed, focuses on Islamophobia as a prime example of this slide: traditions like Christianity that are associated with Europe and European colonial expansion emerge on the enlightened or superior part of the scale, while Islam and other traditions associated more with peoples and places colonized by European powers appear on the less

[42] Making language the primary determinant means that "religion" and religious studies influenced by Smith have been quite conscribed to human interests. In contrast, Schaefer argues in *Religious Affects* that religion is neither "exclusively cognitive nor…exclusively human" (6), and his "approach not only asks what it would mean for animals to have religion; it explores the possibility that a turn to affect can help us better understand human religion as animal" (3). I want to note here, though, that in trying to disaggregate language from religion and make room for animals and animal religion, Schaefer makes the uncritical assumption that animals are "prelinguistic" (3); research on the language of various animal species are ongoing, so it would be more precise for Schaefer to say that religion has been confined to human languages (rather than position animals as pre-linguistic). This may be a silly example: but if an AI religion were ever developed, for example, this would blur the lines since there are computer languages that are not human, but that humans can understand and in which they can communicate.

[43] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 10.

advanced, or lower, portion of the scale. Yet, in a move that is critically divergent from anthropocentric and rational-centered approaches, rather than trying to slide Islam, as a tradition, to the enlightened end of the scale, Schaefer seeks to expand our notion of religion itself by using affect theory to question the entire notion of these sliding scales, noting how "affect shapes this intersection between knowledge, religion, and power."[44] In any sliding scale that privileges reason or rationality, affect understood as emotive, material content will appear aligned more with animality. Thus, if animality and affect are seen as parallel, and certain kinds of persons have "demanded the right to hold themselves immune to affect (white bodies, Christian bodies…)", then Schaefer's answer is to level the playing field entirely by bringing all bodies—and all religion(s)—to the level of animality.[45]

At the heart of Schaefer's argument is the idea that religion is enacted and embodied: it is prior to and surpasses linguistic formulations. Schaefer associates linguistic formulations with anthropocentric concepts of religion, while animality is a category that includes and exceeds human experience. "Affect theory," Schaefer suggests, "is about thematizing power outside of language," then perhaps affect can help us understand the entanglements of emotion and power that operate on both individual and collective planes. Linguistic power is not diminished by a turn toward the affective and the material; affect theory has a wider draw that works as a "supplement" to articulations of religious concepts and ideas.[46] In other words, Schaefer argues that religious power is not just about articulation, or the knowledge production related to the conceptual formulations (theo-logics) often associated with developed religion. Schaefer "updates" a Foucauldian formula

[44] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 4.
[45] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 11.
[46] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 21.

from power-knowledge to power-knowledge-affect, in an effort to "link bodies to systems of power and to regimes of information."[47]

What is most compelling about *Religious Affects*, for my purposes, is the overall framework for Schaefer's argument: if religion is seen as a "massing of affects"[48] that includes but is not confined by language or articulations of belief, then perhaps we can begin to see how emotions are both inculcated, catalyzed, and maybe even consciously affirmed or encouraged in the making of religions and their embodied practices.[49] Reactions to religious others that include relations of superiority, then, could be discussed as a phenomenon that touches (or *impresses* upon, to use Ahmed's terminology) humans, rather than just a theological concept that is prescribed by sacred texts in order to achieve particular benefits or ends. What Schaefer's discussion opens is the possibility that what we feel in our bodies—what is produced, inculcated, learned, or emergent—affects what we know and do related to our traditions, beliefs, doctrines, and so on. And, reciprocally, the effect of this knowledge may work in our individual and collective bodies to sustain certain systems of power and intensified affective solidarity.[50]

Donovan Schaefer's work is situated more in the field of religious studies than Christian theology. Systematic and constructive theologians may be just now starting to weave affect theory

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[47] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 35.
[48] Schaefer, *Religious Affects*, 211.
[49] Schaefer discusses Ahmed's concept of affective economies at a few junctures throughout *Religious Affects*. He specifically writes that "affective economies emerge out of the thick, thrumming ligatures between bodies and materials elements in their worlds" (186). Related to religion and affective economies, Schaefer does not discuss Christianity as an affective economy, but does discuss religion broadly. "Affective economies of religious desire," Schaefer asserts, "will always pull bodies into particular orbits of knowledge, even as they are crosscut by other compulsions, other queer economies, including ostensibly secular commitments like science, nation, liberty, and reason itself…to believe something is not merely to write it down and file it away. Beliefs are… tissues of passion, identity, desire, fear, hope, arrogance, bless, and meaning…Affect theory, following the materialist shift, tries to think of religion as a dance, as a surging of multileveled, deeply stratified bodies into the world that is not reducible to language" (216-217; see also 169-173). Schaefer also helpfully contrasts affective economies and "rationalized economies," drawing attention to Ahmed's insistence that an affective economy is not just a circulation of ideas (169).
[50] I am influenced by Catherine Keller in using this term. Her specific use is "affectively intensified solidarity" in *Political Theology of the Earth*: *Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (2018), and it has a more negative rendering in this portion of her discussion of political theologies of "enmity" / enemy. See pg. 24.

into their work, but in the broad scope of Christian traditions, theologians and philosophers are not strangers to the idea that feeling and embodied experience are important to Christian belief and practice. At the beginning of the twentieth century, for example, mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead began lecturing on how feeling affects humans and all entities in our quantum-entangled, relational world. Whitehead, influenced variously by American sociologist William James and French philosopher Henri Bergson, grounds his philosophy of organism (which becomes process philosophy, and later process theology) to some extent on his definition of feeling. For Whitehead, the process of the world's becoming (and all entities in the world, such as humans, animals, chairs, and so on) is a process of relation, interaction, and affect. "Feelings are variously specialized operations, effecting a transition into subjectivity… 'feeling' is the term used for the basic generic operation of passing from the objectivity of the data to the subjectivity of the actual entity in question."[51] Feeling is emotional, but it is also not just an emotion; feeling is the process by which we "positively prehend" those aspects of experience to include in our concrescence, our becoming. As relational, entangled actual occasions, this positive prehension is oriented toward achieving a kind of unity—the unity through which a human body, while always changing and moving, *includes* those elements of the world that help it maintain, or constitute itself, as an actual occasion. Significantly, these feelings, or positive prehensions, can be both conscious and unconscious. There are potentially numerous feelings that do not rise to consciousness but might nevertheless affect this unity. Unity is not just scaled individually, but also has group or collective-specific trajectories, or processes, toward achieving unity. Thus, it is important to note about Whitehead's centering of feeling and emotional components of experience is that they affect all of the ways in which entities in the world, humans and beyond, become together.[52] Affects, regardless

[51] Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 40-41.
[52] John B. Cobb Jr.'s *Whitehead Word Book*, pgs. 33-35 was helpful for this section.

of our awareness, are effectual, and are in some sense prior to thought, or a conscious awareness that employs a kind of intentionality or rationalization to the process of becoming. I could describe this as the difference between a human body maintaining its bodily boundaries and constitution as a human body, most of which happens through my molecules and atoms positively prehending the unity of a human body. This would be in contrast to the consciousness and thought required to adorn my body in ways that expresses my being and/or becoming as a particular gender.[53]

Whitehead appears in this juncture in the discussion because his process philosophy, along with centering the importance of feeling in the ongoing relational-creation of concrete lived experiences, Whitehead also connects religious or theological feelings with scales of enlightenment. For Whitehead, both the world and God are entangled in a process of becoming wherein even religious traditions are on trajectories of unity; though Whitehead, perhaps more so than his contemporaries, highlights the aesthetics and creativity of Eastern traditions, it is still Western understandings of religion and Western feelings—namely Christianity and Christianity's metaphors for God—that are understood to be superior.[54] Whitehead's version of Christian superiority is more covert, and arguably might leave room for disavowal. But his process philosophy employs affective logics of Christian superiority, and consequently, may contribute to the repetition and circulation of Christian feelings vis-à-vis religious others, especially in the ways that his philosophy has inspired generations of Christian theologians in 20th and 21st centuries.[55]

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[53] Or, as Whitehead expresses in one of his dialogues, "Religion cannot exist without music, music comes before religion, *as emotion comes before thought*, and sound before sense" (*Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead*, pg. 250, emphasis mine). Indebted to Instagram feed @theologynerd for this reference.

[54] Whitehead does not, in my knowledge, use the term superiority. But the sense in which religions are on a scale of development or progress, in an evolutionary sense, positions Christianity and Christianity's version of the Divine as more advanced—hence, superior—than other religious traditions. This scaling of religions can be found in the concluding section of *Process and Reality* and throughout the entire argument of *Religion and the Making*.

[55] Christian theologians will be discussed in chapters 3-5, but I wanted to emphasize Whitehead's potential adjacence to scales of superiority and enlightenment because of his connection to theorists that influence Gilles Deleuze and other affect theorists and, candidly, because process philosophy and speculative metaphysics are a foundation for some of my own theological constructions.

Toward Understanding Christian Traditions as an Affective Economy

We will now shift from outlining broad strokes of affect theory and its potential relationship with religious studies and Christian theology, to more specifically discussing an important line of thought from Sara Ahmed. Delineating the bounds of "Christianity" and "Christian traditions," is complex: the boundaries are simultaneously stable and elusive, fixed yet moving.[56] This project aims to demarcate these boundaries by describing Christian traditions in terms of affect: affective resonance in an economy of individual and collective feelings and emotions that flow in and through and from "the ordinary and the fantastic," the local and the global, the particular and the universal.[57] As sketched in prior sections, some Christian theologians and philosophers who have variously focused on feeling or feelings, rather than just on thought, logic, or understanding. The sense is that crucial issues that surface within Christian traditions and theologies are not just logical problems to be solved; emotions, affect, and feeling must be addressed, too, as we continue to imagine how Christianity relates and *how it should relate* with and to religious others. Christian traditions, in their embodied practice(s) and logics, are affective and effective. When it comes to relations, orientations, and feelings about other(s) and otherness, then, key questions might be: What affects are prominent? And what effects can we discern? And how might (theological) feelings move through individuals and collectives, interactively creating surfaces, boundaries, and flows of power?

In response to some of these questions and concerns, Sara Ahmed, feminist scholar of affect, phenomenology, race, and cultural theory, has developed the concept of affective economies

[56] In her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007), physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad describes an entity called an apparatus (in the experiments of Danish scientist and quantum physicist Niels Bohr) and how an apparatus works to delineate the boundaries between substantial objects. Experiments in quantum physics show, broadly, that the boundaries between objects get fuzzy, the closer a scientist looks into a microscope. Barad's discussion of an apparatus, along with her own meditations on what the nature of an apparatus could mean (philosophically), can be found on pgs. 140-146.

[57] "The ordinary and the fantastic" is from Ahmed, "Affective Economies,"118. The concept of "affective resonance" is from psychologist and progenitor of affect theory, Silvan Tompkins.

to imagine how feelings accumulate a kind of power in both individual and collective bodies.[58] In brief, Ahmed imagines emotions as having "political formations," meaning that they help form groups or collectivities.[59] Ahmed's is a Marxist approach, interpreting emotions in material, bodily terms with vast implications with regard to power.[60] Characterizing affect as having an economic impact, for Ahmed, draws necessary attention to "the 'surfacing' of individual and collective bodies through the way in which emotions circulate between bodies and signs."[61] In an affective economy, neither persons nor groups are closed, individual systems—nonporous bodies—that are impervious to affective influence; embodiment is porous, and emotions arise both within and without.[62] Emotions are not just psychological or ideological; affect is embodied and powerful. Crucial for Ahmed, leveraging Karl Marx's critique of the logic of capital in *Das Kapital*, is that emotions-as-such do not have positive value. The value arising from emotions and affect emerges through circulation, through the movement of feeling through signs.[63] With Sigmund Freud's theory of the unconscious as a resource, Ahmed argues that emotions are attached in some way, or manifest, in relationship with ideas: cultural, social, perhaps even religious or theological. Over time, the ideas may change, but the emotion remains and attaches to some other idea or entity; the emotion *circulates* and *sticks*. This concept of impression and its relation to affect is important because it draws attention to what could be happening, emotionally and affectively, when groups—we could imagine an interfaith gathering of some sort—interact. Ahmed argues that "emotions create the very surfaces and boundaries that allow all kinds of objects to be delineated" and that it is the "objects of emotion that

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[58] Ahmed specifically discusses affective economies of hate and fear with reference to the figures of refugee and terrorist in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004).
[59] Schaefer, *Evolution of Affect Theory*, 53.
[60] My project does not lean heavily into Marxist thought, beyond accepting and relying upon Ahmed's critical analysis.
[61] Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 117.
[62] This characterization of emotion as not emerging from an individual (though there are individual experiences of feeling and emotion) is throughout Ahmed's "Affective Economies"; see also from Ahmed, pgs. 44-49 in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*; and "Collective Feelings; or, The Impressions Left by Others," in *Theory, Culture, and Society* 21, no. 2 (2004): 25-42.
[63] Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 120.

circulate, rather than emotion as such."[64] This distinction regarding what, exactly, circulates is how Ahmed moves to argue that "objects become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension."[65]

Importantly, Ahmed departs from Freud's theory of the unconscious on two points: the positive content of a particular emotion does not reside solely in an individual or an individual's unconscious, constructing the subject; second, her theory of emotion is focused more on material effects than psychological implications. Feelings circulate, moving through individuals and groups; it is through this circulation that they accumulate a kind of value over time.[66] And for Ahmed, drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, this accumulation of value intensifies and materializes, having "the effect of boundary, fixity and surface."[67] Butler's influence is clear in how Ahmed understands the confluence of individual and collective affect: materializations happen in the repetition of certain affects. There can be differences, or slippages, in translating emotions across different persons and groups, but there is also something culturally significant in what is valued as repeatable. And for Ahmed, what is repeated often relates in some way to who or what is seen as normative in an affective economy, and who or what is seen as a stranger or other (of some kind) in that economy. Essentially, the accumulation of affective value shapes the surfaces of bodies and worlds. This is not just a theoretical or abstract point: as Donovan Schaefer describes Ahmed's theory, "the fear attached to some bodies, such as refugees, makes them a target of violent hostility."[68] If religious others are constructed in early Christian theological imaginings, for instance,

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[64] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 10-11. Ahmed notes that this distinction is partially in response to Silvan Tomkin's concept of emotional contagion. Ahmed aims to complicate the ideas that emotions are something that we own (individual), that are "property" (10) and that emotions are easily transferred intact. Ahmed's perspective is more along the lines that emotions have an affect – but they do not follow this easily traceable direct line of causality. In other words, if I am experiencing happiness or sadness, that emotion may influence a room I walk into; but it is not necessarily true that, like a contagion, my sadness is directly transferred as-is to those with whom I interact.
[65] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 10-11.
[66] Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 126. See also 120-124.
[67] Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 10.
[68] Schaefer, *Evolution of Affect Theory*, 53.

as a threat—entities to fear or hate or subvert in some way—then, according to Ahmed's theory, there will likely be intensifications of those affects that will have material, embodied effect(s).

Part of the reason Ahmed's sketch of affective economies is compelling is that it helps clarify the broad import of affective responses. "Emotions are not simply 'within' or 'without' but… they create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds."[69] Emotions and affective responses are a phenomenon that both deeply involve an individual person, while at the same time, transcend an individual person's particular embodiment. And more than being merely emotive or momentarily cathartic, these affective responses create boundaries between bodies and groups: between Muslim and Buddhist, Buddhist and Christian, Christian and Jewish, and so on. This perspective has the potential to give a fuller account of why we feel the way we do; and this fuller account could potentially offer more realistic pathways for change and social justice, beyond the focus on shifting *individual* affective responses to the boundaries that create and sustain difference.

A primary example of circulation in an affective economy, for Ahmed, is hate. How do we come to hate people? Strangers? Others? From where do these feelings come? Do they reside in or emerge from the individual initially, and only afterward permeate collective experience? Why do we hate some people, or religious traditions, and not others? In an affective economy, Ahmed's argument is that feelings of hate only *appear* to emerge from or reside in individuals: because these feelings have no positive value in themselves, they are rather *impressed* upon bodies through their circulation between signs (as experienced by individuals, in societies). Again, her departure from psychoanalysis is on this point; Ahmed's is more of a denaturalized approach. Emotions are not inherent; collective feelings circulate, accumulate value, and are impressed upon bodies in our relational lived experience(s). In this sense, we hate because it is impressed upon us, and this hate has achieved a positive value through its collective circulation, somewhat akin to a snowball effect.

[69] Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 117.

Emotions related to racial hatred, as argued by Ahmed, are more complex than just negative feelings possessed by an individual person toward other persons, whether an individual or group. Rather, these emotions are inculcated—coming from the body, while also being *impressed* upon the body—and there are societal emotional investments for the production, circulation, consumption, and even reproduction of particular emotions in response to particular boundaries.[70] For example, currents of Islamophobia, to use one of Ahmed's primary examples from *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, are connected to emotions of hate that are impressed upon the individual through the ways that feelings "stick," or impress upon us, in a particular cultural context. If Islam, as a tradition or religion, has been associated with fear or hate, then the presence of Muslims (those who embody that tradition or religion) will likely incite fear and hate.

Understanding racial or religious hatred as an affect that circulates, with both investment and potential theological value could perhaps lead us toward pragmatic analyses and solutions that extend beyond a statement such as: "My grandfather is Islamophobic because he feels that way, that's just the way it is for him and his generation." Certainly, those emotions arise from within, and a grandparent may indeed have feelings of hate or disgust that manifest in racist ideologies and practices that seem fixed and individual. Yet understanding these kinds of emotions as part of a broader affective economy—with individual and collective investment in feeling, and then acting, in a certain manner toward others—might help us create more useful strategies for intervening in seemingly intractable collective social realities like racism, white supremacy, xenophobia, religious hatred and extremism, and even Christian theologies and manifestations of superiority toward religious others, be they persons or entire traditions. Ahmed's account is phenomenological, not ontological, which may be the point at which we could imagine a Christian (or Christians) in a

[70] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 47; 79.

Christian affective economy feeling, or being invested in, something beyond or different from theological superiority.

Ahmed's concepts of *investment* and *attachment* are important in an affective economy, and could have correlations to the kinds of desires and motives that prompt practitioners to feel about or act toward (religious) others in particular ways. Emotion, in this sense, is seen as "world making" such that "subjects become *invested* in particular structures," because those structures are directly related to the world that has been created.[71] Investment is related to the construction of self and community, and to the norms that sustain and perpetuate these formations and assemblages.[72] Like John Corrigan's argument in *Religious Intolerance*, Ahmed focuses on investments that contribute to an affective economy of nation-building and state formations: how emotions, both private and shared, work to create worlds and draw boundaries between one nation and another, such that "destroying 'the nation'…would signal the end of life itself."[73]

The Emotionality of Texts in a Christian Affective Economy

In Ahmed's rendering, investment is constructed, or inculcated, through "the emotionality of texts," where what we read affects how we do (or should) feel. Ahmed argues that this "[shapes] different kinds of actions and orientations" and enacts a kind of "causality."[74] This emphasis on texts is beneficial to an argument related to Christian traditions and the formation of Christian theological imaginings, since Christian traditions in significant ways focus on sacred texts.[75] Sacred

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[71] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 12.
[72] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, see chapters 2 and 7.
[73] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 12.
[74] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 13.
[75] I am using the term "sacred texts" as a way to acknowledge similarity within Abrahamic traditions, and to not just refer uncritically to the "Bible." This is especially important because "the Bible" is a text that is partially appropriated from Jewish traditions (Torah, etc.). In Christian traditions, primary sacred texts are typically referred to as the Old Testament and New Testament. Depending on the Christian tradition or denomination, other (sacred) texts may have a degree of authority not shared by Christian traditions as a whole.

texts are important to Abrahamic traditions in general, and Christian traditions are no exception. Often one's orientation to sacred texts determines theological alignments and interpretations, revealing one's understanding of divine revelation, hermeneutics, and so on. Beyond sacred texts are other texts, such as creeds and theological treatises, which help construct the boundaries and surfaces of a Christian affective economy. Texts, and the emotionality of texts, may distinguish the (porous) boundaries and surfaces of Christianity, distinguishing it from the boundaries and surfaces of Islam or Judaism, for instance. This is not to oversimplify traditions in such a way as to erase or minimize internal differences between and among Christian sects, for example. But, as a corollary, Ahmed's work in the cultural import of emotions helps us identify some of the ways that various kinds of texts (not exclusive to writing and reading) work to produce an emotional state, wherein we become *invested* or *attached*, and wherein these investments and attachments mark participation in a political body of some kind. Therefore, at least for traditions that are grounded in sacred texts, it follows that the emotionality of a given text helps construct an affective economy—and that different texts participate in the production of different economies, such that a Christian affective economy is different from an Islamic affective economy. It is not that emotions are simply hidden in "texts" or in cultural artifacts, waiting to be discovered activated: it is rather that a kind of emotional knowledge becomes attached to a text and interacts with a subject and/or subjects, forming entities such as nation-states or religious traditions. This emotional knowledge is varied, contextual, and relational, such that the emotional knowledge connected to (the reading of) particular texts affects, or is affective. And in view of the themes of this project as a whole, certain Christian logics and affects in a Christian affective economy circulate, contributing to continually forming and transforming Christian theological imaginations and horizons.

Beyond contributing to an affective economy as a whole, Ahmed draws implications of the reciprocal affect between reader and text. One implication is action, which is understood similarly to

what I have been referring to throughout as embodied practices. Our investments and attachments orient us in specific ways; for example, we respond to others (to difference) emotively perhaps with hatred or love, and/or we work to sustain a nation, an institution, or religious tradition to which we feel belong. Another implication, as stated in an earlier section, is movement: emotions *move* us, individually and collectively, and prompt us to move.[76] This phenomenon of movement in a world of process, entanglement, and multiplicity is key to understanding why Ahmed might have chosen to employ economic metaphors for affect rather than something more solid, static, easily bounded, or even tangible. Movement illustrates how emotions become attached to objects, and then those objects receive actions associated with those emotions (people, cultures, and traditions can be objectified in such a way that they become the recipient of hateful actions, for example). Again, Ahmed primarily focuses on affective economies of hate and fear, but gestures toward the potential for other affective economies.[77]

We could imagine, then, that religious traditions could be understood as repositories (or subjects) of emotion and feeling, just as much as these traditions (aim to) form our epistemological constructs. Perhaps a Christian affective economy influences not only a logic of (Christian) superiority, but also feelings and embodied practices of superiority vis-à-vis religious others as well. typology of superiority from the first chapter of this project aims to articulate the diverse ways that logics and feelings of superiority operate at that same time, both contrapuntally and synergistically.[78] Ahmed notes how texts—again, understanding texts as more than just written or spoken language—are not just prescriptions for action or descriptions of proper practices, but they are imbued with

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[76] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 10-11.
[77] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 191ff.
[78] To depart from simple causality, I think it is important to note how circulation in an affective economy likely includes cooperation (synergy) and opposition (contrapuntal reading, logics, actions). I am indebted to the work of R.S. Sugirtharajah (*Postcolonial Reconfigurations*: *An Alternative Way of Reading the Bible and Doing Theology*, 2003) for introducing contrapuntal reading within a framework of postcolonial hermeneutics; Sugirtharajah draws from the work of literary theorist Edward Said.

emotional potency that moves between the text and those who are reading the texts: a kind of emotional, feeling-oriented semiotics. Affective economies, then, describe how feelings are experienced individually and circulate collectively, creating discursive political bodies, or assemblages, with emotional power.[79] This kind of affectual power can be understood in Foucauldian terms: a decentralized network rather than a single, centralized entity. In an affective economy, emotions circulate between and among bodies, concrescing into both individual and collective political feelings of love, disgust, hate, and more—whatever accumulates value in a given context, creating and investing in certain political formations over others. Texts understood to be sacred and/or designated as scripture for a tradition such as Christianity could wield potentially significant affective and effective power.

Ahmed does not discuss or refer to superiority specifically as an emotion that circulates in an affective economy. Following trajectories from psychology and other affect theorists, Ahmed focuses on emotions like love and hate that are generally agreed to be emotions or feelings.[80] Superiority does not typically show up in taxonomies of emotion alongside fear, love, or hate; yet, as already examined in the first chapter, superiority is typically defined as a state, orientation, or attitude. Discussing superiority as a state or orientation that has emotional and affectual content, then, is intuitively connected in this project to the relatively common sensibility that one "feels" superior to someone else, or that one group "feels" superior to another group. Thus, this discussion of Christian theological superiority is not a departure from what Ahmed sketches in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* but is intended to be an extension of her arguments related to how affective

[79] Schaefer uses the term "assemblage" throughout *Religious Affects*, which is a term also used by those following in the trajectory of Gilles Deleuze.

[80] There is difference of opinion among affect theorists not only about how emotion is felt and whether it is primarily individual or collective, but also how affect theory is (or should be) connected to psychological theories of emotion, which identify specific emotions (hate, shame, fear, love, etc.). I understand Ahmed as using psychological theories of emotion as a resource to talk about the power of affect and feeling as a whole. As already noted in this project, Lauren Berlant ponders the affective dimensions of inconvenience and optimism, neither of which falls under traditional psychological theories of emotion (as can be traced to Silvan Tomkins).

economies might engender Christian forms of world-making—including but not limited to forming boundaries, delineating religious difference, constructing Christian theological imaginations, and valuing particular logics and embodied relations with and orientations toward religious others. A recurring question and concern, then, is whether and how Christian traditions are affectively invested in and attached to practices of world-making that seek to nonconsensually absorb other worlds or be/come the best possible world, exclusively superior to the those of religious others.

Embodied Practices in a Christian Affective Economy: Persecution, Superiority, Intolerance

Sara Ahmed's concept of affective economies is compelling and relevant, especially related to the affective turn in critical theories and methodologies.[81] One way to interrogate theories and theologies is how they might work, or translate, to everyday experiences. I can claim that Christian traditions have been established, from the very beginnings, as superior to (religious) others, and that this superiority has affectual aspects, or resonances, that are inculcated as part of Christian theological imaginings. Yet this claim remains abstract without exploring its concrete world-making power.

As Michel Foucault and later queer theorists and theologians remind us, power may be more akin to a collective web of relations rather than a force that is tangibly wielded by a regent or monarch.[82] Simply stated, top-down conceptions of power, whether political, theological, or theo-political, may only tell part of a particular story. And, as Christian theologian Joerg Rieger notes, identifying how power is operative (along with who, or what nation-state, wields it) is a complex endeavor in a late global neoliberal capitalist context in which imperial power shape-shifts into

[81] Ann Cvetkovich, "Introduction," in *Depression: a public feeling*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012): 3.
[82] This conception of power may counter Christian theological assertions of sovereign power, ultimately and uniquely wielded by a (Christian) divine entity. Power, as described in process-oriented theologies, is not usually conceptualized as sovereign, top-down, or unilateral but as relational, responsive, and (maybe) even affective.

forms that are less immediately recognizable.[83] There is not a single narrative for Christianity, though certain voices may seem louder than others in particular places and moments in history. In the current context of the United States, for example, any discussion of Christian privilege, superiority, or supremacy must acknowledge the reality of the Religious Right, a loose consolidation of various theologically conservative Christian groups, organizations, and churches that explicitly avow Christianity's entitled claim on political and theological ascendance. As catalogued by numerous scholars, the Religious Right—associated with evangelical public figures such as Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Phyllis Schlafly, Franklin Graham, among others—has employed a decades-long strategy of political organizing to explicitly reclaim the United States as a Christian nation, in the shadows of *Engel v. Vitale* and *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decisions.[84] The development and subtle promulgation of this narrative of loss and reclamation of an imaginary Christian origin calls for critique, but is beyond the bounds of my purposes here. What is striking, in view of the potentially entangled connections between theology, superiority, and affect, is how this narrative of loss and victimhood may foment a affective, persuasive vision of a pervasive, politically-inclined theologically justified superiority by imagining that Christians are the victims of persecution by secular foes or religious others. This phenomenon has come to be known, by scholars and journalists alike, as the Christian persecution complex.[85]

If we return to psychologist Alfred Adler's thesis about the superiority complex, briefly discussed in Chapter 1, then the inferiority stemming from a perceived loss or lack of (Christian)

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[83] Joerg Rieger, *Christ & Empire: from Paul to Postcolonial Times,* Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007. See introduction.
[84] *Engel v. Vitale*, public prayer in schools (1962). *Roe v. Wade*, legalized abortion (1973). See Elizabeth A. Castelli, "Persecution Complexes: Identity Politics and the 'War on Christians," *Differences* 18: 3 (2007): 156-157.
[85] I first came across this term as I was researching Christianity and superiority. It seems that the term has traction in current American journalism, social media, and popular Christian blogs (Rachel Held Evans, popular Christian author, as one example: https://rachelheldevans.com/blog/persecution-complex). Scholars who discuss Christianity's persecution complex include Elizabeth A. Castelli, "Persecution Complexes: Identity Politics and the 'War on Christians," *Differences* 18: 3 (2007): 152–180; John Corrigan, *Religious Intolerance, America, and the World: A History of Forgetting and Remembering*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020); and Candida R. Moss, *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom,* (New York: HarperOne, 2013).

power could be understood in connection with expressions of superiority, maybe even the development of a collective superiority complex for Christians writ-large—or, Christians in a Christian affective economy. American religious historian John Corrigan, whose research heavily centers on the intersections between religion, emotion, and power, argues in *Religious Intolerance, America, and the World: A History of Forgetting and Remembering* (2020) that contemporary emergences of Christian persecution complexes have coincided with the global rise of Islamophobia. Essentially, as conservative evangelical Christians cast a narrative of religious persecution, they must identify whom or what entities are the persecutors; and in a post 9/11 American context, Muslims and Islam, as a tradition, are consistently conceptualized as persistent threats.[86] One of Corrigan's overarching theses is that America has been historically intolerant of religious pluralism, despite the accepted narrative that America was and continues to be a melting pot of difference and diversity.[87] Theologically conservative Christian traditions in particular have responded by identifying with persecuted Christians globally, becoming the victim while simultaneously maintaining vast political power and legislating intolerance domestically. In Corrigan's estimation, based on documentation of religious intolerance throughout America's history, conservative Christians participate in the Christian persecution complex by

> …creatively leverag[ing] both of those public roles – as winners and losers – to advocate for policies that they believed would restore them to cultural dominance. Presenting themselves as a persecuted religious group, but holding greater power in government than any of their competitors, they endeavored to restore a world they had feared was lost.[88]

What is at stake, it seems, is a feeling of entitlement—theologically and otherwise—to reclaim and exert a "cultural dominance" that extends, without consent, to the world beyond Christian

[86] Corrigan addresses this in chapter 5 of *Religious Intolerance*. Both Ahmed and Schaefer address the rise of Islamophobia in their respective works.
[87] John Corrigan and Lynn S. Neal, eds. *Religious Intolerance in America: A Documentary History*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010.
[88] Corrigan, *Religious Intolerance*, 194.

traditions. In concert with Ahmed, we could say this entitled dominance is akin to a Christian affective economy that supersedes or overtakes all other realities, in the way that affective economies are "world-making"; yet this would be an example of the push for one world or one God, in which all are gathered under one umbrella.[89] Further, Ahmed argues that hate, as an emotion in an affective economy, participates in "shaping bodies and world through the way hate generates its object as a defence against injury."[90] Hate, in other words, may affectively connect subject and object (Christian and other), wherein the subject in some sense requires this object to create the boundaries (and "defence") of the subject's community.[91] Importantly, for Ahmed, "the impossibility of reducing hate to a particular body allows hate to circulate in [this] economic sense, working to differentiate some others from other others, a differentiation that is never 'over', as it awaits other who have not yet arrived."[92] In other words, we could posit that the Christian persecution complex is a modern iteration of this process of differentiation, which connects to practices and logics extending back to Christian origins.[93]

Corrigan specifically connects the Christian persecution complex, as it has and continues to manifest in United States contexts, to both theology and affect. Specifically, Corrigan asserts that

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[89] See Laurel C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (2008). Schneider's concept of "the logic of the One," articulated throughout the text, is instructive.

[90] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 42.

[91] Ahmed's chapter "The Organisation of Hate" (Chapter 2, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*) is where her articulation of affective economies takes place. Part of her vision of affective economies is related to expressed extremities of hate and love that is operationalized in white supremacist organizations. She analyzes key texts in which love of community (white community) means hatred for others, or implies that others are potential or active threats to the community. It is not hard to draw parallels of these spectrums of love-hate in religious traditions, particularly between Christian and religious others in the context of the global colonial expansion. Seeing a parallel does not mean, however, that I assume affects of hate work in a line of simple causality or linear progression (Christianity has only "hated," etc.). Yet affective histories of relation are important to constructions of self/community and other. As Ahmed writes, "The transformation of *this* or *that* other into an object of hate is over-determined. It is not simply that any body is hated: particular histories of association are reopened in each encounter, such that some bodies are already encountered as more hateful than other bodies. Histories are bound up with emotions precisely insofar as it is a question of *what sticks*, of what connections are lived as the most intense or intimate, as being closer to the skin" (54). Ahmed makes this argument based on her interpretation of a racial encounter that Audre Lorde shares from her life in *Sister Outsider* (1984).

[92] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 47.

[93] This will be discussed in Chapter 3 of this project, with reference to Christian theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether.

identifying with those who are persecuted involves a "cultivation of feelings" that is supported theologically through the mystical body of Christ, as well as the passion narratives of Jesus Christ.[94] Christians in the United States, despite experiencing measures of freedom and dominance, are understood theologically as being united to Christians globally via the mystical body of Christ, which transcends geopolitical boundaries. Through this mystical union, Christians in the United States can imagine and feel that they are part of a persecuted group. These imaginings and feelings are, at least in part, buttressed by what Corrigan calls "the core mythos of Christianity," which is "the suffering of Jesus as a sacrifice for the sins of humanity."[95] Common theological understandings that Christians are supposed to imitate the example of Jesus Christ means that Christians often cast themselves in the role of victim, rather than persecutor or oppressor. In this sense, the Christian persecution complex could be understood as engendered by emotional practices that are arguably sewn into the fabric of the Christian theological tradition, affecting the ways in which Christians imagine themselves (victims) and others (persecutors, threats). This continued practice of identifying with victims is connected to why religion scholar Elizabeth A. Castelli calls the Christian persecution complex "a discursive entity impervious to critique, self-generating and self-sustaining."[96]

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[94] Corrigan, *Religious Intolerance*, 198.

[95] Corrigan, *Religious Intolerance*, 199.

[96] The term "emotional practices" comes from historical and cultural anthropologist Monique Scheer, in her article "Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (and is that what makes them have a history)? A Bourdieuian Approach to Understanding Emotion," in *History and Theory* 51, no. 2 (2012): 193-220. Scheer describes the habitual, repetitive nature of emotions; in this sense, emotion or feeling is not always directly connected to cognition, though it certainly involves levels of cognition (including belief, etc.). As Scheer writes, "The term 'emotional practices' is gaining currency in the historical study of emotions. this essay discusses the theoretical and methodological implications of this concept. A definition of emotion informed by practice theory promises to bridge persistent dichotomies with which historians of emotion grapple, such as body and mind, structure and agency, as well as expression and experience. Practice theory emphasizes the importance of habituation and social context and is thus consistent with, and could enrich, psychological models of situated, distributed, and embodied cognition and their approaches to the study of emotion. It is suggested here that practices not only generate emotions, but that emotions them- selves can be viewed as a practical engagement with the world. conceiving of emotions as practices means understanding them as emerging from bodily dispositions conditioned by a social context, which always has cultural and historical specificity. emotion-as-practice is bound up with and dependent on 'emotional practices,' defined here as practices involving the self (as body and mind), language, material artifacts, the environment, and other people" (193).

The Religious Right is certainly a critical concern in any discussion of the import of Christian theologies that may have vast affective influence and political ramifications.[97] Offering a social and political perspective of the affective power of a religious tradition like Christianity is relevant, especially in the ways in which scholars like Corrigan and Castelli compile documentary histories to name a collective religious phenomenon related to the push-and-pull of unsubstantiated loss mixed with securing certain kinds of political power to which Christianity is (theologically) imagined (by Christians) to be entitled. Where affect theory is helpful, as articulated by Sara Ahmed, is in critically evaluating and imagining how emotions and feeling are part of producing and sustaining these forms of power. As Ahmed writes, "Attention to emotions allows us to address the question of how subjects become *invested* in particular structures such that their demise is felt as a living death."[98] The structures that Ahmed refers to are not primarily the tangible, obvious artifices—like a church building—that create space for social-spiritual life, formation, and community. Ahmed's focus is more on the less obvious elements of culture (such as heterosexuality, or even social identities like a nation-state or a religious group) that "materialize worlds" through "the repetition of norms."

The Religious Right does not represent the entirety of American Christianity, but in light of an overarching discussion of Christian superiority, it seems plausible to ask whether or how these more obvious examples of Christian dominance and supremacy are related to and entangled with liberal, progressive forms of American Christianity that aim to be inclusive of religious others, theologically and practically. Though it would be reductive to claim that the Religious Right, as an extreme example, represents all of Christian traditions, it would be inversely problematic to claim

[97] The purpose of this section is less about connecting to an ongoing historical, sociopolitical, or psychological discourse related to a Christian persecution complex *per se*, and more about identifying a significant way in which scholars have recently discussed the confluences of superior attitudes, inferiority narratives, cultural dominance, the cultivation of feelings, and Christian theological imaginings.

[98] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 12.

that the theological orientations of the Religious Right have no affective resonance—or theological resonance—with more liberal forms of American Christianity at all.[99]

Feelings: Affective Trajectories, Superiority in the Making

When asked about the most important commandment, Jesus of Nazareth responds by saying that a love (for God) that encompasses the heart, soul, strength, and mind is the priority.[100] Jesus' vision seems to include, then, feelings of some kind, as well as entanglements with bodies and minds. Thus, focusing on feeling and affect in this way is meant to gesture toward a more comprehensive, nuanced, and holistic vision of Christian traditions and the feelings that may

[99] This is not to espouse Silvan Tomkin's theory of emotional contagion, but rather to make a point in concert with queer and feminist theorists and theologians who note how oppositional ideas are often deeply interrelated or dependent on one another. Feminists observe how dualistic framework often create hierarchies of power (and hierarchies of being), while queer theorists show how a concept like heterosexuality is dependent upon its supposed opposite, homosexuality, in order to be rendered coherent. This is not unlike James Baldwin's probing question to White Americans about why the figure of "the negro" is needed: the implication is that the (white) construction of race and specifically blackness is related to whiteness and white identity, rather than to black persons and communities who have become objects of hate, oppression, and suppression (*I Am Not Your Negro*). My point, in connection, is that different iterations of Christian traditions define and delimit one another, especially when rooted in a particular place, such as modern-day North America. To be liberal and Christian in American contexts is often to define myself by what I am not and/or by how I am not like "those" Christians. Beyond explaining Christianity to outsiders, from within, Christian theologies (and I would suggest laypersons) generally agree that Christians are meant to be unified across denominational or sectarian boundaries, for theological reasons ("as God is one with Christ"). This concept of unity, or oneness, comes from various texts (John 17; others) and is ubiquitous in lineages of Christian theology. An embodied, sacramental practice that both represents and manifests this mystical-metaphysical unity is the Eucharist, also known as communion or (more colloquially) as the Lord's Supper. Theologies of community, belonging, and unity catalyze questions of just how different Christian groups, with diverse affective orientations toward superiority and religious others, are connected: theologically, mystically, or otherwise. Taking all of this into consideration, I would argue that even theologians within liberal, pluralistic lineages of thought—who might argue that they and/or their communities are unaffected by Christian theological superiority vis-à-vis religious others—are still potentially entangled with logics and embodied practices of superiority insofar as Christianity remains a powerful, life-defining force in North American context. A similar line of thought (or, line of flight, in Deleuzian terms) is asking how different, and often competing, conceptions of what it means to be an American might work in an (American) affective economy. Love of country (and even whether or how one should love their country, delineated by borders and engaging in constant othering and policing of who is an insider/outsider) is defined variously by those who have contradictory political views; yet try as I might, I cannot separate myself entirely from those other Americans when I am traveling abroad, as an example, and engage in conversations with "outsiders" about American identity and American empire. The associations are "sticky," as Ahmed might suggest, and "press" upon myself and others.

[100] See Luke 10:27: "Jesus answered, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.'"

circulate—and may be inculcated—within a Christian affective economy that has a broad, powerful global reach.

If Christian traditions are understood as an affective economy, then perhaps we can continue to explore superiority as one of its potential affects, or influences. Affect theorists identify various kinds of emotions, as do philosophers such as Aristotle, Baruch Spinoza, and others in Western lineages of thought. It may be too reductive to describe superiority as an emotion; it might be more generative to continue to describe it as an attitude or as an affect that has resonance with other feelings and emotions, such as love, hate, or disgust as discussed by Ahmed.[101] Viewing superiority through this lens, an economic analogy like Ahmed's effectively illustrates the distinctions I have begun to draw between supremacy, privilege, and superiority in the first chapter. These distinctions are not only important considering Khyati Joshi's work on white Christian privilege as it operates in the United States. They may also be important for understanding the varied affects of Christian supremacy, privilege, and superiority as a central, not peripheral, theological concern.

Supremacy is the dream that the Christian affective economy should become synonymous with economy itself, extending a total global reach that and overtakes all economic systems. Privilege —in the sense that is it invoked by Joshi, Knitter, and others who are active in multifaith dialogues, projects, and other engagements—is a practical (embodied) benefit that Christians experience when they are living in contexts in which the Christian affective economy is the dominant center of circulation. Superiority, as I am attempting to describe it, works as an affect that accumulates value and is attached, in myriad ways, to both intangible and tangible investments for attaining and sustaining that value: Christians *feel* superior because it *feels* good, in some way; or perhaps this

[101] Khyati Joshi, *White Christian Privilege.*

feeling is learned or becomes individually and/or collectively habitual.[102] Consequently, this *feeling of superiority* accumulates intangible, theological value in its circulation. Normativity in this analogy would be more akin to cultural assumptions about what makes a dominant economy, what is valuable according to that economy, and/or what provides an attractive lure to sustain that economy's dominance.

In some ways, Ahmed's work is an experiment in imagining how emotions circulate, how they affect individuals and groups, and how they are participating in "world-making" and creating boundaries that delineate "us" and "them." Ahmed's affective economy is compelling for several reasons, some of which have been discussed in the preceding sections. An affective economy draws our attention to the porous boundaries of groups, illuminating how emotion and affect are elements of constructing or maintaining traditions, normativity, and stability. Rather than positing a universal feeling that emerges in community, as Schleiermacher does, Ahmed's affective economy is an analogy that makes more explicit the theologically-motivated feelings of love, hate, or superiority that might emerge in a world of multiplicity and difference. These feelings are powerful, and become more powerful as they accumulate value in the affective economy within which they operate and circulate.[103] Beyond these reasons, economic analogies are relational. Value, of the kind emphasized in Ahmed's affective economy, is not ontologically prior to the relationships (individual, groups,

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[102] Monique Scheer, "Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (And Is That What Makes Them Have a History?) A Bourdieuian Approach to Understanding Emotion," *History and Theory* 51 (May 2012), 193-220.

[103] To offer an example beyond my suggestion that Christianity involves an affective economy of superiority, Donovan Schaefer posits that religious traditions can be affective economies of dignity. Using Saba Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* as an example, Schaefer offers an alternative interpretation of Mahmood's ethnographic work with women participating in the mosque movement in Egypt. Rather than focusing on how the mosque movement is an example of agency, Schaefer suggests that the mosque movement, interpreted as "an overarching affective economy… can be best understood as the unfolding of an economy of dignity, guiding bodies to a set of embodied practices that elicit dignity as a distinct affective structure" (57). Certain emotions and dispositions were emphasized in the mosque movement, which meant that women were encouraged to cultivate their affective states. Certain affects, and their cultivation, had value in an economy of dignity: "the retrieval of a set of religious lifeways that distinguished politically disenfranchised women from a stiflingly aloof ruling class and reconstituted them as religious bodies set apart from the world offered a strategy for affirming dignity in the face of everyday degradation" (60). Schaefer's suggestion is not altogether different than Christian liturgical theories which underscore the connection between doing and being/becoming.

etc.) that generate value; value is not intrinsic, it must be agreed upon, to some extent. Just as printed money is only paper unless backed by an agreed upon currency system, certain theological concepts might accumulate more value as they circulate. And this circulation is relational, comparative, and even *intimate*. And intimacy, as we will see in chapter 5, is often an explicitly stated, significant value in contemporary theologies that imagine or posit how Christian traditions can and should be related to (certain) religious others.

Conclusion

Affect theorists emphasize human desire, and broadly argue that humans are structured by desire formations. Ahmed's work is specifically important in the ways that she analyzes and describes how desire and feeling circulate, emerge in collectives and individuals, insofar as the desires and feelings of political bodies work to sustain those very bodies. Further, affect theory expresses the phenomenological aspects of relational entanglement in a world of difference and diversity, while also highlighting the very real issues of power, supremacy, and the impact of the European colonial project on the formations of individual and collective feelings. And Christianity, Christian traditions, and Christian theologies are not exempt from these histories. Tracing these histories, however, is complex and somewhat elusive, precisely in the ways that Ahmed and other affect theorists note the quantum rather than Newtonian nature of causality.

Despite these complexities and limitations, in building a case for superiority being endemic and central rather than sporadic and peripheral to Christian theological imaginings, it may be helpful to go back to the beginnings, so to speak. That is the work of the next two chapters, where I will explore the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether, as well as three key Christian theological texts that mark moments of transition, inflected with orientations toward religious others. The overall intention is to show how their theological imaginings create and (continue) to sustain a Christian affective economy which values, incentivizes, and lures toward a logic of Christian superiority.

Chapter 3

Patterns of Superiority in a Christian Affective Economy: Beginning(s)

Therefore God also highly exalted Him and gave Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven, and on earth, and of under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2: 9-11

Thomas said to Him, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

John 14: 5-6

At the heart of every Christian dualizing of the dialectics of human existence into Christian and anti-Judaic theses is Christology, or, to be more specific, the historicizing of the eschatological event.[1]

Rosemary Radford Ruether

The formulations involve a certain amount of uncritical assimilation of prejudice…compounded by time. Generations and centuries have passed in which the believing community has reinforced old formulations with constant repetition. By this process, the whole cultural accumulation has come to be regarded as an integral part of the message of salvation.[2]

Monika K. Hellwig

Introduction: Imagining Superiority…

In building a case for superiority being endemic and central rather than sporadic and peripheral to Christian theological imaginings, it may be helpful to go back to the beginnings, so to speak.[3] This is not to place undue emphasis on origins, however; as philosopher Jacques Derrida suggests, origins can be a prosthesis. This prosthesis lures toward the notion that if we—in this case, Christians in a Christian affective economy—can just return to our origins and readjust a few key

[1] Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism,* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 246.
[2] Monika K. Hellwig, "From the Jesus of Story to the Christ of Dogma," in *AntiSemitism and the Foundations of Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 119.
[3] My use of the plural "beginnings" rather than the singular "beginning" is intentional and related to the complexity of determining origins.

issues, then we can repair the issues that concern us in the present.[4] In this way, the assumption that we can return to an idyllic, sacralized past connects, logically, to securing a hopeful future of some kind. Understood more artistically, this "prosthesis" is akin to the sense affected by Coldplay's early 2000's music video for their song "The Scientist." In the video, lead singer Chris Martin sings the lyrics linearly while the action of the sequence moves in reverse. The feeling invoked by this cinematographic technique, coupled with the song lyrics, is if we can just return to the "start" and change something significant, then we can avoid a terrible disaster. Martin moves forward, in reverse, and in doing so, seems to avoid a proverbial automobile wreck and the potential death of a loved one.[5]

My goal is not to trace Christian origins with the intention of fixing or readjusting Christian theologies, to reverse course and avoid the unsavory effects of a pervasive, globalized Christian normativity or superiority. But the various harms in which Christian traditions have been complicit over the centuries should open Christian traditions, and the theologies operative within its affective economy, to both internal and external critique.[6] These harms, from forced conversions of Jewish communities; to theological, as well as material, complicity in the Mid-Atlantic slave trade, global conquest, and European expansion; to theological rationales for the genocide and removal of Indigenous peoples of the Americas, are not insignificant, nor should they be treated as peripheral to the development of Christian theologies nor the deployment of Christian logics. Reversing course is not feasible, just as going back to the beginnings of Christian theologies to discover and capture the

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[4] Prosthesis of Origin is widely discussed on contemporary academic conversations. For the original discussion in context, consult Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin,* Translated by Patrick Mensah, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.

[5] Jamie Thraves (Director), Coldplay, "The Scientist," October 2002, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RB-RcX5DS5A.

[6] For comprehensive studies related to these topics, here are a few suggestions: David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*, New York: Norton and Company, 2013; David Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014; and Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race,* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010.

moment when Christian traditions were "good" or "pure" would be impossible.[7] Viewing Christian practices and Christian theologies in the context of their complicity in immense evils is complicated, and should be treated as a genuine, deep theological problem that cannot be easily solved, rationalized, or fixed.

The crux of the issue, then, may be to forgo the impulse to argue how an abstracted version of Christianity does not try to position itself as superior, theologically and otherwise. Rather, perhaps we can move forward with a methodological framework centering the theological implications of the complicity of Christian traditions in pervasive frameworks of normativity or superiority. Or, in the words of constructive theologian Ellen T. Armour: "Suppose that, rather than asking what Christians believe about God, we were to ask about the work certain concepts of God do? That is, what practices do particular concepts enact and maintain?"[8] In the affective circulation of imperial imaginings and colonial expansion, this might indicate that superiority is, indeed, endemic to Christian theological frameworks, insofar as Christian concepts or beliefs about God work to maintain Christian ascendancy, normativity, or superiority.

Armour's question might allow theologians to illustrate how superiority has been part and parcel of Christian theological constructions since its very beginnings, instead of treating it as a surface-level concern that only arises in moments that civilizations or theologies clash, or when

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[7] An example of this strategy to separate true from false Christianity is the Twitter trend #notchristianity in response to the Supreme Court overturning of Roe v. Wade (June 24, 2022) and various mass shootings across the United States. A complicated aspect of claiming that these current events, which have taken place partially as a result of conservative Christian political organizing over the course of decades, is that it positions liberal Christians as bearers of "true" Christianity and conservative Christians as organizers of "false" Christianity. Political associations aside, the question that emerges is whether and how these versions of Christianity might be more interrelated than assumed, or how useful it is to identify what is "#not" in order to consolidate, consolidate, or name what is. For an article from Daily Kos cataloguing these responses, see Walter Einenkel, "'Not Christianity' Begins Trending on Twitter in Response to Supreme Court's Perverse Rulings," July 1, 2022, https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2022/7/1/2107825/--Not-Christianity-begins-trending-on-Twitter-in-response-to-Supreme-Court-s-perverse-rulings.

[8] Ellen T. Armour, in "Beyond Atheism and Theism," from *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Press, 2005), 48. Laurel C. Schneider also engages this topic in *Re-Imagining the Divine: Confronting the Backlash Against Feminist Theology* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1998). See pgs. 11-14 for a discussion of how feminist theology engages functional concepts of God.

religious or theological differences momentarily come to the fore, such as in an interfaith relations or religiously plural encounters. Instead, if superiority has been with Christian traditions since the very beginnings, then surface-level adjustments may not attend to the ways in which maintaining superiority is constitutive of Christian logic(s). In a Christian affective economy, a logic of superiority, in its cumulative circulation, may incentivize these feelings of being 'right' or 'good' or 'better than' religious others; at the very least, these notions of superiority, threaded into early Christian theological arguments, may circulate in such a way that "other" is an open category always looking for definition.[9]

This chapter will be a survey of Christianity's beginnings, with an eye toward identifying how superiority is a constitutive aspect of a Christian affective economy in its earliest stages of development.[10] By constitutive, I aim to identify ways in which Christian theologians use "religious others" to construct their arguments. More often than not, these theological arguments are meant for Christian insiders but are reliant on comparison to or polemic reference to those beyond the bounds of Christian traditions. These arguments, extant in theological texts which contribute to Christian practices and general theological understandings, become part of a Christian affective economy. To begin, I will discuss Rosemary Radford Ruether's *Faith & Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (1974), a groundbreaking text which demonstrates how early Christian writings were often oriented in opposition to Jewish traditions. This scholarly treatment of early Christianity relations with Jews and Jewish traditions is foundational. Accepting Ruether's assertions, I examine the theological argument in an early Christian treatise, Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*, to demonstrate

[9] This concept of requiring an "other" or others for self-definition and/or self-affirmation is discussed in this project in conjunction with queer theory and affect theory. Ruether also mentions this aspect of Christian anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism throughout *Faith and Fratricide* (see especially chapters 1 and 5).

[10] "Development" can be a complicated term to use because it implies linear progression or progress of some kind. What I mean by using this term is simply the growing body of literature, practices, and theologies that contribute to the formation of Christian traditions.

how superiority vis-à-vis religious others is necessary, not peripheral, to his argument. I chose this text in part because it arguably represents a theological perspective that was not only influential in its own time, but has remained influential—accumulated value for determining the norm, so to speak—in a Christian affective economy of power and relation. In particular, *On the Incarnation* uses refutations of religious others to build a case for the prominence of Jesus Christ, and therefore the (universal) superiority of the Christian tradition in comparison to all others. Overall, this chapter aims to trace how patterns of superiority, in logics and affects, surface and accumulate (or at the very least, maintain) theological value, as a way of establishing Christianity's primacy in the face of religious difference.

… From the Beginning(s)

A comprehensive study of how early Christianity began to define itself over and against religious others is found in Rosemary Ruether's *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (1974). Though somewhat dated and referenced less than her other well-known works in feminist and ecotheologies, Ruether's historical study and theological argument continues to have relevance and potential impact. As the title suggests, Ruether's focus is how Christianity developed alongside, and eventually in distinction to, Jewish traditions, with the reality being that the emergence of Christian traditions catalyzed a kind of violence to Jewish traditions, Christianity's historical counterpart and forbear. In Ruether's characterization, the development of Christianity has never been neutral, with Christianity— in its becoming, as a tradition—consistently seeking to supersede or eliminate its closest relative. Ruether suggests that this theologically competitive urge is

often, at least textually, related Jesus being envisioned as a divine figure who activates salvation for all, overcoming even death in that universal process.[11]

Ruether readily acknowledges the theological and practical problem that Jesus's human experience, as a Jew, presents to Christians. Jesus, the key figure of Christianity, was rooted in Jewish traditions and marshaled the language and visions of those traditions in the ways that he embodied his active ministry. He was born, lived, and died as a participant in Jewish culture and religious practices. To ignore or deny Jesus's formation and deep immersion in Jewish culture and theological imaginings would be both unnecessarily abstract and naïvely ahistorical. Likewise, to ignore the ways in which early Church Fathers—canonical, such as the Apostle Paul, and theological, such as Athanasius and Irenaeus—meld anti-Jewish[12] sentiments into the integrity of Christianity's theological architecture would also be unnecessarily obtuse and naïvely ahistorical.

Gregory Baum, Roman Catholic theologian and ethicist, pointedly articulates in the introduction to *Faith and Fratricide*: "If the Church wants to clear itself of the anti-Jewish trends built into its teaching, a few marginal correctives will not do. It must examine *the very center* of its proclamation."[13] Baum proceeds to call Ruether's text both "brilliant" and "disturbing," because "here the Christian tradition is examined by a Christian theologian who is willing to let the

[11] Ruether's suggestions for how Christianity (or, Christian logic) can manage its inherent impulses to assimilate or exclude others matches more contemporary theological approaches, which will be discussed briefly in the conclusion to this project.

[12] The terms (along with various spellings) anti-Jewish, antisemitic, anti-Semitic, and anti-Judaic will be used throughout this chapter. Antisemitism (sometimes styled anti-semitism or anti-Semitism) signals the racially or ethnically-centered prejudice, discrimination, suppression, and/or oppression of Jewish persons and communities. Anti-Judaism signals specifically religious aspects of this prejudice. I will intersperse "anti-Jewish" when it seems appropriate. Historians and theologians employ these terms variously, and there is no consensus in scholarship as to which term most clearly describes the anti-Jewish sentiments endemic to Christianity. In fact, this lack of consensus about which term to use is a source of critique for some (is Christianity's anti-Jewish orientation racial or religious?), and represents theological hope for others (i.e., antisemitism can properly be separated from anti-Judaism; this might mean that Christian traditions can repent of anti-Judaism, and likewise demonstrate its peripheral culpability for historical tragedies, such as the Holocaust, which are understood by most scholars to have been catalyzed primarily by antisemitism). See Rosemary Ruether and David Nirenberg.

[13] Gregory Baum, "Introduction," *Faith and Fratricide*, 7.

documents of the past say what they have to say, without *softening their meaning* to make them a little more acceptable to modern ears."[14] Instead of "softening", he acknowledges how Ruether

> tries to raise to consciousness the repressed side of Christianity that has *affected* language, theology, and *cultural attitudes* of Christians over the centuries and that is still, because repressed and unacknowledged, perpetuated by the Church's doctrine and operative in the Church's collective unconscious.[15]

My intention in highlighting Baum's appraisal of Ruether's text is to keep in mind how common it may be for Christian theologies, in various ways, to "repress," "soften," or dismiss the virulence of early Christian writings vis-à-vis (religious) others, in the effort to interpret this virulence as an aberration rather than as a constitutive aspect of Christian logics. An overture of my argument is that Christianity's early anti-Jewish sentiments are instructive for understanding how Christianity relates to and interprets religious others in later centuries. These anti-Jewish sentiments become part of the attitudes, orientations, and feelings toward others that accumulate value in the Christian affective economy. To use Ahmed's terminology, these sentiments are what *stick* in the ways that Christians think, feel, and act toward religious others. This is not to be reductive: anti-other sentiments may not be the only feelings that stick. However, as Ruether convincingly shows, there is a consistent logic of Christian superiority that has circulated from Christianity's very beginnings.

All relationships between and among religious traditions are not equivalent; I am not arguing, and Ruether certainly does not argue, that Christianity shares the same relationship with Islamic or Buddhist traditions that it does with Jewish traditions. Her study may thus inspire more of a question than an assertion: if we accept, as Ruether does, the idea that Christology is inherently anti-Jewish, where can we go from here, theologically speaking? Did those cultural feelings simply disappear at a particular point in the history of Christianity, especially if these explicit comparisons

[14] Baum, "Introduction," 20. Emphasis mine.
[15] Baum, "Introduction," 22. Emphasis mine.

are no longer focal points of theological treatises?[16] Or, does Christianity's practice of defining itself over and against religious others potentially translate to its continued practice of comparison, for the purposes of dialogue, absorption, or elimination, over the last two millennia?

Ruether's survey of anti-Jewish trends in early Christianity, as well as the continued development of these trends up to the Holocaust, is comprehensive, covering far more than I can for the issues at hand.[17] Because Ruether's study is important for illustrating the logic of superiority that is constitutive of Christian traditions, though, I will provide a brief overview of her treatment of early Christian texts, as well as her focus on Christology. As with the entirety of this project, what I will continue to keep in mind is an internal critique of Christian theological imaginings, using Christianity's process of relating with (or toward) religious others as a guiding norm for discernment.

Tracing Ruether's Central Concerns

Focusing on early Christian writings, Ruether argues that slowly, but surely, Christian identities were formed with the original relationship to Jewish traditions in mind. She characterizes the relationship as fraternal, in a way, at least in Christian self-understanding, wherein positionality to Judaism and Jewish traditions is crucial to establish. Jesus Christ and most of his earliest disciples and followers were Jews, and for some it remains a legitimate question whether Jesus intended to reform his own tradition or create something new. The specter of Jewish traditions thus haunts Christianity throughout its emergence, beginning with the question of Christian origins compounded by the anti-Semitism inherited from Greek and pagan cultures that predate Jesus and the first generation of Christian practitioners and theologians. Regarding the latter, as participants in Greco-Roman culture, early Christian theologians arguably inherited a measure of paradigmatic negative

[16] A logical question could be whether these theological affects endure if the *adversos Judaeos* modes of argumentation has fallen out of fashion or common practice. See the "conclusion" section of this chapter.
[17] Ruether uses the term "Holocaust," so I will use her terminology instead of the Hebrew term "Shoah."

orientations, myths, and affective responses to Jewish traditions, especially as Christian traditions increasingly diverged from Jewish traditions and practices.[18] Ruether warns against arguments that place the blame entirely on inherited prejudice from pagan culture, however, partly because Jewish status in the Greco-Roman empire "began to be rescinded only after Christianity became the official religion…and a Christian anti-Semitism began to express itself in anti-Jewish legislation."[19] This historical point that Ruether makes is important in response to critics who argue that Ruether, throughout her argument, collapses anti-Semitism, anti-Judaism, and general anti-Jewish prejudice; typically this critique is levied toward Ruether as a way to assert that anti-Jewish sentiment in early Christian contexts was ubiquitous, which means that Christianity and its theologians were not special catalysts but recipients of general Jewish antipathy.[20] Ruether acknowledges this cultural inheritance, but in my estimation, makes the important point that the theologizing of Christian anti-Semitism cannot be completely blamed on Greco-Roman culture:

> It was only when Christianity, with its distinctively religious type of Anti-Semitism, based on profound theological cleavage within the fraternity of biblical religion, entered the picture that we begin to have that special translation of religious hatred into social hatred that is to become characteristic of Christendom…the special virulence of Christian anti-Semitism can be understood only from its source in a religious fraternity of an exclusive faith turned rivalrous.[21]

For Ruether, pagan anti-Semitism does not logically lead toward religious or theological hatred, because there were few if any symbols shared between groups; Christianity and Judaism, at least in Christianity's early emergences, shared religious and theological imagery. The significance of this

[18] The first chapter of Ruether's *Faith and Fratricide* discusses these cultural inheritances.
[19] Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 28.
[20] Examples of scholars who generally appeal to this stance in their contributions to *AntiSemitism and the Foundations of Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979) are Alan Davies, John C. Meager, Douglas R. A. Hare, and James Parkes.
[21] Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 30.

sharing of symbols, and the potential for burgeoning competitive urges and "religious hatred" spurred by an "exclusive faith" cannot, thus, be ignored or taken lightly.[22]

Constructing artifices of anti-Judaism becomes one of the primary ways in which theologians begin to tell the story of Christianity and its place in the cosmos (space-time) through positioning itself in relation to Jewish traditions.[23] Over time, this relationship ultimately becomes one of supersession rather than equitable coexistence.[24] Ruether notes, more precisely, that early Christian self-understanding within its own boundaries, and subsequent proclamation beyond its boundaries, includes the necessary replacement of initial Jewish election by God with a secondary-but-superior election of Christianity, initiated through Jesus Christ. Whether this superiority is enacted through the life, ministry, crucifixion, death, or resurrection of Jesus depends on the Christian author and their context, with the result nonetheless being the same: the advent of Jesus Christ means that Jewish election must be reinterpreted to make room for Christians, and in budding Christian logic, this continually meant that Jewish election must be superseded.

After cataloguing contentions between Jewish religious leaders and burgeoning Christian self-understandings recorded in the Synoptic Gospels, Ruether turns toward later Christian texts that

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[22] In her rebuttals to various critiques, catalogued in the last chapter of the edited volume *AntiSemitism and the Foundations of Christianity* (ed. by Alan T. Davies), Ruether refers to her thesis (from *Faith and Fratricide*) that the history of Christian anti-Judaism over the centuries has (at the very least) influenced or contributed to the cultural forces that bred Nazi ideology; she notes that this thesis "raises tremendous anxiety for Christians" (230). Ruether accepts some critiques of her thesis, but also suggests that Christian bias and conditioning (as well as a lack of historical knowledge about Christian treatment of Jews, over the centuries) may be connected to initial reactions of incredulity, or discrediting her strong indictment of Christianity, because it is difficult to prove indubitably the line of cause and effect. Ruether, "The Faith and Fratricide Discussion: Old Problems and New Dimensions," in *AntiSemitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, ed. by Alan T. Davies, (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 230-256.

[23] Ruether and other scholars refer to the "myth of the Jews," a phenomenon that many historians ground in pagan/pre-Christian contexts, which means that early Christians, as well as Christian theologians in the centuries after Christianity's emergence as a tradition, were affected by these cultural myths and, unfortunately, imported them into Christian theological imaginings. See *Faith and Fratricide*, ch. 1; John C. Meagar, "As the Twig Was Bent: Antisemitism in Greco-Roman and Earliest Christian Times," in *AntiSemitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, ed. by Alan T. Davies (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 1-26.

[24] There is widespread scholarly acknowledgement of the supersessionist tendencies of early Christian theological texts and formulations. Where scholars differ is what these tendencies indicate about Christianity's special antipathy toward Jewish traditions, and whether supersession is inherent or inherited. Ruether's position is that these tendencies cannot be blamed solely on inheritance from Greco-Roman cultural influences.

show the continuing development of Christian theological imaginings in relation to Christology and supersession.[25] She argues compellingly that the writings of Paul and John, as well as the epistle to the Hebrews, represent the early moments in which the anti-Judaism of the developing "testimonies tradition"[26] begins to take on "theological implications on a metaphysical level."[27] In other words, portions of the Gospels may be rife with anti-Jewish elements of various kinds (such as placing the responsibility for Jesus' crucifixion on Jewish religious leaders), but the theologizing moment, regnant in texts from later decades, effectually entangles anti-Judaism with the formation of Christian identity and imagination from its beginnings. To use Willie James Jennings terminology from *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, we could indicate this as a moment in which Christian theological imaginings began to be *distorted*, at least if we are using Christian orientations towards religious others as a norm that calls for internal theological criticism.

Essentially, these Christian theological texts begin to distinguish the Israel that rejects Jesus Christ as the Messiah and the Israel that accepts his identity. These texts variously position Jewish traditions as those that reject the Messiah and Christian traditions as those that accept the Messiah, with the latter of course being the good, or eschatologically important, orientation, as circumscribed by the limited binary imaginings of the text.[28] Crucially, for Ruether, these authors and texts fuse a Platonic dualism of the material and the spiritual: a literal, materialistic understanding of Jewish traditions and practices (such as circumcision) is presented alongside a metaphysical, spiritual meaning in developing Christian theologies (circumcision is unnecessary), in which the latter fulfills and ultimately supplants the former.[29] Ruether's attempt to demonstrate how early canonical texts

[25] Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 60-95.
[26] Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 118.
[27] Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 95.
[28] Feminist theologians, critical race theorists, and comparative religions scholars are accustomed to identifying and critiquing dualisms that strategically assert binary categories; the implication of these binary imaginings, more often not, is that one category (man, light, good, white, Christian) is understood as hierarchically higher than the category interpreted in opposition (woman, dark, evil, black, nonChristian).
[29] Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 95.

contain the seeds of anti-Judaism is not without its critics, most of whom argue that there are contextual factors that must be taken into consideration; any anti-Jewish sentiments require nuance and should not be taken at face value. In short, some Christian scholars critique whether Ruether can draw such stark conclusions from these early texts, given that most were written by Jewish authors trying to reconcile Jewish logics and practices with the Jesus movement. At the very least, scholars call for more nuance. Though I agree that nuance is helpful, Ruether's argument is strong, as is the amount of early historical and theological data that she accrues to support her claims.

A culmination of an anti-Jewish theological imaginary beyond the Scriptural canon is most clearly shown in *adversos Judaeos* tradition of the Patristic Era.[30] Ruether calls this method of writing "a continuous tradition of christological and anti-Judaic midrashim on the Old Testament, which was the earliest form of Christian theologizing."[31] This tradition—comprised of treatises, "imaginary dialogues," sermons, and so on—repeatedly emphasizes replacement, exclusion, and downright "negation" of Jewish traditions.[32] These negations are not mere footnotes in the text; often they comprise key components of arguments, such as with Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*.[33] Justin Martyr, Gregory of Nyssa, Cyprian, Tertullian, John Chrystostom, Origen, Irenaeus, and Augustine are just a few examples of Church Fathers whose writings directly participate in this tradition. And because these figures also contribute significantly to the development of Christian theologies, from outlining

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[30] Isabel Wollaston, scholar of Jewish and Holocaust studies, helpfully summarizes the *adversos Judaeos* tradition in her evaluation of Ruether's *Faith and Fratricide*: "There are three elements in this explicit tradition of theological anti-Judaism. First, Jewish history is interpreted as a catalogue of crimes (the creation of the Golden Calf, the denigration of the Prophets). Second, this criminal history culminates in deicide, the killing of God's Son, for which all Jews—past, present and future—are guilty. Third, the conclusion drawn is that the Jews are inherently sinful." In "Faith and Fratricide: Christianity, Anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust in the Work of Rosemary Radford Ruether," *Modern Churchman* 33, no. 1 (1991): 9.

[31] Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 117.

[32] Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 117ff.

[33] I have in mind the section "Against the Jews" in Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*. The sections against Jews and Pagans in *On the Incarnation* are key components of Athanasius' argument regarding the person, mission, and supremacy of Jesus Christ over competing theological visions, prophecies, and oracles. See the portion of this chapter that discusses Athanasius' text. Ruether does mention Athanasius in passing; Church Fathers such as John Chrystostom are her focus, however, since they have numerous works that employ an *adversos Judeaos* rhetorical device.

a linear salvation history (Irenaeus), to the development of the Trinity (Augustine and Tertullian), to the incarnation of Jesus Christ (Athanasius), and so on, we must pay attention to the fact that these theological formulations have significant influence in the development of Christian theologies and their affectual force, or resonance, in a developing Christian affective economy of power and relation.

Unless the truth of these Christian theological claims is presumed, it seems like special pleading[34] to imagine that we can keep these conclusions while ignoring premises, building blocks, or seeming peripheral elements of those arguments. Essentially, what I argue is that the way that religious others, specifically Jews, are used as foils by which these early Christian theologians construct their arguments is *theologically consequential*. If anti-Judaic sentiments and hermeneutics "[represent] the overall method of Christian exegesis of the Old Testament,"[35] as Ruether suggests, then holding that the polemics against Jewish traditions and Jewish persons are peripheral, and not central, to the development of Christian theological imaginings, is a dubious position at best. Early emergences of anti-Judaism were significant in building a theological foundation for how Christianity imagines itself and exists in relationship to religious others. It would be reductionist to argue that Jewish traditions are exchangeable for all other traditions; as stated in prior chapters of this dissertation, the relationship between Christian and Buddhist traditions is not the same as with Islamic traditions, and so on. Yet it is legitimate to question whether Christianity's early orientations

[34] I have compared certain Christian scholarly conclusions to "special pleading," at least conversationally, prior to this dissertation. Another scholar unsurprisingly uses this term as well. Stephen R. Haynes, in "Changing Paradigms: Reformist, Radical, and Rejectionist Approaches to The Relationship of Christianity and Antisemitism," summarizes the work of (non-Christian) historian Hyam Maccoby who argues that Christian scholars and theologians that attempt to absolve Christianity and its sacred texts (Gospels, Pauline epistles, etc.) from antisemitism or anti-Judaism engage in "interested scholarship and special pleading." Stephen R. Haynes, "Changing Paradigms: Reformist, Radical, and Rejectionist Approaches to the Relationship of Christianity and Antisemitism," in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 32, no. 1 (1995): 78; also ft. 47. For Maccoby, according to Haynes, consult *Paul and Hellenism* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991), ch. 6, "The Gaston-Gager-Stendahl Thesis."

[35] Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide,* 121.

toward difference has engendered unhealthy patterns, or norms, of relating in a Christian affective economy.

A key piece of this pattern of relation and comparison for Ruether, when it comes to what she describes as Christianity's endemic anti-Judaism, is Christology: not only because Christianity asserts a divine, salvific figure with universal implications, but also because the way in which this Jesus Christ is theologically imagined as a culmination, or eclipse, of all that preceded. Christology, in Ruether's estimation, discovers its theological significance, context, and force through marshaling the resources from Jewish traditions. This means, in a sense, that Christian theologians must be aware of both the logical implications and the practical consequences of drawing from theological resources beyond itself, particularly when the impulse is replacement and redefinition, at least in the instance of early Christian-Jewish relations. Because Christian theologies name Jesus as the Messiah—a figure in Jewish traditions that becomes essentially Christianized in the naming of its fulfillment, whereas in Jewish traditions this figure is still being awaited, not having been fulfilled in the person of Jesus—then Christian theologies are always-already duly affected by this appropriation and reimagining of a Jewish concept. Christian theologies are also affected by the reality that Jesus is "refused" by Jewish traditions as the historical advent of this figure. In view of this reality, Ruether asks: "But is it possible for Christianity to accept the truth of this refusal without at the same time rejecting totally its own messianic experience in Jesus?"[36] She continues, even more pointedly: "Is it possible to purge Christianity of anti-Judaism without at the same time pulling up Christian faith? It is possible to say 'Jesus is the Messiah' without, implicitly or explicitly, saying at the same time 'and the Jews be damned'?"[37]

[36] Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 246.
[37] Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide,* 246.

Ruether's questions, I contend, anticipate the issue of whether the structural integrity of Christian theologies relies upon foundational assertions Christian superiority vis-à-vis religious others, in both concrete and abstract ways.[38] Will troubling these foundations destroy the architectural integrity of the structure as a whole? Ruether wavers on this question in *Faith and Fratricide*, acknowledging that "possibly anti-Judaism is too deeply embedded in the foundations of Christianity to be rooted out entirely without destroying the whole structure."[39] She concludes the text by suggesting that hermeneutical priority should be given to Jewish traditions for concepts such as the Messiah and she remains hopeful, overall, that Christian theologies can correct certain theological distortions by Christians learning more about Jewish traditions, as well learning about the distinct history of Christian anti-Semitism.[40] In her response to critics in *AntiSemitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, an edited volume published to response to *Faith and Fratricide*, Ruether allows that reaching this theological impasse

> can be a profound impetus in Christianity for new creativity and insight…the very meaning of Jesus as a historical person and as a bearer of Christological identity for us, the entire patterning of our theological systems, is profoundly linked with our ways of identifying ourselves over against the rejected parent religion. To reconsider that relation is, at the same time, to enter into deep transformations of our own theological identities.[41]

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[38] For discussion of the "testimonies" tradition, see Ruether's third chapter (117ff.) in *Faith and Fratricide*. David Nirenberg's chapter, "The Early Church: Making Sense of the World in Jewish Terms," in *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (2013).

[39] Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 228. I was reminded of Ruether's quotation while reading David Patterson's *Anti-Semitism and Its Metaphysical Origins* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 77, ft. 67. Patterson's second chapter, "The Arrogation of God: Christian Theological Anti-Semitism," takes up the question of how Christian theology is related to anti-Semitism. As an outsider to Christian traditions, it is interesting that Patterson follows a similar line to radical interpreters of Christian anti-Judaism (as outlined by Stephen Haynes). Patterson separates Christian theology from "certain forms of dogmatic Christian theology" (55), making the latter the kind of theology that is a source or effect of the problem. "My argument," writes Patterson, "is that in this case anti-Semitism stems not from the theology as such but from the theological longing to conceptually possess God, to presume to know the judgment of God, and thus to be as God" (56). This is similar to other strains in Christian scholarship noted by Haynes, wherein "authentic Christianity" (read: not anti-Jewish) is disaggregated from problematic forms of Christian theology. This line of argumentation is similar to Monika K. Hellwig's chapter "From the Jesus of Story to the Christ of Dogma," in *AntiSemitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, ed. by Alan T. Davies (New York: Paulist Press, 1979): 118-136.

[40] See Ruether's final chapter in *Faith and Fratricide*, particularly pgs. 257-261.

[41] Ruether, *Antisemitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, 231.

Responses to Ruether's *Faith and Fratricide*

Initial critiques of Ruether's argument dispute that anti-Judaism is intrinsically tied to Christology; or these critiques at the very least assert that anti-Judaism is not the necessary logical outcome of Christological imaginings. Ruether ties the universal, imperial dreams of Christology to atrocities such as the Holocaust, whereas her critics suggest something akin to correlation but not causation. In this view, Christology, Christian rhetoric, and Christian impulses toward power across time and space should not be held responsible for the development of an ideology such as the "Final Solution" nor for its horrific outcome in the Shoah.

Religion scholars Thomas Idinopulos and Roy Bowen Ward, whose "Is Christology Inherently Anti-Semitic?" is one of the earliest article-length responses to *Faith and Fratricide*, follow this line of thought. While agreeing that "the record of Christian thought makes unmistakable the hostility to the Jew in the canonical gospels," as well as in numerous subsequent writings through the centuries from sermons to edicts to modern theologies, Idinopulos and Ward argue instead that Ruether leaps too quickly to assumptions that Christianity can be traced as the source of anti-Semitism. In addition, she misconstrues a practical concern—Jewish-Christian relations—as a theological problem. In short, they disagree that it would be a foundational theological concern that Christology is inherently anti-Semitic. [42] Idinopulos and Ward, contemporaries of Ruether, contend that the anti-Judaic elements of Christianity emerge in the *practical interference* between "church and synagogue," rather than in the earliest imaginings of Christian theologies and in the development of Christology, for "it is the historical or political context of church-synagogue relations which accounts for the devolution of Christian anti-Judaism into anti-Semitism, not some fateful, inner logic of Christology itself."[43]

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[42] Thomas Idinopulos and Roy Bowen Ward, "Is Christology Inherently Anti-Semitic?: A Critical Review of Rosemary Ruether's *Faith and Fratricide*," in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion, 45:2* (1977): 194.
[43] Idinopulos and Ward, "Is Christology Inherently Anti-Semitic?," 203.

For Idinopulos and Ward, any issues between Jewish traditions and early Christian emergences fit the already-established pattern of "Jewish-Pagan antagonisms," meaning that Christianity and Christian theological constructs cannot be held responsible for the history of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, especially in the way that these forces culminate historically in pogroms in medieval Christendom or a largescale genocide as witnessed in the Holocaust.[44] Therefore, if the initial clashes between Jewish and emerging Christian traditions took place socially rather than theologically, then Ruether's attempt to prioritize theological solutions rather than practical ones in *Faith and Fratricide* is ineffectual at correcting the problem, as it has existed historically, and as it continues to re-surface in current social, historical, and political realities. Further, Idinopulos and Ward contend that fixing a theological problem within Christianity, by giving Jewish traditions hermeneutical priority (for concepts like Messiah) in defining those concepts, confuses the difference between the traditions. Just because Christian practices and theological imaginings initially materialize from within Jewish contexts does not mean, for Idinopulos and Ward, that Jewish traditions should always dictate how certain concepts are understood and interpreted for Christian communities, practices, and theological imaginings as a whole. Last, Ruether makes the mistake of imagining that Jewish traditions would presume or desire to maintain hermeneutical priority in a different tradition, like Christianity, that has been variously interpreted as a heretical sect, or outgrowth, in the history of Jewish-Christian relations. They suggest, in other words, that Christians being more conscientious about Christianity's relationship with Jewish traditions may only do something substantial theologically *for Christianity*. In their estimation Ruether goes too far by assuming that restoring an original relationship between Christian and Jewish traditions, and thereby shifting Christian theological paradigms, would be a meaningful act for both traditions.

[44] Idinopulos and Ward, "Is Christology Inherently Anti-Semitic?," 202.

Idinopulos and Ward do raise a powerful critique: Ruether's positing of an original relationship between Christian and Jewish traditions, coupled with suggesting that repairing something at the point of those origins, will purify Christianity of its anti-Judaic elements, is a questionable assertion or prospect. Ruether's is not a unique corrective or theological move to make; contemporary versions of this corrective, akin to Ruether's, which stress the need to correct a theological distortion through restoring or initiating interfaith relations, will be discussed in the fifth chapter of this project.

Beyond the power of this specific critique, however, I would argue that Idinopulos and Ward bypass the significance of theological imaginings and constructs. We may not be able to prove indubitably that anti-Judaic rhetoric or theology produces anti-Semitic practices and orientations, just as we cannot prove that anti-Judaic elements of Christian thought slide into practices and logics toward other manifestations of religious difference and diversity. As noted in chapter 2, however, causation and causality are more complicated than tracing a linear logic, in which we can identify all the elements that relate, influence, or affect one another. But at the same time, this reality does not mean we cannot trace elements of power, influence, or correlation at all. Complexity should not mean that Christian theologians can ignore or downplay the affects and effects that theological imaginings have on the hearts and minds of those who identify within the boundaries and theological constructs of Christian traditions. This is where Ahmed's affective economy, I suspect, could be helpful in identifying how Ruether's historically-grounded assertions—that early Christian anti-Judaism cultivated affects of antipathy or hatred—are still in circulation. Maybe the connection between symbol and object of hatred is obscured; yet the feeling, the affect, and its effects remain, regardless of whether scholars can definitively trace the line(s) of causality.

Idinopulos and Ward ground their argument on the established conclusion that if theology follows practice, then it is the practice—*not the theology*—that matters more: employing more of an

Aristotelian interpretation of causality, they suggest that theology is not the cause, but the "expression," of the anti-Judaic elements that already exist, not just in the emergence of Christianity, but in culture as a whole. Early Christian traditions unfortunately participated in the process of taking up these unsavory aspects of widespread culture and practice into its theological expression, but Christian theology itself is not to be blamed.[45] The practices are the cause, so any proposed changes must attend to the initial cause rather than the secondary effect. This seems to be why Ruether is characterized, in their critique, as "[showing] *unusual naiveté* in thinking that anti-Judaism can be rooted out by the mechanical act of theologically redefining the doctrine of Christ."[46]

The questionable (and potentially gendered) charge of Ruether's "unusual naiveté" aside, what Idinopulos and Ward sidestep is her focus on Christian theologians' "selective ignorance" regarding any anti-Judaism that remains unacknowledged or hidden in Christian frameworks and traditions.[47] Or, referencing once more Gregory Baum's comments from the introduction to *Faith and Fratricide*, Ruether consistently refuses throughout her argument to "soften" any of Christianity's anti-Judaic impulses that may be entangled in its theological construction. Ruether does not propose that theological shifts are the *only* or even the *primary* answer to the problem of Christian-Jewish relations; she does, however, assert that theological changes are necessary. Another way of understanding this is that a theological problem can have theological solutions, and this does not necessarily mean that embodied practices and affects are being ignored. In this sense, arguing whether theology follows practice or whether practice follows theology could be distracting, because both contribute to the problem. To assert changing one, and not the other, seems simplistic and reductionist in its own fashion.

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[45] Idinopulos and Ward, "Is Christology Inherently Anti-Semitic?,"204.
[46] Idinopulos and Ward, "Is Christology Inherently Anti-Semitic?,"205. Emphasis mine.
[47] Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 258.

Further, reinterpreting Christian supersessionism is consistently fraught if Christian theologies are viewed from an outsider's perspective rather than from an insider's perspective, wherein the truth of Christian theological frameworks is assumed. Jewish traditions have no need to include or accommodate the theological visions of a rogue messianic sect, which is what Christian traditions were, by-and-large, in its beginnings.[48] The supersessionist lure is in large part why Ruether holds that interpretations of the person of Jesus Christ, and subsequent Christological formulations, contain seeds of anti-Judaism: for Ruether, Christology always-already contains an inherent logic of comparison that manifests in supersession as it attempts to justify Jesus Christ's identity and purpose, and thereby, Christian identity and purpose. Yet the reality that Christian theologies largely repress or deny that this supersessionist logic is inherent means that Christians cannot confront the problem or approach a remedy, if there is one. For Ruether, "repressed parts of our past are preserved in pathological ways" and Christians must "look at these suppressed pages [of history] honestly, understand them, [and] repent of them in a way that acknowledges responsibility."[49] The evasion of responsibility and repentance also forestalls the potential for Christian theology become a better version of itself, or at the very least, to discover a Christology that is not founded on legitimizing itself over and against its forbears.[50]

Additional Responses:
Insiders, Outsiders, and (Christian) Interpretive Bias

Twenty years after the publication of *Faith and Fratricide*, Christian religious studies scholar Stephen R. Haynes categorizes the varying critiques of Ruether's work from both "insider" and

[48] Or, as stated clearly: "Anti-Judaism is part of Christian exegesis. Anti-Christianity is not properly a part of Jewish exegesis." Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 181.
[49] Ruether, *AntiSemitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, 230-231.
[50] Ruether reserves this hope in her conclusion. I am not entirely persuaded that a Christology without anti-Semitism is realistic or possible.

"outsider" perspectives. His thesis is a response to "recent publications on the subject of Antisemitism by influential scholars," which he suggests "have downplayed or ignored religion as a source of antisemitic feeling in the modern world."[51] He classifies respondents to Ruether's thesis into three categories: reformist, radical, and rejectionist. Reformists are those whose responses assume that antisemitism and anti-Judaism are relegated to less developed or antiquated way of articulating theological themes, such that "antisemitism… is essentially foreign to authentic Christianity." In other words, a more developed Christian logic will overcome distorted logics and harmful affects. The reformist, to Haynes, assumes that

> Xenophobia, paranoid delusion, and the neurotic need for evidence of religious superiority should not characterize modern persons, Antisemitism is an anachronism in the post-Enlightenment world. Likewise, Christian anti-Judaism, based as it is on the persistence of irrational fears and hatreds, should have disappeared with the rise of modernity. Anti-Jewish prejudice in the church is not only a source of intolerance but also a regressive symbol of ignorance and insecurity.[52]

Reformists rely on the advent of a superior Christian logic, wherein anti-Judaism is not a constitutive or native element.[53]

Radicals, in contrast, understand anti-Judaism as inherent, and are not as optimistic as reformists as to whether anti-Judaism can be disarticulated from Christian theology. Yet Haynes

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[51] Stephen R. Haynes, "Changing Paradigms: Reformist, Radical, And Rejectionist Approaches to the Relationship of Christianity and Antisemitism," in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 32, no. 1 (1995), 63. From the Precis.

[52] Haynes, "Changing Paradigms," 65. Haynes distinguishes reformist and radical views, but importantly connects their theological vision in the way that they imagine Christianity apart from these distortions. In the radical view, according to Haynes' description, "the same pivotal distinction is made between the original message of Jesus and the anti-Jewish 'Christianity' that developed when in the heat of controversy some of Jesus' followers began preaching a triumphalist or supersessionist version of his life and death. This distinction is definitive for the radical paradigm. From the perspective of the Christian scholar concerned with Antisemitism, it has the distinct advantage of allowing one to admit deep flaws in Christian faith at its very heart, without relinquishing the life of faith itself" (69).

[53] Invoking the affective dimension of love, Haynes characterizes reformists' optimism in this way: "Ironically, the characteristic of the reformist paradigm that is responsible for its impact on the church—and that continues to make it attractive to many thoughtful Christians—is also its major limitation. This is the tendency for its practitioners to assume that Jew-hatred is related to Christian belief only superficially through historical circumstance. This assumption has produced excessive optimism concerning the prospects for overcoming this relation via a new level of historical awareness. *One encounters this optimism in repeated claims that the existence of antisemitic prejudice in the modern world is rooted in a simple failure of Christian love and/or Enlightenment values*" (67, emphasis mine).

notes a theological subtlety characteristic of Ruether and others who fall into this radical paradigm: in order to maintain the integrity of Christian traditions, typically a "pure essence" of Christianity is claimed, with all distortions, corruptions, or deformations relegated to the New Testament or Patristic era—or at the very least, to the decades and centuries after Jesus' ministry and death, but not to the actions or practices to Jesus or to the earliest followers of the Jesus movement.[54] In this way, the potential for a pure Christianity, along with the restoration of an original relationship with Jewish traditions that is free from anti-Jewish sentiment, is secured. Haynes' last category, rejectionist, consists of non-Christian scholars (Gavin I. Langmuir and Hyam Maccoby) who critique Christian theologians and scholars for reformist and radical paradigms, which ultimately are biased toward maintaining the integrity of Christian traditions. The hope that the tradition can be absolved, or saved, from its inherent anti-Judaism is "an act of faith" rather than a justified rational or scholarly stance.[55] Haynes, by way of conclusion, wonders whether a post-Holocaust theology is possible without the Christian theological bias identified by scholars whose research comprise the rejectionist paradigm.[56]

Ruether's premises and conclusions, at the time of publication, were deeply related to confronting the horrors of the Holocaust. The relentless focus of *Faith and Fratricide* is best understood in context, wherein Ruether and several contemporaries aim to confront Christianity's complicity in and responsibility for the culmination of anti-Jewish attitudes that resulted in genocide

[54] Haynes, "Changing Paradigms," 77.
[55] Haynes, "Changing Paradigms," 74.
[56] Haynes states: "At the very least, it appears that the rejectionist paradigm as represented in the work of Langmuir and Maccoby must prove both challenging and disturbing to post-Holocaust Christian theologians. Challenging, because where rejectionist claims are accepted a firmer historical basis for claims that Jesus and his original movement were free of anti-Judaism will be required. Disturbing, because if one becomes convinced that Christian faith is fundamentally and necessarily anti-Jewish, the hope that is so vital to post-Holocaust theological reflection in the Christian tradition is gravely threatened. In order to qualify as 'Christian,' post-Holocaust theology must retain a vision of 'Christian faith' that is unsullied by anti-Judaism. Yet, if the reigning assumption were that such a version of Christian faith has never existed, even in the first century C.E., from whence would this animating vision derive?" (84).

on an unprecedented level.[57] Trying to argue Christianity's complicitly in the horrors of the Holocaust is both a strength and weakness of Ruether's argument: a strength because it keeps the question of anti-Judaism in sight, and a weakness because demonstrating singular or linear culpability for a historical event is difficult, or even impossible, to absolutely determine. Yet I understand Ruether's focus as more of a strength than a limitation, as it "stays with the trouble" of the entanglement of Christian theologies with a logic of superiority and questions how Christian theologians should respond to this inheritance.[58]

Despite the critique of Christian theological bias that might subvert, or work against, the strength of her argument, Ruether's theological contribution is not archeology for archeology's sake: she is not just excavating the purported theological underpinnings of Christian traditions to pose an abstract dilemma or to satiate an intellectual curiosity. She is a Christian theologian, concerned about the past, present, and future of Christian theologies, and convinced that "avoidance of this knowledge [the anti-Judaic myth and its social workings in Christendom]…allows the Christian theologian to continue to turn out Christologies which are implicitly, if not explicitly, imperialist and anti-Judaic."[59] Scholars and theologians who object to Ruether's arguments for being too reductive largely contend that her historical data requires more nuance and that her lines of causality are too

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[57] I use "unprecedented" here in terms of Nazi ideology and the strategic implementation of the "final solution." Ruether notes that critics misrepresent her scholarship when they claim she blames Christianity (exclusively) for the Holocaust. "Christian anti-Judaism was not genocidal. This is clearly stated in my book (pp.185-186)…Christianity demonized the Jew religiously, not racially…Theologically, the Church's view did not support a racial view of the Jews…But we must realize equally that these distinctions escaped the simple minds of most Christians…Most ordinary Christians heard it said over and over again that the Jew was the devil incarnate…The Church must take responsibility for creating this cultural role of the Jews, even though its murderous results were contrary to its strict intentions" (Ruether, *AntiSemitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, 249).

[58] Haynes, "Changing Paradigms," 67-69 (see section on radical views). Likewise, in the introduction to his provocative text *Is the New Testament Anti-Semitic?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1965), Gregory Baum writes: "While I tried to uphold the purity of the gospel… Christian authors have covered the mystery of Israel with theological embroidery that has contributed to the contempt and the debasement of the Jewish people, and these theories have become so much entangled with the Church's teaching that they have formed the mentality of generations, of whole centuries, even to our own day" (17). Notably, Baum introduces Ruether's *Faith and Fratricide* a decade later and acknowledges that his views expressed in his own research (in which he concludes that the New Testament is not anti-Semitic in nature) shifted as a result of Ruether's forceful indictments of the inherent anti-Judaism of Christian theology.

[59] Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 258.

simplistic. One cannot draw a direct line from Christian anti-Judaism to the Holocaust, as Ruether seems to do. These objections are valid but do not necessarily trouble Ruether's overarching argument that anti-Judaism is a key material in certain Christian theological constructs.[60] My contention with her argument is less about objecting to the implicit imperialistic and anti-Judaic elements of Christian theologies, which I accept as persuasive, and more about how these elements may be connected to contemporary Christian orientations toward religious difference in general, and whether Ruether's proposals for purging theological imaginings of their superiority or triumphalism toward religious difference is even possible.

Transitions, Tracings, Resonances

Up to this point, I have used Ruether's extensive study to make a case that theological superiority vis-à-vis religious others has been with Christian traditions from their very beginnings. In this way, we could say that superiority has been a consistent affect circulating in the Christian affective economy. This affect is textual, in the sense of Ahmed's method of reading the "emotionality of texts," but the affect does not remain merely textual. Ruether spends a significant portion of *Faith and Fratricide* tracing the ways in which the *adversos Judeaos* trend in Christian theologies "was incorporated in the legal status of the Jew in Christendom."[61] Scholars rightly advise caution for drawing direct lines of responsibility from the Gospels, to *adversos Judeaos*, to the legal oppression and suppression of Jewish communities through the medieval Christendom, and finally to the Nazi ideology that spread through Western Europe with horrific consequences. At any rate, the *adversos Judeaos* tradition might reveal pattern—a Christian logic—of relation toward (religious)

[60] As Jewish and Holocaust studies scholar Isabel Wollaston articulates, "The weakness of Ruether's approach is that it is one-sided. In her determination to emphasize the extent to which Christian anti-Judaism was a 'necessary cause' of the Holocaust, she fails to pay sufficient attention to the pragmatic and modern nature of the event" (11).
[61] Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 185.

others that nonetheless has had vast, unintended consequences and affectual resonance.[62] Ruether concludes her discussion of this legacy, left to medieval and modern Christians by the Patristic theological traditions, by stating forcefully:

> For Christianity, anti-Judaism was not merely a defense against attack, but an intrinsic need of Christian self-affirmation…The *adversos Judaeos* literature was not created to convert Jews or even primarily to attack Jews, but to affirm the identity of the Church, which could only be done by invalidating the identity of the Jews. All of this might have remained theoretical, however, if Christianity and Judaism had both remained minority religions…in the fourth century, however, Christianity became the religion of the Greco-Roman Empire. What had previously been theology and biblical hermeneutics now was to become law and social policy.[63]

Though we have shown some significant ways that Ruether's arguments in *Faith and Fratricide* have been critiqued, her indictment of theologians' "selective ignorance" or even outright denial about some of the key structures of Christian theologies, such as Christology, remains. What would it mean to admit that theological superiority has been with Christian traditions from its beginnings, and to assert at the same time, that we cannot return to those beginnings in order to repair the problem? Nor can we skirt this problem by referencing an abstract, pure version of Christianity that is exempt from these affects or effects? This question assumes, of course, that we understand theological superiority to be a theological problem at all.[64]

In order to explore superiority as a theological problem with affectual resonance in significant Christian texts, from early theological imaginings to the present day, this section moves

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[62] Jewish traditions and Jewish persons are not stand-ins for all religious difference and religious others; but it seems plausible to wonder whether there are theological patterns of relating to difference that emerge in Christianity's earliest stages of formation, that still haunt the ways that Christian theologies prompt how Christians think (logic), act (embodied practices), and feel (affect).

[63] Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 181. The fourth chapter of *Faith and Fratricide* focuses on tracing these connections between theological resonance and the legal status of Jewish persons after Christianity becomes an imperial religion.

[64] It is possible to defend the superiority of Christ and Christian traditions through reference to various Christian scriptures. This would be especially pertinent for those within the bounds of Christian traditions, and for whom scriptures ("literal" readings or otherwise) count as sufficient evidence for an argument. My comment about whether theological superiority is even understood as a theological problem should be interpreted in this light. For some, Christian paradigms constitute the truth vis-à-vis all other traditions and paradigms, so the superiority of Christian paradigms is assumed and would not be a theological problem at all; this is especially the case if one is working from the perspective wherein the logic of the One (Schneider) is understood as preferable.

from Ruether's work to discuss, albeit briefly, Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*. My intention is to show how an important theological claim—a claim which most Christians would likely identify as central to Christian logic, beliefs, and practice—as it is constructed in a text, is deeply entangled with the presence of religious others. In other words, religious others are a prism through which Christ is constructed and established as superior and universal.[65] In texts such as these, Christian theological superiority is not always overt, though there are plentiful examples of overt superiority within early Christian texts, especially within the *adversos Judaeos* tradition on which Ruether focuses. But whether a superior or triumphalist relationship is overtly or covertly intimated does not shift the importance of asking how these patterns may be embedded in the logic of a given text or theological theme.

With this in mind, *On the Incarnation* is an interesting text to analyze in connection to Ruether's *Faith and Fratricide*, because it was written to affirm key Christological arguments that would largely become understood as the orthodox or traditional view of Jesus Christ. As will be discussed in successive sections, Athanasius spends a significant portion of his treatise employing comparative arguments between Christians, Jews, and pagans to make his case for Christ's prominence. Though it should be noted that his arguments are not the most virulent or inflammatory in comparison to other Patristic authors, Athanasius comparative strategy remains striking and, as I argue, theologically important. His Christological argument is constructed with anti-Judaic sentiment, and this sentiment is part of what is intended to prove Christ's identity and ascendance.

[65] This is another way of stating that Christian theological architecture might require real or imagined religious others to affirm, create, or maintain its own constructs. At the very least, using religious others as a foil is a significant trend that can be traced throughout the history of Christian constructive theologies.

Circulating Superiority: *On the Incarnation*

Context of the Text: Athanasius Contra Mundum[66]

Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, is often construed as the early Church Father who most explicitly articulates post-Nicene incarnational Christology. The creed resulting from the first council of Nicea (325 B.C.E.), though perhaps intended for a different purpose than the baptismal creeds used regularly in Christian liturgies, becomes a pivotal moment in the materializing of a universal, orthodox Christology.[67] Athanasius' *On the Incarnation*, written in the centuries after the first council, is the "first writing devoted specifically to the topic of incarnation."[68] The result is that Athanasius' argument becomes foundational for all Christology that follows.

As a young deacon, Athanasius witnesses the debates of the first Council of Nicea; this gathering of bishops proves to be significant in the history of Christianity because it is the first council of its kind called, by a political entity apart from the Christian church, for the purpose of reaching universal "agreement on manners of faith."[69] Soon afterward, as the youngest bishop of his time, Athanasius concretizes his career and solidifies himself as a significant theological figure through his written refutations of Arius and the Arians, which take up themes generally agreed upon by the Council. Arius and his followers, in brief, taught that Jesus Christ—if begotten—was not the

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[66]This is a typical honorific in used for Athanasius, translated from Latin as "Athanasius against the world." Tracing the original use of this honorific has proven difficult. The phrase itself is a reference to his work as a bishop who articulates and vigorously defends, throughout his life and several exiles, what becomes the orthodox view of Jesus Christ in Christian theological renderings. See *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History* (eds R.S. Bagnall, K. Brodersen, C.B. Champion, A. Erskine and S.R. Huebner), Rebecca Lyman (2012), "Athanasius," https://doi-org.proxy.library.vanderbilt.edu/10.1002/9781444338386.wbeah05028

[67] There is a difference, especially in early Christianity, between baptismal creeds and conciliar creeds. The former is generally understood as liturgically important for conversions and baptisms into Christian traditions, whereas the latter (also appearing later, historically, than early baptismal creeds) emerge as expressions of Christian bishops and other institutional authority figures determine the content of orthodox Christian doctrine and belief. As theologian J. N. D. Kelly notes, part of the difference is that the conciliar creeds "were intended… to have far more than local authority" (in *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (London: Continuum, 1972; 205). The Council of Nicea and its resultant creed is the "first which could claim universal authority in a legal sense" (207).

[68] John Behr, "Saint Athanasius on 'Incarnation,'" in *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*, edited by Niels Henrik Gregersen, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 81.

[69] Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 205.

same substance as God the Father; their logic follows that there was a time when Jesus Christ was not. This Arian logic brings to the fore questions of Jesus' divinity, power to save, and sovereignty, and overall complicates the role of Jesus' humanity.[70] In contrast to Arius, Athanasius holds that Jesus Christ is the same substance as God the Father, and that this co-eternal and co-equal essence does not contradict Jesus' humanity, but instead, renders it reasonable and fitting.[71]

In this historical context, Athanasius' Christology, which posits Jesus Christ to be of the same substance with God the Father, ultimately overcomes Arius' assertion of a Jesus Christ who is divine, but substantially different, from God the Father.[72] This is not to say that Arian logic and visions of Jesus Christ are completely outside a Christian affective economy, either historically in the present-day. Rather, this is to simply acknowledge that Athanasian logic represents what has generally become accepted as orthodox or traditional in Christian theology and valued as being non-heretical.[73] In Ahmed's terms, we could say that Athanasian logics and feelings accumulate value through their increased circulation; these feelings impress[74] upon generations of Christian adherents,

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[70] The advent of Arian logic, with the power of its circulation, created Christological factions in the early power structures of the Christian church, as noted by J.N.D. Kelly in *Early Christian Creeds*.

[71] "Reasonable" and "fitting" are two terms shared by a host of early and Patristic Christian theologians, in their apologies for the Christian faith. Christian apologists were largely responding to critiques that Christian theological themes were irrational.

[72] Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 238ff. For a discussion of the term ὁμοονσιοσ (ὁμοούσιον) and Athanasius' wavering on its use throughout his writings, consult 243ff; as well as 257ff. Kelly theorizes that Athanasius was uncomfortable with the term at first (which is why it does not appear in *On the Incarnation*) because the term represents too near a compromise with adherents of Arian logic.

[73] Definitions of heretical and non-heretical, in certain moments of (Christian) history, have been quite literally understood to determine one's value, or eternal destiny, in a Christian economy of salvation.

[74] On this concept of impression, I found it interesting that Cyril of Jerusalem, in catechetical documents written in the century after the first council of Nicea, implores catechumens to inscribe the traditions "across [their] heart" and uses an economic analogy for humanity-divinity relations: "That is why, my brothers, you must consider and preserve the traditions you are now receiving. Inscribe them across your heart… Faith is rather like depositing in a bank the money entrusted to you, and God will surely demand an account of what you have deposited… You have now been given life's great treasure; when he comes the Lord will ask for what he has entrusted to you. At the appointed time he will reveal himself, for he is the blessed and sole Ruler, King of Kings, Lord of lords. He alone is immortal, dwelling in unapproachable light. No man has seen or ever can see him. To him be glory, honor and power for ever and ever. Amen." (From a catechetical instruction on the Creed by Saint Cyril of Jerusalem, bishop. Cat. 5, De fide et symbolo, 12-13: PG 33, 519-523). Initial reference to this catechetical section from Cyril of Jerusalem was found on Roman Catholic website (confessional, not scholarly): https://www.crossroadsinitiative.com/media/articles/nicene-and-apostles-creed-cyril-of-jerusalem/. It should be noted that J.N.D Kelly explains that Cyril of Jerusalem can be placed, theologically, between Athanasian and Arian logic (Kelly, 255-256).

helping to orient Christians toward the boundaries of inside and outside. These feelings represent social investment in what becomes normative Christian belief and practice.[75]

While it is true that there are multiple Christianities and traditions, with varying levels of reference to Athanasius as a theologian and purveyor of orthodox Christology, the significance of the First Council of Nicea to Christian communities and the development of Christian traditions is undisputed. It is noteworthy, then, both historically and in current contexts, that Athanasius' *On the Incarnation* is "the defining exposition of Nicene theology" and remains the theological treatise that most clearly elaborates the theological conclusions agreed upon by the bishops in attendance.[76] Yet Athanasius, as specific figure, may be less important than the powerful shadow that his theological articulations cast over a cornerstone of Christian traditions, which powerfully influences both Christology and subsequent Trinitarian conceptions of the Christian divinity (colloquially referred to as "the Godhead").[77]

Weighing the soundness of Athanasius' Christology on its own or in relation to the competing claims of Arius and his followers is not my primary concern. My concern in this section is how and whether patterns of Christian superiority emerge in early Christian theological formulations, such as *On the Incarnation*, wherein the integrity of argument requires (religious) others to remain sound. What does it mean if the rhetorical (and practical) presence of (religious) others in a text is necessary for a theological argument, or guiding logic of a particular theological theme, to be

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[75] Sara Ahmed discusses concepts of impress/impression, emotion, feeling, and social investment in norms in her concluding chapter ("Conclusion: Just Emotions") to *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. See pgs. 194-196.
[76] John Behr, Introduction to *On the Incarnation*, 21.
[77] In modern settings, if Christians encounter Athanasian Christology through conciliar creeds, it is most likely through recitation during a religious gathering, such as a Roman Catholic mass or an Orthodox liturgy. Some Christians, however, depending upon their branch or denomination within the economy of Christianity, may not recite creeds or be familiar with Athanasius, in name or office, at all. The Apostle's Creed is the oldest creed, whereas the Nicene Creed is recited variously in the three major branches of Christianity (Eastern, Roman Catholic, Protestant). The Athanasian Creed, appearing in the centuries after the first council of Nicea and the council at Chalcedon, is regarded by scholars as pseudonymous and is used less frequently in liturgical contexts. The Nicene Creed is the only conciliar creed of these three. For more information on Christian creeds, including their development and modern use, see Donald Fairbairn and Ryan M. Reeves, *The Story of Creeds and Confessions: Tracing the Development of the Christian Faith,* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2019.

coherent? It is my contention that if reference to religious others is significant to an argument for Christ's superiority, then perhaps we can imagine how superiority becomes an affect in a Christian economy of power and relation over time, such that Christians in this economy may continue to feel the need to establish this superiority to fulfill an "intrinsic need for Christian self-affirmation," even if the origins or source of this feeling cannot be traced linearly or with unmistakable precision.[78]

To be fair, Athanasius' rhetorical framework throughout *On the Incarnation* is not unique. Opposition to Jewish traditions (or, "the Jews"), Gentiles, and Pagans is typical of Patristic texts, as already discussed with reference to Ruether's *Faith and Fratricide*. But beyond the context of Athanasius and his contemporaries, the use of this comparative, oppositional framework to develop an incarnational logic can justifiably prompt modern Christian theologians to ask whether and how early Christian imaginings related to Jesus' uniqueness and universal relevance may always-already be entangled with arguments that rely on denigrating other traditions, in this case primarily Jewish traditions. Staying with the trouble of this question of theological entanglement is akin to Ruether's insistence that "as long as Christology and anti-Judaism intertwine, one cannot be safe from a repetition of this history in new form."[79]

Athanasian Logic, Superior Feelings: On the Incarnation

Athanasius addresses *On the Incarnation* to an audience that is already a "true lover of Christ," which means that this treatise is likely meant for Christian insiders rather than outside readers, or even potential converts.[80] Nonetheless, establishing Jesus Christ's universal relevance is a central

[78] Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 181.
[79] Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 226.
[80] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, Greek Original and English Translation, trans. by John Behr, (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 51. Because his audience is the "true lover of Christ," Athanasius writes to Christian insiders who must presumably learn why and how certain Christian theological themes are the truth. It is likely that this text was catechetical.

focus of Athanasius' argument throughout, as is providing the intellectual tools (or logic) for Christians to prove the truth and universal impact of these claims. To accomplish these tasks, Athanasius does not appeal to universality as an abstract concept, however; Christ's, and thereby Christianity's superiority and primacy, is directly established in the text vis-à-vis comparison to religious others. Whereas *Against the Gentiles*,[81] his preceding text, more explicitly recounts the problem of idolatry and human error in contrast to the truth of Christian logic, *On the Incarnation* endeavors to answer the question of why Jesus, if truly divine and powerful, could be embodied and experience death. Or, why the incarnation, wherein divinity becomes laden with human materiality, is a central claim that does not logically contradict Jesus Christ's divine status: rather, it renders his divinity manifest.

To answer this question, Athanasius first addresses why it was necessary for the divine (God) to indwell a human body and then experience death; or, why the incarnation is fitting and necessary. If it is necessary for God to be embodied to accomplish a task that would not be accomplished without a body, then Jesus' positionality in relation to God can be established. Yet both embodiment and death, as theological themes, are controversial in Athanasius' historical context because they make the divine subject to change. Change, or becoming, characterizes materiality, not divinity; divinity, or God, is the source of being who is unsullied by human predicaments and experiences. Mutability is a theological problem because it implies that God is subject to change in

[81] Gentiles can be translated as pagans, which is the practice that John Behr, Eastern Orthodox priest and theologian, follows in his discussion of Athanasius' various texts. It is interesting that Behr remarks: "Most of *Against the Pagans* is given over to recounting, at great length, the variety and perversity of pagan idolatry (hence it rarely accompanies *On the Incarnation in* translations!). However, it also lays out a number of structural elements that are important for understanding the coming of the Word to created reality" (Behr, "Saint Athanasius on 'Incarnation'," 84). This seems to indicate that *Against the Pagans* is redacted from editions of *On the Incarnation* (including the version used for this project), even though Athanasius understood them as being interrelated. I want to also note that Behr's chapter fails to mention that Athanasius concludes his arguments for the incarnation by refuting Jews and Pagans/Gentiles. Behr only discusses the initial sections of *On the Incarnation*, leaving out almost half the treatise.

similar ways that humans are vulnerable to these processes.[82] This is perhaps why "the Jews slander" and "the Greeks mock" emerging Christian conceptions of Jesus Christ as a divinity: a powerful God would not be vulnerable to death, nor subject to forces of change beyond divine control.[83] The incarnation, then, is a central theological problem for which early Christian theologians, like Athanasius, must provide an account.

Athanasius argues that a potential theological problem is, in reality, a theological solution. The incarnation, despite its adjacence to embodiment and death, is necessary to save humanity from the death and demise brought about by corruption. This corruption is not the fault of a divinity, for God made "the human being and willed that [he] should remain in incorruptibility."[84] God creates humans as rational and in God's image, which for Athanasius means that humans' comprehension of God, as the one who is Being and Goodness itself, is what makes humans (unnaturally) eternal. Keeping with generally accepted and repeated Christian narratives of his contemporaries and predecessors, and aligned with the Platonic tradition, Athanasius writes that humans "despised and overturned the comprehension of God, devising and contriving evil for themselves."[85] Evil is entangled with the material, which means that evil is an entirely material, human affair, separate from the God that is beyond. This choice of evil returns human beings to their "natural state" of corruptibility and death, which is the progression toward evil and non-being. In non-being there is no participation in Being and Goodness, which is God.[86]

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[82] Process theologians, responding to modern scientific discoveries and postmodern approaches to truth and subjectivity, readily accept that change characterizes both God and the world (see Alfred North Whitehead's *Process and Reality*; the works of John B. Cobb, Jr.; Charles Hartshorne; among others in the trajectory of process philosophy and theology). Yet, in what is generally considered to be more traditional formulations of divinity and divine power, God is constructed as all-powerful, beyond the material processes that envelop humans, as created beings. God is creator and therefore uncreated, and ultimately beyond the realms of change and becoming. God is the source of Being, and all who experience being are participants not initiators or creators of such. Embodiment and death are related to these processes of becoming, change, and corruptibility; God, as the being that is beyond these entanglements of materiality, is immutable, eternal, and incorruptible.

[83] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 51.

[84] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 59.

[85] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 59.

[86] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 59-60.

Jesus Christ, as the eternal Word of God, intuits that the only way to save God's creation, while also maintaining God's integrity regarding the connection of corruptibility and death, is to incarnate in a body and die for humanity's sake. Because human bodies share a universal substance, the divine indwelling of a human body means that all human beings could be saved from corruptibility by Jesus Christ's ultimate defeat of death through the resurrection.[87] Ultimately, inflecting his argument with affect, Athanasius writes that Jesus Christ incarnates, dies, and resurrects because of love for human beings:

> And thus, taking from ours that which is like, since all were liable to the corruption of death, delivering it over to death on behalf of all, he offered it to the Father, *doing this in his love for human beings*, so that, on the one hand, with all dying in him the law concerning corruption in human beings might be undone (its power being fully expended in the lordly body and no longer having any ground against similar human beings), and on the other hand, that as human beings had turned toward corruption he might turn them again to incorruptibility and give them life from death, by making the body his own and by the grace of the resurrection banishing death from them as straw from fire.[88]

Again, the logic grounding Athanasius' Christology is quite clear and in line with the ubiquitous Platonic-infused Christian imaginings of his day: Being is eternal and beyond matter, with matter being a substance that is corrupting through its association to change and death. Matter corrupts not only because of its proximity to evil, but matter also corrupts because of its potential to become something else. Immutability must characterize Divinity's essence to ensure incorruptibility, an unchanging essence that is impervious to evil or the potential for evil. Athanasius' assertion that salvation comes through a bodily indwelling, then, is a complicated claim to make, especially in a period when Platonic outlooks were assumed and likely regnant. Thus, it is in relation to this point, with salvation and incorruptibility being tied to a bodily substance, that Athanasius must argue for Jesus Christ's power and universal relevance. An embodied salvation (achieved through incarnation,

[87] This is the implication of "through the one body" (69).
[88] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 67. Emphasis mine.

death, and resurrection), leading to incorruptibility, must be applicable to all of humanity or it has achieved nothing.[89]

If the problem is a universal problem—evil, as well as the corruptibility of human bodies and eventual death—then the answer must be a universal answer. Therefore, Athanasius argues that Jesus Christ is *the* universal answer to this universal problem: Jesus Christ is "superior to death" (93), making his own body and thus the universal human body incorruptible through the resurrection, which applies to all in the "universal resurrection."[90] Beyond the resurrection, the manner of Jesus' death is also fitting, because "there are solid arguments that the salvation of all had to take place in no other way than by the cross," Athanasius writes.[91] Part of this fittingness is also inflected by affect, as Athanasius affirms that a loving Savior died with arms outstretched to draw "the ancient people" with one hand, and the Gentiles with the other.[92] Athanasius' vision of salvation, as well as the impetus for the universal relevance of the incarnation itself, means that addressing the presence of religious others is imperative.

Athanasius thus turns his focus to "the Jews" and "Gentiles" to further underscore Jesus Christ's superiority. Jews and Gentiles present a fundamental problem for Athanasius' argument not

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[89] This drive for universality is important for the integrity of Athanasius argument (universal substance), yet it is also contextual. Athanasius is writing in response to pagans, "Gentiles," philosophers, and others who critique Christianity (and Christian logics, in their early emergences) for affirming not only that the divine became incarnate, but that the divine experienced bodily death. This seems to make the divine feeble and vulnerable. Claiming that God, the source of all Being and Goodness, has experienced corruption (indwelling matter) and death was nonsensical in Athanasius' context, so defending Christian narratives and the person of Jesus Christ from critiques of this kind becomes part and parcel of early Christian apologetics. Thus, *On the Incarnation* argues that it was necessary for the divine to not only become incarnate to save humankind, but that this incarnation had to be accomplished by "the God Word" (71) and "the very image of God" (79), since it was "fitting" (71) for the one who participated in the creation of humans to secure their salvation.

[90] The Greek word in these passages (translated as superior) is κρείττων, a comparative term that has a range of meanings, all designating an entity as better, higher, more advantageous, etc.; Strong's concordance [2909] defines the term as "better, superior, greater." It is an inherently comparative term, and a derivative of κράτος [2904], which strength or power over something else ("force, strength, dominion, power"). See Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon,* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996; or James Strong, *The Strongest Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible,* 21st century ed., fully rev. and corrected by John R. Kohlenberger III and James A. Swanson, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001.

[91] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 105.

[92] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 105.

only because of potential objections to the soundness of his argument, but also the presence of difference troubles his appeal for a necessary, relevant universality. If Jesus Christ's bodily indwelling penetrates the universal human bodily substance, for the purpose of saving all humans from incorruptibility through his bodily death and resurrection, then what do these truths mean for those who do not believe in or follow Christian logic (the Jews), or for those who mock the narrative and its premises (Gentiles/Greeks)? We might imagine that Athanasius could have finished *On the Incarnation* without reference to any other traditions or frameworks beyond the Christian theological argument he has labored to construct. But this is not the text we have in circulation. Thus, rather than letting his own argument stand as is, Athanasius concludes *On the Incarnation* with extended refutations of Jews and Gentiles, with specific reference throughout to differing religious beliefs and practices.[93] If Jesus Christ achieves something universal, then any tradition that asserts something different, or something that opposes, upends, or even ignores a universal Christian logic is a threat to the coherence of Athanasius' argument. Questioning Christ is questioning God's power, for Athanasius, so Christ's superiority and power over all must be established.

Against the Jews, Against the Gentiles

The question of how Christian traditions come to different conclusions than their Jewish counterparts is an important one for Christians to answer, especially because Christian logics are (and continue to be) entangled with Jewish sacred texts, cosmology, and theology.[94] In earlier

[93] *On the Incarnation*, Sections 33-56. Thinking in terms of later discussions of antisemitism and/or anti-Judaism (and whether these orientations overlap, or not), I want to note that Athanasius' refutation designates Jews as a group, but the force, or emphasis of this designation relates to religious matters. Arguing whether Athanasius is antisemitic or anti-Judaic is beyond my concern; the point is that it is prejudicial regarding a particular identified group of people and practices.

[94] I want to emphasize here that this is an important question for Christians to answer, not necessarily one that matters or should matter to those from Jewish traditions. The figure of Jesus Christ may only be a significant discussion point for Jewish traditions because of how Christian traditions, because of Jesus' status as a Jewish person, consistently appropriates texts, practices, and other aspects of Jewish traditions in the formation of the Christian affective economy. As cited already in footnote 48 of this chapter, Ruether states: "Anti-Judaism is part of Christian exegesis. Anti-

sections of *On the Incarnation*, for instance, Athanasius references the Torah and other Jewish sacred texts to provide evidence substantiating his premises about how the "Word" fits into creation.[95] In later sections, Athanasius aims to show that "the Jews" misinterpret their own sacred texts because they do not reach Christian theological conclusions, which he deems to be "obvious." The following excerpts provide examples of Athanasius' argument for the self-evident nature of his conclusions:

> The unbelieving Jews have their rebuttal from the scriptures which they also read. From beginning to end, and simply every inspired book proclaims these things, as also the very words themselves are obvious…all scripture is full of things which refute the Jews' unbelief…[96]
>
> Who then is this of whom the divine scriptures say these things? Or who is so great, that the prophets also foretell such things about him? For no one else is found in the scriptures except the Savior common to all, the God Word, our Lord Jesus Christ…He it is who is the Life of all, and who like a sheep delivered his own body to death as a substitute for the salvation of all, even if the Jews do not believe.[97]

These two excerpts demonstrate how Christian theological constructs seem to find their raison d'être through Jewish scriptures, but then must also justify why Jewish traditions do not accept Jesus Christ as a pervasive, universal, salvific divine figure. Athanasius deals with this dilemma by first

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Christianity is not properly a part of Jewish exegesis" (*Faith and Fratricide*, 181). Theologian Kathryn Tanner similarly suggests that Christianity is parasitic; we can imagine that any concerns originating from Jewish traditions with Jesus and Christianity may be more about Christianity's appropriation and parasitism (of Jewish traditions) rather than about answering cosmological or theological questions internal to Judaism or Jewish traditions. Tanner states: "A Christian way of life is, then, essentially parasitic; it has to establish relations with other ways of life, it has to take from them, in order to be one itself." Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for* Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 113.

[95] This is not to overstate Athanasius' use of Jewish texts to make his claims early in his argument; he references what were (by then) Christian sacred texts at a greater frequency to provide textual evidence and overall rationale for the fittingness of a divine incarnation and necessity of universal salvation. However, he references Jewish sacred texts consistently in the latter sections to build a case for his refutation of the Jews. Theologians would likely disagree on whether Athanasius' use of these texts is problematic, since they are (and were, at that juncture) understood to be part of a Christian scriptural canon texts. The assumption that these texts remained texts, with a similar meaning or integrity, when passing from Jewish to Christian use and interpretation is an assumption that is glossed over; or, whether these texts are truly shared texts, when the hermeneutical lens is quite different, leading Christians to prejudicially read themselves and their divinity into the text, should be an open question from my theological perspective. Regardless, what seems important is that the Jews must be refuted in order for Athanasius to substantiate his argument regarding the universal relevance and power of Jesus Christ, and that he does so using texts in circulation in both Christian and Jewish communities, though these texts were read and disseminated in community with very different interpretive strategies.

[96] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 121; 125.

[97] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 129; 131.

using Jewish sacred texts as a resource and second, by arguing that Christian interpretations and experiences supersede those of "the Jews."[98]

Athanasius' basic rhetorical strategy would not be unfamiliar in contemporary contexts.[99] He identifies prophetic passages scattered throughout the Scriptural canon, revered by both Jewish and Christian traditions, and then argues that Jesus Christ fulfills these prophecies. According to Athanasius, the advent of a divine human being through a virgin, as well as his death on a cross, is foretold throughout various prophetic books in Jewish traditions. Athanasius even indicates that death on the cross is "expounded with great clarity by the saints," meaning Moses and later prophets.[100] The clarity that Athanasius describes is tenuous at best; he largely resorts to arguing how important patriarchs and prophets in Jewish traditions, from Abraham to Moses to David, do not fulfill the prophecies; further, while these important figures were still alive, religious diversity—which Athanasius calls idolatry and superstition—persisted.[101]

Athanasius continues, rather forcefully, with what he understands to be his most damning proof that Jesus Christ is the one who fulfills Jewish prophecy:

> For a sign and a great proof of the advent of the God Word is that Jerusalem no longer stands, nor does a prophet arise, nor is vision revealed to them, and rightly so. *For when he*

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[98] Athanasius is not unique in this employing this rhetorical strategy. Supersessionist arguments are ubiquitous in Athanasius' historical context; Christian supersessionism has been analyzed by numerous theologians and scholars, including Ruether. What is different in my analysis, in connection with Ruether's driving point in *Faith & Fratricide*, is asking how this (rather common) supersessionary and superiority-inflected hermeneutical and rhetorical strategy influences Christian theological constructs to such an extent that they become part and parcel of a Christian affective economy that values (and incentivizes) Christianity's ascendancy and superiority over other religious traditions. I make this connection because of the importance of the incarnation to Christian theology, practices, and traditions, and because of the importance of *On the Incarnation* to solidifying Christian theological constructs and creeds (embodied practices) regarding Christology.

[99] What I mean here is that Athanasius' strategy for proving that Jesus Christ fulfills Jewish prophecies is similar to how this continues to be demonstrated in contemporary contexts, with reference to various scriptures that foretell a messianic figure with specific qualities or markers. Because Athanasius is writing to those within the Christian community, the sense is that he is teaching Christians which scriptures to use as proof that Jesus Christ is the prophesied messianic figure.

[100] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 124-125.

[101] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 127. This is important to his claim for Jesus' superiority as the figure through which idolatry ceases throughout the world; other prophets were powerful, but did not wield universal power over idolatry in this way.

> *who was indicated has come, what is the use of those who indicate?* When the truth is present, what need is there any more for the shadow?[102]

Athanasius affirms that Jewish traditions were necessary to prepare Jews and others for the truth. But now that the truth has come through "the God Word," Jews, who are "impious and perverse," misinterpret their own prophecies and scriptures regarding the advent of Christ.[103] They "willingly ignore" what is "obvious," even when Gentiles turn toward the God of Israel.[104] This is the root of their disbelief. Ultimately, for these reasons, Athanasius questions whether the "the shadow" is even necessary if its function has fulfilled its purpose. Jerusalem has fallen and, according to Athanasius, prophecy and vision have ceased for the Jews; these are clear proofs that Jesus Christ is the one to whom Jewish scriptures point to as the savior for all.

As noted earlier in this section, *On the Incarnation* is not the most virulent anti-Jewish text. In comparison to certain letters and treatises of John Chrystostom, for example, Athanasius' treatise is relatively tame. Yet I would argue that this text leaves an impression, in the conceptual scheme of Sara Ahmed; Athanasius' words are stark, and not to be taken lightly. The Jews, their scriptures, and their prophecies are used as building blocks for Athanasius' argument, in the way that they provide evidence for Jesus Christ as the prophesied figure. Moving from refuting the Jews, who should readily believe in Jesus Christ and do not, Athanasius turns to addressing Gentile critics to continue to construct his theological argument.

Though a prior treatise against the Gentiles is a precursor for *On the Incarnation,* Athanasius still spends a significant portion of this treatise arguing against premises and conclusions that he attributes to Gentiles. He refers broadly to Gentiles, whom he sometimes specifies as Greeks when writing about widely accepted philosophical and metaphysical paradigms; religious, philosophical,

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[102] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 135. Emphasis mine.
[103] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 135; 137.
[104] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 137; 121.

and (likely) cultural themes are intertwined in this section of *On the Incarnation*, with no clear separation among them. A difference between these refutations (that of the Jews, and of the Gentiles) is that the former represents a religious group to which Christians must justify their existence in direct relationship, whereas the latter represents external cultural critics who deny that divinity would be embodied and experience death. Inflecting the refutation against the Gentiles with feeling, Athanasius invites the reader to "put [the Greeks] to shame" for their uncritical skepticism toward Christian theological themes when they themselves extol divinities "made of stone and wood."[105]

To shame the Gentiles with rational arguments, then, Athanasius spends the initial part of this refutation arguing for the legitimacy of the Christian assertion that God could be a human (embodied) while also remaining powerfully more-than-human. This portion simply outlines, from a vantage point of Greek philosophical thought, why the incarnation is fitting, or specifically why salvation which comes from an embodied divinity makes sense from within Greek constructs.[106] Moving quickly from an internal argument, Athanasius turns toward external proofs that should "convince" the Greeks of the truth of the Christian perspective: the universality of Christ, which are "those things manifest to the sight of all."[107]

It is at this point in his refutation that Athanasius engages in comparisons between the god of Christians and the gods of Greeks and others, arguing that the divinity of the Word is proven through his universal power. This power is constructed, by Athanasius, as power beyond and over other divinities. The evidence that Athanasius outlines is similar to the way he argues for Christian legitimacy in comparison to Judaism: the advent of Christ has stopped the worship of idols and the continuate of Greek prophecy, just as the lack of prophets and the fall of Jerusalem are evidence for

[105] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 139.
[106] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 151.
[107] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation,* 151.

the prowess of the Christian divinity in relation to Judaism.[108] Further, Athanasius asserts that it is only since the incarnation and resurrection of "the Lord" that "those who are called gods and heroes by the poets begin to be condemned as merely mortal humans."[109] His central claim, to which he returns throughout his refutation, is that Jesus Christ is the only divinity that wields universal power.

> For formerly the whole inhabited world and every place were led astray by the worship of idols, and human beings regarded nothing else but idols as gods. Now, however, throughout the whole inhabited world, human beings are deserting the superstition of idols, taking refuge in Christ, and worshipping him as God, and through him they know the Father, of whom they had been ignorant. And what is amazing, is that while there were thousands of diverse objects of worship, and each place had its own idol, and that which was called a god by some had no power to pass over into the neighboring place to persuade those of the neighborhood to worship it, but was barely worshipped even among its own people—for no one worshipped his neighbor's god, but each kept his own idol, thinking it to be the lord of all—*only Christ is worshipped by all as one and everywhere the same.*[110]

In successive sections, Athanasius lists places of prophecy, centers of magic, and deities across the known world that no longer have power, even the power to illude, in comparison to Christ. For "Christ alone among humans is known to be God of true God, the God Word."[111]

The evidence that Athanasius offers for his evaluations is scant and attempts to prove too much; there seems no way to verify, either now or even in his historical context, that prophecy has immediately ceased across the world, nor that "magic" from the "Chaldeans and Indians" is, on account of Christ's revelation, "confuted and thoroughly destroyed."[112] The significance of

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[108] I should note, here, that some Christian scholars might object to my phrasing, arguing that the Christian and Jewish divinity are one and the same. This is assumed, not established. I am purposefully distinguishing between a Christian and Jewish divinity here to draw attention to key differences between the Jewish and Christian conception of divinity: in Jewish traditions, there is one God, and that God is one. For Christian traditions, there is one God, the same God of Jewish traditions, but that God is read symbolically (and metaphysically) as necessarily and automatically including Jesus Christ. This interpretation of divinity could be construed as quite different, then. Another way of saying this might be to remark that in Jewish traditions, God is one, whereas in Christian trinitarian approaches, God is metonymic (in the sense that the term God, semiotically, *essentially* and interchangeably includes Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit). A recent text discussing the question of whether the Abrahamic religious tradition are oriented to the same deity, and if that deity is one, is: *Do Christians, Muslims, and Jews Worship the Same God?: Four Views*, ed. by Ronnie P. Campbell and Christopher Gnanakan (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2019).

[109] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 151.

[110] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 153. Emphasis mine.

[111] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 153.

[112] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation,* 153.

Athanasius' refutation is not whether his evidence is valid and indisputable (whether prophecy indeed immediately ceased) but how he uses comparison to (religious) others to demonstrate the primacy, or superiority, of Christ. The gods heralded by Greeks, such as Dionysius and Heracles, act woefully human compared to an exalted divine-human Christ; in a similar vein, the teachers of other religions and philosophies have failed where Christ prevails, in the universal spread and acceptance of his teachings.[113] It is not enough that Christ be a powerful force on his own: his power is demonstrated by "everything opposed to the faith of Christ daily diminish[ing] and weaken[ing] and fail[ing]…this is a proof that Christ is the God word and Power of God."[114]

Concluding Comments: Structural Integrity?

As a theologian in the 21st century, I can engage in a thought experiment and posit that Athanasius' argument could have stood on its own, that his refutation of the Jews and treatise against the Gentiles are both of its time and context. Athanasius became bishop during a period of intense cultural change, in the century when Christianity became the imperial religion; thus, as a theologian, it seems reasonable to imagine that a primary concern for Athanasius would be articulating what is—and is not—Christian ways of understanding the divinity and the world. As a way of moving forward, perhaps we can just redact the portions of Athanasius' argument that resonate and leave behind the components that are no longer socially or politically acceptable, or even necessary in terms of the argument's premises. There are likely no longer any Chaldean magicians plying their trade throughout the world, anyway, so why does it matter that Athanasius includes refutations of those whom he was trying to supersede or prove wrong?

[113] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 157; 159.
[114] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 169.

This practice of redaction and compartmentalization, however, would seem to presume that Athanasius' argument about the incarnation stands on its own if we redact key points that appear later in his argument, namely the refutation of the Jews and Gentiles. Arguably, Athanasius did not need to refer to Jewish traditions to make his point about the knowledge of God, the universal evil pervading human nature, and the universal salvific cure presented through the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Athanasius could have potentially ended his treatise by underscoring that there is a developing tradition of belief and practice related to a divine figure, the God Word, who is the universal and exclusive pathway to incorruptibility, through his unique and powerful defeat of death and corruptibility. Was it necessary to pivot to the Jews and Gentiles to conclude his treatise?

Yet if Athanasius had stopped his argument without reference to the Jews, the question remains of how he would he have justified the consistent of Jewish sacred texts to provide evidence for his argument regarding the person and work of Jesus Christ. How is Jesus Christ rendered coherent, as a divine figure, without reference to Jewish paradigms that act as prophetic precursors, heralding a savior of some kind? Athanasius' references to the Jews, perhaps even more than the Gentiles, are necessary to his argument regarding the incarnation and resurrection, precisely because the sacred texts and overarching paradigm that he places the figure of Jesus Christ within is directly related to Jewish traditions and conceptions of divinity. Thus, excising Athanasius' "refutation of the Jews" from his incarnational theology would be misleading in its relation to the argument as a whole. To provide evidence for his argument about Jesus Christ's universal relevance, Athanasius must explain how it is that those who participate in the traditions and culture from which Jesus came—namely Jewish traditions and culture—have rejected Jesus' claims of divinity and Christian theologians' claims of Jesus' universality. During Athanasius' time, Christianity was already in the process of appropriating Jewish sacred texts and key aspects of Jewish cosmology, such as affirming

the oneness of God as Creator, as well as the reparation and salvation mediated by this God. Further, Jesus' embodiment had been as a Jew, participating in Jewish cultural and religious practices, so it appears that it was necessary for Athanasius to address the place of Jewish traditions in a situation of already-appropriation. In this way, it seems that refuting the Jews is not a peripheral task in constructing his Christian theological argument; it is an important building block that helps maintain the structural integrity of his argument.

Beyond refuting the Jews in order to contextualize Jesus Christ and successive Christian theological paradigms, it is also possible that references to Jews and others were a way to establish Christian traditions as more than just a new religious materialization. In *Antisemitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, Roman Catholic scholar David P. Efroymson notes that "the Greco-Roman world seems to have mistrusted innovations and late arrivals," such that new religions were regarded with suspicion not only because of their theological novelty but also because of their recent historical appearance.[115] Comparison to Jewish traditions, then—especially when the audience seems to be Roman, Greek, or pagan—was likely a way for Christianity to legitimate itself historically. Efroymson notes, however, that "the logic of this claim" was not neutral and still "involved a strategic use of anti-Judaic premises."[116] Apart from the *adversos Judaeos* tradition, which is obvious in its strategy to compare in order to subvert or overcome Jewish traditions, the Christian claim to "antiquity" is yet another way "in which anti-Jewish colorations were attached to Christian theological arguments and themes."[117]

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[115] David P. Efroymson, "The Patristic Connection," in *Antisemitism and the Foundations of Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 108. For Efroymson's citation of works that focus on this theme, see footnote 18 of his chapter. I would venture to suggest that this response is common, even in modern contexts, wherein newer religions and traditions may be regarded with certain initial misgivings, by wider culture and perhaps other religious traditions. Examples of more recent traditions that branched from more established traditions include the Latter-Day Saints (Christianity) and the Bahá'í tradition (Islam). Historical responses to these traditions, especially in early formative decades, seems to show that a new religion and its adherents (including key figures, prophets, etc.) may be generally regarded with suspicion.
[116] Efroymson, "The Patristic Connection," 108.
[117] Efroymson, "The Patristic Connection," 108.

Continuing the thought experiment, the question remains whether references to religious others, despite the need to establish Christianity as legitimate, can be redacted. To rehearse Athanasius argument, the incarnation and resurrection were both necessary and fitting. The incarnation is necessary because all humans participate in a human substance, and that substance is corruptible after humans reject the knowledge of God, succumbing to evil. Likewise, the incarnation and resurrection are fitting because the only way to recoup human incorruptibility is for the divine to become embodied, experience death, and then defeat death through a show of divine supremacy and power. Only by sharing in human substance can this power over death be shared with all of humanity, for "he was incarnate that we might be made god."[118] As indicated already, either this potential for incorruptibility applies to all, or it applies to none. In Athanasian logic, then, Jewish traditions, and any tradition that would propose a different narrative, is a threat precisely because difference exposes the contingency of the Christian logic that Athanasius constructs. As he writes near the end of *On the Incarnation*,

> After what we have said above, therefore, it is right for you to learn this and to consider it as the principle of what has not been said, and to marvel at greatly, that when the Savior sojourned idolatry no longer increased, but even what there was diminished and gradually ceases; the wisdom of the Greeks no longer advances, but even what there was now disappears; and the demons no longer deceive with fantasies and oracles and magic, for if they but dare and try they are put to shame by the sign of the cross. *To speak concisely, behold how the teaching of the Savior increases everywhere, while all idolatry and everything opposed to the faith of Christ daily diminish and weaken and fall. And, seeing this, worship the Savior and mighty God Word "who is over all" (Rom 9.5), but condemn those who, by him, are diminished and disappear…When the real king emerges and appears, then the seditious imposters are exposed by his presence…*[119]

To return to the discussion of superiority from the first chapter, Athanasius builds the case for Jesus Christ's divinity and prominence via comparison to (religious) others. And comparatively, what is beyond the bounds of the Christian logic that he develops is already, "diminishing" with the

[118] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 167. This phrase is often referred to as a key theological statement in *On the Incarnation.*
[119] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 169. Emphasis mine.

appearance of a divinity that Athanasius has shown to be superior. The diminishing of (religious) others, both Jewish and Gentile, is tied to his proofs for the truth of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

Determining whether the integrity of a theological argument remains if significant portions of its content is mired in a logic of superiority might be a thorny endeavor on which to embark. As is determining whether Christ would be Christ, in terms of the traditional Christology as expressed in Athanasian logic, apart from comparison to (religious) others. Tracing these lines of comparison and superiority prove difficult, particularly in determining how a logic of superiority has potentially been maintained and circulated in a Christian affective economy from its early emergences in Christian theological texts. The *adversos Judaeos* rhetorical tradition transformed over the centuries, in similar ways that Christian theological texts began to take shape differently in relationship with imperial power, differing historical contexts and time periods, and normative practices for writing and disseminating theology. Yet if Christian self-affirmation, in the words of Ruether, is dependent upon comparison, then I will tentatively suggest that *adversos Judeaos* contributes to informing a logic, or pattern, of Christian superiority in relation with religious difference. Or, as theologian Kathryn Tanner so aptly states in *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (1997):

> Even Christian cultural productions that are specifically religious in a more narrow sense of the term—say, the production of theological statements themselves—depend to much the same extent on other ways of life. Christians do not construct out of whole cloth, or from the bottom up, what they say about God and Jesus or the nature of things in relation to God…***A Christian way of life is, then, essentially parasitic; it has to establish relations with other ways of life, it has to take from them, in order to be one itself.***[120]

[120] Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for* Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 113. Emphasis mine.

Using the modifier "parasitic" may seem stark. But what the metaphor of a parasite calls to mind is the (perhaps unconscious) necessity and power involved in sharing resources, to put it blandly. Not all parasites infect or kill their hosts, but to be defined as parasitic means that there is a consistent, necessitated pattern of relationship that primarily benefits one organism; there is power involved in mining resources from others, in Christianity's case, from (religious) others.[121]

Regarding *Faith and Fratricide*, Ruether's critics are justified in pointing out that her relentless concentration on Christianity's inherent anti-Judaism is prioritized above acknowledging the ways in which Christian theologians did not employ rampant anti-Judaic sentiments. Critics note, for example, that some Christians, throughout the centuries, have explicitly supported Jewish communities and traditions, or were able in some way to maintain theological supersession with practical coexistence; or, we could say that supersession or superiority is not the only affect that *sticks*. These exceptions to Ruether's thesis would suggest that harmful theological content does not always, or inherently, correlate with harmful embodied practices.[122] Ruether responds to these exceptions, at least in part, by arguing that Jewish traditions are indeed regarded differently by Christian logics since Jewish traditions (as well as Jewish persons) escape complete eradication

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[121] This calls to mind Laurel C. Schneider's logic of the One; specifically how one is never one. See pgs. 142-144, in *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (New York: Routledge, 2008). For general information on parasites and parasitic behavior, see "parasitism" in the Encyclopedia Britannica (https://www.britannica.com/science/parasitism). There are different kinds of parasites, of course, and the metaphor (or modifier, in Tanner's use) could provoke interesting discussions. There are parasites that seem to achieve a kind of symbiotic relationship with hosts (see *cymothoa exigua*, the tongue-eating louse), and others whose form of parasitism kills hosts (see Pisonia trees and their predatory relationship with seabirds). In addition, a review of Tanner's *Theories of Culture* by Michael Jinkins helped me conceptualize the power involved in Christianity's relationship with others. He states on pg. 254: "Our theologies, like our lives, are constructed from a variety of elements, traditions, competing ideas and visions of God, the world and humanity. When we engage in the creative task of constructive theology we are making choices; and in our exercise of selectivity, we are also exercising power; and we are making choices and exercising power in and through a matrix of social relationships in particular cultural contexts. We are responsible for the theologies we construct from the vast supply of options and possibilities at our disposal" (Review, in the *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54, no. 2 (2001): 253-255).

[122] Two articles that have been helpful in thoughtfully critiquing Ruether while recording the trajectory of her arguments in Christian theological circles of that time period, are Isabel Wollaston, "Faith and Fratricide: Christianity, Anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust in the Work of Rosemary Radford Ruether," in the *Modern Churchman* 33, no. 1 (1991): 8–14; and Stephen R. Haynes, "Changing Paradigms: Reformist, Radical, And Rejectionist Approaches To The Relationship Of Christianity And Antisemitism," in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 32, no. 1 (1995): 63-88. Wollaston in particular notes examples of certain Christian theologians (Bernard of Clairvaux, etc.) who do not follow established anti-Judaic theological or practical patterns.

because of Christianity's impulse for the self-affirmation that comes from continually distinguishing itself from the group that rejected the revelation that they were designated by God to receive. In other words, Jewish traditions need to persist, materially and abstractly, so that Christians can continue to have a foundation on which to construct their theologies. The "solution" to Jewish traditions, from the perspective of Christian theologies, is conversion after supersession, not complete eradication.[123] Athanasius, after all, does not call for the eradication of the Jews; they must be "shamed" for their disbelief in Jesus Christ.[124] An implication could be that they would transition from disbelief to belief, in acknowledgement of "obvious" scriptural evidence shared by both Jewish and Christian traditions.

The force of Ruether's argument in *Faith and Fratricide*, apart from these potentially dubious endeavors, is in interrogating how Christian theological themes and texts might function to exert, enact, or catalyze harm. Athanasius' *On the Incarnation* stands as an example of this functionality, not because it casts the worst version of a theological vision toward (religious) others, but because this landmark text attaches oppositional views of (religious) others to the incarnation and resurrection. We can posit, then, that this oppositional, superiority-inflected affect *sticks*.[125]

In this way, *Faith and Fratricide* (as well as the subsequent theological responses and discussions provoked after its publication) provides a path to recognize how significant theological texts, such as *On the Incarnation*, participate in circulating oppositional and triumphalist views of (religious) others that impress upon Christians affectively, not just logically or rationally. The *adversos*

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[123] Ruether, *Antisemitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, 249-250. Ruether speaks of conversion here; I add supersession.
[124] Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 135.
[125] As Sara Ahmed clarifies in her chapter "Happy Objects" (*The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010): "…objects accumulate positive affective value as they are passed around. My essay will offer an approach to thinking through affect as 'sticky.' Affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects… I do not assume there is something called affect that stands apart or has autonomy, as if it corresponds to an object in the world, or even that there is something called affect that can be shared as an object of study. Instead, I would begin with the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and the drama of contingency, how we are touched by what we are near" (29-30).

Judeaos tradition is largely associated with Patristic authors: if we imagine Christian traditions as an affective economy of power and relation, then we can also imagine how these impressions of superiority, in the affect theory of Ahmed, might *stick* to or impress upon the ways that Christians continue to theologize. In addition, these historical texts are still in circulation; perhaps we would be naïve to presume that unsavory, politically incorrect, or similarly undesirable elements are redacted consistently by all who operate within a Christian affective economy.

Chapter 4

Patterns of Superiority in a Christian Affective Economy: Bartolomé de Las Casas, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and the Inclusive Turn in Christian Theologies

So let us draw pagans by the good life we lead, let us build the church through their conversion, let us grow rich this way.[1]

Bartolomé de las Casas
quoting St. John Chrystostom

Our proposition does not assert, but it does tacitly presuppose the possibility, that there are other forms of piety which are related to Christianity as different forms on the same level of development, and thus so far similar. But this does not contradict the conviction, which we assume every Christian to possess, of the exclusive superiority of Christianity.[2]

Friedrich Schleiermacher

Introduction

The second half of *On the Incarnation* represents the overt superiority connected to early Church Fathers, a concrescence of a rhetorical strategy (*adversos Judaeos*) that constructs Christian theology through comparison and opposition to religious others.[3] These religious others exist, certainly, but are also fantastic; or, objects of fantasy in Christian logics and imaginings. As David Nirenberg states in his comprehensive history *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*, "anti-Jewish logics," as an example, "were not necessarily nor even primarily the product of confrontations between real Jews and followers of Jesus. Rather, they were often developed among Christians in

[1] Bartolomé de las Casas, *The Only Way*, ed. by Helen Rand Parish, trans. by Francis Patrick Sullivan, S.J., (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 112.
[2] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, trans. by H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart, (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 33.
[3] Along with being a rhetorical strategy to justify the validity of Christian traditions and theology over against Jewish traditions and conceptions of the divine, Ruether notes that "the *adversos Judaeos* tracts and sermons are remarkable for their relative lack of an appeal to the Jews for conversion" (*Faith and Fratricide*, 148). This is somewhat parallel to Las Casas' strategy regarding Muslims in *The Only Way*.

their struggles with each other over which teachings to follow and (once teachings were cast into texts) how these should be read."[4] These rather "fantastic" creations of religious others become artifices that support the premises of foundational Christian theological architecture, including but not limited to what becomes understood as orthodox Christology.[5]

To continue from the discussion in chapter 3, the First Council of Nicea, and the resultant creed associated with the council's work, has had broad influence in the development of both Eastern and Western Christian theologies, especially as a significant textual expression of incarnational Christology. The borders and boundaries of Christianity have always been porous, and naming concretely in the present what comprises the substance or essence of Christianity can be difficult or even impossible because of its internal diversity and shifting nature. Yet the Nicene Creed represents a fulcrum, or a touchpoint, that is both descriptive and prescriptive of orthodox Christian belief and practice. As such, we can imagine how the theological touchpoints of the Nicene Creed continue to cultivate a certain logic or feeling in a Christian affective economy. And

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[4] David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 93.

[5] Fantastic is emphasized here in relation to two conceptual trajectories: the fantastic hegemonic imagination (Emilie M. Townes), discussed in chapter 1, and fantastic inclusiveness (Sara Ahmed), which appears in Ahmed's *Strange Encounters*: *Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (2000). "Fantastic inclusion" is used when Ahmed is discussing the construction and consolidating, rhetorically, of Australia as a "multicultural nation." She writes: "Immediately, the use of the term, 'multiculuralism', to describe the nation allows cultural diversity to reinforce, rather than undo, the fantastic inclusiveness of the nation: what 'we' are is not 'one', but 'many'. What binds Australia together as a 'we' is the fact of our differences: differences that belong to us, and that allow Australia 'to be' as a nation" (103). Ahmed does not define "fantastic," here, but the sense is that rhetorically naming a nation as "multicultural" is theoretical, abstract, and imagined—the process of making something real by projecting a collective vision, or fantasy. Ahmed also discusses fantasies of inclusion in *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012) in chapters 4-5 and the conclusion. In connection, David Nirenberg writes in *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (2013) about how Jews were imagined in early Christian theological texts. "Anti-Jewish logics…were often developed among Christians in their struggles with each other over which teachings to follow and (once teaching were cast into texts) how these should be read. In other words, whatever its origins might of have in the early Jesus movements, the logic of Jewish enmity in the second, third, and fourth centuries—that is, in the period of the 'church fathers'—drew much of its nourishment not from Christian conflict with Jews, but from Christian conflict with other Christians" (93). This is another way of saying that Jews and Jewish traditions, in their being theologically constructed as foils to the truth of Christian logic, appear in a text to stabilize what becomes normative doctrinal assertions in the development Christian theologies. Nirenberg characterizes this in different ways throughout his text, referring to "hermeneutic Jews" (132) and the "strategic deployment of Judaism" (231). The point is that Christian projections were fantasy, or imagined—not necessarily related to actual experiences with Jews or Jewish traditions. For an extensive study of how this works in the theological imaginings of Martin Luther, see chapter 7 ("Reformation and Its Consequences") of *Anti-Judaism*.

these feelings and repeated impressions, in the affect theory of Ahmed, continuously form the boundaries and surfaces between self and other, us and them, insider and outsider.

Acknowledging difference, identifying distinctions between groups, or engaging in the process of comparison are not in themselves problematic endeavors. But as we have seen from the historical and theological excavations of Rosemary Radford Ruether, the question of whether the theological superiority that stems from comparison can be disaggregated from constructive Christian theological imaginaries, in the face of religious difference and the identification of religious others, is questionable. As intimated in chapter three, Athanasius is not necessarily the first Church Father that comes to mind as the worst offender, if we understand unmistakable invectives against religious others as a theological problem for which Christian theologians must be accountable. There are numerous examples of this theological pattern concerning religious others—Tertullian and John Chrystostom to Augustine and Nicolas of Cusa, among others—from an orientation of the primacy of Jesus Christ and, thereby, of the superiority of Christian logic and traditions. These are affective, textual relations that, I would argue, influence Christian logics and practices toward religious others.[6] In this way, an affect of superiority continues to circulate, accumulating value especially in its attachment to the person and work of Jesus Christ as universally relevant. Yet not all Christian theologians following Christian lineages and traditions of thought express this superiority overtly or polemically, choosing instead to take a more inclusive, considerate tone toward religious others. This chapter will examine the texts of two such theologians, Bartolomé de las Casas and Friedrich Schleiermacher, whose respective theologies include the reality of religious others in the process of constructing Christian artifices.

[6] I am categorizing these as "textual relations," since a focus in chapters 3-5 of this project is tracing theological superiority through Christian theological texts. I also describe these as "textual relations" in connection to Sara Ahmed's "emotionality of texts," which is an analytical tool for examining what is circulating in affective economies. For more moments of "textual relations," see also chapter 3 in *Faith and Fratricide*, as well as chapters 2-3; 5; and 7 in David Nirenberg's *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition.*

Bartolomé de las Casas, *The Only Way*

Context of the Text: Protector of the Indians

While Athanasius was a theologian living and writing during an era in which Christianity was establishing itself as an affective economy with a logic of superiority whose circulation was accruing value, Bartolomé de las Casas was a Roman Catholic priest who became a Dominican friar (and later a bishop), living and writing in the period of European colonial expansion. This was a period in which Christianity had attained a vast measure of cultural and imperial power. Born in the last decades of the *Reconquista*, Las Casas travels to the New World as young adult and spends his vocational life in direct contact with a new kind of difference, represented by various Indigenous peoples of the Americas.[7] This direct contact becomes theologically important for Las Casas; a theme throughout his writings is the theological significance of European contact with non-Europeans in the New World. This variety of "others" (Africans, Amerindians, pagans, Muslims)—whether constructed as religious difference or racial difference—factor heavily into the body of Las Casas' writings.[8] This era of colonial expansion, which theologian Willie James Jennings views as an

[7] The *Reconquista* is a term used by historians to refer to the period of Christian reclamation of the territories of modern Spain from Muslim rule. This slow reclamation of the Iberian Peninsula was accomplished through military conquest, forced conversions of Muslims and Jews to Christianity, and/or expulsion of Muslims and Jews from cities and communities, once Christian rule had been reestablished. Bartolomé de las Casas was born in the last decade (1480s) before the "official" end of the *Reconquista*. Along with the expulsion of Muslims, for over a century the Spanish territories in the jurisdiction and geographical region of Castile and Aragon had already been engaged in projects of segregation, isolation, and conversion of Jews (Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism*, 210; 217-229). Nirenberg remarks that these efforts (in the century prior to the birth of Las Casas) affected the "Iberian Christian Imagination" (222). For further study, consult Roberto Marin-Guzmán, "Crusade In Al-Andalus: The Eleventh Century Formation of the *Reconquista* as an Ideology," in *Islamic Studies* 31, no. 3 (1992): 287-318. Marin-Guzmán puts the notion of Christian crusade into conversation with Islamic *jihad* in the overall context of the *Reconquista*. For a broader historical overview, see Charles Julian Bishko, "The Spanish and Portuguese Reconquest, 1095-1492," in *A History of the Crusades, Volume III: the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries*, edited by Harry W. Hazard (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1975), 396-456. For a description of how the *Reconquista* impacted Jewish communities on the Iberian peninsula, consult David Nirenberg, "The Extinction of Spain's Jews and the Birth of Its Inquisition," in *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*, 217-245.

[8] Much of Las Casas' writings are detailed histories of the colonial enterprise in the New World, often highlighting the violence and atrocities of war. As historian Lawrence A. Clayton writes: "What Las Casas witnessed on the island of Española between 1502–1511 (and wrote about in his *History of the Indies*) determined the course of his life: defending the Amerindians from the abuses inflicted upon them by the Spanish. He returned to Spain on at least four occasions in his lifetime, each time to seek the support of the Crown and like-thinking allies, especially among the Dominicans and

era that negatively distorts the Christian theological imagination for its entanglement with the construction of race, is marked by an uneven entanglement between imperial grasps for global resources and a logic related to the superiority of Jesus Christ, and therefore, of Christianity and Christian traditions.[9] The historical context of Las Casas is one of obvious, or overt, Christian saturation and imperial power.

Bartolomé de las Casas is, to some, perhaps more of a theological footnote than a primary text. He is more well-known now, in part because of the work of liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez to retrieve Las Casas' theological legacy.[10] A few decades into his various experiences in the "New World," (Cuba, Hispaniola, Mexico, Nicaragua, etc.) Las Casas composes a theological text intended to be read and implemented by the political and religious elites of his time. Though this text, *The Only Way to Draw All People to a Living Faith*, would find a wider audience in the decades and centuries after Las Casas' death, scholars generally agree that the text was intended to persuade powerful Spaniards—those who possessed the authority to make decrees or laws—that the Amerindians were not only human, but also that any efforts to relate to the Amerindians, whether for conversion, trade, or labor, needed to be methods of peace and gentleness, not violence or coercion.[11] Those conquering the "New World" in the name of Spain, as well as those who intended to colonize and settle these territories, stood to gain vast amounts of wealth through theft of land and forced labor of various Indigenous groups; exploitation of resources, both land and human, was profitable. Thus, in a geographical and historical context where Spanish and Christian were

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Franciscans, and he became the most outspoken, well-known protector of Amerindians before the forums of power in Spain." Lawrence A. Clayton, *Bartolome de Las Casas and the Conquest of the Americas,* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 9.

[9] Jennings's work will be discussed in chapter 5. I am persuaded by his argument that the "Christian theological imagination" is affected by its entanglements with whiteness and scales of racial superiority.

[10] See Gustavo Gutiérrez*, Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ,* Translated by Robert R. Barr, Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1993. Lawrence A. Clayton also notes how Gutierrez connects Las Casas to modern iterations of liberation theology, of which Gutierrez is understood as originator (Clayton, Introduction, 9).

[11] Amerindian is a term that generally refers to indigenous communities and tribes in the Caribbean, Central America, and some parts of Latin America of whom Las Casas had knowledge and direct experience. Parish and Sullivan use this term throughout their editorial content and translation, so I have maintained this usage.

synonymous, it became important to key religious figures, like Las Casas, to disentangle the horrors of war from the Spanish colonization from the joy of converting pagans to the kingdom of Jesus Christ.[12]

In terms of theological prominence, a figure like Athanasius may have had much more of a direct constructive influence on theological imaginings across Christian traditions, though it is suggested by scholar Helen Rand Parish that Las Casas' thought was taught during his lifetime, with *The Only Way* becoming "the basis, point by point, of the great papal encyclical *Sublimis Deus*."[13] Regardless of tracing specific lines of influence, Las Casas is an interesting case study not only because his writings represent inclusive theological assumptions circulating in the Christian affective economy during the European colonial expansion, but also because he still employs a Christian logic of superiority over religious others that calls for gentleness over exclusion, expulsion, or eradication. In a sense, we can understand the theology of Las Casas as a theology wherein colonial intimacy with religious others ferments and reveals flows of political and religious power; in these flows of power and Christian logics, the Indigenous peoples of the Americas present a new group of humanity to convert.[14]

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[12] This is related to multiple threads of Spanish history, which include the *Reconquista* (defeating and expelling Muslims from Spanish lands) and the ongoing effort to expel, convert, or isolate Jewish populations in Spain. For more on this topic, see Andrew Wilson, "Willing Assent and Forceful Jurisdiction in Bartolomé de las Casas," *EU-topias* 3 (2012): 99-109; and David Nirenberg, "The Extinction of Spain's Jews and the Birth of Its Inquisition," in *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 217-245. Nirenberg in particular makes compelling historical arguments related to the impossibility of reconciling Jewish ethnicity, religious practices, or genealogy with full participation in Spanish culture, societal leadership structures, and so on.

[13] Helen Rand Parish, "Preface," *The Only Way*, 4. Parish goes into greater detail about the circulation of Las Casas' text in the postscript to her Introduction to the volume as a whole. Parish, "Bartolomé de Las Casas' Spirituality – The Three Crises," in Bartolomé de las Casas*, The Only Way*, ed. by Helen Rand Parish and trans. by Francis Patrick Sullivan, (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 56-58.

[14] The juxtaposition of "colonial" with "intimacy" is invoked by several postcolonial and decolonial theorists. Significantly, for this project, Willie James Jennings writes of coloniality and intimacy—or, the contact between colonial powers and those being colonized, subjugated, or oppressed—in *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (2010) which will be discussed in chapter 5. David Chidester, scholar of comparative religions, discusses contact zones extensively throughout his works, but most extensively in *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (1996).

Most of Las Casas' writings are historical and critical, cataloguing current events in his lifetime in the conquest of the Americas. *The Only Way* is distinct among his writings for its specifically theological themes. In this text, Las Casas essentially constructs a theological argument for the humane treatment of the Amerindian populations who were being conquered and colonized by European forces. His theological premise is that Jesus Christ himself modeled gentle persuasion rather than coercion in the process of conversion to Christianity.[15] Due to his efforts to convert the Amerindians more humanely than his contemporaries, and for his progressive arguments for the humanity of the Amerindians, Las Casas was eventually named "Protector of the Indians" in the New World by the regent of the Spanish Empire. The *only* way of converting Amerindians to Christ, for Las Casas, is through persuasion rather than violence or coercion; for Las Casas, this is a theological matter, tied to his Christological and eschatological vision.

Las Casas is revered by historians and Christian theologians alike for his foresight and persistence in defending the Amerindians and for his careful, logical arguments regarding their equal standing with Europeans and for his resistance to forcing conversion to Christianity through violent means.[16] Throughout his life, Las Casas implores Spanish political leaders and Christian religious leaders to decree that Spanish colonizers must not use conversion as an excuse to violently conquer the Amerindians; conversion must be gentle, and above all, cannot be forced or achieved through

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[15] This would be in contrast, for instance, to justifications for the Crusades or other overt logics of superiority and supremacy in which Christian colonial impulses and/or wars for conversion are unquestioned. Textual references to Las Casas' argument for gentle persuasion will be discussed in successive paragraphs.

[16] Las Casas traveled to the New World as a young man, initially to the island of Hispaniola, and became involved in the colonization of the island and the slaughter of indigenous leaders. Witnessing the early atrocities of colonization, including the decimation of the Amerindian population, Las Casas became convinced that a peaceful process of evangelization and colonialism is a theological imperative. Helen Rand Parish, in her "Introduction," writes of Las Casas' early experience with Amerindian slavery, first in Spain when his father brings a young Amerindian boy to be Las Casas slave (at age 12), later on when Las Casas owns slaves on his father's plantation before becoming a priest (ages 13-14), and finally as a priest involved in the *encomienda* system (ages 18-21). The *encomiendas* were granted land ownership by the Spanish crown, which meant that they could exact compulsory labor from the indigenous communities who subsisted from that land. Las Casas, in Parish's terms, has a crisis of faith in the realization that the *encomienda* system was a "mortal sin" (21). Helen Rand Parish, "Bartolomé de Las Casas' Spirituality – The Three Crises," 12-21. Parish offers a long introduction to *The Only Way* that verges on hagiography, especially in her emphasis on several key crises of faith that affect Las Casas' theological perspective, writings, and relations with Amerindian communities.

fear or terror. In some ways, he anticipates human rights discourses of later centuries: he is unique among his contemporaries for consistently arguing for the humane treatment and, in certain circumstances, land sovereignty of the Indigenous groups the Spanish were continually colonizing.[17] Further, even in *The Only Way*, Las Casas emphasizes the importance of Indigenous consent to both conversion and the methods or tools of conversion. At the very least, this creates spaces for others to remain others, even if their path of living and/or belief is understood as outside of the truth. Last, Las Casas is a theologian who changes his political and theological perspectives throughout his lifetime, in response to contact, or, a kind of intimacy with the Amerindians. These shifts are commended by modern theologians, since Las Casas by-and-large turns toward theological arguments for increasing liberation and inclusion for all. All have the capacity to become Christian and follow the path of Jesus Christ, even the Amerindians and Africans who have been enslaved by Europeans during the initial era of colonial expansion. Las Casas even argues for restoration of all that had been destroyed from wars of conversion.[18]

Yet for all the reasons Las Casas should be commended for his significant part in shifting European attitudes toward and theological visions of the Indigenous peoples of Americas, Las Casas remains an interesting and complicated case. On the one hand, he advocates for less violence and for humane treatment—but on the other hand, he does not question, at least in his influential theological treatise, the colonial project as a whole, nor does he question Christian complicity within such a system. If we are attentive to how religious others feature in *The Only Way,* then we must ask how Amerindians are included in Christianity as a result of the colonial project, for what (theological) purpose they are included, and whether other religious others appear to ground Las Casas' argument for peaceful, gentle conversion.

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[17] Andrew Wilson, "Willing Assent and Forceful Jurisdiction in Bartolomé de las Casas," *EU-topias* 3 (2012), 99-109.
[18] Las Casas, *The Only Way*, 171; 180. In the latter reference, Las Casas refers to what has been taken away from "unconverted pagans."

Beyond the specific answers to these questions, what remains the case in Las Casas' theological treatise is an assumption of Christian superiority and ascendancy in relation to religious others. Las Casas does not question the superiority of Christ, and by extension, Christianity. It is understood as the universal, exclusive way to which the Amerindians should convert; the taking of land and resources by Christians in the New World should be humane and ethical, but whether Christians should have access to the land and resources of the New World is not debated. What may be more significant regarding Las Casas' argument for Christian theological superiority is how religious differences factor into a scale of convertibility. Las Casas' particular invective against Muslims and the prophet Mohammed ﷺ provides a foil for the Amerindians: more specifically, not only why the Amerindians *can* convert but also why Christians should use peaceful conversion practices, ultimately as a way to distinguish their efforts from Muslims.[19]

In the paragraphs below, I will briefly explore Las Casas' argument toward peaceful conversion, highlighting how *The Only Way* is grounded in a particular notion of Christ's unique and total ascendancy. Jesus Christ's ascendancy is envisaged as necessarily and ultimately persuasive to religious others, namely those others that Las Casas views as outside the bounds of Christianity: Amerindians and Muslims. As will be shown, Las Casas provides an example of a theological argument constructed entirely with reference to religious others—the end result being the gentle absorption (conversion) or elimination (damnation) of religious others in the coming kingdom of Christ.

[19] I will use Las Casas' spelling of "Mohammed," in contrast to "Muhammad" (which I would typically use).

Conversion Logic, Gentle Persuasion: Feeling into The Only Way

Las Casas begins *The Only Way* with a brief prologue defending the humanity of the Amerindians. Like Athanasius, Las Casas is concerned with a human's ability to comprehend God. Knowledge is understood to be an indicator of humanity's uniqueness, and the capacity for rationality is necessary for salvation. The human condition is such that by nature it can potentially be drawn toward the good; however, the content of this good must not only be taught, but also received gently, and in a way that induces willing assent to the good.[20] Las Casas is not a proponent of natural theology, however, meaning that the specific truth of Jesus Christ must be taught or learned, not inferred. Christianity is indubitably the "right religion"[21] and "true faith"[22] that comprises the good, yet because it is a doctrine "not found in the nature of things," the question of how to effect conversion becomes prominent.[23] Thus, in the context of colonial intimacies, methods of conversion to the good, represented by Christianity, is a necessary feature of relationality.[24]

In opposition to his contemporaries, Las Casas argues that the Amerindians are rationally capable of conversion. In Las Casas' world, humanity is scaled by rational capacity, and because the Amerindians can comprehend Christian logic, they have the potential to become Christian. European Christians may be superior in some civic and political senses, but this is circumstantial and contextual rather than inherent and ontological.[25] For Las Casas, then, the question is how to

[20] Las Casas, *The Only Way* ,100; 118.
[21] Las Casas, *The Only Way*, 121.
[22] Las Casas, *The Only Way*, 123.
[23] Las Casas, *The Only Way*, 119.
[24] Las Casas refers to Aristotle as a philosophical resource for concepts like nature, goodness, potential for development, and generally with regard to causality (Las Casas' citations include Aristotle's *Ethics*, *Metaphysics*, *Physics*, and *Politics*). Parish notes in her introduction that Las Casas, after suffering his first major setback in trying to engender less violent colonial intimacies with the Amerindians and subsequently becoming a Dominican friar, spends time reading the works of St. Thomas Aquinas. This reading of Aquinas helps Las Casas form a more Aristotelian perspective about potentiality, hierarchies, and the ultimate good that is God. See pg. 28ff in Parish's introduction to *The Only Way*.
[25] See typology of superiority from chapter 1 of this project.

properly relate to religious others, with the understanding that Amerindians are indeed capable of becoming Christian.

The process of converting religious others—or essentially the relationship between Christians and non-Christians in the attempt at converting—must also be affectually consistent with the example of Jesus Christ. Christ's "will," according to Las Casas, is for "no race, no nation on this entire globe to be left totally *untouched* by the free gift of divine grace."[26] The Amerindians, like other human beings, can accept Christ's gift of grace (touch) because of their rationality, which is the way that the Divine is known by human beings. Not only does this rationality produce art, music, and logical prowess, but as further evidence, Las Casas asserts that their intelligence lends itself to a strong "social and political order" with "laws that are often superior to our own."[27] Because the lands that Spain has colonized initially belong to the Amerindians, Las Casas invokes divine natural law and classifies the Amerindians as a different kind of infidel than, for example, the Muslims in his native Spain would be.[28] Thus the Amerindians, for Las Casas, are rationally capable of conversion to a "complete and sound morality, and more so to our Christian belief," possessing both the "sound intelligence" and the "ready wills" that proper conversion requires.[29]

Las Casas heralds Christ as a representative of God's will, as the only way to attain salvation, and as an exemplar for methods of evangelization and conversion.[30] Christ's primary role is to announce the repentance of sins and the kingdom of heaven, as well as the gentle means by which

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[26] Las Casas, *The Only Way*, 63. Emphasis mine.
[27] Las Casas, *The Only Way*, 64. Las Casas writes of the artistic and musical prowess of Amerindians on p.65.
[28] Las Casas, *The Only Way*. Reference to "infidel" on p.66. See footnote 58 of this chapter for more information about categories of infidels.
[29] Las Casas, *The Only Way*, 66.
[30] Las Casas, *The Only Way*, 70; 114-115. Christ as representative and exemplar come from p.70; Christ as the means to attain salvation comes from Las Casas' extended quotation of a letter sealed by the Pope Paul III (contemporary of Las Casas) regarding the status of the Amerindians. This letter denounces any tactics that take away the freedom and/or the property of the Amerindians, as well as denounces any conceptions of the Amerindians as less than human. Their common humanity gives them equality before God; they, like any other humans, must attain salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, so any methods that are antithetical to the Amerindians actually "receiving the faith" are the work of Satan.

those who are chosen will be attracted to the living faith. Christ's way is also God's way, since "the activity of the Son is the activity of God…so Divine Providence fashioned and prescribed what Christ fashioned and prescribed when he was mortal in His flesh."[31] In other words, because God and Christ are one, the way of peaceful conversion is God's way as well, revealed through the incarnated Christ.[32] Jesus Christ's example "was a winning way indeed…*a way to affect*. To draw the will of the watcher without force."[33] It is therefore not for humans to decide that persuasion by violent means is a viable method; if Christ was not violent himself nor instructed his disciples to be violent or coercive, then violence as a tool for conversion is simply is not the way of Christ.[34] Las Casas' Christology is clear on this point: Christ's example definitively illustrates the way that God wills for humans to be persuaded to salvation, and thus all other methods—namely those that use "force" or "punition"— ultimately "usurp divine judgment" and therefore are in "violation of divine law."[35]

Las Casas, in this sense, paves the way for the impression or force of conversion to be understood affectively.[36] The affects can be negative, wherein the "the focus of the whole soul is *affected*"[37] by violence and trauma, which renders any conversion suspect; or the affect can be positive, through the example of Christ, to "breathe peace and love and kindness…the fittest means

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[31] Las Casas, *The Only Way*, 70.
[32] This is parallel to Athanasius' perspective, for whom the unity of God and the Word of God is a crucial premise.
[33] Las Casas, *The Only Way*, 77.
[34] For Las Casas, Christ has the power to issue eternal punishment. Christ's gentleness on earth in no way assumes that this gentleness continues in the eternal realm (p.78).
[35] Las Casas, *The Only Way,* 80. Even if violent means are not used, Las Casas later states: "There were many ways, many other ways for Christ to have drawn people to Himself. Not for us…No one is allowed to take a different path, to invent a way different from Christ's, to use an opposed way in transmitting the truth of the gospel" (90).
[36] It is fascinating how Las Casas invokes Pope Leo in his argument. Las Casas writes: "There is nothing more powerful in prompting the human soul to do likewise [in conversion] than the deeds of bygone days. So, says Pope Leo, that is the reason why dramas are mounted. Through fictional characters we reinforce in people's minds the values we want them to have. And that happens because people move to some understanding through the use of their senses; it is nature. They communicate to others this way as well. *Through sense-things we are led to mind-things and to the things of God*…Providence provides for people. *Hints of the divine are put in reach of people's senses*. That way people's minds are pulled toward the things of God" (*The Only Way*, 89; emphasis mine).
[37] Las Casas, *The Only Way*, 122.

for God's purpose, the conversion, the salvation of humankind, a means steeped in love, grace, charm, humanity, joy…"[38] Positive affects produce positive conversions, whereas negative affects result in questionable, largely negative, effects.

The only way to achieve a positive effect—i.e., conversion—is for a Christian to follow the example set by Jesus Christ, and by extension, the apostles. Christ is the exemplar through which Christians understand how to orient themselves toward religious others. Christ's sovereign eschatological role in coming kingdom of God clarifies why it is important that the only way to Christ is by persuasion, and not coercion. First, persuasion is the means "to gather and unify all people in one faith" and "[bring] them under the culture of Christ."[39] As Las Casas shows through careful reference to the Gospel narratives, both the mind and the will of a human must be won in a fashion that logically tends toward a peaceful unity into one faith; violence and coercion create a faith that is forced or obligatory, not peacefully unified. Second, persuasion creates the proper atmosphere for Jesus Christ's sovereignty over the eternal kingdom. The eternal kingdom, for Las Casas, is unlike earthly kingdoms that rely on unbridled power, arrogance, and violence to exact the submission of their subjects. The power wielded by Jesus Christ is a spiritual power, which contrasts with the power harnessed by political entities; Jesus Christ models humility, compassion, and this gentler form of power in an effort to "clear the way to the kingdom."[40] Las Casas draws a direct comparison between the methods used to attain the kingdom of God and the reality of that kingdom itself. Violence cannot create the peaceable reign of Jesus Christ over His kingdom, only gentle persuasion cultivates unified, peaceable subjects who willingly submit themselves to the rule of Jesus Christ.

[38] Las Casas, *The Only Way*, 116.
[39] Las Casas, *The Only Way*, 90; 93.
[40] Las Casas, *The Only Way*, 95.

In this way, violence and war are antithetical not only to Jesus Christ's methods of gentle persuasion and attraction, but also to the eschatological kingdom over which Christ will reign.[41] Unjustified war, he asserts, is a tool of Jews and Muslims, not Christians. The kingdom heralded by Jesus Christ is characterized by peace, gentleness, and compassion, whereas violence and earthly weapons conquer via bodily trauma and destruction, creating panic and procuring submission through visceral fear.[42] Fear, for Las Casas, is not an emotion that prepares a human for being persuaded that Christ is the way to attain a living faith; fear only leads to confusion, negating any calm, rational processes for making free decisions.[43] Influenced by Aristotle on this point, Las Casas argues that "contrary causes produce contrary effects," meaning that just as peace produces peace, violence and fear will only produce more violence.[44] This is aligned with Las Casas' approach to Jesus Christ's example of peaceful conversion. Wars for conversion, which rely heavily on fear, are the "dead opposite of the natural, normal, pre-established way" of Christ.[45] In the conception of Ahmed, the emotionality of *The Only Way* progressively illustrates how a negative emotion, such as fear, produces powerful, contrary affects that are antithetical to the affects that Las Casas deems significant to bringing about the kingdom of Christ, such as love and gentleness.

This insistence on the necessity of a peaceful persuasive process seems to clash, on the surface at least, with Las Casas' rhetorical acceptance of spiritual warfare. While Las Casas describes Christ as a different kind of conqueror than a worldly prince who conquers through "the ravages of

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[41] I would argue that this is a juncture at which the theological bent of Las Casas' text (not just the "human rights" discourse) becomes exceedingly obvious.
[42] Las Casas is not absolutely opposed to war. He concedes that just wars are possible "for the defense of the nation" or for recovering land that had formerly been under the rule of the Church (101).
[43] Las Casas, *The Only Way*, 120. Las Casas writes: "The thinking mind must have calm and quiet and enough time if it is to do what it does freely. It must be free as well of fits of passion. Then the will is safe from all coercion, from all harassment…If his mind is filled with grief, with loss, with fear, with horror, with desperation, will he listen peaceably, will he reason calmly…will he admit as true what he hears of religious faith?"
[44] Las Casas, *The Only Way,* 119.
[45] Las Casas, *The Only Way*, 119. Violence and unjust war are antithetical to Christ's kingdom; if "sense creates sense," then only peaceful conversion methods can lead to a peaceable kingdom.

war" and "cruel massacres," he uses militaristic metaphors to describe how Christ's spiritual vanquishing of unbelievers is qualitatively different from conquering through physical means. Christ uses "spiritual weapons," rather than tangible weapons, to "form the Christian people." These "spiritual arms" are "a gospel message full of light, of gentleness, [and]of kindness."[46] Christ, through his example, has imparted these "mighty weapons" to his "army," to his loyal "soldiers of Christ," so that they can properly conquer the minds and hearts of those who do not yet believe in Christ's supremacy. "Physical weapons can bring ruin on a people," irreparably harming both body and mind; Christ, in contrast, utilizes spiritual weaponry to exact a positive "destruction" that eventually "conquers the world."[47] Las Casas' description is unapologetically affective: in contrast to the negative feelings associated with physical trauma from war, feelings of kindness and gentleness are spiritual weapons that can impress upon the mind and will of religious others, stretching the boundaries of a Christian affective economy to absorb difference (that becomes, ultimately, sameness).

The conception of spiritual warfare and the allowance for just physical warfare introduces Las Casas' rhetorical and theological orientation toward both Jews (albeit very briefly) and toward Muslims, the latter of which comprise a different religious other than the Amerindians. Jews are mentioned in reference to their conquest of the Promised Land by "a series of wars"; Las Casas allows that although physical warfare had been a method employed by the Jewish people, the way of Christ "wins nations" with spiritual weapons that are "fully peaceful, fully loving."[48] In other words, Jews are not categorized as the starkest contrast to the only way of Jesus Christ, however.

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[46] All quotations up to this point are from Las Casas, *The Only Way*, 100.
[47] All quotations are from Las Casas, *The Only Way*, 101. If we tried to argue that Las Casas is only elevating spiritual warfare over its physical counterpart for rhetorical effect, Las Casas clarifies that his argument, which favors spiritual warfare, should by no means be interpreted as an argument against all physical warfare. Wars to defend Christian territories, both defensive and offensive, are allowable. In this way, Las Casas is a proponent of the "just war" tradition of thought.
[48] Las Casas, *The Only Way*, 100.

Mohammed ﷺ, the prophet of Islam, enters into Las Casas' argument as a precursor to the comparison between spiritual and physical warfare.[49] Christians who use violent strategies for conversion are no better than the prophet Mohammed ﷺ, "that foul and gruesome monster" who, in Las Casas' perspective, is a prime example of enacting physical warfare for questionable spiritual ends.[50] Muslims thus serve as a foil against which Christians in the New World should measure the Christ-centeredness of their own conversion strategies. Las Casas insists that Muslims, following in the example of the prophet Mohammed ﷺ, are inherently violent and militaristic. In this way, he rhetorically constructs Muslim conversion methods as the exact opposite to the way of Jesus Christ.[51]

This reference to the prophet Mohammed ﷺ and Muslims, which materializes in the text quite abruptly, clashes with the consistent emphasis of peaceful relations with those who have not yet been convinced of the truth of Christianity. What becomes increasingly clear is that for Las Casas, the prophet Mohammed ﷺ, and by extension Muslims as a whole, do not belong to the same theological or anthropological category as the Amerindians. The prophet Mohammed ﷺ represents, rather, the other of ultimate difference—a different and worse category of infidel, one whose potential for conversion is slim at best. This category of infidel has conquered Christian territories and may have created barriers for the spread of Christian belief. The Amerindians are still infidels, but with the potential to become Christians.[52]

Las Casas' Christologically-grounded arguments for peace, gentleness, and compassion may only extend to those groups of infidels who represent religious others that are clean slates, so to

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[49] Las Casas does not use "prophet" as a descriptor, but I will respectfully use "prophet" here. Las Casas does not add the reverential phrase "peace be upon him" ﷺ either; I have chosen to use this throughout.
[50] Las Casas, *The Only Way*, 97.
[51] Las Casas, *The Only Way*, 144-151.
[52] This is, in part, because Amerindians have never conquered Christian territories; metaphorically speaking, the Amerindians are an open land that can be conquered and tilled, precisely because they have not participated in nefarious relations with Christians, Christianity, or Christian territories prior to colonial contact.

speak.[53] These infidels have not yet been touched by Christendom nor have they laid waste to lands already claimed by Christians; this kind of infidel, in contrast to Muslims or Jews, is ripe for persuasion and conversion.[54] Muslims have knowledge of Christianity and have stripped Christendom of lands, in the past, through war and violence: this means that Muslims are not ripe for conversion, and even more so, represent a religious group that invites "just war." Christians can and should reclaim and retake—violently, if necessary—lands that are understood to be Christian lands.

It could be argued that *The Only Way* focuses on proper comportment toward the Amerindians and that, if Las Casas had ventured to discuss specific conversion strategies oriented toward Muslims, he might have stressed peace and gentleness all the same. In this line of thinking, it is conceivable that Las Casas invokes the prophet Mohammed ﷺ and Muslims only as a rhetorical device to show the absurdity of violent conversion strategies: if Christians use these methods, they are no better than Muslims.[55] In this way, though Las Casas' language regarding the prophet Mohammed ﷺ and Muslims is reprehensible (by modern standards of religious inclusion and mutual respect), could we argue that his rhetorical strategy does not ultimately contradict his overarching theological argument of peace and compassion toward religious others, in the efforts of conversion? This interpretation represents a stance similar to one taken by liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez, who acknowledges that Las Casas' posture toward Muslims is reprehensible but must be seen in light of his loyalties as a Spaniard.[56] Yet as already mentioned, Las Casas grew up in the

[53] Views commonly held by bishops in the Catholic Church during and after Las Casas' lifetime.
[54] Gutiérrez notes that medieval Christendom "was little concerned with the evangelizing of the Jews and Muslims," in contrast to Amerindians (Gutiérrez, *In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ*, 193).
[55] Las Casas, *The Only Way*, 144. It appears that Las Casas is writing for those who already assume Islam to be deplorable since he says the prophet Mohammed ﷺ is "*clearly* the falsest prophet of them all" (emphasis mine). It is not "clearly" argued, which means that the prophet's ﷺ falsity must be inferred or assumed.
[56] Gustavo Gutiérrez calls Las Casas' language a "shortcoming" and insists that more knowledge of and experience with Muslims would have shifted his view. In *In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ*, 494, n. 2; 106.

decade that Christians on the Iberian Peninsula finally triumphed over Muslim rule after several centuries of steady resistance. This triumph was a work in progress, with the geographic area of Las Casas' birth having been free from Muslim rule for more than two centuries.[57] The Christians and not the Muslims, in Las Casas' historical milieu, were in the position of supreme power, and so Las Casas' references to the prophet Mohammed's ﷺ wars for conversion are likely based less on historical veracity and more so on his categorization of religious others (that Muslims belong to a different category of infidels than the Amerindians) and desire to establish Christian conversion methods as superior to methods used by Muslims.[58]

Working from a theological premise that Jesus Christ is the only way and that Christianity is the "right religion," it seems by analogy that Las Casas builds a theological case that Christianity is superior to the religious others who appear in *The Only Way*.[59] Those beyond the bounds of Christianity exist as either potential Christians (Amerindians) or as foils by which Christian methods of conversion are proven to be superior, in their alignment with Jesus Christ and God himself. For Las Casas, this seems to be as theological as it is affectively practical. What is notable in Las Casas' argument, beyond his unquestioned premise that inclusion of religious others is achieved through conversion, is the consistent emotionality invoked to persuade other Christian leaders of his argument. Christianity, as a "living faith" and "right religion," is superior to all other traditions, in its relation to Jesus Christ, whose methods of attraction were gentle and loving.[60] The theological

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[57] For a brief history of the *Reconquista*, specifically as it affected Muslims in Spain, see Roberto Marin-Guzmán, "Crusade in Al-Andalus: The Eleventh Century Formation of the *Reconquista* as an Ideology," in *Islamic Studies* 31, no. 3 (1992): 287-318.

[58] In the Textual Appendices to *The Only Way* (227-230), Parish includes documents from bishops that clarify the four different kinds of infidels. Muslims belong to either the first or second category of infidels, depending on whether they "hold land and rule taken against the law from Christians, by force, by violence" (228). Amerindians are the fourth kind of infidel who have never taken lands that were formerly under Christian rule and occupation. As to historical veracity, the text that Las Casas cites to support his view of the prophet Mohammed ﷺ seems questionable, inflammatory, prejudicial, and biased (145-146).

[59] Las Casas, *The Only Way*, 121.

[60] Las Casas, *The Only Way*. "Right religion" (121) and "living faith" (68).

impress of conversion, to invoke Ahmed, should be light, in order to achieve consensual conversion. This conversion toward the good is ultimately described as participation in the eschatological kingdom of Jesus Christ.[61] Christian conversion methods, then, should follow Christ's ultimate example, characterized by gentleness and love, affectively "draw[ing] all to a living faith."[62]

Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*

Context of the Text: Romantic Gestures and Christian Feelings

Vast differences in experience and cultural milieu separate an early Christian theologian like Athanasius with a 16th century Roman Catholic theologian like Las Casas riding the wave of global Christian expansion, or with a 19th century Protestant theologian such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, whose writing is inflected with a flourish of European enlightenment ideals. Yet these three, among many others, write in a lineage of Christian theologians, and in that sense, are at the very least broadly connected to the Christian logic and feelings circulating in a Christian affective economy.[63] Likewise, each theologian, in significant theological works, focuses on traditions outside the bounds of Christianity to make an argument wherein Christianity (or, Christian logic and Christian theological imaginings) is superior to all religious others. Athanasius does so by turning to religious others to argue for the ascendance of Jesus Christ and the universal relevance of Christian theological narratives of salvation; similarly, Las Casas uses religious others to provide a foil for conversion methods and to construct a scale of inclusion and exclusion, all from the premise that Christianity is the superior religion.

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[61] A theoretical and theological question arises, however, about whether there can really be "consent" if the alternative to this consent is damnation, rather than a separate flourishing or thriving outside or beyond Christ's eschatological kingdom. It could be argued that this is not a real choice if the alternative is to convert to Christianity or to experience eternal harm.

[62] This is the subtitle for Las Casas' text. See pg. 59.

[63] Schleiermacher does not, of course, use the term affective economy, but does include an interesting perspective on the interconnection of Christian affections and theological lineages. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 94ff.

Though Schleiermacher does not diverge from Athanasius or Las Casas in assumptions of Christian prominence, he represents a turn toward inclusion that does not include or absorb via the eradication of religious difference. Rather than eliminate religious difference to prove Christian superiority, Schleiermacher offers a way, theologically, to strategically include religious others in their otherness; this inclusion, however, is imagined as part of a theological narrative of Christianity's natural ascendance, grounded in history. Christianity, and the religious feelings related to Christian logic and sentiment, represent, for Schleiermacher, the pinnacle of human progress. Religious others can continue to subsist in Schleiermacher's scheme, but—like his contemporary G.W.F. Hegel—Christianity nonetheless holds exclusive access to the highest manifestation of religious feeling and consciousness.[64] A common thread among all three, however, is how an assumption of Christian superiority "sticks" to the figure of Jesus Christ, which is significant when the audience (for all three texts) is assumed to be Christian "insiders." In other words, these theologians are instructing Christians, or those within a Christian affective economy, about the limit and power of inclusion and exclusion in the face of religious difference.

Writing and teaching from Berlin, Friedrich Schleiermacher is widely regarded as the father of modern Protestant theology.[65] His theological influence as such extends through the 18th and into the 19th century, as his theological constructions affect the cultural, ideological, and theological formation of generations of (European) Protestant theologians. We can imagine Schleiermacher's context: continuing in and furthering the relatively new lineage of Protestant theology (in contrast to Roman Catholic traditions) amid modernity, wherein the philosophical ideals of the European

[64] This will be discussed in successive paragraphs, with textual references.
[65] This is a ubiquitous description of Friedrich Schleiermacher. For this project, I have gathered this description from *Christianity and Plurality: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. by Richard Plantinga, (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 1999): 188. I also want to note Schleiermacher's influence in hermeneutics and philosophy of religion, for which the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy refers to him as "one of the best second-tier philosophers of the time period" that includes philosophical giants such as "Kant, Herder, Hegel, Marx, or Nietzsche"). Michael Forster, "Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2022 Edition; updated from 2002), ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/schleiermacher/.

Enlightenment and notions of science and human progress were beginning to eclipse the power of religion. Religion, or at least understandings of religion and religious diversity, were undergoing vast changes as well: Christian traditions were both diverse and divided, making Christian unity more of an abstract ideal than a concrete reality. This fact, coupled with the explosion of data regarding religions across the globe, would inspire a variety of Christian theological orientations toward difference. Schleiermacher's way of responding theologically to these cultural and political realities affects trends in liberal Protestant theology for well over a century.[66] In this way, *The Christian Faith* is noteworthy for how Schleiermacher, in a European environment already infused by global imperial and colonial encounters, develops a creative account of religion—in its diversity of forms— that forms the bedrock for his Protestant Christian dogmatics and systematic theology.

The Christian Faith: The Superiority of Christian Logic and Feeling

Schleiermacher begins *The Christian Faith* with a long treatment of the meaning and method of Dogmatics before embarking on his systematic theology as such. Schleiermacher's systematic theology, ambitious and thorough as it is, will not be discussed here in detail; much of Schleiermacher's reference to religious others occurs in his prolegomena on Dogmatics, which comprises roughly a seventh of his text. His introduction should not be set aside as less important than what follows: for, according to Schleiermacher, the "purpose of [the] Introduction is, first, to set for the conception of Dogmatics *which underlies the work itself*…"[67] According to Schleiermacher, this introductory section lays the foundation for all that follows in his systematic theology.

In contrast to a theologian like Las Casas who asserts that the truths of Christianity were beyond the natural order, Schleiermacher insists on grounding the Christian tradition firmly in

[66] Schleiermacher's influence on liberal theology and the reactions to liberal theology in the 20th century (the neo-orthodox Protestant theology of Karl Barth, for example) is well-documented.
[67] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 1. Emphasis mine.

history; Christianity, and its founder Jesus Christ, are part of the natural order, not separate from the undulations of human experience and progress. Grounding Christianity in history means, for Schleiermacher, that Christianity is a religion among other religions, equal in its appearance and development in human civilization. The question becomes, then, how and whether Christianity and Christian theology can be distinguished from other religious traditions that have also emerged historically and might even be older than Christian traditions. Before Schleiermacher offers his argument for Christian particularity and superiority, he attempts to provide a different foundation for religions and religious phenomena altogether. In this scheme, as interpreted by theologian Richard Plantinga, "the seat of religion is therefore not reason or conscience, but feeling or affectivity," wherein "religion is…irreducible to anything more basic; it is a genus unto itself (*sui generis*)."[68]

Religion is conceived as more of a cultural artifact for Schleiermacher: religion is not abstract but lived and felt, a cultural expression of human relatedness to divinity. Because religion is cultural and historical, it follows that geography, time, and context in some sense determine the particularity of religious expression. "Religious affections" are diverse, such that Christianity is one among many. If religion as a universal feeling of absolute dependence is lived and felt by humans, then it follows that these humans are living and feeling from different cultures and geographies. The reality of multiple religious perspectives, traditions, and "religions," therefore, is not something that Schleiermacher denies in his theological framework. Religious others are not an anomaly but more a requisite result of different human cultures living within the bounds of time and history. Thus, religious others—if not outright denied or eradicated—become a foil through which Schleiermacher argues that Christianity is the highest, or most superior, form of religion. In a scale not unlike the scales of religion proposed by the progenitors of the field of comparative religions, for

[68] Plantinga, *Christianity and Pluralism*, 188.

Schleiermacher, "subordinate forms" of religion include what he refers to as polytheism and fetishism, the latter of which is a primal form of idolatry.[69]

In Schleiermacher's rather positive view of history, humanity ("man") is destined to progress from lower to higher forms of consciousness, and to specifically God-consciousness; what is left to determine is which religions comprise the lower (subordinate) forms and which are the "higher" forms. Schleiermacher is clear that this progress is not necessarily linear in terms of historical chronology. Religious linearity, or progress, is traced in terms of a religion's relationship with teleology and Monotheism, with the former encompassing the highest forms of a religion's externalization and totality, and with the latter representing the highest forms of God-consciousness. Totality, or the characteristic of speaking from beyond particularity to what is universal, marks the higher form of religion and totality, for Schleiermacher, is best achieved or envisaged through monotheistic religious systems.[70]

Schleiermacher deems monotheism to be a superior way of describing the divine because of its singular focus, its potential for universality, and its higher expression of religious affection, as a corollary of a more developed self-consciousness.[71] He is not alone in this estimation of monotheism as a higher form of religious feeling, or religion as such; taxonomies of religion, developed through the era of colonial expansion through Christianity's repeated contact with non-Christian religious systems, ubiquitously describe monotheistic religious traditions as more advanced, developed, and civilized forms of religious thought springing from more advanced, developed, and civilized human cultures and societies. Schleiermacher repeats assumptions that

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[69] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 34-36. For a history of comparative religions in relation to European power, imperial expansion, and scales of superiority, see David Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism & Comparative Religion*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 1-90; and Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
[70] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 34-43.
[71] Monotheism is capitalized in the translation by H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (T&T Clark/Continuum version) of *The Christian Faith*. I choose to not capitalize the term except inside a quotation.

religion (and thus, religious feeling) progresses from fetishism (idolatry), which is particular and somewhat parochial; to polytheism, which represents the orientation toward a totality, as the "local references"[72] of the divine become de-emphasized; to monotheism, which is the "highest plane"[73] because there is awareness in the religious self-consciousness of one, supreme being upon which all is felt to be absolutely dependent.[74] A singular divinity best represents the totalized form, or the most sophisticated religious form, of the feeling of absolute dependence.

Though Schleiermacher is not unique for repeating a scale of religious development that begins with idolatry and progresses toward monotheism, his theological innovation is in describing this progression affectively, wherein Christian feelings represent a higher plane or higher consciousness than the feelings of religious others. In brief, Schleiermacher is notable for constructing feeling and affect as the baseline for religion. Religion is humanity's way of expressing dependence, or relatedness, to God; the feeling of being absolutely dependent on the divine is the foundation for the development of different religious traditions, logic, practices, and feelings. What is distinct about *The Christian Faith*, however, even in its acceptance of the reality of religious diversity, is how Christianity fits into Schleiermacher's taxonomy of religious feelings and how Christianity's assumed ascendancy reinforces Schleiermacher's comprehensive theological vision. Schleiermacher is candid that his attempt to describe religious diversity (in a scale of development) is for the purpose of illustrating Christianity's superiority:

> …Our sole concern is to investigate how Christianity is related…to other religious communions and forms of faith. Our proposition does not assert, but it does tacitly presuppose the possibility, that there are other forms of piety which are related to

[72] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 34.
[73] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 37.
[74] Schleiermacher states, "Now this self-consciousness can only be described in terms of Monotheism, and indeed only as we have expressed it in our proposition. For if we are conscious of ourselves, as such and in our finitude, as absolutely dependent, the same holds true of all finite existence, and in this connexion [sic] we take up the whole world along with ourselves into the unity of our self-consciousness. Thus the different way of representing that existence outside of us to which the consciousness of absolute dependence refers, depend partly on the different degrees of extensiveness of the self-consciousness (for as long as a man identifies himself only with a small part of finite existence, his god will remain a fetich [sic]…" (Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 35-36).

> Christianity as different forms on the same level of development, and thus so far similar. *But this does not contradict the conviction, which we assume every Christian to possess, of the exclusive superiority of Christianity.* In the realm of Nature also we distinguish perfect and imperfect animals as different stages of the development of animal life, and again on each of these stages different genera, which thus resemble each other as expressions of the same state; but this does not mean that one genus of the lower stage may not be nearer to the higher, and thus more perfect, than the others. *Similarly, though several kinds of piety belong to the same stage as Christianity, it may yet be more perfect than any of them.*[75]

Specific religious others appear in *The Christian Faith* at this juncture as a way for Schleiermacher to illumine Christianity's superiority. This is despite Schleiermacher's attempt to mark the resemblance of Christian feelings to other religious feelings and traditions. Monotheism may be the superior way of describing and relating to divinity, according to Schleiermacher, but Christianity is not alone in this affirming the logic of the One: Christianity is similar to both Judaism and Islam in this way, which means that either Christian feeling is on the same level as Jewish or Muslim feelings, or that Christian feelings must be distinct in superior in some way. Christianity's superiority, though, should not rest on proving other religions and their requisite feelings to be false, in comparison. For Schleiermacher, religious feelings—even less developed traditions and communions—develop and progress toward better and ultimately what is the highest, or the truest. Traditions and feelings outside of Christianity, then, contain portions of truth, for "only the true, and not the false, can be a basis of receptivity for the higher truth of Christianity."[76]

Schleiermacher asserts that we are moved toward the truth via the less partial truths, or even error; once we find "the true thing to which [error or partial truth] is attached," then we progress to a higher stage of self-consciousness.[77] We can certainly commend Schleiermacher's acceptance of truth beyond the boundaries of Christian traditions and his insistence that Christians should not "adopt towards at least most other forms of piety the *attitude* of the true towards the false," since he

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[75] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 33. Emphasis mine.
[76] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 33. Earlier in the discussion, on pg. 13, Schleiermacher refers to this receptivity as an "affective receptivity."
[77] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 33.

has shown that other traditions can contain partial truths.[78] Yet we should also keep in mind that this acknowledgement of religious diversity and the potential for partial truths expressed by various traditions exists primarily to illustrate the purest, highest, fullest version of truth. Competing monotheisms are judged, then, with this prior estimation of Christianity.

Judaism, as a religious communion, is "almost in the process of extinction" and "betrays a lingering affinity with [Fetichism][sic]."[79] Islam, on the other hand, "betrays…a large measure of that influence of the sensible upon the character of the religious emotions which elsewhere keeps men on the level of Polytheism."[80] Because Judaism and Islam are monotheistic, they are higher forms of religion (or piety) than what characterize other forms of piety that are mired in idolatry or plurality or plural divinities. Yet despite their monotheistic inclinations, each fails in significant ways. Judaism is too particular and Islam is too passionate, or aesthetic; Judaism fails in its stubborn particularity, while Islam fails in its dedication to the kinds of emotions and sensibility that fully maintain both a clarified monotheism and an active, communally-based teleological emphasis.[81] Schleiermacher does not cite his sources for his evaluation of either Judaism or Islam.[82] Nonetheless, he concludes his discussion of comparable monotheisms by stating definitively that "this comparison of Christianity to other similar religions is in itself a sufficient warrant for saying that Christianity is, in fact, the most perfect of the most highly developed forms of religion."[83] Because different faith traditions catalyze different levels of self-consciousness and God-consciousness, a person does not pass from

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[78] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 33. Emphasis mine.
[79] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 37.
[80] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 37.
[81] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 40ff. Schleiermacher embarks on distinctions between aesthetic and teleological religions in this section, determining that the former are lower (because of their passivity) while the latter are higher (because of their activity). Schleiermacher designates Islam as aesthetic, whereas Judaism and Christianity are teleological.
[82] For insightful treatments of Schleiermacher's experiential and rhetorical relationship with both Islam and Judaism, see Joshua Ralston, "Islam as Christian Trope: The Place and Function of Islam in Reformed Dogmatic Theology," in *The Muslim World*, vol 107 (October 2017): 754-756; 764-768. And Richard Crouter, "Schleiermacher's Letters on the Occasion and the crisis of Berlin Jewry" (chapter 5), in *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Between Enlightenment and Romanticism*, (New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005): 123-139.
[83] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 38.

lower to higher forms of feeling only to later retract the developments they have achieved. No one passes from Christianity back to Judaism or Islam, except for individual pathology.[84]

Beyond this estimation of Christianity's (and thereby a Christian's) perfection by comparison, no other faith tradition includes a founder like Jesus Christ, who concretely secures Christianity's particularity, ascendance, and ultimate superiority. To expound upon his scales of development for religion, which is to say the God-consciousness connected to the religious affections—and to further distinguish Christianity from Judaism and Islam—Schleiermacher turns to a discussion of religion's essence.[85] If the essence of a particular faith can be determined, then as a corollary, it can be determined who belongs to that tradition, how that tradition is different from other traditions, and, importantly, where the tradition falls on the scales of development. This is important because it maintains boundaries between different faith traditions and shows that certain religious affections cultivate higher forms of consciousness. A polytheist, or Jew, or a Muslim will not achieve the same level of self-consciousness and God-consciousness as a Christian, because the specific religious feelings that arise from the root feeling (the soil representing the feeling of absolute dependence) will take on a particular character. This is not to say that Schleiermacher argues that every Christian is automatically superior in terms of God-consciousness to Muslims or Jews; it is possible, since each of these traditions is monotheistic, that individual Muslims and Jews could achieve a God-consciousness that is more developed than an individual Christian. Schleiermacher views individual examples more as aberrations or exceptions, however, just as he notes that an

[84] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 38. This comment about pathology is related to Schleiermacher's insistence that piety is both individual and communal, but that the formation of traditions is community-oriented in nature (though the emphasis should be family-centric, not state-centric). There could always be examples of individuals who make choices among piety and religious feelings, with the possibility that they could choose to go backward in development, so to speak. But Schleiermacher's point is that Christianity has initiated a new level of development such that there is no wholesale return to lower forms. This formula for development could be akin to leveling-up a character and/or campaign party in role-playing games such as Dungeons & Dragons (there are multiple ways of playing Dungeons & Dragons, with different rules as to whether a character can lose levels of experience; generally, though, once a character achieves a higher level, they maintain that level for the duration of the campaign).
[85] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 53ff.

individual could revert to the "lower planes" of polytheism or heathenism.[86] As a way of understanding Schleiermacher's formula, we could imagine different trees that grow from the same soil (the feeling of absolute dependence). Some trees will grow taller than others, and ultimately no tree will meld with another tree—even if those trees are closer in height to one another. In terms of religious development and progression, a tree that grows with Christian feelings possess, simply, the potential to grow taller than other trees. The essence of Christianity, along with its distinction from religious others, is important for Schleiermacher because he must demonstrate according to his scheme how Christianity, as a faith tradition that traces its lineage to its Jewish founder, is completely different from Judaism and is not just a branch on the Jewish tree.[87]

Since Schleiermacher's treatment is centered on delineating scales and progressions of different religious traditions, wherein the most superior religious feeling is indubitably Christianity, Jesus Christ thus becomes the pinnacle of human progress—or, the best and most perfect human as such.[88] Not only does Jesus Christ represent the highest form of self-consciousness and God-consciousness, in comparison to the founders of other religions. He represents the exemplar who catalyzes all of humanity to a higher from through his role as redeemer. Schleiermacher identifies the essence of Christian feeling as the focus on redemption. With the advent of Jesus Christ, he argues, redemption takes on a totality and teleology that does not exist in comparable faiths that spring up from this feeling of absolute dependence. Christianity is thereby a teleological faith tradition, already on a higher level, whose founder becomes the universal Redeemer.[89] Thus Christianity, as the metaphorical tree that grows from the feelings and practices centered and circulating upon its

[86] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 36. Schleiermacher seems to view this as more of a surface-level reversion.
[87] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 44-68.
[88] Traces of this theological emphasis emerges later in the work of theologians like Karl Barth (*The Humanity of God*) and John B. Cobb, Jr. (*Christ in a Pluralistic Age*).
[89] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 40ff; 52ff.

founder, becomes a faith tradition whose feelings and affections can best achieve human development and progress, which is to say self-consciousness and God-consciousness:

> …In comparison with [Christ], everything which could otherwise be regarded as revelation against loses this character. For everything else is limited to particular times and places, and all that proceeds from such points is from the very outset destined to be submerged again in Him, and is thus in relation to Him, no existence, but a non-existence; and He alone is destined gradually to quicken the whole human race into higher life.[90]

Conclusion

Schleiermacher is not writing to audiences external to Christianity. Like Athanasius' *On the Incarnation* and Las Casas' *The Only Way*, Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith* is a theological text meant to express Christian logic and dogmatics, and "Dogmatics is only for Christians."[91] Religious others may not be convinced of the truth of Christianity from this theological account, so Schleiermacher affirms that "this account is only for those who live within the pale of Christianity."[92] Along with accepting the reality of religious diversity, Schleiermacher is also keenly aware, refreshingly for his time period, that there is no singular version or interpretation of Christianity, which renders the task of systematizing Christian theology a complex endeavor. Christian diversity is just as prevalent as wider religious piety that exists beyond the bounds of Christian traditions.[93]

Regardless of his intended audience and his statement that *The Christian Faith* is for Christians who possess "already the inward certainty that his religion cannot take any other form…", the question arises: why are references to religious others necessary to his theological argument, schema, or vision?[94] What is the affective afterlife of these assertions of theological

[90] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 63-64.
[91] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 60.
[92] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 60.
[93] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 52-54.
[94] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 60.

superiority as written to Christian insiders, especially from a theologian such as Schleiermacher, who influences generations of modern Protestant theologians rooted in Western traditions and paradigms?

For Athanasius and Las Casas, Christian logic and affect is universal and superior *a priori*, which means that religious difference is temporary and non-constitutive: the advent of Christ means that religious others are ultimately subsumed (Athanasius) or should be gently converted to the truth (Las Casas). Schleiermacher, to some extent, represents a theologically liberal and inclusive turn that appears to be more *a posteriori*, wherein religious difference exists as a natural emergence in a world of diverse cultures, times, and places. In this natural emergence, the revelation of Jesus Christ as the redeemer who is the pinnacle of self-consciousness and God-consciousness sets Christian piety apart from its co-ordinates of Judaism and Islam. Schleiermacher's theology of religious diversity is not one of proving Christianity to be true, and all else to be false. Or, the truth of Christianity is not demonstrated by the *immediate* disappearance of religious others, as with Athanasius, or the wholesale conversion of religious others, as expressed in the theology of Las Casas. Christian logic and feelings do not subsume or eradicate religious others, even in their universal power and appeal. Instead, Christian logic and feelings are simply superior—higher, best, purest—and are gradually demonstrated to be so, in comparison to religious others, even in comparison to Judaism (which predate Christianity) and to Islam, both of which share a monotheistic focus.

What remains consistent in *The Christian Faith* is that Christian piety that is cast as the highest religious development of self-consciousness—where the totality of the world, and of feeling absolutely dependent on a single God reaches its pinnacle. Schleiermacher is focused on identifying the peculiarity of Christianity in comparison to rival monotheisms, and it remains for subsequent Christian theologians to argue how, in Schleiermacher's logic, understanding Christianity as superior and Christian feelings as the highest development of religious affections does not leave an affect, or

impression, of superiority in the circulation of Christian feelings in a Christian affective economy. Despite Schleiermacher's acceptance of religious diversity as a phenomenon, religious others appear as figures to prove Christianity's superiority to those who are already convinced of Christianity's superiority. Or, religious others only appear as foils to reinforce Christian presuppositions and premises, to justify Christian feelings and theological foreclosure. Though the fact of Christian superiority should not necessarily engender attitudes toward other forms of piety that seek their eradication as false, the question we will turn to in the next chapter is how, or whether, a theologically liberal inclusive turn such as this can be disentangled from an affect of superiority in a Christian affective economy of power and relation.

Chapter 5

Patterns of Superiority in a Christian Affective Economy: From Inclusion to Intimacy in Contemporary Constructive Christian Theologies

Therefore God also highly exalted Him and gave Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven, and on earth, and of under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2: 9-11

Thomas said to Him, "Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.

John 14: 5-6

All humanity includes in some measure the immanent Logos, which is the lure to the fullest possible human realization in each moment. The more fully the lure is responded to, the more fully the human potential is actualized.[1]

John B. Cobb, Jr.

When you are criticizing the philosophy of an epoch, do not chiefly direct your attention to those intellectual positions which its exponents feel it necessary explicitly to defend. There will be some fundamental assumptions which adherents of all the various systems within the epoch unconsciously presuppose. Such assumptions appear so obvious that people do not know what they are assuming because no other way of putting things has ever occurred to them.[2]

Alfred North Whitehead

Introduction: The Logic of "Our" One[3]

Feelings create impressions in affective economies, according to Sara Ahmed. An emotion or feeling like hate has no positive value. Instead, value accumulates through circulation, and it is through this circulation that hate becomes real.[4] This is the ideological racism that makes way for the

[1] John B. Cobb, Jr., *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1975), 171.
[2] Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, original publication 1925, (New York: Free Press, 1967), 48. Mary Daly uses this quotation as an epigraph to the introduction of *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, 1985 edition, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 1.
[3] This comes from a conversation with Laurel C. Schneider in the fall of 2022, in discussion how the logic of the One might operate or continue to manifest in liberal, pluralistic theological contexts attentive to the importance of religious diversity for the flourishing of all beings.
[4] As mentioned in the last footnote of chapter 3, Ahmed argues that emotions do not have "positive value," meaning that an emotion is not substantive or an object; emotions achieve value through circulation. She includes this assertion in

tragedy of Charlottesville, or the theological superiority that manifests in the horror of the Oak Creek shootings. Another way of saying this is that feelings, such as a love or hate, as they accumulate value, become socially embodied and engender material effect. Taking cues from Ahmed, then, I have focused on demonstrating how Christian theological superiority, as an affect or feeling in a Christian affective economy, accumulates value in such a way that these feelings might have resonance, or embodied effects. Theology and practice are reciprocal: our theologies matter, and thus how theologians think and feel about religious others, in the logic of their theologically imaginative schemas and in the emotionality of their texts, matters as well.

Christian theological arguments, especially in the post-Enlightenment era, have become increasingly sophisticated and inclusive of religious others, imagining worlds in which both particularity and difference are supported by a divine being who is, in that divine being's own nature, diverse.[5] By sophisticated, I mean that Christian theologies in the 21st century, more often than not, take into account the legacies of Christian complicity and participation in historical horrors and emphasize the importance of political, social, geographical, and even topographical context in affecting our imaginations in the process of constructing theological visions. Imbuing theology with contextuality—or identifying the contextual markers, biases, or perspectives that limn theological construction, whether acknowledged or not—has become increasingly important. Current theological tides have gifted Christian traditions with explicitly feminist, womanist, mujerista, postcolonial, decolonial, Indigenous, and queer theologies, just to name a few more recent

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her articles "Collective Feelings" and "Affective Economies," and it is a primary catalyst of her thesis in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion.* In "Happy Objects" (*The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) she states: "…objects accumulate positive affective value as they are passed around. My essay will offer an approach to thinking through affect as 'sticky.' Affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects… (29-30).

[5] Along with the theologians discussed in this chapter, I want to refer to the work of John J. Thatanamil, Catherine Keller, Kwok Pui-Lan, Pamela Dickey Young, David R. Brockman, Roland Faber, Perry Schmidt-Leukel, Laurel C. Schneider—just to name a few.

theological emergences. Theologies that ignore historical realities, or that fail to consider race, gender, or sexuality, might seem out of place, or too abstract for this historical moment.

The importance of contextuality brings to the foreground impulse to universality that appears across Christian theological themes, creeds, and foundational theological texts—and that we have tried to demonstrate has appeared in different eras.[6] In the presence of religious others, this lure toward the universal prominence or relevance of Christian theological visions becomes increasingly problematic, if creating space for the internal validity of religious others to remain others becomes a stronger theo-ethical value than maintaining Christian superiority or prominence.[7]

For this last full chapter, I will discuss significant theological works of the 20th and 21st centuries, each of which could be described as pluralist, particularist, or radically open in theological orientation toward religious others.[8] Each of these theologians uses a different lens through which to view Christian relations with difference: Roman Catholic theologian Jeannine Hill Fletcher engages in feminist analysis, while Protestant theologians Willie James Jennings and John B. Cobb, Jr. focus respectively on issues of race and racialization as inscribed in the Christian theological imagination and on process cosmology and metaphysical foundations for constructive theology. Though their theological foci are different, each engages the question of religious difference as a constituent thread in their theological fabric. And each, in turn, emphasizes a kind of intimacy between Christians (or Christian traditions, as a whole) and religious others that they understand to be both

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[6] Roland Faber's sketch of "axial ages" of Christian relations to religious others in *The Ocean of God: On the Transreligious Future of Religions* is helpful.

[7] In some ways, the chapter progression of this dissertation is aligned with, or parallel to, the classic typology of orientations toward religious others, accepted, expressed, and reinterpreted ubiquitously by scholars in Christian theology, comparative theologies, interreligious and interfaith studies, and theology of religions: exclusive, inclusive, pluralist, and particularist. Athanasius' *On the Incarnation* could be interpreted as the most exclusive of these texts, wherein Christian traditions are legitimized through asserting Christ's superiority over and against the perspectives of all others, religious or otherwise. Las Casas' *The Only Way* and Schleiermacher's *The Christian Faith*, in their unique ways, could represent a more inclusive turn in Christian theology, wherein Christian theological visions and practices are still understood to be superior to those of religious others; but the overall orientation is that of including currents of difference into the stream, and eventually the ocean, of Christian futures.

[8] I want to note that Jeannine Hill Fletcher, in attempting to construct a theology of religious pluralism, to some extent places her work outside this typology; she is attempting to write something different in orientation.

necessary and transformational. Finally, these theologians are also grounded in, and in a significant sense are reciprocally formed by North American contexts. This brings the discussion of North American emergences of Christian theological superiority in the face of religious diversity and difference more explicitly into focus.

Part of what I suggest in this chapter is that in an era of renewed attention to relational entanglement—in which cosmologies and terminology related to multiplicity, fluidity, or hybridity are becoming increasingly common—many Christian theologians are shifting their language and orientation toward religious others. Fletcher and Jennings are examples of how contemporary Christian theologies respond to religious pluralism with doctrinally-rooted arguments for joining (Fletcher and Jennings), intimacy (primarily Jennings), a boundary-less or boundary-defying orientation (Jennings), and interior appropriation (Cobb). For Fletcher, Jennings, and Cobb, greater intimacy with religious others is a necessary and crucial step for Christianity to regain a kind of integrity or to affect a transformational, holistic future.

While I am deeply interested in Christian theological arguments for holistic relationships with religious others, I am also wary of doctrinally or theologically-rooted arguments for intimacy that may not take into account the devastating effects of gestures toward multiplicity and boundary-less-ness that could be operationalized in a given context.[9] Fletcher, Jennings, and Cobb are not entirely unique in their responses to otherness by arguing for greater "joining," intimacy, or dialogue: both current scholarship and practices move in the direction of affirming deeper engagement and encounter with religious others. What Fletcher, Jennings, and Cobb do that is slightly different from

[9] My thinking in this direction is ongoing and provisional. I pondered conceptions of consent in interreligious contexts in my 2022 AAR presentation "The Impossibility of Consent: Intimacy Metaphors in Contexts of Religious Diversity." Yet I am also interested in Gloria Steinem's comment, in a q&a at Vanderbilt University in November 2019, that consent can sometimes be too transactional, so perhaps conceptions of "welcome" can intimate something more relationally appealing. 'Welcome' (and a correlate, hospitality) is a concept utilized heavily by multifaith university chaplains in the United States, which I discussed in my 2020 AAR presentation ("Decentered Inclusivity: The Limits and Possibilities of Multifaith Work in College and University Chaplaincies").

scholars in theology of religions, and even comparative theologies or religions, however, is ground their arguments in Christian doctrines that invoke the past in order to call for a new present and future *together, with others*. They each, in their own way, uphold the viability of Christian doctrines, reimagining these doctrines, theologically, to justify arguments for a human immanence (intimacy, joining) and encounter.

In light of Rosemary Radford Ruether's compelling argument about the inherent antisemitism (and foundational anti-otherness) entangled in the roots of Christian theologies then, a question arises whether these pluralistic and particularistic constructive Christian theologies from North American contexts adequately face the deeper theological or doctrinal artifices that might continue to support logics and feelings of theological superiority.[10] In asking this question, what I hope to draw attention to is the ways in which the arguments for greater intimacy, in an era of multiplicity, may still unintentionally incorporate logics of Christian primacy and superiority that could look and feel different than the kind of overt eradication of the other that appears at other moments in the history of Christianity. This is another way of exploring how logics and feelings of superiority may be embedded in Christian theological concepts, feelings, and practices, such that arguments for intimacy with religious others may become suspect. Whereas Jennings will approach the question of religious others through narratives of colonialism and constructions of racial hierarchies and otherness in "the age of discovery," Fletcher and Cobb will center the question of religious others via theological explorations of soteriology and Christology.[11] What we should note about all three texts, in line with the theological texts discussed in chapters 3 and 4, is that they are ostensibly written with Christian audiences in mind. The implications of their arguments, however,

[10] For Fletcher, as an example, is not critical of salvation as a concept. Rather, Fletcher's priority is to re-imagine salvation in a way that affirms both Christian particularism and religious pluralism.
[11] Fletcher's is a more traditional approach to soteriology, wherein salvation includes becoming, fulfillment, and a progression of a kind. For Cobb, it is what I would describe as a broader approach, in which the figure of Jesus is somewhat eclipsed by the more abstract concept of "creative transformation."

extend beyond Christian audiences, gesturing toward relationships with others across the bounds of religious difference. The following sections analyze key aspects of their theological texts and then, in the subsequent conclusion to the dissertation as a whole, briefly return to the work of Rosemary Radford Ruether and to Sara Ahmed's approach to understanding relationships between intimacy and power.

Jeannine Hill Fletcher: The Mystery and Promise of Relating to Religious Others

In *Monopoly on Salvation? A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism* (2005), Jeannine Hill Fletcher attempts to construct a "Christian response to religious diversity" rooted in apophatic theology and feminist thought.[12] Her aim is to "construct a theology of religious pluralism that respects and maintains the "distinctiveness" —we could say boundaries—between and among religious traditions, while not forfeiting the "Christian affirmations of what is known of God through Jesus."[13] In brief, Fletcher is situating herself in the trajectory of Christian theologies of religions, from John Hick to Paul Knitter, wherein Christian theologians tackle the proverbial elephant in the room: if Jesus revealed that "no one comes to the Father, but by me" (John 14:6), then how are Christians to orient themselves toward the possibility of truth in other traditions?

The key challenge that Fletcher faces in the theology of religions is how to maintain Christian distinctiveness and affirmation in a way that 1) takes seriously the problem posed by Christian soteriology, 2) affirms feminist conceptions of hybridity and subjectivity, and 3) imagines a religiously pluralistic future. In her reading, theology of religions scholars fall short of viable theological responses to pluralism in the way that they either skirt Christian soteriological concerns by ignoring or discarding them entirely, rely on stable identity categories (for persons, for traditions)

[12] Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation*?, 14.
[13] Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation*?,, 16.

in speaking of pluralistic engagement, or posit separate eschatologies as an answer to the problem of exclusive soteriological claims, such as with the work of S. Mark Heim.[14] For the latter solution, Christian soteriology is for Christian persons, and only Christian persons will go to the Christian heaven; Muslims and Hindus each have separate paths for salvation, and so on. For Fletcher, though, simply doing away with or ignoring soteriology is not an option, in part because doing so relies on an assumption of separability that collapses once we take a closer look at traditions and those who practice traditions. Further, in her interpretation, notions of ultimate eschatological separability evacuate the unity of God and abscond the (Christian) responsibility "to love your neighbor as yourself" in the present (Mark 12:30-31).[15]

Fletcher begins her task of positing a (Christian) theology of religious pluralism by emphasizing resources within Christian traditions that decenter Christian claims of superior access to truth. Certainly, Christianity has a troubling history of exclusive soteriology that has resulted in deleterious and far-reaching material effects, as already reference throughout this project.[16] But what Fletcher seeks to remember are parallel streams in the history of Christian theologies that stress the mystery and unknowability of God. Pulling together theological insights from Thomas Aquinas to Pseudo-Dionysius to Karl Rahner and Karl Barth, Fletcher affirms the underlying "tension" in Christian theology between negation and affirmation: God is a mystery to us and all that we think

[14] Fletcher refers to S. Mark Heim's *Salvation: Truth and Difference in Religion* (1995). S. Mark Heim is known for arguing that different religious traditions achieve different forms of salvation, according to that tradition. It is exemplary of the particularist approach, as acknowledged by Fletcher. Notably, Heim argues against notions of salvation that result in positing a unified ultimate (as does John Hick, as an example).

[15] This is a brief summary of the Preface (vii-xi) and portions of chapter 3 in *Monopoly on Salvation?*, where Fletcher discusses how she is differentiating her argument from Hick, Knitter, and others.

[16] Throughout the text, Fletcher acknowledges the atrocities perpetrated by Christians (and Christianity) in the colonial era. However, in contrast to Jennings' work, I would characterize Fletcher's sketch is more generous. The clearest example is her references to Bartolomé de las Casas, whom she characterizes as a positive example of a colonialist who could accept religious difference; she does not mention his writings about Africans, nor does she nuance how his exclusively Christian soteriological vision meant that indigenous groups must necessarily be converted to Christianity (meaning a kind of eradication of their traditions, which he does accept as valid practices on a material level, but not ultimately on a theological level). Failing to nuance Las Casas invites skepticism; Las Casas only accepted difference to the point that it directly conflicted with Christianity's notion of superiority over other religious practices and concepts.

we know must ultimately be undone (negation). Yet because "Christians understand God through creation," we do—at the same time—have the capacity to know something about God (affirmation).[17] What, exactly, we can know has consumed the imagination of Christian theologians for centuries, since "the limits of human understanding of the creation of which they are a part means that all human existence is conditioned by mystery."[18] In other words, God is mystery and so are we; as much as creation is revelation, however, there exists potential for partial knowing, and it is this project of partial knowing that comprises the meaning and purpose of our lives.[19] Immanence, or intimacy with God through creation, paves the way for intimacy with difference. Following the work of Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, Fletcher suggests that God's mystery posits a "creative tension" wherein there is always abundance, always more to know in the "ever-receding horizon of transcendence" that is God.[20] Connecting to this mysterious horizon, which Fletcher calls "intimate joining," concretely "sustains the process of human fulfillment."[21]

What Fletcher essentially calls for—in light of Christian theological traditions attentive to what humans know and cannot, ultimately, know—is a balance between negation and affirmation in the process of human fulfillment. Too much negation or too much affirmation can lead to despair or arrogance, so Christians must be continually mindful of this need for balance. According to Fletcher, the problem that Karl Barth presents to this balance is the insistence that Jesus Christ, as the revelation of God, is the incarnation of what we can know about God.[22] Barth preserves the mystery of God in his notion of "wholly Other," but at the same time, centers all capacity for ultimately significant human knowledge of God in the person of Jesus Christ. One can easily see

[17] Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation*?, 7.
[18] Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation*?, 8.
[19] I Cor 13:12.
[20] Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation*?, 12.
[21] Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation*?, 13.
[22] Fletcher does not refer to Ruether, but this is akin to how Ruether names "incarnational triumphalism" as an issue that must be dealt with in Christian theologies.

how this specific affirmation introduces a problem for Fletcher's project: Barth insists that Jesus Christ represents this knowledge for all of humanity, not just for Christians or Christianity. This kind of Christian epistemological priority is further compounded by an "additional affirmation," which is "that God's ultimate design in creating humanity is to bring all people to salvation, and, importantly, Jesus is the mediator of that salvation."[23] Fletcher rightly indicates that this affirmation poses a significant barrier between Christianity and other religious traditions; this barrier not only creates an epistemological hierarchy (Christianity's Jesus as unique revelation of what we can know of God) but a soteriologically-inflected ontology and eschatology (Christian 'being' is requisite to a salvific present and future). Barth's negations related to the truth of Christianity in its material form as a religion are helpful, but recentering Jesus as the source of divine knowledge is nonetheless christocentric in such as a way that the potential for truth in other religious traditions is always subordinate to Jesus.

Fletcher's answer to this problem is that the balance is off, that the insistence on Jesus as unique revelation and exclusive salvation is a claim that "knows" or proves too much: it is overly affirmative. Rather than democratize the incarnation or problematize the concept of soteriology, Fletcher's strategy is to redefine the meaning of salvation, such that encounter with religious others is part of the salvific wholeness, becoming, and fulfillment that God, through Jesus Christ, offers humanity.[24] This encounter balances the affirmation of salvation through Christ with the mystery of God's abundance, represented by the mystery of religious otherness and diversity. It is the aspect of unknowability and mystery that prevents Christianity from having an exclusive grasp, or "monopoly," on salvation. Fletcher turns an affirmative teleology of salvation history mediated by

[23] Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation*?, 16.
[24] What I mean here is that Fletcher's strategy is to construct a Christian soteriology of religious pluralism, rather than question soteriology altogether. Another theological re-imagination of salvation is from womanist process theologian Monica A. Coleman in *Making A Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008).

Jesus Christ into a *process of becoming* that is inclusive of mysterious truths beyond the bounds of Christian understandings.[25]

There are four crucial movements of Fletcher's argument, and we must keep in mind that her overarching goal is to construct a theology of religious pluralism that goes beyond the exclusivist, inclusivist, pluralist, and particularist paradigms generated by Christian theologians and philosophers in the latter half of the 20th century.[26] First, coupling Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's hermeneutics of remembrance with Homi K. Bhabha's strategy of "reading against the grain" to hear the "voice of the other," Fletcher complicates the notion that there has ever been a *sui generis* Christian identity.[27] Next, Fletcher shows the limits of the traditional typology and introduces feminist perspectives on the hybridity of identity; this is to show how exclusivist, inclusivist, pluralist, and even particularist claims are founded on assumptions of discrete identities and separable traditions, which fall apart upon a closer look.[28] Third, Fletcher makes the claim that "we are all hybrids"[29] because Christian has always been a "synthesis" which "challenges the borders between Christian and non-Christian forms."[30] Her theological sketch becomes clearer, here, because she asserts that hybridity is a reality which "breaks down the duality between self and other, breaking open the conceptual space to reimagine bonds of solidarity."[31] Last, as a way of reimaging these bonds, Fletcher argues that "*intimate joining* of God's reality and human being" is part of the work of salvation—a salvation grounded in encounter with religious others in the process of human becoming and fulfillment.[32] In our embodied experiences, this intimate joining is realized via the

[25] Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation?*, 19.
[26] Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation?*, 51ff.
[27] Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation?*, 54.
[28] Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation?*, 29; 82ff.
[29] Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation?*, 82.
[30] Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation?*, 98.
[31] Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation?*, 100.
[32] Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation?*, 13. Emphasis mine.

bond created between religious others (who represent the mystery and abundance of God) and Christians (who are in the process of human being and becoming).

Fletcher is not entirely clear whether she would claim that the Christian salvific process is regnant for all times, places, people, and traditions—such that the Christian mode of salvation is what ultimately saves all, whether they know it or not. She critiques Rahner for this move earlier in her text, writing that he pivots to knowability at a moment when the infinitely receding, mysterious horizon would do its greatest work.[33] And Fletcher also uses Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model as a tool for arguing that different traditions have different patterns for finding holistic meaning, though she critique's Lindbeck's model for its shortsightedness in characterizing traditions as silos that preclude life-giving "solidarities."[34] Understanding hybridity as a universal reality for persons and traditions means, for Fletcher, that Christians cannot conceive of their theological paradigms (such as salvation) apart from religious others and religious differences: we are all in relationship.

Ultimately, she leaves the mystery of diverse salvations to the mystery and abundance of God, while at the same time maintaining that "it is through Jesus alone that persons find the life-giving ways of relating to God and others."[35] Jesus' "pattern of relating" is what salvation, for Fletcher, entails; and importantly, relationships require others, so for Fletcher, it is religious others that represent the mystery that overflows from the God that is beyond our understanding. Salvation for Christians, then, necessarily involves difference; relating to different others is parallel to relating

[33] Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation?*, 11. Overall, I would commend Fletcher's soteriological construction, while still wondering whether Fletcher falls on this question, theologically speaking. In terms of practice, Fletcher's emphasis on "creative exchange", "communicative exchange," and religious hybridity distances her work from overt Christian exclusivity or superiority. Where we seem to differ is that in posing the problem of Christian theological construction in the context of religious diversity ("do Christian theological constructions presuppose that Christians alone know God…"), Fletcher remarks that this perspective is related to Christian exclusivity. My question is different, related to whether the theological constructions themselves are marred by inflections, or affects, of Christian superiority, such that this affect can have resonance across exclusive, inclusive, pluralist, and/or particularist stances toward religious others.
[34] Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation?*, 76.
[35] Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation?*, 130.

to an unknowable God.[36] It is through this relating that Christians participate in the process of salvation.

While Fletcher's overarching argument is important on a number of levels, I find her final claims to be potentially problematic. It is precisely this logical move of asserting a universal hybridity coupled with a reimagining of salvation—which positions Christianity as needing to form a more intimate relationship with religious others—that poses a slight danger.[37] To be fair, in reimagining a salvation that includes religious others, Fletcher acknowledges the history of Christian colonialism and the power differentials and Christian privilege that seeks to make all identities and traditions the same. She, in turn, seeks to keep difference alive and well, as the catalyst for experiencing the mystery and abundance of God in our process of salvific development. Grounding her argument for relationship with religious others in the words of Jesus from Mark 12:30-31 (love God, love neighbor), Fletcher writes:

> When we follow this particular directive—to love the neighbor-who-is-other—we might envision that there are even deeper reasons *why we are directed to envelope the religiously other in our salvific relationship*. Perhaps they might draw us ever closer to the incomprehensible mystery that is God.[38]

The result is that Christians *need* religious others in their process of salvation (reimagined as becoming and fulfillment). In my perspective, this leaves the door open for modes of relating in which a tradition that has already been entangled with domination, exclusion, and hegemony discovers yet another way in which Christians/Christianity need the other to become the best version of themselves/itself. The problem I am identifying here is not the "hard power" move of overt domination; it is the covert "soft power" move of intimacy and inclusion that posits *who*

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[36] Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation?*, 131; 133.
[37] I pose this as a "slight" danger because I think Fletcher's insistence on feminist practices of inclusion and power-analysis puts her theological imaginings into a more self-critical mode than perhaps other theologies that do not implicitly or explicitly employ theoretical tools of power analysis and/or internal criticism. She also includes practices in chapter 3 ("communicative exchange" and "creative exchange") that gesture toward the kind of reciprocity that invites reciprocity and, perhaps, a kind of internal criticism or posture of self-criticality in the context of pluralism.
[38] Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation?*, 130. Emphasis mine.

envelops whom in the Christian salvific process. "If difference serves the essential function of opening us further to the mystery of God," Fletcher writes, "then the otherness of the other needs to be safeguarded as a precious gift and *opportunity for growth*."[39] But do others get to be (and remain) others in this affective movement of relational intimacy?

The dynamic of religious others supporting Christian growth may seem laudatory at best and benign at the very least: at least Fletcher argues for religious diversity as part of God's mystery and goodness, and calls for embodied practices of interreligious dialogue in order for Christians to become the best version of themselves. It is commendable, from my standpoint, that Fletcher argues for salvific relationality and eschews Christian separability from religious others. While I applaud the impetus of underscoring the gift and opportunity that religious diversity represents for a Christian tradition that has a sullied history of conversion and eradicating religious difference, I still wonder whether this logic (and consequently, the embodied practices), even in Fletcher's insistence on religious hybridity, is a potential modulation of the logic of the One—where the logic of the Many (religious diversity) reinforces a logic that is still One, even if it is ultimately mysterious (Christian salvation mediated through Jesus, who requires relations with religious others).[40]

Fletcher is not positing that Christians are enfolded into the narratives or stories of other traditions; rather, Christians enfold others in their own process of becoming.[41] I see this as a

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[39] Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation?*, 134. Emphasis mine.

[40] This question of the logic of Fletcher's call for religious hybridity is akin to Kwok Pui-Lan's generous critique of Fletcher's work in *Globalization, Gender, and Peacebuilding: The Future of Interfaith Dialogue* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2012): "For Fletcher, such an understanding of hybrid identity, which challenges dualism and binarism, will help us overcome the impasse of sameness and difference in interfaith dialogue and theologies of religions…" (59). Kwok expresses appreciation for Fletcher's argument but also suggests that Fletcher goes further to "explicate how identities are also mutually constituted and implicated" (61), and in a similar vein, "The suggestion that we are all hybrids might camouflage or make invisible power difference, as in the liberal understanding of multiculturalism and plurality" (62) — this may not be the scenario that Fletcher has in mind, but we must stress that even if we are all hybrids, all the hybrids are not equal" (64).

[41] This is not to say that Fletcher should speak on behalf of other traditions; I am pointing more toward the reality that Christian theologians do not typically suggest that Christianity must shift or transform in the same way as religious others in proximity to Christian traditions. As stated elsewhere in the footnotes, I do think Fletcher includes practices (creative exchange) that gesture toward reciprocity, but in the context of the power relationships between Christian traditions and its others (that Fletcher also acknowledges), more precision or clarity would be helpful, especially how

problem that seems eerily reminiscent of similar moves made by other Christian theologians in a postmodern (and increasingly hybrid, interrelational, even queer) era, where gestures toward hybridity and multiplicity offer new ways in which Christian theologies, *grounded in christocentric assumptions*, can argue for necessary, intimate, and relational access to religious others (and their traditions). It is in this sense that I am trying to identify the ways in which Christian theologies maintain agency and subtle superiority over and against the others that are implicated in the brushstrokes concretely applied from Christian theological imaginings. What is missing is the consent of religious others, or the enthusiastic "yes" to intimacy. How might Muslims respond to being enfolded—theologically—into Christian understandings of salvation? Can Muslims consent to this relationship? What if Muslims say no—what of Christian salvation then? What if religious others do not desire to be part of Christian processes of salvation, if those Christian processes remain identifiably Christian—with Christianized versions of Jesus and Christian visions of the eschaton?

Willie James Jennings: Rectifying Original Relations Through Necessary Intimacy Between Christianity and Israel[42]

Whereas Fletcher is clear from the beginning of *Monopoly on Salvation*? that Christianity's relation with religious others is at the fore of her theological construction, Jennings's narrative is more intricate and labyrinthine in its approach to the topic of religious others. A central focus of *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (2010) is how the centuries of European

religious others might shift or transform Christian theological themes or doctrines (such as soteriology), not just add to or deepen these themes.

[42] Jennings's use of "Israel" is polyvalent. Israel, throughout the text, refers to place (geography), a people, a "hermeneutic horizon," "biblical Israel," and "living Israel, the Israel that is Judaism, the practitioners of its living faith, as well as the communities of memory that claim deep and abiding familial connection to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and their God. I have also had a view of Israel as an ethnic, cultural, or even racial reality" (251). Jennings further clarifies, in the footnotes to this section, that he wants to maintain a theological significance to "the people of God" (Israel) so as to not repeat "the troubled history of ethnicity" that "disrupts a reading of biblical Israel and hinders a theological significance for Judaism" (ft. 8, pg. 340). In Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010.

expansion, "discovery," and subsequent colonialism create a watershed moment for Christianity: where even in a postcolonial or decolonial era, we cannot disentangle constructions of race and racialized hierarchies from modern forms of Christianity and Christian traditions. For Jennings, these constructions have provided the seedbed for the Christian theological imagination, such that whiteness and Christian-ness are understood to signify—together—a deeper reality of Christianity's ascendency over other traditions, catalyzed by the original supersessionist impulse of Christianity over Judaism.

The "distorted relational imagination"[43] and "diseased social imagination"[44] that pervades Christianity and Christian theologies is the logical byproduct of the failure to be in right relationship. The righting of relationships, then, is the reimagined landscape to which Jennings moves throughout the text, meandering through narratives of Christian complicity in horrors and *Christian failure to be what Christianity (truly) is*. Jennings grounds his argument in the belief, or perhaps hope, that there is a deep Christian identity apart from patterns of dominance, and that this identity is rooted in a desire for intimacy and holistic relations that subvert and decenter the racialized hierarchies that construct Christian theological imaginations and affected realities. The problem is that, more often than not, this original identity and desire are lost in the fog of the diseased social and theological Christian imagination. As a way forward, Jennings ultimately argues that there is a common ground beneath the fog, an "original trajectory of intimacy."[45] Jennings connects intimacy to the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, with an eye toward reformulating theologies of intimacy and reconciliation, "to seed a new way of belonging and living together."[46]

[43] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 4.
[44] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 6.
[45] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 9.
[46] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 11.

For the overarching thesis of this dissertation, Jennings's argument is compelling because of his focused attention on the ways in which Christian theological superiority—formed and then sifted through the sieves of soteriological exclusivity, divine immutability, and providential sovereignty[47]—have catalyzed, rationalized, and/or otherwise affected the destruction of peoples and the seizing of land across the globe.[48] His argument is yet another pathway for exploring how or whether colonial and conversion impulses were (and are) *fulfilling Christian theological themes* rather than departing from them; though Jennings, for his part, concludes that such logics of superiority are distortions or departures from Christian traditions, rather than their logical pathway and enduring effect.[49] This slight difference—whether superiority is endemic or not—is where I pivot from Jennings's perspective. In the paragraphs below, I will attempt to reconstruct key pieces of Jennings' argument as they relate to his focus on intimacy and belonging, ultimately leading to healing the relationship between Christianity and Israel.[50]

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[47] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 16-18.

[48] Jennings has compelling arguments when it comes to issues of difference, power, and so on, because he is taking up the historical and material manifestations of Christianity's collusion with the evils of colonialism. In more recent work, Fletcher takes up issues of white supremacy in the United States, and therefore might tell a more compelling story (in that text) with regard to race and subsequent hierarchies that pervade our theological imaginations. For example, Fletcher discusses Bartolomé de Las Casas only in a positive light; whereas Jennings corrects this tendency for 'rose-colored glasses' by highlighting Las Casas' perspective of African slaves, noting that his "theological generosity does not solve the problems of either Western epistemological hegemony…or ecclesiastical imperialism" (101). For the questions posed by this project, it is notable that neither Fletcher nor Jennings question whether Las Casas' failings are directly related to Christian theological concepts and doctrines (in this instance, soteriology). For Fletcher, Las Casas represents a hopeful moment in Christian memory and tradition, an alternative way of relating to religious others; for Jennings, Las Casas is commendable in the way he resists some of the most nefarious notions of otherness regnant in the historical period in which he lives, but Las Casas' failure lies in departing from Christianity's original vision of intimacy rather than following its logical path. Jennings specifically notes not it is not "incoherence in doctrinal logics" that keeps Christians (and Christian theology) from maintaining the importance of intimacy between Christianity and Israel (7).

[49] For careful treatments of Jennings' pathologizing of Christian imaginings, see Sameer Yadav, "Willie Jennings on the Supersessionist Pathology of Race: A Differential Diagnosis," in the *T & T Clark Handbook of Analytic Theology,* eds. James M. Arcadi and James T. Turner, Jr. (London: T & T Clark, 2021), 357-368; and "Religious Racial Formation Theory and Its Metaphysics," in *The Lost Sheep in Philosophy of Religion*, (New York: Routledge, 2020), 365–90.

[50] As with the term "Israel," Jennings uses "Christianity" throughout. He notes the diversity of Christian traditions; but throughout the text, Christianity is used broadly—in my estimation, theologically as a gesture toward both Christian unity and the reality of a widespread distortion in its theological imagination. Jennings helpfully notes that Christianity is a "history of relations" (*The Christian Imagination*, 4).

In the first chapter ("Zurara's tears"), Jennings contends that geographical displacement and aesthetic hierarchies of being mutually reinforced the solidity and naturalness of the other's being-in-the-world; the other being, largely, non-European.[51] In the colonialist drive, 'white' coincided with 'placed', while 'black' and 'displaced' became synonymous. Colonialist dominance suffused with Christian theologies of Providence determined who was most worthy of the land (Christians), while a developing racialized soteriology provided a litmus test for who was closest to (Europeans) and furthest from (Africans) Christian identity. "Through a soteriological vision, church and realm [discerned] all peoples to exist on the horizon of theological identities" such that Christian identity designates power, place, and identity not only in this material reality, but also in the eschatological realities to come.[52] Further, racialization becomes a way to determine the capacity for various peoples—indigenous converts, for example—to "ascend the heights of Christian identity."[53]

Yet how can one determine who is Christian and who is not? In all instances, Jennings argues, the aesthetics of soteriology grew increasingly white (lighter skin) in the effort to secure European dominance in Christian identity—not only who could be Christian, but who could be accepted into Christian leadership roles (and thereby become priests, leaders, ministers, etc.). European (white) capacity to be the best kind of Christian worked hand-in-hand with the rationalizations for stripping the land from indigenous peoples, evacuating a source of their placed identity so that Christianity, in its capacity to be in and transcend all places, could be their new source of identity. And if this identity was increasingly racially marked, then Europeans could be in control of a ready-made system of justifications for why they *should* hold the power that they do.

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[51] At this juncture, Jennings's focus is on a progressively racialized other, rather than religious others, though the latter appears significantly in the concluding chapters of his text.
[52] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 29.
[53] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 32. This is a theme running through the chapters Acosta's Laugh and Colenso's Heart—whether indigenous Peruvians were capable of pedagogical reform in the church, and whether Zulus were capable of true conversion.

Jennings is dealing with multiple moving pieces throughout "Zurara's Tears"; he is not following a strict line of causality, but from my perspective, is tracing how power, bolstered by a Christian theological imagination, catalyzes (and continues to generate) multiple historical and material effects.[54] He asserts that the building blocks ("ontic markers") of racialization and aestheticization[55] of Christian identity during the colonial era were founded upon the "theological distortion" of supersessionism.[56] Supersessionism, as already discussed in chapter 3, refers to the displacement of Jewish traditions ('Israel', in biblical texts) with Christian traditions and identities; the supersessionist "effect" in the colonial era "begins with positioning Christian identity within European (white) identity and fully outside the identities of Jews and Muslims."[57] Essentially, Christian identities are solidified by their differences from religious others; these differences are imagined as cosmological and ritual-based (Acosta's Laugh), as well as racially and aesthetically based (Zurara's Tears, Colenso's Heart). Jennings states clearly:

> In the age of discovery and conquest supersessionist thinking burrowed deeply inside the logic of evangelism and emerged joined to whiteness in a new, more sophisticated, concealed form. Indeed, supersessionist thinking is the womb in which whiteness will mature.[58]

For this project, rehearsing the connections that Jennings makes to support his arguments vis-à-vis race, place, colonialism, and identity is not my primary task. I accept his claims that the Christian theological imagination is implicated (if not largely responsible) for the systematic displacement and eradication of peoples during the colonial and neocolonial eras. What I am most interested in, then, is how Jennings describes the deepest problem and subsequent solution to

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[54] Jennings does not refer to Michel Foucault, but his conception of power networks maps onto network theories of power initiated by Foucault. Jennings's conception of power, arguably, is less top-down and more pervasive, related to biopower and the different webs and networks that sustain hegemony and supremacy. I think his text is best understood and his argument accepted as sound if we think of webs of power and pervasive logics, rather than one event or one figure who powerfully marks, or determines, history. The massive shift in the Christian theological imagination that occurs in the colonial era is not supported by only one historical happening, one sect of Christianity, or one nation-state.
[55] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 33.
[56] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 32.
[57] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 33.
[58] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 36.

rectifying distorted Christian logics and theological imaginings. In the end, Jennings claims that a supersessionist logic paves the way for distorted logics of race, place, and various forms of otherness. Christianity, from the beginning, has had the task of explaining how and whether its Jewish founder was casting a vision beyond Jewish traditions: essentially, Christian origins are deeply rooted in anxieties of belonging and attachment that have manifested, through the course of history and imperial alignments, as differentiation from Judaism by eclipsing God's relationship with Israel altogether. To justify Christian existence, Christianity must supersede Judaism and show how its Jewish founder engendered the impulse to generate a distinct Christian theological imagination.

Because this is a problem of origins and beginnings, Jennings returns to Christian origins to recover the solution. For Jennings, if supersessionism is understood as Christianity's original sin, which is entangled in a materially violent history of oppression, subjugation, and failures at belonging and intimacy; then reimagining "joining" and "intimacy" is the solution that will save, restore, and/or correct Christian theological distortions. What Jennings means by intimacy is crucial to following his theological vision; Jennings is not referring to the "distorted" joining of the "Christian imaginary that [emerged] out of colonialist power."[59] This "deepest and most comprehensive joining"[60] bespeaks a Christian universality blended with a racialized hierarchy that paves the way for land displacement; this kind of joining is part and parcel of the "architecture of white intimacy."[61] Rather, intimacy for Jennings includes "a more grounded vision of a doctrine of creation."[62] A distorted doctrine emphasizes domination and subjugation, in which God's power and sovereignty over creation provides a map for how people should relate to each other and to all creation, with an emphasis on place. Jennings' definition of intimacy is inferred through its

[59] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 208.
[60] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 208.
[61] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 243.
[62] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 248.

manifestation in "right relationships," a "deep joining" that is the "opening of lives" to generative transformation and redemption.[63] The "deep joining" that represents the most significant transformation is that of Christianity and Israel, such that "Christian theology can explain how Israel is important to Christian existence," in such a way that Israel's chosenness no longer needs to be superseded by Christians.[64]

The narrative that Jennings traces to make this argument is a thorny one.[65] Because a reimagined, or truer, doctrine of creation includes both land and people, such that material or metaphorical displacement is not a logical possibility, Jennings tries to reconfigure the space that becomes the land of Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures as a place that remains theirs, related to God's act of choosing Israel, such that that their distinctive relation to God can never be truly severed or evacuated of meaning. This is a difficult move to make because it means that Jennings invokes a narrative that "brings us to a God who demands that Israel invade, occupy, and slay the inhabitants of the promised land."[66]

Jennings responds to the theme of conquest and settler colonialism on the part of Israel in the Hebrew Bible by asserting that the theme of the narrative is Israel's chosenness by God, coupled with their obedient response to God's commands regarding conquest of that particular place. In this way, God chooses a particular people to be related to a particular land; it is God's commands, God's action which join people and place. Israel's conquest thus is "an unrepeatable act" since the conquest manifests Israel's unique relationship to God.[67] In other words, for Jennings, this is the only time in history where conquest of this kind is acceptable. Maintaining Israel's right to literary,

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[63] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 248.
[64] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 251.
[65] It is thorny in light of a Christian affective economy of power and relation, wherein superiority manifests as a significant affect, influencing Christian logics and feelings of primacy, ascendancy, or ultimacy.
[66] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 256-257. This is a difficult move because in this instance, Jennings must present Israel's occupation of the Promised Land (as a place) in an exclusively positive light. Yet it is precisely this kind of imperial and settler colonialist narrative that he argues, centuries later, distorts the Christian theological imagination.
[67] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 257.

metaphorical, and literal space requires Jennings to argue that repetition of this event is impossible. Or, if it takes place, then it is a distortion or deviation from the original, truly unrepeatable event and relationship between God and Israel. In a footnote, Jennings allows that the narrative of Israel's chosenness and conquest has been used to catalyze nefarious land theft and (settler) colonial justifications for displacing indigenous peoples. Jennings states, however, that

> The way toward resisting the redeployment of this ideological justification is to establish a specific theological limitation. This was *only* for Israel, and any further claim to it, even by Israel, was collapsed onto Jesus himself. *That is, Jesus presents a way forward from violence for Israel and the entire world.*[68]

Jennings' interpretation in this footnote fits into his overall argument to position Israel as grounded in the space in a way that cannot be appropriated by colonial powers. But in my interpretation of his conclusion, he rests his case on a rather arbitrary "theological limitation" to bypass exploring the possibility that Israel's own colonial project—related to conquering the land and eradicating the religions present before their own settlements, justified via God's command—might find its modern traces in Christian logics of comparison, absorption, and superiority. And that this narrative could, essentially, be part and parcel of the distortion of the Christian theological imagination that he is trying to pinpoint. In other words, even if we allow this "theological limitation," it seems a quite precarious task to disaggregate the pattern of Israel's conquest from all other patterns of conquest that follow, or which trace their lineage to this moment.

Drawing from the words of Jesus recorded in the Gospels, there is also a sense of chosenness in Christian theologies—related to Israel's chosenness—that is imagined to break boundaries, religiously, racially, geographically.[69] Throughout *The Christian Imagination*, Jennings calls Christianity to account for any sense of Christian chosenness that is tied to colonial impulses; thus it

[68] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 345, fn. 27. Emphasis mine.
[69] John 15:16. It could be argued that this speech is from a Jewish person (Jesus) to a group of Jewish persons (disciples), in order to flow with Jennings' argument that Israel—not Christianity—is unrepeatably chosen by God. So Christianity's sense of chosenness, if drawn from this text, is presumptive.

seems contradictory that this specific instance, which closely ties chosenness and conquest together, is heralded as an unrepeatably good Divine command with material, colonial effects. It may be no coincidence, then, that Jennings moves to draw parallels between one theological limitation and another: Israel's unrepeatable act (of conquest) is understood in connection to Jesus' own unrepeatable Incarnation (of God joining to humanity) to argue for an intimacy and belonging between Christianity and Israel that would affectively heal the distorted Christian theological imagination.

Jennings stresses that Jesus, as a central figure in Christian traditions, *is* Jewish and, as such, provides Christianity's direct connection to Jewish traditions. In order to avoid the original sin of supersessionism in Christian theological interpretations, we (Christians) must remember who we are (Gentiles) in relationship to God, to Israel, and ultimately to Jesus.[70] Therefore, Jesus and subsequent interpretations of Jesus' identity and mission cannot be disentangled from Jewish traditions or identity. I agree with Jennings on his critique of supersessionist impulses within Christian theological imaginings; yet I differ from Jennings is in where he goes next, which I understand to be a Christian hermeneutical move that seems, unintentionally, to repeat the act of Christian paradigms encompassing Jewish ones. Jennings rereads Jesus' advent and Incarnation—which is perhaps the most significant, controversial, and exclusive claim of Christianity—as "an election in the heart of Israel's space."[71] This election is a "rupture" that breaks open "[Israel's] story and reveals a *deeper layer* for how Israel should understand birth, family, and lineage."[72] This deeper layer includes a "new form of communion with the possibility of a new kind of cultural intimacy between peoples."[73] This cultural intimacy brings a new kinship relationship, new ways of being

[70] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 259.
[71] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 259.
[72] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 260. Emphasis mine.
[73] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 265.

together, and new visions of connectedness that abscond the distorted visions of connection solidified during colonial conquests.[74] Instead of connection through scaled racial hierarchies, connection is engendered through the Jewish person of Jesus Christ, who becomes the originator of Christian traditions.

In making this hermeneutical move, Jennings is trying to address the scandal of Christians disassociating themselves from the very tradition that provides the ground for their own emergence as a set of living traditions: Jesus was Jewish and represents a key moment in God's relationship with and election of Israel. To forget this is to distort Christian origins; to forget this leads to distortions in Christian theologies. As a consequence of this forgetting, the strong anti-Semitic strains in Christianity have damaged the Christian theological imagination, and this damage has had far-reaching theological, affective, and material effects. Jennings does acknowledge the dangers of the move he is trying to make, in which "this reading of the organic connection of Jesus and Israel could be construed as a collapse of Israel into Jesus and a loss of the distinct reality of Jewish life inside a Christian theological vision."[75] In order to avoid this danger, Jennings asserts that Christians should interpret the Gospels with the understanding that Christians are Gentile-outsiders in the text, and implores Christians to read Jesus' sayings and stories primarily as invocations to Israel, not to those in the lineage of Christian traditions. As described by Jennings, Gentile positionality in the text is indicated best by the Canaanite woman whom Jesus referred to as a "dog": she does not respond to Jesus' harsh words about her positionality as a Gentile, but responds to Jesus with Jewish "words of worship." Her actions indicate "the way of Gentile inclusion" by not subverting and replacing Israel, but by understanding the place of Gentiles, and thus Christians, in the Gospel narratives.[76]

[74] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 265.
[75] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 260.
[76] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 262.

This is an intricate theological move, and I laud Jennings's efforts to critique and abandon Christian supersessionist impulses, as well as for challenging Christian hermeneutical assumptions for New Testament passages. From my theological perspective, however, the problem is not rereading the Gospels such that Jesus' Jewish traditions and identity are more fully enfleshed and understood to be crucial for Christian theological interpretations. The problem, rather, is that this theological move is still *a very Christian interpretation* that is dangerous in its attempt to understand itself as getting to the heart of the matter, to Incarnate Jesus into the heart of Israel's chosenness. The consequence is a Christian logic and affective move that imagines Jesus' narrative to be relevant to Jewish peoples and traditions such that his Incarnation (or identity) "announces a reality of newness" that is not only universally applicable,[77] but wherein Jesus' "despised flesh is the salvation of the world and *the true but hidden desire of all nations*."[78] This is the point at which the theological story that Jennings tells unnecessarily, perhaps, becomes a theological story that necessarily implicates all—yet another story in which Christian theological imaginings include all, whether this "all" desires to be included or not. With this "hidden desire" in mind, Jennings aims to connect the body of a Jewish Jesus with modern black bodies in such a way that reveals the hypocrisy of the white European body that Gentiles (Christians) forced Jesus to assume in the colonial era and into the present. Thus, reimagining Jesus' body materially translates theologically: the body of Jesus and the body of the world are reimagined, with Jesus' Incarnation and Resurrection redrawing the boundaries of intimacy and kinship in a paradigm-shifting, world-rupturing fashion.

Jennings reads Jesus' story into Israel in a way that assumes that Jesus' story is one that has enduring hermeneutical power and theological significance for Jewish people and traditions. If Jennings were trying to make a point for Christians within Christian theology, then this kind of claim

[77] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 259.
[78] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 277. Emphasis mine.

would still be suspect from my perspective, but the implications would not be as far-reaching nor assumed to be universally revelatory and transformative. However, Jennings does draw "all nations" into the narrative of Jesus insofar as Jesus reconfigures ways of belonging and intimacy formed *in Jesus' body* through "the removal of a fundamental boundary" that separates Jews and Gentiles. While maintaining the possibility for a kind of joined-separateness, Jennings still argues that what is superseded is not Israel by Christianity, but "one form of Torah drawn inside another, one form of divine word drawn inside another form—that is, the word made flesh."[79] Essentially, Jesus as Jewish Messiah reinterprets the Torah's notion of belonging, rather than circumventing the Torah by claiming a new form of chosenness beyond the Law: Jesus draws all into his body, for it is his body that operates as a "new center."[80]

Because Jesus is a Jewish person who represents Israel—not the Christian church or Christian people—then imagining his body as the universal space wherein reconciliation, belonging, and God's relation to humanity occurs does not, in Jennings' argument, have the same flavor of Christian superiority as displacement or eradication narratives. It is true that the "mutual enfolding" that Jennings envisions means that Christianity and Christians are transformed by a Jewish people and traditions that have not been superseded, at least in the same way that Christian supersessionist impulses have typically appeared, theologically, throughout the history of Christian theologies. Jennings's point, rather, is a reimagined relationship between Christianity and Israel grounded in a mutual Jewish heritage. Jennings ostensibly places Jewish and Christian identities and traditions on common ground in their relationship to both "the one true God" and to each other, which means that mutual enfolding is imagined reciprocally.[81] Yet the fact remains: this mutual enfolding,

[79] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 272.
[80] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 272.
[81] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 274.

boundary-transgression, and intimacy happen within the newly imagined space of *Jesus' body*, "the space that joins and the space that draws."[82]

My question for Jennings is whether this mutual transformation is universally applicable from the Christian vantage point—as a narrative within the Christian theological imagination that has resonance for Christian ways of seeing the world—or whether his attempt at "reversal" of the "telos" of Christian colonial logics is just another way of describing a Christian universal salvation history in a different way, through the material and metaphysically Incarnate body of Jesus.[83] More precisely, is this still a Christian story with a Christian ending, with "Christian" indicating a kind of centering of truth on the interpretation of Jesus as the Christ? Does Jennings's reversal of the telos of colonialism upend Christian conceptions of both telos and eschaton, as well? Would drawing closer to Jewish traditions mean that Christian theological imaginations could be transformed in such a way that Jesus and Jesus-centered time and salvation are both decentered? If the answer to these questions is no, then the possibility for transformation through a deeper enfolding and intimacy is not as mutual as Jennings seems to be suggesting. And if the possibility of mutuality is suspect, then I would suggest this is the juncture at which themes of intimacy and desire for and with religious others, in a Christian affective economy of power and relation, could be related to longstanding, circulating logics and affects of Christian theological superiority, however slight or unintentional it may be.

Jennings effort to keep the boundaries between Jewish and Christian identities intact is dubitable precisely because this joining, intimacy, and new forms of kinship and belonging happen within a Jesus-centric space. If Jesus were a figure that mattered in Jewish traditions such that Jewish people accepted that his claim as Messiah had been a revelation from God, then this mutual

[82] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 274.
[83] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 288.

enfolding might have more promise as a realizable, mutual theological vision engendering mutually intimate transformation.[84] Yet how can this intimacy be mutual if it happens in Christian-inflected space? Reminding Christians that Jesus was Jewish simply does not clear the path enough. In one sense, Jennings' claim about Jesus could be conceived as both ahistorical and atheological, from the perspective of Jewish traditions wherein Jesus is not the Messiah.[85] What part of Christianity is *truly* enfolded in mutual intimacy with Jewish traditions if the very figure that enables boundary-defying joining is, in fact, the figure who is understood to be the one upon whom Christian imaginings and logics of soteriology are grounded? My hesitation is that Jennings's narrative describing new forms of intimacy is just theological déjà vu: in the end, Christianity's focus on Jesus is still the pivoting point for all peoples, all religions, and all nations, such that Jesus continues to mediate God's relationship to humanity in a way that is theologically relevant and universally applicable. Jennings's vision seems like a slightly different retelling of a story to which Christians already know the ending.

Jennings's vision is enacted through a return to origins: the original sin of Christianity and its subsequent distortions are remedied through a return to the "original relationship" between Jews and Gentiles.[86] This original relationship demonstrates how Israel's boundaries were redrawn through Jesus, to invite all to join in Israel's chosenness and belonging with God and with one another.[87] Jennings articulates that the moves of the Spirit toward intimacy were distorted by Christianity's unwillingness to view itself as part of Israel's narrative. This unwillingness produced,

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[84] See Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 250. She also writes later in that chapter: "Christians must be able to accept the thesis that it is not necessary for Jews to have the story about Jesus in order to have a foundation for faith and a hope for salvation" (256).

[85] *Ahistorical* in the sense that there was a concept of a Jewish Messiah that justified Jesus' claims of reconfiguring law and kinship. New Testament scholar A.J. Levine, for instance, questions whether there was a universal Messiah anticipated by Jewish traditions. Levine claims that it is Christian theologians throughout history who have misread texts to make the Messiah figure more than it actually is within Jewish traditions (see Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: the Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006). *Atheological* in the way that it describes a relationship to Israel's God in terms that I am not certain would be recognized by Jewish traditions—that is, through a God-man named Jesus.

[86] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 275.

[87] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 269.

over time, a "segregationist mentality"[88] that cannot be undone without the kind of intimacy that would confront and heal our original sin. Again, it is Jesus who mediates this intimacy and healing, as the point of contact between Jews and Gentiles (Christians).

Jennings's stated hope is to tell a "different story of race" that calls for redrawing intimacy in such a way that Christians are not forever mired in the logics of racialized hierarchies molded and cast in the centuries-long project of Christianity's colonizing of bodies and spaces.[89] "The Christian social imagination is diseased and disfigured"[90] and requires healing or reimagining to rectify the deleterious effects of distorted Christian theological imaginings.[91] Yet making a return to original relationships a requisite for moving forward into a more hopeful (and equitable, or intimate) future means that there must be some level of agreement between traditions on what these origins are: what those original relationships entailed and how they should generate new meaning. Would Jews or Jewish traditions consent to or recognize the original relationship in the way that Jennings describes it?[92] Would these traditions consent to theologies, feelings, logics, or embodied practices that pivot on Jesus' body as the centerpiece for holistic relationships in the present so that we can imagine futures beyond the eternal recurrence of racial and spatial hierarchies? Without a substantial Jewish voice present in the text—beyond Jesus, whose voice even in the Gospels is mediated by others—Jennings's argument seems eerily parallel to Fletcher's, in the way that a hopeful future entails a necessity that other traditions to be in relationship with Christianity, for the healing or betterment of Christians and Christian traditions. On the surface, I see this as a positive step in

[88] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 224.
[89] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 289.
[90] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, 293.
[91] I do not take issue with the claim that the Christian social imagination is distorted.
[92] I am not trying to repeat the trend, in Christian theologies, of the imagined or "hermeneutic" Jew, as already referenced in relation to research compiled by David Nirenberg and Rosemary Radford Ruether. These are important questions to ask, and is less about defining an answer for religious others (for individuals and for traditions/collectives) than it is about outlining important questions Christian theologians should ask ourselves about what we are expecting of others, without their consent.

Christian theologies; we are nowhere near where we need to be in taking seriously the distorted ways, to use Jennings's terminology, that Christianity has justified its own existence by erasing, subsuming, or destroying the capacity for other traditions be sources of revelation and truth(s). In view of this reality, the significance of Fletcher's and Jennings' arguments for Christianity to positively relate to other traditions cannot and should not be understated.

Yet at the same time, I am concerned with any claims that seem like a Christian call for a mutuality that is essentially nonmutual, which is likely the case if Jesus, the very figure of difference between traditions, is the agent of enfolding or the necessary conduit for connection. Other traditions might simply understand this figure differently, and thus need or desire different kinds of relationships: Jesus is not necessarily the "hidden desire" of all nations, and if he is posited as such by Christian theologians, then the consequences of that claim must be further explored in its affective and effective dimensions, in view of religious others. Until Christian theologians imagine how it could be just as valid for Jesus to be ultimately subsumed by Krishna in a universal narrative of God relating to humans, then Christian arguments that use intimacy (and perhaps gestures toward multiplicity or hybridity) to make mutuality possible seem to be, in the end, part of an (unintentional) logic of opening boundaries so that Christianity can claim space and ultimate primacy.

John B. Cobb, Jr.: The Lure of Christ and Creative Transformation in a Pluralistic Age

The Christological perspective of John B. Cobb Jr. is heavily influenced by the philosophical thought of Alfred North Whitehead and his process metaphysics, enfleshed in his philosophy of organism.[93] Cobb is one of the early theological interpreters of Whitehead's thought, catalyzing the

[93] See chapter 2 for a brief treatment of Whitehead's metaphysics.

discourse that has become known as process theology.[94] As a brief review, process thought, as a philosophical and theological movement emerging in 20th century American contexts, takes cues from modern quantum mechanics and disavows substantialist, and to some extent positivist, conceptions of the universe. In Whitehead's view, correlation does not imply causation: though ordered actuality presupposes the actual,[95] the actuality of the world does not mean that "like produces like," such as what is well-known from Aristotelian metaphysics. Quantum mechanics has revealed a world of events and movement rather than substance and stasis; the ways in which a body changes over a lifetime, always expelling and absorbing molecules, or the ways in which particles dance between entities were assumed to be concrete and separable, may tell us something significant about the nature of the material world in which humans participate. Specifically, what this may reveal is that there is no such thing as a substance that exists unto itself, as substance-based metaphysics presumes and requires.[96]

Where Whitehead differs from substance-based theorists is in construing the world as a series of related events in which decisions, mental and emotive, create the reality that we experience as concrete. These decisions are not relegated to the rational mind of humans, as traditionally assumed; a tree or a table, in the same way as a human,[97] is constantly making decisions toward their process of being and becoming. How this process is related to God's interaction with the world is beyond the scope of this essay; suffice to say that in this process of decision, the lure or attraction

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[94] Gary Dorrien, "The Lure and Necessity of Process Theology," In *CrossCurrents* 58:2 (Summer 2008): 316; 322. Though Alfred North Whitehead participated in academic discourse on the history of religions and the scope of comparative theologies, his central focus remained mathematics and speculative philosophy, which meant that the task of translating his philosophical paradigms into explicitly theological discourse was left to others—most prominently, John B. Cobb, Jr.
[95] Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making: Lowell lectures 1926*, Second Printing (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1957): 104; 152.
[96] Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, 106-107.
[97] But in a less complex fashion, according to some interpreters of Whitehead's thought. This is not about placing humans on a higher level than other entities, though, as is usually the case when "sentience" appears in a discussion.

toward goods such as peace, gentleness, and compassion are key aspects of the aesthetic process of valuation that characterizes the universe as a whole and that bursts beyond rational cognition.[98]

The "lure" articulated by process theology is an inherent draw toward that which is good, an aesthetic unity that represents the highest valuation of similarity and difference in the continual process of interrelatedness and world-creation. Essentially, the "lure" characterizes the nature of relationships, or the ordered operation of the world's possibilities that humans and all creatures have the ability to accept or reject in their process of becoming.[99] Cobb infuses this "lure" into his Christology, aligning the work of Christ with the nature of this world and the harmonic possibilities that are set before sentient beings. Though other theologians have refracted Christology through process thought in more recent decades, John B. Cobb Jr.'s *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (1975) endures as significant text; it is because of this text's significance in process Christology, as well as its fidelity to Whitehead's concept of "the lure," that we now turn to a close reading, with an eye toward how Cobb's theological sketch relates to, or includes, religious others.

Cobb begins by distinguishing the "Jesusology" of his own early writings from the Christology of *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*.[100] His earlier thought focuses on the historical figure of Jesus, viewing Jesus' incarnate presence as a kaleidoscope through which we can understand and interpret the work and nature of God. Cobb's move to Christology, in turn, is part of his effort to comprehend Christ in cosmic dimensions, as a "proposition" toward hope[101] and as the "process

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[98] This aesthetic process of valuation is related to the consistency of the primordial nature of God, which is "the unlimited conceptual realization of the absolute wealth of potentiality" that is continually offered to the world through God's consequent nature. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, Corrected Edition, Original publication 1929, ed. by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne, (New York: The Free Press, 1978): 343; 350.

[99] Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, 98-99; 105; 156.

[100] John B. Cobb, Jr., *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press), 13.

[101] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 14. Cobb connects propositions to hope on p.182. Also, it is important to note that "proposition" is a Whiteheadian term that brings potentiality into metaphysical discourse. As Cobb writes in his glossary for *Process and Reality*, "a proposition is defined very much as an eternal object is. The difference is that an eternal object is a pure potential and a proposition is an impure potential. An eternal object is disconnected from actuality; a proposition is tied to it. Propositions come into being along with actualities." Quotation from John B. Cobb, Jr., *Whitehead Word Book: A Glossary with Alphabetical Index to Technical Terms in 'Process and Reality',* (Anoka, Minnesota: Process Century Press, 2015): 46.

itself' through which history moves from absolute truth to a pluralistic synthesis.[102] Though the narrative of the life of Jesus will be important to Cobb's Christology, he relies on cosmology and metaphysics to describe both the nature of Christ and the nature of his "lure" toward goodness and a fulfilled structure of existence.

For centuries "Christ as been the central image of saving power in the present as well as in both the past and the future," Cobb writes.[103] The image of Christ has been "obscured" in contemporary life by the expulsion of Christ out of the domain of the profane (separation of church and political life, for example) and by the advent of pluralism as the operative global norm.[104] Cobb suggests that Christians have typically dealt with pluralism either exclusively (Christ is the only way) or inclusively (Jesus Christ is the culmination of all religions); as such, in theological trends through the centuries, "pluralism was not recognized at a level significant for Christology."[105] We could agree with Cobb, here, that Christian theologians—in the history of Christian traditions and theologies—might *acknowledge* the reality of other faith traditions without that reality necessarily shifting their Christologies in *recognition* of the internal validity of those traditions. Cobb, in contrast, argues that an exclusive theological stance is no longer warranted. The depth and breadth of the truth-claims of other traditions, like Zen or Mahayana Buddhism, are now "impossible to dismiss" in a "negative or condescending fashion."[106] What Cobb emphasizes, instead, is that his contemporary context calls for a different pluralistic ethic, a Christian theological response to other faith traditions that is qualitatively different than what has come before. Christology can no longer claim to operate a vacuum: Christology must be written and interpreted with the reality of pluralism in the foreground.

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[102] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 15. This Christological perspective (oriented cosmically) is more akin to Fletcher, Schleiermacher, Athanasius, and to some extent Las Casas, than to Jennings.
[103] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 17.
[104] Pluralism, or the reality of multiple diachronic faith traditions, is not a new reality; as mentioned above, even Las Casas was deeply aware in his own time that Christianity was not the only religion in the world.
[105] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 18.
[106] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 18.

The problem that pluralism poses to Christology is significant. As referenced in the first chapter, the truth revealed through Christ has been traditionally, but not exclusively, interpreted as soteriologically and eschatologically momentous, an exclusive truth that eclipses the truth or revelations of other religious traditions.[107] Cobb remains firm, though, that we have reached a historical period in which the acceptance of multiple truths, or "multiple centers of meaning," is part of the fabric of the world-process.[108] Therefore, in Cobb's Christology, Christ is reimagined as the world-process of "creative transformation"[109] which

> provides a unity within which the many centers of meaning and existence can be appreciated and encouraged and through which openness to the other great Ways of mankind [sic] can lead to a deepening of Christian existence.[110]

Cobb aligns his Christological task with the position of Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, who argues that interpretations of Christ need to shift according to their time period and context.[111] Cobb does not propose a closed Christology, but in the tradition of process metaphysics which eschews claims of finality, he offers a provisional Christology that speaks to the ebbs and flows of modern conceptions of meaning and existence. Cobb seeks an image wherein Christ is portrayed as "the way

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[107] For a comprehensive introduction to this issue across Theology of Religions, see Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions*, (London: SCM Press, 2010), 1-108.

[108] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 20. Cobb is referring here to the work of religion scholar and theologian David L. Miller (*The New Polytheism*, 1974). Miller proposed polytheism as the operative paradigm for postmodern systems of meaning.

[109] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 44. Cobb's conception of creative transformation is heavily influenced by art historian André Malraux. Cobb expands this historical argument beyond art to all of human history and specifically to theology; akin to Hegel's *Geist* that becomes in and through history, Cobb identifies creative transformation as the Christ-principle at work in *any* movement from exclusion to pluralism. Yet what creative transformation is, how it is integrally related to Christ, and why it is (or should be) attractive for human structures of existence requires further exploration. Cobb suggests that Christ as creative transformation "names an immanent process of relativizing every given object or claim." Briefly, Malraux's argument is that as Jesus receded from being the exclusive visual image and focal point of Western art, Christ became the inner principle of the multiplicity and pluralism of artistic images; historically, Malraux contends, artistic method traversed from cosmic omnipotence to incarnational, human images of Jesus, and finally toward the effacement of Jesus-images in favor of the self-recognition of the artist as the center from which creative power emanates. Thus the power of the artist becomes the power of creative transformation in a diffusion of pluralistic images and novel methods, where "eventually this *creative transformation itself* was recognized as the specific value of art" (54). Emphasis mine.

[110] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 21.

[111] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 21.

that excludes no Ways" and who "answers the changing needs of human history without ceasing to be the one and the same Christ."[112] Even though "'Christ' has been the symbol of exclusive superiority," Cobb redefines the nature of Christ as "the principle of critical overcoming of any such exclusiveness."[113] In other words, Cobb names Christ as the principle by which we are lured (or converted) from exclusivity to pluralism.

Cobb ties this argument to any liberation movements that use Christology in their arguments for the transformation of unjust social structures, because "[identifying] Christ with these movements is to see Christ as the creative transformation of thought and imagination even more than of economic and political structures."[114] Essentially, Christ is present in movements for liberation, not as a sacralization of a particular method or historical moment, but as the undergirding principle through which liberation and transformation of society can be individually and collectively envisaged and accomplished.[115]

Creative transformation is integrally related to Christ through the incarnation of the Logos. The Logos, for Cobb, is structurally the same as the primordial nature of God, serving as the principle for aesthetic value and subsequent order of the world. Cobb takes a step beyond Whitehead's notion of the primordial nature, however, and connects the principle of the Logos with the "power of creative transformation" that is *incarnate* in the world.[116] Because the incarnation is regarded as an event and not a substance-based indwelling of the Logos in the human person of Jesus, it would be a mistake to identify Jesus as the *exclusive* incarnation of the Logos, as the only

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[112] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 22.
[113] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 22.
[114] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 57.
[115] Creative transformation is not conscribed to being change for the sake of change, as womanist and process theologian Monica A. Coleman observes. Creative transformation is rather the "change that upsets the status quo and moves toward greater complexity." In Monica A. Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008): 91.
[116] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 76.

purveyor of creative transformation.[117] Jesus is conceived instead as the fullest manifestation of creative transformation—and therefore, of the Logos—because "the distinctive structure of Jesus' existence was characterized by personal identity with the immanent Logos."[118] Incarnation and creative transformation is ubiquitous, but in the person of Jesus we witness an incarnational overflow.[119]

Though incarnation of the Logos transcends its concrete manifestation in the human Jesus, Christians can interpret the nature of Christ's unique incarnation as related to the fullest integration of the Logos made actual (or incarnate) and effectual (creativity) in a human being. The lure toward Christ is therefore the call to liberation, to creatively transforming the unjust structures of existence. On an individual level, this lure is also toward the "field of force" created through "the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, involving his total being."[120] This field exists in "time and space," so "to enter the field is to have the efficacy of the salvation become causally determinative of increasing aspects of one's total life."[121] We could say, here, that Cobb's rendering of salvation is universally available but particularly effectual; this means that salvation through Christ could be understood as determinative for the Christian who steps into this field of force, while a Buddhist may concurrently find it more "salvific" to enter a different field of force.

Just as the lure of the primordial nature of God is toward goodness—which for Whitehead is the highest form of aesthetic valuation—the lure of the Logos is the "lure to the fullest possible human realization in each moment," witnessed to by Jesus Christ who was himself "in unity with the

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[117] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 73-76. This is how Cobb might sidestep Ruether's diagnosis of "incarnational triumphalism."
[118] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 142.
[119] This seems resonant with aspects of Schleiermacher's Christology, in the sense that Jesus Christ represents the fullest version of humanity in history—in relationship with the divine.
[120] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 117.
[121] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 117. Cobb borrows the term "field of force" from German theologian Walter Grundmann. More recently, Sharon Betcher (*Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*) used the term force field to describe the time-space that Christians enter in their relationship with God (in Betcher's case, the Spirit).

lure" as the fullest incarnation (thus far) of the Logos.[122] The lure is toward the goodness of the kingdom of heaven that is already present; this conception of the kingdom of heaven exemplifies the "lures to the expansion of horizons of concern toward truth and the future of [and with] others."[123] Cobb's Christological "lure" emerges in world of creativity and multiplicity, and it is the task of *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* to imagine what the way, or the lure, of Jesus (in particular) looks like when constituted in a world of religious diversity and difference. In contrast to exclusive theological imaginings, Cobb's "lure" does not result in an only way that excludes all other ways or defines itself over and against religious others; rather, the lure of Jesus Christ in a context of pluralism leads to harmony, peace, and mutual transformation in Christianity's relation with other traditions. Cobb maintains this focus on plurality while at the same time building an argument for the non-totalizing meaning and particularity of Jesus Christ for the world as a whole.

Because Cobb begins his Christology with acknowledging the truth of multiple perspectives and traditions, weighing its potential entanglements within a Christian affective economy of power and relation is, perhaps, more complicated. Cobb's Christology directly challenges the kind of Christian exclusivity, primacy, or ultimate superiority that Christian theologians, such as Athanasius or Bartolomé de las Casas presuppose. One of the central problems that Cobb faces, then, is how Christ (and Christianity, or Christian traditions) can be alluring without being exclusive and relevant in a way that does not relativize all truth or that does not create a new kind of hegemony or supremacy. As recognized by various scholars in interreligious studies and theology of religions,

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[122] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 171.

[123] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 87. In agreement from Whitehead, the potential for the kingdom of heaven is made possible and actual through the consequent nature of God, which absorbs all actualities (good and evil), and offers goodness back to the world. The lure is toward the goodness, the highest aesthetic value, for all potential futures. What should be further stated explicitly is that Whitehead's conception of kingdom of heaven, assimilated and reinterpreted by Cobb, is a this-worldly reality. The metaphysical posture of process theology and Cobb's Christology toward eternity (i.e., an eternal kingdom of heaven) is one of unknowability. Since we cannot conceive how or whether our individual subjectivities will be maintained eternally (or whether there is an afterlife at all), the lure to the kingdom for Cobb is a lure toward creative transformation and liberation in the present reality.

presuppositions of plurality do not necessarily guard against unequal power relations between and among traditions. An ambivalence of Cobb's theology, then, is evident in the way that he presumes that pluralism and diversity are inherently resistant to totalitarian political and theological logics.

Two ways that this presupposition emerges is in his insistence of the universality of creative transformation and in his call to "conversion to [the] interior appropriation" of other traditions.[124] With regard to creative transformation, it is unclear whether naming the universal process of creative transformation as Christ is just another way of drawing other traditions under the Christian umbrella and stating that the subversive liberative force that lures us to goodness, throughout history and in particular contexts, should be understood as Christ.[125] If "Christ transforms the world by persuading it toward relevant novelty" and if "Christ is himself the hope of the world," then this seems to imply that the inclusivity and plurality that Cobb argues for throughout may be exclusive in the end, or at least that creative transformation discovers its superior culmination in Christian language and paradigms. Christ's role as the fullest incarnation of the Logos, which is the process of creative transformation toward liberation, could be interpreted as all-encompassing, surpassing the truth of other traditions.[126] Cobb's statement that "whenever hope is present in history, Christ is present, whether recognized or not" implies that the problem is universal recognition of Christ rather than the universal implication of Christ's supremacy.[127] Weaving a universal process of transformation into Christology, therefore, could be ambivalent in its orientation toward other traditions. This point is aptly argued by womanist and process theologian Monica Coleman, who asserts that

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[124] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 204.
[125] This Christological strategy has a distinct history, from Schleiermacher to Rahner, and many theologians in between. Cobb traces some of this history in his second chapter. Some current iterations of this theological emphasis is the "transreligious future" thesis of Roland Faber, whose process-inflected Christian-Bahá'í theological arguments can be found in *The Ocean of God* and in the concluding chapter of *The Becoming of God*; and in more popular theological conversations, the work of Richard Rohr and Matthew Fox.
[126] Cobb's Christological sketch and emphasis is similar, I would argue, to Schleiermacher's argument that Christ is the fullest culmination of humanity. See chapter 4.
[127] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 186.

> This [Christological] understanding can further alienate Christians from non-Christians. Because the word 'Christ' has assumed a specific connection to Jesus and Christian exclusivism, the result of Cobb's assertions is that Christians can identify Christian concepts in non-Christian contexts.[128]

Though Cobb names Christ as "the principle for the overcoming of any such exclusiveness,"[129] Coleman rightly points out that this is a complicated claim to make in light of Christianity's impulses toward theological superiority throughout its varied and thorny history.

Another questionable aspect of Cobb's Christology, with a focus on Christian relations with religious others, is the call to "conversion to [the] interior appropriation" of other traditions.[130] On the surface, this seems that it could be a worthwhile endeavor that is consistent with Cobb's Christological sketch of creative transformation, whereby discord between religious traditions is resisted by supporting mutual reciprocity, transformation, and fulfillment within and through encountering diversity. The mutual reciprocity of religious traditions then multiplies the abundance of potential alternatives to the overarching system. Cobb discusses this appropriation near the conclusion of *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, stating that the "interiorization of pluralism" is connected to the "move toward a new spiritual unity."[131] Using the mutual encounter between Buddhism and Christianity as an example, Cobb suggests that a syncretic urge to synthesize the perspectives of these traditions is tied to the "an image of hope in a time of fragmentation."[132] This hope is oriented toward a "future unity" to which all are being lured.[133] Though the particularity and importance of each tradition is acknowledged and accepted, the concept of interior appropriation nonetheless contravenes the issue of whether any ideal "unity" could be just another manifestation of the supremacy and superiority of the image of Christ, since Christ is the image of hope is the Logos who

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[128] Coleman, *Making A Way Out of No Way*, 91.
[129] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 54.
[130] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 204.
[131] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 203.
[132] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 220.
[133] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 220. In Cobb's Christology, Christ is bound up with the concept of hope.

lures all the world toward creativity and goodness. In this way, Cobb's Christological emphases of creative transformation and inner appropriation leaves space for Christian desires toward religious others (and traditions) to be affectually entangled with inflections of theological superiority.[134] Or, in a more process-oriented way of stating this problem: in any lure toward the goodness of unity-in-difference, moderated by the accretion of aesthetic value and intensity, the potential for the unsavory aspects of this unity and entanglement with others (represented by the logic of the One, or of a unity achieved through Christian triumphalism—either now, in the eschaton) is always present.

Conclusion

In discussing the important constructive theological contributions of Jeannine Hill-Fletcher, Willie James Jennings, and John B. Cobb, Jr., I do not want to leave the affective impression that Christian theologians should not include religious others in the composition of their theologies or in the purview of their theological visions. A theo-ethical value undergirding this dissertation is that we must, as Christian theologians, take responsibility—and account for the history of—our relations with religious others. This means addressing otherness and pluralism as central, not peripheral, to Christian theological construction. But I am also positing that our theological imaginings, even when oriented more toward Christian audiences, can still be a method of repeating, creating, or recreating these non-mutual relationships. We are already-always in relationship, whether or not we understand our Christian theological themes, paradigms, and architecture to be closed or foreclosed.

Yet in light of my sympathetic critiques of the three contemporary theological works included in this chapter, a few questions that have been present throughout this dissertation come back to the foreground: In a world of religious diversity and multiplicity, is a universal argument still

[134] Cobb, *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, 245. Cobb speaks positively of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's theological vision, wherein all of history will converge in the Omega Point represented through Christ.

compelling? Or is universality a lure toward Christian theological superiority? Further, are Christian theologies and traditions still "Christian" without this abiding universal, all-encompassing or all-inclusive impulse? Or is there potential for a universality that includes not just mutuality or joining, but *mutual consent* to intimacy with religious others? If so, what would that look or feel like, both for those from the bounds of Christian traditions, and for those from without?[135] Intimacy looks different for Fletcher, Jennings, and Cobb, but I would suggest that Christian theologies which employ metaphors (with concrete implications) of intimacy with religious others, then—taking seriously logics and feelings of theological superiority circulating in a Christian affective economy—that Christian theologians might need to hesitate in emphasizing any desire for intimacy with religious others.

[135] A related claim I might make is that any Christian calls for mutuality are suspect, as are any return to origins (as the remedy) or calls for a joint future. This hermeneutic of suspicion could also be critically applied to any theological arguments I could make about mutuality, since I am a scholar and person inundated in Christian traditions and theologies and am, consequently, always-already embedded in the logics and embodied practices of superiority that I argue should be identified and dismantled.

Conclusion:
Provisional Construction(s), Theological Affects

Superiority keeps me annoyed.[1]

"Material Boy" by Sir Sly

If the physical presence of the 'the other' could have such an instant and dramatic effect on the theology performed in the midst of the community, then 'what does that tell you?' Perhaps what that tells us is that we human beings only find it possible to scapegoat others when we are not confronted with them as present, as full beings in interrelationship with us.[2]

Siobhán Garrigan

Emotions are the very 'flesh' of time…through emotions, the past persists on the surface of bodies.[3]

Sara Ahmed

As they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. They become a safe-house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action.[4]

Audre Lorde

The Lure of Superiority

In the speculative philosophy of organism that appeared first as lectures and later in his magnum opus, Alfred North Whitehead introduces the concept of the "lure," which is his way of describing the pull—or persuasive nature—of the universe toward the good.[5] The lure, aligned with a Platonic conceptual lineage, is affective, attracting the universe toward greater intensity and value,

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[1] Sir Sly, "Material Boy," *The Rise and Fall of Loverboy*, Interscope Records, 2021.

[2] Siobhán Garrigan, *The Real Peace Process: Worship, Politics, and the End of Sectarianism*, (London, UK: Equinox, 2010), 196. In this portion of the text, Garrigan discusses how Christian liturgical worship changed (in a specific setting) when a Rabbi was present, by invitation, at the liturgy.

[3] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 202.

[4] Audre Lorde, "Poetry Is Not a Luxury," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 37.

[5] The "lure" is referred to in various ways by Whitehead and his interpreters, most often in discussions related to other concepts posited by Whitehead (eternal object, initial aim, subjective aim, value, concrescence, etc.). In *Process and Reality*, Whitehead suggests: "at some point…judgment is eclipsed by aesthetic delight. The speech, for the theatre audience, is purely theoretical, a mere lure for feeling. Again, consider strong religious emotion—consider a Christian meditating on the sayings in the Gospels. He [sic] is not judging 'true or false'; he is eliciting their value as elements in feeling. In fact, he may ground his judgment of truth upon his realization of value. But such a procedure is impossible, if the primary function of propositions is to be elements in judgments. The 'lure for feeling' is the final cause guiding the concrescence of feelings (185). For helpful interpretations of Whitehead's terminology in *Process and Reality*, see John B. Cobb, Jr., *Whitehead Word Book*, Anoka, MN: Process Century Press, 2015.

via novelty and creativity.[6] The good is never final, always becoming: always in process, a moving target, so to speak. The good, imagined in this way, is less a noun and more a verb, which for Whitehead, means that the world is in movement, or a process, a succession of events that prehend feelings toward the good. The good is not an omega point[7] at which we arrive, but a continual concrescence, a gradual demonstration;[8] the good is a heartbeat that requires both contraction and expansion.[9] Perhaps because the good is not a destination but a process of becoming, then momentary or ultimate arrivals to "the good" are not necessarily guaranteed, either. Thus, in the context of religious plurality, and in an era in which increased scholarly attention is focused on the potential for unity in a world of multiplicity and difference, it seems theologically and ethically necessary for Christian theologians to explore how and whether Christianity and Christian logic, affects, and embodied practices either open or close potentialities for this continual procession toward the good.

I describe theological superiority as a lure in this project precisely because of these affective dimensions, of the way in which feeling (theologically) superior might be attractive—it might feel good or right, at least for those who can comfortably inhabit certain Christian norms.[10] Sara Ahmed speaks of emotions, or affects, "involv[ing] investment in social norms."[11] The "discomfort"[12] that can proceed from awareness that not everyone fits into these social norms means that we must "always [question] our own investments."[13] In a related sense, questioning this investment, for

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[6] In some sense, creativity and "the good" are intimately conjoined in process philosophy and theology, which is why some process theologians identify Whitehead's notion of God with creativity.
[7] The "Omega Point" is a well-known concept from Jesuit priest and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (*Phenomenon of Man*, 1955). I am influenced by Mary Daly's critique of the "Omega Point" in *Beyond God the Father* (see pgs. 190-193).
[8] This phrasing comes from a colleague and friend, Gray Henry Blakemore.
[9] As far as I know, imagining concrescence as a heartbeat is my own innovation.
[10] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 147.
[11] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 196.
[12] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 155. Ahmed describes discomfort as a queer political practice, because queer folks must "inhabit norms differently," since "normativity is comfortable for those who can inhabit it" (147). Even though painful in some moments, this is a discomfort which can be generative and creative.
[13] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 178.

Christian theologians, is the force of Rosemary Radford Ruether's thesis in *Faith and Fratricide*: *The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*. "As long as Christology and anti-Judaism intertwine," asserts Ruether, "one cannot be safe from a repetition of this history in new form."[14] Christian theological superiority, in a sense, seeks to create Christian normativity, or a "worlding"[15] wherein Christian ways of being, doing, and feeling become the way, rather than "a" way. Ahmed, for her part, argues that normativity itself is an accumulation of repetitions that create what seems to be ordinary. Normativity, in this sense, is an expression of repeated investment in what, in a particular affective economy, is assumed to be valuable or good, and the future toward which all (who fit) should collectively strive.

"For Each Tree Is Known By Its Fruit"

Two of the synoptic Gospels, Mark and Luke, recount Jesus' story about a tree and the kind of fruit that it bears. This recounting is metaphorical, often interpreted as Jesus figurative portrayal of false prophets—and how to identify them.

> For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good man out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure produces evil; for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.[16]

In a sense, this project is an attempt to account for theological investments in Christianity's "goodness," or whether Christianity (and its logics, feelings, and embodied practices) can still be a "good tree" if it has produced bad fruit. It is indisputable that Christianity and Christian theological constructs have contributed to questionable (or even evil) material effects toward religious others—

[14] Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 226.
[15] Kathleen Stewart, "Afterword: Worlding Refrains," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Siegworth, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.
[16] Matthew 7:18-20; Luke 6:43-45.

or, in Rosemary Radford Ruether's terminology, Christianity has a "fratricidal side" in which the "tyranny of unity" and "incarnational triumphalism" are fruit, so to speak.[17] So, if there have been material, evil effects, then what does that mean for Christianity's present and/or future as a living organism (such as a tree)? Is the fruit rotten? Can there be both good and bad fruit, without Christianity needing to be saved from itself (or for religious others to be saved from Christianity's "fratricidal side")? These are not just rhetorical questions; they are questions that center the theological implications of Jesus' contention in this story, a contention that grapples with causality and the question of the goodness or badness of entities, in terms of what entities do (or can) generate. The answer that bad trees produce bad fruit seems fairly definitive, at least in both versions of the story that are found in the Gospels.

But perhaps it is best not to apply Jesus' metaphor of a tree to the whole of a living tradition. The claim I would venture to make, at this juncture, is that both the goods and the evils perpetrated by those who claim Christianity, from its very beginnings as a tradition, do not just disappear because we ignore or downplay them. If Christianity (or Christian theologies, within the many iterations of Christian traditions) can be understood as an affective economy of power and relation, then an affect like superiority circulates—as does love, as does hate, as does ambivalence. For Christian theologians, this presents a complicated problem, because it means that theological construction, which includes concepts understood to be central and life-giving to the tradition, may be also mired in these affects, and not always in ways that can be traced or easily removed.[18] As Ruether suggests:

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[17] Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 261; 260.

[18] I have in mind, here, at least in part, the constructive thought of womanist theologian Delores S. Williams, as developed in her groundbreaking *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1993). In this text, Williams' argument implicates traditional Christian interpretations and imaginings of atonement theory in response to the suffering of black women specifically, and women of color broadly. Though Williams' approach is not usually categorized as de facto or traditional Christian theology, her effort to reimagine Christian theological constructs remains a significant pivot, in my perspective, for all Christian theological imaginings.

> At the most fundamental level, the problem is the presuppositions which are still affirmed by Christian theologians as basic to Christian theology, long after they have repudiated the more fanciful mythic projection [of anti-Judaism]…Anti-Judaism was originally more than social polemic. It was an expression of Christian self-affirmation. So now rethinking anti-Judaism has become more than an external task. It has become an internal task of Christian theological reconstruction.[19]

What I have suggested in this project, in a continuation of Ruether's argument, is that this "expression of Christian self-affirmation" is not just contained to anti-Judaism, but overflows and finds others. Which, if this suggestion speaks something true, renders Ruether's solution to Christianity's problem of "self-affirmation" somewhat incomplete. Ruether includes several important suggestions to heal Christian relations with Jews (individually, and on the level of a tradition relating to tradition) by instituting necessary encounters between traditions. But if this problem extends beyond Christianity's inherent anti-Judaism, then we are at somewhat of a loss to heal relations (or ways of relating) to multitudes of religious others. And still, the issue of consent, which I mentioned briefly at the end of chapter 5, rises to the surface and remains. Christianity, and Christian theologians as interpreters and imaginative story-tellers of Christian traditions, have a tenuous history with staking universal claims. A question, then, is whether religious others—especially in contexts of overwhelming Christian normativity, such as the United States—have the space *to consent to relating or to relationships with Christianity, Christians, or Christian traditions*. As Ruether states,

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What I mean here is that Williams' theology of the atonement should not just be compartmentalized as liberationist, black, womanist, or feminist—or as a deviation or alternative to traditional understandings of Christian theology. Williams' indictment of traditional conceptions of the atonement that valorize suffering as salvific cuts to the heart of Christian theological imaginings and inquires whether a key feature of Christian understanding (Jesus' submission, passion, violent death, and resurrection) can indeed be salvific or liberative for all, if it has influenced significant, repeated material harms against black women. Williams' text is not focused on interreligious questions (though her references to Hagar might open the door to interreligious engagement, especially with emerging Muslima Theologies), but her theological method of critiquing key features of Christian theology has been both influential and generative for my thought process for this dissertation project.

[19] Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 228.

> One God, one faith, and one Church for all mankind (sic) invalidated the rights of other people to exist in other ways before God. There was only one path to God, that of Christian revelation. There was only one society of salvation, the Church, founded on this revelation, the cultural and political vehicle for which became the Roman Empire. Historically, from this time on, the missionary and the conquistador went hand in hand to realize the manifest destiny of the Church's mission to become the one faith through which all men are to be saved.[20]

So where can or should consent fit into this process, if healing involves—as many contemporary theologians advocate—renewed relations with religious others?

Consensual Encounters with Religious Others

I would argue that relational consent should be a primary concern in this era, in which some Christian theologians forecast a "transreligious" future in which the boundaries between and among traditions will become softer and more porous.[21] If Christian theologians argue for intimacy with religious others, however, I likewise interject that consent to intimacy is theo-ethically important. How consent can be achieved apart from individual levels of relating is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but there could be a seed of hope in the etymology of "consent," at least as catalogued by Mary Daly. According to Daly in her inimitable *Wickedary*, the word "consent" is derived from the Latin *consentire*, which means "*to feel together*, agree."[22] What would it look like to feel together, toward a yes or a no? Or even a maybe?

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[20] Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, 234.

[21] I presented a paper at the 2022 American Academy of Religion conference on the issue of consent in interfaith relations, given the numerous metaphors of love, intimacy, and amorous relations (Keller) that Christian theologians increasingly employ (Rachel A. Heath, "Beyond Boundaries? Intimacy, Desire, and the Possibility of Consent in Interfaith Relations," in the session Agile Boundaries, co-sponsored by Lesbian-Feminisms in Religion & Interfaith and Interreligious Studies Program Units). See also Roland Faber's *Ocean of God* for one example of forecasting "transreligious" future.

[22] Mary Daly, *Webster's First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language*, in cahoots with Jane Caputi, illustrated by Sudie Rakusin, (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 113. Emphasis mine. I found Daly's entry for "consent" during a theological discussion with Bryce Wiebe.

Feeling together, though, might mean that there is some kind of *presence* among religious others that is necessary.[23] In the conclusion to *Beyond Monotheism*, Laurel C. Schneider moves to define "love," in the context of divine multiplicity, as a promiscuous presence that risks an encounter, momentary or otherwise.[24] Schneider's account is that this encounter is, in a way, incarnational from a Christian perspective—which means it is embodied, and its embodiment is inherently porous, messy, and uncontrollable.

> To follow a God who becomes flesh is to make room for more than One… it is a posture of openness to the world as it comes to us, of loving the discordant, plenipotential worlds more than the desire to overcome, to colonize, or even "save" them.[25]

Both Ruether and Ahmed, in their different ways, also turn to "encounter" as a way to dismantle or decenter these power differentials, repeated in both logic and affect, that make it impossible for the "other" to be *present*; they might diverge, however, on whether the "other" can actually be present.[26] For Ruether, Christianity's renewed "encounter" with Judaism could be a way to pull up the roots of Christian theology, a corrective which expresses the hope that there could be Christian theologies (and a Christology) purified of its early anti-Judaic orientation. Ruether's emphasis is more aligned with the conclusions of Willie James Jennings, who also argues that a deep encounter between Christian and Jewish traditions is a corrective to theological distortions—metaphorically speaking, the toxin will be flushed from Christian theologies, the distortion can be corrected.[27] "Encounter" is also emphasized as a salve-ific[28] possibility by several Christian theologians who engage in the relatively new field of Interreligious Studies—from comparative theologies, comparative religions, as

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[23] Whether presence is possible is a different issue, for a later project.
[24] Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 206.
[25] Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism*, 207.
[26] Jeannine Hill Fletcher also focuses on the possibilities of encounter in chapter 3 of *Monopoly on Salvation?*, where she affirms the hope for creative/communicative exchange.
[27] An initial direction for this dissertation project included problematizing "distortions" or "toxins/toxicity" as descriptors or metaphors, using the work of philosopher Alexis Shotwell and queer affect theory Mel Chen.
[28] In reverence to the wordplay of Mary Daly's *Wickedary*, this is my own theological wordplay.

well as Roland Faber's process approach to theological dialogue between Christian and Bahá'í traditions, and John Thatanamil's theology of religious diversity (TRD).[29]

Ahmed, for her part, is more neutral on the possibilities of encounter, or the material affects of encountering "others" or "strangers." In *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, she discusses the positive gestures of both Emmanual Levinas and Jacques Derrida toward philosophical conceptions of "others." In their different ways, both philosophers intimate the importance of creating or leaving space for the other to be "other," even though this "othering" can constantly elevate the friction of difference or opposition. In her estimation, philosophically grounded gestures of openness to the "other," like those posited by Levinas and Derrida, retreat to somewhat abstract concepts like "Being" or "ethics": in other words, what allows for the "being" of the other, or what *a priori* or *a posteriori* ethical stances are. For Ahmed, the question instead becomes the "how" of relating to others, not necessarily the "what" of the relation. Naming an "other" gives the other being as "an other," which can be practically useful—but can also ontologize difference, naturalizing others/strangers as always different or outside: concretizing rather than concrescencing, in Whiteheadian terms. This possibility of concrescence, rather than solidity, is where Ahmed turns to the possibility of "encounter." An "encounter" reminds us that there is "sociality" to the creation of

[29] Roland Faber, process theologian, has increasingly turned toward integrating Christian and Bahá'í concepts and theological approaches in his most recent works. See *The Becoming of God: Process Theology, Philosophy, and Multireligious Engagement* (2017) and *The Ocean of God: On the Transreligious Future of Religions* (2019); in the latter, Faber discusses superiority as a "poison" (27-28). I have specific critiques of Faber's analysis and theological conclusions that do not fit within the scope of this project. Faber's work represents an important contemporary theological vision that advocates for a transreligious future, wherein religious boundaries are more fluid. John J. Thatanamil's recent work, *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity* (2020) represents, in my estimation a practical and realistic approach (to what Thatanamil calls theologies of religious diversity, or TRD) because it acknowledges the problem of power differential between "Christianity and its others" (25). Thatanamil asks whether Christian theology can be reimagined with "an eye to difference" (23). A feminist critique I have of Thatanamil's important gesture, however, is that when he emphasizes Christian " theological desire" or "eros" for the other, he slips into using feminine pronouns for religious others, a slippage which is all too familiar to feminists attuned to the microaggressions of heteropatriarchy (Thatanamil does not use masculine pronouns for Christianity in this analogy, but because he has just rehearsed the history of exploitation and religious imperialism of Christianity toward all others, the move to use feminine pronouns for traditions Christianity has deemed penetrable is, in this way, an unfortunate slippage).

an other, that "others" do not incarnate simply as foils for Christian self-affirmation. As much as a philosopher like Levinas wants to maintain a boundary or space for the other to be a self, a place where the other is touched but not grasped, Ahmed argues that this could unintentionally obscure the histories, social interactions, and feelings that, in actuality, create "the other."

Ahmed's emphasis on "encounter" keeps these histories dynamic and active, in a way. Ahmed does not rely on an abstract sense of "encounter," but insists that "encounters" are modes of contact, accumulations of affective impressions that create both ourselves and others. Encounter reminds us of this circulation of affects, the emotional content that compose the very "flesh of time." As she states in her conclusion to *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*:

> Emotions show us how histories stay alive, even when they are not consciously remembered; how histories of colonialism, slavery, and violence shape lives and worlds in the present. The time of emotion is not always about the past, and how it sticks. Emotions open up futures, in the ways they involve different orientations to others.[30]

Encounter, with this affective outlook, can make *present* the very real, very material histories and interactions of power between and among religious others. It makes present that "othering" not only signifies a relationship, but an "orientation of asymmetry."[31] If space for religious others must be created *for them* to be present in an encounter, then that might mean there is always-already a flow of power that begins with the Christian (theologian) attempting to make space. But if we feel together, with Ahmed, that "emotions open up futures," then perhaps we can gesture toward the already-but-not-yet future in which there is an overflow (a failure, or opening) to categories that are reliant on each other for definition, an overflow in the presence that bespeaks "encounter." This is an affective gesture toward an "encounter" where asymmetry does not have to lead, inevitably, toward those normative spaces of Christian power continually created by theological expressions of

[30] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 202.
[31] Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, 142. For the full discussion, see pgs. 140-160.

Christian superiority. In this sense, if Christianity continually seeks "others" for its own self-affirmation, then "encounter" with real others will always be a failure; this failure is, in part, because the presence of "others" is continually an impossible-possibility.[32] Yet, despite this reality, a failure of this kind might be important to affecting Christian investment in Christian normativity and the pleasure of theological superiority.[33] In this way, we could tentatively suggest that this is a failure that might lead to an opening—an opening beyond Christian futures.

I find Ahmed's metaphor of a scar, in conversation with the somewhat ubiquitous metaphors of toxins or distortions employed by Christian theologians, helpful for how Christian theologians might hesitate before relying on returning to an original state (where Christianity was "true" or "good") to find a solution to Christian theological superiority (or fratricide, in Ruether's terms). Ahmed refers to a common understanding that a "good scar is one that is hard to see."[34] She suggests, instead, that "a good scar allows healing, it even covers over, *but the covering always exposes the injury, reminding us of how it shapes the body.*"[35] In this way, the affective encounter between Christianity and its "others," especially in the affective history of Christian theological superiority that has impressed upon others, wounding multiple parties—is not a toxin that can be removed, nor a distortion to be corrected. Perhaps it is a scar; and this scar, in the possibility of "encounter" or "presence" with others, is both a reminder of the histories that cannot be removed, the imaginings that have engendered harm… but also maybe, just maybe, an affective reminder that can "open new futures" and "different orientations to others." Maybe.

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[32] I am reading Ahmed's "encounter" with both Ruether's and Nirenberg's work regarding imagined religious others (Jews, in both of their work) that appear in Christian theological texts.
[33] Ahmed discusses what feels good in her chapter "Queer Feelings" (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion*). She plays with what is supposed to be pleasurable (heterosexual relations), and how pleasure or comfort, to some extent, reveal social investment in certain norms. Ahmed calls for a continual questioning of investments (164), in the way that these investments are tilted toward the future (in which there a questionable return on investments). Queer feelings can demonstrate the failure of heteronormative investments (failure to repeat heteronormativity) and gesture towards a politics of discomfort that creates openings—or feelings that "'impress' differently" (165).
[34] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 201.
[35] Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 202. Emphasis is Ahmed's.

"God is Not a Christian"[36]

I would suggest that one such scar is the pervasive logic of the One, wherein a branch is a divinity that has become entangled with Christian imaginings, logics, and affect. With reverence to Mary Daly's tautological precision, I will return to a similar claim made in the first chapter of this dissertation: if God is Christian, then (what is) Christian is God. Or, at the very least, if God is understood in Christian terms more so than in any other terms, then Christian is a more accurate (or superior) modifier for the divine.[37] If this basic premise is foundational for how Christian theologians imagine the Divine, then with Mary Daly, I concur that this kind of imagining is affectual, effectively determining how Christians imagine relating to religious others—or how religious difference factors into Christian theological constructs. This affect could be subtle or overt; and my emphasis is simply that *this affect has impressive power in its circulation in a Christian affective economy*.

A question for Christian theologians could be: can God be imagined outside or beyond Christian terms, and/or can Christians imagine the divine without the specific, particular revelation of Jesus Christ?[38] Answering no would certainly be justified, and could map differently onto exclusivist, inclusivist, pluralist, and particularist orientations toward religious others (chap 5). A

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[36] Archbishop Desmond Tutu is known for making this claim in public speeches and sermons. See Desmond Tutu, *God is Not a Christian: and Other Provocations*, ed. by John Allen, New York: HarperOne, 2011.

[37] Feminist theologians—notably Sallie McFague—have for a long time emphasized the importance of metaphors for only constructing theologies that are more inclusive, egalitarian, holistic, and justice-oriented… Metaphors are significant to naming *what is* and imagining *what is possible*. At the same time, Mary Daly warns us that metaphors (especially in their attachments/parallels with material, embodied realities that we might experience) can also work to sustain imbalanced, unequal, or negative relationships of power. For Daly, imagining God's gender is not a benign concept in Christian constructive or systematic theology: it directly affects how humans relate to one another. If men are more like God than women, for example, then it is highly likely that men will yield more political and societal power than women. Theology yields embodied practices, and in turn these embodied practices continue to influence Christian theological constructs. Theology and practice are reciprocal in nature, which complicates solutions to these theological problems that rely upon direct lines of causality or senses that Christianity as such has been distorted. Further, heavily influenced by Paul Tillich's description of idolatry, Daly indicts Christian theology as idolatrous in its entanglement of gender with conceptions of God.

[38] Or, to refer to a thought experiment from earlier in this project: can Jesus and Krishna be theologically imagined as possessing similar significance and universal appeal or relevance (if universality is necessary)? Or to go further: can Krishna ever be imagined as superior to Jesus Christ—why, or why not?

nuanced answer to this question, however, oriented toward interfaith understanding and a religiously plural orientation, would likely attempt to hold space for both theological emphases: God beyond Christian constructs, and God understood within Christian constructs—being held together, by Christians, in the same space-time.[39]

Regardless of one's answer to the above questions, and in light of the history of indisputable Christian theological assumptions of superiority vis-à-vis religious others, I would claim that the onus is on Christian theologians to construct theologies that are attentive to the ways in which the divine is always-already entangled with *Christian* imaginings of superiority. The Christological inflections of this entanglement are difficult to overcome, and Ruether is apt to posit that trying to disentangle Christology from Christian superiority might dismantle the foundation of Christian theologies altogether. Perhaps a decentering of Christian power and normativity, in the context of religious diversity, is necessary to quiet the soft vibe of Christian theological superiority.[40] Our theological imaginations help us form maps and pathways, or lines of flight, for what we see and experience—and also for what we imagine to be already-but-not-yet. Is "God" is unimaginable for Christians apart from Christian drag?[41]

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[39] There are, of course, precedents in this attempt to maintain Christian concepts in the context of religious diversity and pluralism. Along with Jeannine Hill-Fletcher's *Monopoly on Salvation?*, see also: John J. Thatanamil, *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity*, New York: Fordham Press, 2020; Thatanamil, *The Immanent Divine: God, Creation, and The Human Predicament / An East-West Conversation*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006; Wendy Farley, *Eros for the Other: Retaining Truth in a Pluralistic* World, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996; Marjori Hewitt Suchocki, *Divinity & Diversity: A Christian Affirmation of Religious Pluralism*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2003; Young, Pamela Dickey Young, *Christ in a Post-Christian World: How Can We Believe in Jesus Christ When Those Around Us Believe Differently – or Not at All?,* Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995; Schubert M. Ogden, *Is There Only One True Religion or Are There Many?*, Dallas, TX: SMU Press, 1992. I also want to highlight Axel Marc Oaks Takacs' theo-ethical intervention in "Undoing and Unsaying Islamophobia: Toward a Restorative and Praxis-Oriented Catholic Theology With Islam," in *Horizons* 48 (Cambridge University Press, 2022): 320-366.

[40] See the conclusion to David R. Brockman's *No Longer the Same: Religious Others and the Liberation of Christian Theology* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011). I have been playing with the concept of "decentered inclusivity" as an interfaith praxis for several years (in writing and presentations), but it is a concept that is still in process. See also "a-centered relationality" in Laurel C. Schneider's *Beyond Monotheism* (for a correlate concept).

[41] I have in mind gender theorist Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*) and theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid (*Indecent Theology* and *The Queer God*).

Should Christianity be "Saved"?[42]

This question is a play on words, evoking the tenuous relationship with conceptions of salvation and conversion that have continually marked Christian traditions. If "saving" denotes preserving or conserving certain theological elements (logics, practices, feelings) that lend themselves to Christian superiority over religious others, then I do not advocate "saving" this incarnation of Christianity.

I see four distinct pathways, but not the only or exclusive pathways, for Christian traditions and theologies in the present. First, we assert overtly that Christianity is justified in its primacy and superiority in relation to religious others; with this path, we keep all the theological concepts that pertain to the universal relevance and uniqueness of Jesus Christ, as an example. Second is the path of cognitive or theological dissonance, or more positively stated, the path of mystery or paradox: we assert these core theological concepts while maintaining that these concepts do not fundamentally inculcate logics, affects, or practices of superiority vis-à-vis religious others. I would argue that this pathway is taken by most contemporary Christian theologians, who desire to maintain Christian theological architecture in the hope that these structures do not ultimately cause undue harm to religious others. The third pathway accepts that Christianity will always be entangled with a superiority that seeks to cancel out or absorb religious others, and that because of this quality, Christianity should not be saved. The fourth is the likely the pathway I would take, while fully accepting the 'good faith' of the third option. This fourth pathway, in connection with the third, accepts that Christianity is always-already entangled with superiority, and can never be absolved or rid of this scar; returning to origins or casting the problem into the mysterious eschaton may not

[42] In *Circling the Elephant*, Thatanamil writes: "As a Christian, can I even affirm that Christianity saves? And if so, *which Christianity*?" (43, emphasis Thatanamil's).

save anything except the boundaries of Christian belonging. Ultimately, this pathway rejects Christianity's universal relevance; or a universality that must or should be accepted by all.

Without a universally relevant narrative, however, toward what future does the fourth pathway lead? Perhaps what this project offers is an answer to this question, but not a solution, beyond the gesture that "loving" one's neighbor might mean that it is vital for Christian theologians to construct a "safe-house for difference," for encounters wherein religious others can remain others—love with impressions, but without (Christian) conditions.

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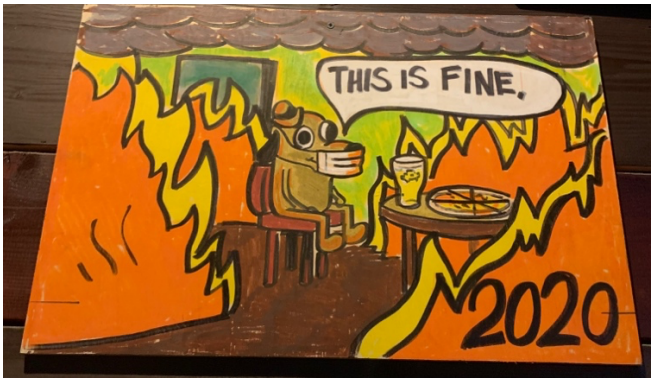
Visual Rendition of Writing a Dissertation During a Pandemic



Mural at Tailgate Brewery
Charlotte Avenue, Nashville, TN
Picture Taken on November 30, 2022
With Kat Olson