

Special Issue Reprint

Critical Issues in Christian Ethics

Edited by
Kenneth L. Waters, Richard Rose and Sandra Morgan

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Critical Issues in Christian Ethics

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Guest Editors

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Richard Rose

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About the Editors

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Richard Rose is a Professor of Religion and Philosophy at the University of La Verne. Dr. Rose is an ordained elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church. His current research examines global issues related to Interfaith dialogue and Religious Pluralism. Dr. Rose sees his life's work as continuing the Process of Building the Beloved Community. That work is achieved primarily through the Ecumenical Center for Black Church Studies (ECBCS) Program at La Verne. The Purpose of ECBCS is to provide accredited in-service learning to persons of whatever ethnic background who serve the African-American community. During the COVID-19 pandemic, ECBCS established the Jr. Order of Melchizedek (JOM) Rites of Passage Program for youth in the community. JOM is a community-based program designed to improve the well-being of grade school students through value-based decision-making. Dr. Rose is the author of *An Interreligious Approach to a Social Ethic for Christian Audiences* (2017) and *7 Meditations on the Lord's Prayer* (2016), both published by Christian World Imprints, New Delhi, India. He serves as a Co-Chair of the Southern CA Committee for the Parliament of the World's Religions, as a Trustee of the Bethany Theological Seminary, and as a Board Member of the John Cobb Institute.

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Sandra Morgan is Executive Director of the Global Center for Women and Justice at Vanguard University. She is an educator and nurse globally recognized for her expertise in combatting human trafficking and working to end violence against women and children. Dr. Morgan's experience serving exploited women, men, and children includes direct care as a pediatric nurse, as a volunteer with Doctors of the World (Athens, Greece), and as a past Administrator of the Orange County Human Trafficking Task Force. She is a tireless advocate for victims of exploitation, slavery, and trafficking

across the world, including South America, Russia, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. She serves on the Orange County Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC) Steering Committee, partnering with Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice. In her role as Faculty and Executive Director of the Global Center for Women and Justice, she builds capacity for research, education, and advocacy directly related to the exploitation of women and children, consistently bringing together diverse groups to collaborate during the annual Ensure Justice conference. Her Ending Human Trafficking podcast has listeners in 167 countries and is housed in the Library of Congress as a resource to practitioners and the public. Dr. Morgan recently served as Co-chair of the Public-Private Partnership Advisory Council to End Human Trafficking by presidential appointment. She is co-author of *Ending Human Trafficking a Handbook of Strategies for the Church Today*, IVP Academic, and is a recipient of the following awards: the William Wilberforce Award for Outstanding Leadership in the Fight against Human Trafficking, the Orangewood Crystal Foundation Vision Award, the LA Times Orange County Inspirational Women Forum and Leadership Award, and the Vanguard Faculty Legacy Award and was named as the Orange County Register's 125 Most Influential People in 2024.

Preface

There have been numerous definitions of ethics presented over the years, some more involved than others. A simple definition will suffice for this preface. Ethics is the science of determining right and wrong. Undoubtedly, this definition will be too simple for many. We could add that ethics also involves determining the criteria for deciding right and wrong. This brings us to the unique position of Christian Ethics, which holds the life and teachings of Jesus as primary criteria for ethical inquiry. Yet as we see in this Special Issue Reprint, Christian Ethics is still interdisciplinary, intercultural, and formulated in dialog with other religious traditions.

To speak of Critical Issues in Christian Ethics is to speak of interhuman debates that can make or break progress toward flourishing and well-being for humans, non-human life, and the environment, depending on how these debates are addressed and whether tensions are resolved. It is also to speak of those issues that are pressing upon humans and their habitats, either because these issues have been neglected or inadequately addressed. These are issues that have an immediacy about them. They are confronting us now because they are part and parcel of the technological changes, scientific advancements, cultural shifts, and environmental degradation that accompany the modern era. It is not that the age-old questions are no longer relevant—what is true, what is real, what is good. These are indeed questions that are still relevant. It is merely that there are now new sets of questions that demand attention—questions such as those addressed by the authors of the articles included in this Special Issue Reprint.

The included articles have foci that range from ideological shifts to behavioral changes, from interhuman interaction to human impact upon the environment, and from belief structures to political movements. If we could agree that clear thinking generates therapeutic relationships, social solidarity, sound behavior, psychological health, and personal stability, then we can posit clear thinking and its effects as the collective aim of these deliberations. Although we write as a service to the academic community, we ultimately write as a service to the world. We know that our audience will include professional scholars and other authors, and we welcome their input. We also hope to reach students and other seekers who are questing for clarity. We also welcome their input and their questions.

Kenneth L. Waters, Richard Rose, and Sandra Morgan

Guest Editors

Editorial

Introduction to Critical Issues in Christian Ethics

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The articles in this issue cover a broad range of topics and bring together global perspectives originating in China, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States, but a unifying core to these works can be found in the belief, either explicitly stated or implied, that Jesus Christ—the content of his teachings and the pattern of his life and ministry—is the model for Christian Ethics. This would seem to be the least we could ask of Christian Ethics. In his close comparison of Divine Command Theory and Christian Moral Theory, Martin Jakobsen argues for the centrality of Christ in Christian Ethics, or as he terms it, Christian moral theory. He says, “Because the most central part of Christian theology is Christ, a moral theory that is not connected to Christ has a weak connection to Christian theology and hardly qualifies as a Christian moral theory” (Jakobsen 2023, p. 3). As he points out, he does not challenge the rightness of Divine Command Theory; he only maintains that it should not be labeled Christian.

Some may not be willing to draw a hard line between Christian ethics and divine command theory. Richard J. Mouw, who describes himself as a “divine command ethicist,” expresses appreciation for the exploration of virtue ethics in Christian circles. He sees that there is no incompatibility between the imitation of Christ and the divine command perspective (Mouw 2024, pp. 227–28). J. Caleb Clanton and Kraig Martin would go so far as to argue that virtue ethics, which holds a prominent place in the Christian intellectual tradition, requires “non-reductive versions” of both natural law theory and divine command theory to be complete (Clanton and Martin 2025, pp. 2, 9). They see these two theories as “dominant frameworks” in Christian tradition, and they see this combination approach with virtue ethics as nothing less than Christian (Clanton and Martin 2025, pp. 8, 11). There may be some debate over how Christian a particular moral theory might be, but it seems generally agreed that a Christian ethic must have significant grounding in Christ.

Another unifying core belief in these articles is that Christian ethical inquiry is indispensable for shaping proper response to current threats to human well-being and survival. Therefore, in this collection, ethics are formulated in the ominous shadow of alienation and despair among marginalized youth and young adults, ecological and environmental crisis, the encroachment of nationalism and its corrupting tendencies, the loss of human values in reproductive technology, political opposition to religion, conflict over human sexuality, social and political powerlessness, and a developing culture of death.

In her reflections on an anthology of studies focusing on Christian ethics and biocultural evolutions, Lisa Sowle Cahill mentions the current trend in Christian ethics toward practicality. She says,

Since the middle of the last century, and more decisively in the present one, Christian political and social ethicists have moved beyond normative analysis of decisions, policies, and institutions, attending more specifically to how values, norms, and teaching are or are not translated into practical commitment and change. (Cahill 2025, p. 178)

She accepts this as a positive change in direction.

In relatively recent times, this lean toward practicality is described in terms of a shift from “quandary ethics” to “ordinary ethics” or from “hard case ethics” to “everyday ethics” (Banner 2014, pp. 4, 24; Tranter and Torrance 2018, p. 158; Kelly 2020, p. 415; Kelly 2021, p. 124; Stauffer 2023, pp. 13–74; Williams 2024, pp. 360–61). A special interest in ethnographic methodology has emerged in this area. Following the pivotal work of Michael Banner, Samuel Tranter and David Torrance highlight the significance of this methodological development in Christian Ethics. They say, “First, to be truly therapeutic, Christian ethics must cleave closely to the best descriptions of everyday lived reality it can find. Ethnographies help make sense of what a practice is actually for, and how it fits into life overall” (Tranter and Torrance 2018, p. 169). Banner himself sees everyday ethics and its turn to ethnography as a necessity for fulfilling its pastoral and therapeutic role. As he says,

But if moral theology is to set out an everyday ethics which would sustain and support the Christian imagination of the human, and yet address pastorally and therapeutically other ethical imaginaries and forms of life, it must attend to the psychological and sociocultural depth of the different forms of life which we encounter. And to do this, it should be willing to learn from social anthropology, which can assist moral theology, so I hope to show in subsequent chapters, both methodologically and materially. (Banner 2014, p. 24)

I am reluctant to attribute this specific categorical shift in ethical methodology to any of the authors in this issue, only because none of them have explicitly claimed adoption of this shift in their articles. Nevertheless, these articles still share an interest in influencing everyday life.

The perennial academic issues involving what ethics are, what religion is, what is good, what is true, and what is real still abide in the background of these pages, but the overarching reach of these deliberations is toward street-level relevance. Only through a close engagement with the authors (an engagement to which all of us are invited) can we appreciate how each scholar aligns these interests with the investigation of their particular subject. It is my privilege to briefly introduce each scholar.

Sandra Lynn Barnes asks what Christian Ethics mean for young Black sexual minorities in a medium-sized metropolis in the southern part of the United States, and how “everyday sacredness” informs their thinking. She conducts a mixed-methodological qualitative study that uses content analysis to establish and frame the concept of everyday sacredness, which refers to a worldview that enables Black youth with diverse sexual identities to embrace positive valuations of themselves and their potential. Barnes leads us to consider how the church can draw upon everyday sacredness to more effectively serve this demographic.

Bin You, Zhaolei Li, and Timothy Knepper argue for a Christian ecological spirituality and ethic based upon the *Laudato Si*, Orthodox Christian doctrine, and cultural resources drawn from China’s religious and philosophical heritage. Their method is tradition analysis and intercultural dialog within the field of environmental ethics. While ecological theology is characterized by its focus on knowledge, ecological spirituality is characterized by its focus on practice. Their key emphasis is that Christian ecological spirituality comprises the core of Christianity. You, Li, and Knepper seek to revolutionize the global response to the current environmental crisis through a shift in Christian thought and practice.

Darryl W. Stephens mines the literary legacy of Theodore R. Weber (1928–2023) for a delineation and appraisal of his Wesleyan-based political theology and ethics. Using a method of close reading and synthesis, Stephens aspires to advance an overview of Weber’s outlook and approach for current and future generations of scholars. Stephens embraces Weber’s contention that a fully developed political theology and ethic must

move beyond Wesley's *ordo salutis* with its individualistic focus to a full application of political sanctification. In Weber, Stephens sees a trinitarian political theology and social ethic based on the *Imago Dei*. Weber's political theology and ethic are valuable tools of social redemption for those who reject the idolatry of Christian Nationalism.

Xi Li and Lining Lin conduct a qualitative study that launches from secular Belief in a Just World (BJW) studies and new approaches that incorporate religious and cultural resources to initiate and frame "an explicitly Christian measure." Christian thought and discourse have evoked themes of retributive and restorative justice and have furthermore involved discussion of distributive and procedural justice. Xi and Lining deploy a Christian Belief in a Just World (CBJW) scale grounded in 34 biblical texts to analyze CBJW and to discuss the nature of Christian divine justice. They found that respondents saw justice and love as independent characteristics of God, that moral laws are universal and not only applicable to Christians, and that religious belief overlaps with secular Belief in a Just World. However, Christian belief in God's sovereignty and in God's forgiveness is seen as irreducible to secular BJW. By clarifying the features of CBJW, Li and Lin highlight God's sovereignty and forgiveness in eschatological justice.

María del Carmen Massé García shows how the Abrahamic religious traditions have contributed to the ethical evaluation of assisted reproductive technologies and their use. Her methodology is to analyze the perspectives inscribed in representative texts and other recorded deliberations from Judaism, Islam, and Christianity on specific ethical issues. She then provides an ethical framework for the cross-section of followers. Massé García finds that the Abrahamic religions have always dealt with the changes imposed by science and technology, but by forging ethical responses grounded in faith, they have protected humanity's most precious values, such as, life, love, and family. She discovers common ground in these very different religious expressions. In all of them, human origins are filled with mystery and meaning not reducible to personal convenience, human desire, or economic means.

Edward Anthony David frames religion as "a reasoned action-guiding good" in response to Brian Leiter's dismissal of religion as epistemically deficient. David draws upon John Finnis's view of Thomistic tradition to support this understanding of religion. David is concerned with the moral status of religion itself, and therefore conducts a meta-ethical exercise. His article has bearing on issues at the heart of ethics, such as truth and natural law, the defensibility of moral teachings, utilitarianism, and deontology. Not only does his discussion concern the moral status of religion itself, but it also concerns the moral status of arguments against the legal, constitutional protection of religion.

In my own contribution to this Special Issue, I maintain that a preservationist Christian sexual ethic speaks for itself when its vehicles of verification and vindication are addressed in dialog with a revisionist perspective. After arguing for congruence between the normal and the natural, baseline features of normative sexuality, and the function of verifiers and vindicators in the preservationist perspective, I share an understanding of normative sexuality. I write for the reader who seeks ground for choosing between the preservationist and revisionist perspectives. However, I do not pretend to be impartial. Although I try to give the revisionist perspective a hearing, I write from a preservationist point of view. I leave it to the discerning reader to determine whether I have made a compelling case for the preservationist perspective.

Charles S. Brown takes issue with the domination theory of power so aptly represented by Max Weber. Brown argues that dominant forces are not the only entities that have power in a relationship of power imbalance. Even though the stronger side may have an advantage in the imbalanced relationship, the weaker side can still prevent the stronger side from achieving its desired goals. Power is the basic condition of being. Euro-American contexts

prioritize the individual in the discussion of being vs. non-being, while indigenous African societies prioritize the community. Social bonding is an essential component of power. Social power is a unique possession of the group as a whole. Individualism and anti-social attitudes make it difficult to realize the social bonding that is necessary for positive expressions of social power. When power is constitutive of personhood and society, it is reciprocal, community building, and accountable. Violence and force are the opposite of power. Brown clarifies that all forms of social power are relational, but the options of forms among them are hierarchy, conflict, and co-operation. Echoing Hannah Arendt, Brown finds that non-violence is power.

Renzhong Cui and Siyi Han exhibit literary evidence for the influence of Karl Barth on Stanley Hauerwas. They argue that Barth's rejection of Protestant liberalism was pivotal for Hauerwas. Following Barth, Hauerwas is particularly critical of the liberal tendency to separate theology and ethics, and to translate theological discourse into "common language." However, while Barth maintained that these tendencies made Christian ethics less Christian, Hauerwas indicts these tendencies as features of "American" ethics. According to Cui and Han, Hauerwas sees the church as the place where theology becomes inseparable from ethics. "Faith" and "actions" are inseparable in the church. Both Hauerwas and Barth conclude that theology and ethics are inseparable, but they arrive at this conclusion in different ways. Hauerwas arrives at this conclusion through ecclesiology, and Barth arrived at it through theology. Barth tended to underestimate the significance of the church and particularly the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in the church. Cui and Han maintain that although Hauerwas is not satisfied with Barth's estimation of the church, Barth still occupies a significant place in Hauerwas's thought. To characterize Hauerwas's thought as a deviation from Barth in the direction of "ecclesism" is an exaggeration.

I think it is safe to say that none of these contributors imagine themselves as speaking the final word on the issues they raise. It is more likely that they see the publications of their articles as an invitation for dialog and springboards for further research. I am grateful to each scholar for their work and for their willingness to share their expertise with the rest of us.

I furthermore wish to express my thanks to my co-Guest Editors Sandra Morgan and Richard Rose for their support and willingness to serve. I also give special thanks to the panel of anonymous reviewers who assisted these authors in achieving the highest level of clarity in their writing. I am grateful to Academic Editors Cristobal Serrán-Pagán y Fuentes, David Baslinger, and Monique Moultrie who helped guide this Special Issue to completion. My thanks also go to Section Managing Editor Suncica Djordjevic for her help and support. I am deeply appreciative of Managing Editor Loretta Chen, who served as Assistant Editor for this Special Issue. I cannot adequately express what this opportunity to serve as a Guest Editor has meant for me, but it has truly been an enriching experience and the gift of a lifetime.

Any one or all of the articles that comprise this Special Issue can have a life beyond this Special Issue. At the very least, they have the potential to encourage discussion, which may in turn change a set of behaviors, which may in turn change the world. May the readers of this issue find light and inspiration for their own academic, professional, and vocational endeavors.

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Article

Christian Sexual Ethics and Everyday Sacredness: Voices of Young Black People with Diverse Sexual Identities

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Abstract

Christian ethics are often associated with dichotomies such as right versus wrong, good versus evil, and moral versus immoral. How do young Black people with diverse sexual identities who also embrace Christianity understand such ethics? What constitutes Christian ethics for people who live on the margins and are often vilified for their racial and sexual identities? This mixed-methodological study considers these questions for a group of 76 young Black members of the LGBTQIA community aged 18–30 years old. The study is also designed to theorize and apply the concept of *everyday sacredness* as an ethos to illuminate the religious and spiritual experiences of Black sexual minorities. Three themes emerge that focus on ethical expectations. The initial theme reflects common questions about historic and present-day unethical practices in certain Black churches linked to homophobia and heterosexism found in current studies. The second, more spiritually focused theme, presents agape love as an ethical response to all God's creation. The final practically focused theme emphasizes holistic health as an ethical response to health inequities in the Black LGBTQIA community.

Keywords: Black LGBTQIA community; Christian ethics; Christian sexual ethics

1. Christian Sexual Ethics and Everyday Sacredness: Voices of Young Black People with Diverse Sexual Identities

Christian ethics are often associated with dichotomies such as right versus wrong, good versus evil, and moral versus immoral. What constitutes Christian ethics for groups that live on the margins and are often mistreated based on their racial and/or sexual identities? Specifically, how do young Black people with diverse sexual identities who embrace Christianity and/or spirituality understand such ethics relative to the Black Church? Informed by content analysis, this study considers these questions for a group of 76 young Black members of the LGBTQIA community aged 18–30 years old. The study is also designed to theorize and apply a concept I have coined, *everyday sacredness* (Barnes 2023a), as an ethos to illuminate the religious and spiritual experiences of Black sexual minorities. This endeavor also documents whether individuals consider themselves religious and/or spiritual, their views about God and the Black Church, tensions between reconciling Christian ethics and their sexual identities, and whether and how concepts such as agape love and holistic health inform their views about Christian ethics. Findings include representative quotes, scriptural references, and experiences to assess *everyday sacredness* as an epistemological bridge to help explain aspects of Christian ethics. In addition to documenting the voices of an often under-represented population, this analysis is important for several reasons. First, it broadens Christian ethics by considering the sentiments of a cadre of Black sexual minorities. Moreover, I endeavor to consider more emotive aspects of

the experiences of young Black members of the LGBTQIA community beyond the common foci on HIV/AIDS and sexual behavior. Lastly, this study offers insights into possible more universalistic concerns among Black sexual minorities that illustrate whether and how some of their ethical concerns parallel those of their peers outside this community.

2. Black People with Diverse Sexual Identities: A Summary

Studies document trials among Black people who embrace diverse sexual identities due to forces such as sexism, racism, and classism (Dangerfield et al. 2019; Greenway et al. 2022; Hunter 2010). Homophobia, heteronormativity, stigma, and stereotypes undermine positive identity development and quality of life (Arnold et al. 2014; Arscott et al. 2020; Barnes 2023b; Centers for Disease Control [CDC] 2020; English et al. 2020; Staples 2006; Raifman et al. 2019). Racism and heterosexism can also increase the chances of internal homophobia; moreover, the desire for affection may fuel increased risky behavior (Garcia et al. 2016). In addition to challenges associated with one's sexuality, individuals contend with many of the same economic and non-economic challenges their non-LGBTQIA peers face, but often without the safety nets. Yet Black sexual minorities are more apt to experience limited health services and health disparities such as disproportionate rates of HIV/AIDS and other STIs (Alessi et al. 2020; Barnes 2020; Centers for Disease Control [CDC] 2020; Dacus et al. 2018; English et al. 2020; Moore et al. 2019).

Equally important are their triumphs as well as the intrinsic and extrinsic dynamics that foster them. Welcoming and affirming families, friends, fictive kin, and networks can reduce the effects of homophobia and help buffer negative experiences (Arscott et al. 2020; Barnes 2023a, 2023b; Dangerfield et al. 2019; English et al. 2020). Further, the lives of Black sexual minorities are enhanced by support from the LGBTQIA community and allies as well as resources to combat economic constraints (Balaji et al. 2012; Price-Feeney et al. 2020). Equally salient, people who feel personally empowered tend to experience a better quality of life (Barnes 2023a; Hunter 2010; James and Moore 2005). Moreover, religion, including Christianity, can have a significant influence on their lives. For example, religious affiliations have been correlated with exposure to homophobic biblical interpretations and imagery as well as stigma, resulting in increased internal homophobia (Barnes 2023b; Douglas 1999; Garcia et al. 2016; Pinn and Hopkins 2024; Sorett 2022; Staples 2006; Watkins et al. 2016; Young 2023). Yet certain religious affiliations have been linked to healthier sexual decision-making, personal empowerment, and improved quality of life (Balaji et al. 2012; Barnes 2023a; Dangerfield et al. 2019; Foster et al. 2011; Lefevor et al. 2020; Quinn et al. 2015). In light of these diverse ecologies, this endeavor adds to existing studies by considering how Christian ethics are understood for a group of young Black people with varied sexual identities.

3. Christian Ethics and Sexuality: A Summary

Christian ethics reflects the study of moral life informed by scripture, specifically the Great Commandments in Matthew 22:37–40 to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, and to love your neighbor as yourself. Ethicists consider the degree to which the attitudes and behavior of believers, non-believers, and society, in general, adhere to these principles. Yet the very nature of what can be considered ethical (i.e., ethical as normative or morally good) can be ambiguous, contradictory, and misunderstood in light of theologies, societal influences, and human tendency toward self-interest. This summary documents seminal work about Christian ethics as a means to explore the topic for a cadre of young Black members of the LGBTQIA community.

Niebuhr's (1932) seminal work details the inherent immorality of society in contrast to individual morality and the importance of laws to combat egoistic abuses of power;

“society remains man’s great fulfillment and his great frustration. . .we have noted that self-deception and hypocrisy is an unvarying element in the moral life of all human beings” (pp. 82, 95). Niebuhr’s pragmatic response suggests that sin and self-interest make group-led conflict inevitable; yet human agency, at its best, can turn the tide on immorality. Yet like other White ethicists of his day, his stance on addressing racial injustice was often conservative. Lehmann (1976) suggests that ecologies inform ethics. To know how God expects one to act requires discerning how God is working in the human condition. Thus, ethical decisions that foster *koinonia* (i.e., fellowship or community) are fueled by societal needs as one endeavors to model Christ. Yet Black ethicists contend that emphasis on universal themes is insufficient when examining the diverse experiences of marginalized groups.

Hollinger (2009, p. 171) admits that homosexuality is one of the most divisive issues facing religion that reflects “polarizing hostilities that are not easily overcome [but]. . . we’re not only dealing with an ethical issue; we’re dealing with human beings.” Christian sexual ethicist Thielicke (1964, p. 19) offers a response: “the sexuality of man cannot be explained simply in terms of the biological aspect of his nature (*bios*). . . the biological aspect is thoroughly integrated in the *humanum*; and the *humanum* lives and moves and has its being in the *divinum* (emphasis is his).” But it is common for White ethicists to directly or indirectly frame homosexuality as a problem (Hollinger 2009; Jordan 2002; Thielicke 1964).

Groundbreaking work by Black ethicist Sneed (2010, p. 180) offers a definition germane here: “Ethics is human reflection on moral choices within the realms of human conduct. Further, ethical reflection, as an intellectual discipline focuses on theorizing about the causes, means, and ends of ethics. . .concerned primarily with human endeavors and strivings.” His ethics of openness requires reflection on what should be considered moral, emphasis on humanism, and centers human flourishing, positivity, and peace. For Sneed and others, White Christian ethicists tend to ignore or criticize what constitutes ethical behavior for groups such as Black women and Black sexual minorities. For example, Douglas (2015, p. 50) posits that ethics related to sexuality must “identify the social-cultural conceptions that coalesce to deem the Black body—especially the Black male body—as not just inferior to the White body but as a threat to it. These conceptions depict the Black body as chattel, hypersexual, and dangerous.” And rather than consider sexual diversity a threat, Jordan (2002) challenges ethicists to: focus on how sexual minorities understand ethics; avoid formulaic understandings of behavior; and consider the influence of historicity. He queries, “how can Christian ethics be persuasive, and even authoritative without becoming abusive and even tyrannical?” (Jordan 2002, p. 19).

Womanist ethicist, Townes’ (2006) pivotal research also encourages a focus on particularities that provide context for understanding the nuanced lives of oppressed groups. She invites counter-memories that assess under-studied histories rather than dominant narratives that commodify Black bodies; “Womanist ethical thought. . .explores the magnitude and scope of the diversity of Black identities, so that we do not commit the gross errors of stereotype and sentimentalization that are often forced on our communities” to counter hegemony, homophobia, heterosexism, racism, and intra-racial complicity (Townes 2006, p. 53). When marginalized groups cannot share their stories, the consequences are dire for both them and society (Cannon 2006; Floyd-Thomas 2006), and stall the ability to counter the following ethical quandary; “whatever favorite White advantage was ‘good’ and whatever attended toward Black advantage, Black freedom and rebellion, became a ‘sin’” (Thomas, as quoted in Ross 2006, p. 119).

Similarly, in Cone’s (1997) landmark text, *God of the Oppressed*, he questions Christian ethics that do not require oppressors to be held accountable. For him, Christian ethics must include a liberating dimension that correlates theology and ethics such that ethical decisions are informed by a God-driven imperative to eliminate all forms of oppression. He

posits that biblical stories and the life of Christ provide evidence that God is the God of the oppressed. Like Townes, Cone (1997, p. 184) suggests that a preoccupation with universals means certain societal ills have gone uncontested:

White theologians and ethicists simply ignore Black people by suggesting that the problem of racism and oppression is only one social expression of a larger ethical concern. . . it is an ethics of the status quo. . . despite slavery, lynching, sit-ins, and boycotts, White ethicists have not made the problem of racial oppression a central issue in their theological discourse.

For Cone and ethicists like him, work by Niebuhr and Lehman is valuable but too narrow in its understanding of how ethics can manifest diversely. Germane to everyday sacredness is the value of the voices of marginalized people such that Christian ethics is not distinct from Christian *sexual* ethics because like race, class, and gender, sexuality is a salient dimension of humanity.

Ultimately, more inclusive ethical work means: avoiding absolutes that do not consider the contexts of decision-making; normalizing the experiences of marginalized people; embracing diverse forms of truth telling; accepting accountability for unethical behavior; informing ethics based on real struggles that people face; embracing a liberating imperative; and embedding heritage and historicity in analyses. Additionally, the Black Church must be involved and accountable during this process as “a real conserver of morals, a strengthener of family life, and the final authority of what is Good and Right” (Du Bois [1953] 1996, p. 195). Further, ethics that consider the Black experience will: illumine how religion is practiced and evolves overtime; welcome critical reasoning across social and political domains; refuse to overemphasize piety at the expense of the innate value of humanity; extend grace and mercy to human frailty; and, thoughtfully and equally consider the needs and concerns of all humanity (Cannon 2006; Cone 1997, 2000; Du Bois [1953] 1996; Floyd-Thomas 2006; Ross 2006; Thomas 2004; Townes 2006). But what do Christian ethics mean to young Black sexual minorities? And how does everyday sacredness inform their sentiments?

4. Everyday Sacredness as an Ethos

Everyday sacredness refers to a worldview that enables Black people with diverse sexual identities¹ to embrace a sense of intrinsic value, unconditional self-love, personal agency, purpose, and freedom. The concept emerged during the on-going process of content analysis (refer to the Analytical Approach for a description of this process) of hundreds of interview transcripts and surveys, as my research partners shared their stories. I provide the primary features of this ethos here (for details, refer to Barnes 2023a). For Black sexual minorities here, being true to oneself (i.e., often described as “living or telling one’s truth”) is crucial to holistic living. The resulting wisdom encourages increased honesty with themselves, other people, and with God/Higher Power.

This search for the sacred is continual and includes spiritual, psychological, and emotional reflection; introspection; and, for many people, re-socialization to identify, understand and squelch the effects of negative childhood religious and non-religious experiences (Thurman 1999, 2007). Learning and sometimes unlearning beliefs are key. Everyday sacredness is not conditioned on theological interpretations, religious tenets, or good deeds, but posits that, as one of God’s creation, Black members of the LGBTQIA community are valuable *just because*. Individuals take solace in knowing that God recognizes their innate holiness and will never abandon them—even if members of society do (James and Moore 2005). This stance emerges both attitudinally and behaviorally; it can manifest as quiet certainty about one’s relationship with God/Higher Power and confrontationally in the face of oppression (Allen and Miles 2020; Cone 1997).

The concept extends Scott's (1984) *everyday resistance* to consider how Black sexual minorities understand and intentionally forge positive, empowering racial, sexual, religious, and/or spiritual identities. Everyday sacredness reflects a myriad of often seemingly small ways that sexually marginalized people empower themselves daily. Although it often focuses on individual and group dynamics, it offers correlates between micro- and systemic-level change. Like everyday resistance, everyday sacredness can engender activism and community-building. In contrast, it is driven by spirituality and certain religious tenets that people believe more accurately represent how God envisions them—and thus how they should envision themselves. Ultimately, like tenets forwarded by many Black ethicists, everyday sacredness is reflected in positive, proactive beliefs and choices that shape one's perspective, posture, and body politic in spite of societal attempts to devalue them due to their intersecting, often multiply marginalized social identities (Cannon 2006; Cone 1997; Du Bois [1953] 1996; Floyd-Thomas 2006; Ross 2006; Thomas 2004; Townes 2006).

This ethos also centers scenarios of marginalized biblical characters and historical figures such as the Daughters of Zelophehad and Jarena Lee² whose lives were initially minimized, yet ultimately celebrated. People also reject respectability politics, strict classifications of sexual identities, and mistreatment in church spaces. Yet periodic church attendance,³ prayer, faith in God/Higher Power, gospel music, and inclusive Christian mentors are embraced, but on one's own terms, as people comfortably select rituals, beliefs, and other behavior relevant to their lives (English et al. 2020; James and Moore 2005; Moore et al. 2019). Biblically well-versed, phrases such as "anyone without sin cast the first stone" in John 8:7 and "love thy neighbor as thyself" in Matthew 22:36–40 are particularly salient schemas that inform beliefs and practices.

Yet certain tenets may be in tension with biblical themes when persons largely focus inward—contrary to Christ's model of self-sacrifice. And pre-occupation with self-empowerment contrasts with the biblical emphasis to keep God first, thy neighbor as thyself⁴ and other edicts that encourage agape love-based community-building (Cone 1997; Thielicke 1964). But Christ's model looms large. Like them, He was despised, misunderstood, and rejected for being different; lived and thought outside the box; welcomed and interacted with society's so-called outcasts; and did not express concerns about homosexuality. Ultimately, this mindset encourages individuals to strive to become better people, regardless of their social identities. This study considers everyday sacredness as a possible component of the ethical views of individuals who shared their stories.

5. Describing Diverse Sexual Identities in This Study

In medical research, young Black male members of the LGBTQIA community are often referred to as young Black men who have sex with men or BMSM. A broader, more inclusive concept is used here. Scholars such as Kaplan et al. (2016) and Young and Meyer (2005) critique reductionist binaries and categorizations. Individuals who shared their stories in this analysis did not seem concerned about the concept BMSM as described in the prevention program grant; they had various opportunities to self-identify. Most persons embraced descriptions such as African American, Black, multi-ethnic, transgender, multi-racial, male, female, gay, queer, straight, non-binary, bisexual, gender non-conforming, and, in several instances, human. When provided, their self-definitions are included in thumbnail descriptions with representative quotes. Diverse terms are also used to describe the research partners (i.e., Black persons with diverse sexual identities, Black members of the LGBTQIA community, Black sexual minorities, sexually fluid, people, and individuals). Just as some researchers consider concepts like BMSM problematic, other scholars avoid categories and labels altogether. The goal here is not to mis-identity, mis-gender, essentialize

or erase individuals, but to document the diverse ways they describe themselves and their experiences (Kaplan et al. 2016; Young and Meyer 2005).

6. Beliefs: God and/or a Higher Power and Religion and/or Spirituality

Religion can be broadly defined as a formal set of beliefs, values, and practices under the authority of a non-corporeal entity (for example, God among Christians). Common Christian practices include corporate worship, praying, and reading the Bible. In contrast, spirituality is not typically associated with an organized belief system but rather reflects various practices and beliefs that emphasize humanity's links to the universe and each other (Barnes 2023a; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Religion tends to be formal; spirituality tends to emphasize informality, connections to nature, belief in a Higher Power (not necessarily "God"), self-reflection, personal empowerment, holistic wellness, and self-care. However, many of these same spiritual features can be associated with religion (James and Moore 2005). Important here, one study finds that "47% of queer respondents identified as not religious, while 24% identified as highly religious" (Harris et al. 2018, p. 33). In addition to providing views that can be associated with Christian ethics, individuals self-identify as religious and/or spiritual and acknowledge belief in God and/or a Higher Power.

7. Data, Methods, and Analytical Approach

7.1. Data Collection and Participants

This analysis is based on a sample of 76 young Black people with diverse sexual identities who participated in an intensive prevention program to combat HIV and Hepatitis C in a medium-sized metropolitan city in the United States (U.S.) South. The program was developed to cultivate positive decision-making among young people aged 18–24 years old⁵ to reduce risky behavior and engender healthier sexual, racial, and religious identities. Views about spirituality were an unanticipated program outcome. This project was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the grant-receiving university; all research partners signed consent forms to participate. Recruitment occurred using snowball sampling via flyers, social media, word of mouth, and community partners.

Based on grant requirements, individuals reflected the pre-determined selection criteria of race (African American or Black), self-identified sexual behavior (men who have sex with men or MSM), age (initially 18–24 years old), and self-identified negative HIV status. Participants were screened for eligibility. They were not required to be sexual minorities or provide specifics about their sexual identities beyond the young Black MSM designation for program participation. Demographic data were captured such as sexual identity, gender, race/ethnicity, age, and education. Most persons are Black/African American (97.2%) and 66.2% self-identify as Latinx/Hispanic; 7.0% are transgender (Table 1); most self-identify as male ($n = 61$). About 46.5% ($n = 33$) self-identify as gay, 29.6% ($n = 21$) self-identify as straight/heterosexual, 16.9% ($n = 12$) consider themselves bisexual, and 7.0% ($n = 5$) identify as Other. The average age is 22 years old; 39.4% have earned a bachelor's degree or greater. Slightly over half of the people are unemployed and most are single.

This study is informed by two cross-sectional data sources, a survey provided by the grantor and completed no more than 30 days after program completion between 2016 and 19 (the survey response rate was 47.3%) and in-depth, follow-up interviews with this same group between 2018 and 2019 (75% face-to-face and 25% via telephone). Data collection was required as part of the prevention grant and to document participant experiences for research purposes. The survey consisted of closed- and open-ended questions completed online or via hardcopy. A total of twenty-seven open-ended questions were developed by this writer based on existing scholarship on the Black LGBTQIA experience and understudied

topics for this populace (i.e., religiosity and self-care). Questions focused on demographics, identities, religion, self-care, support, and overall life. Only open-ended questions were posed during the 45 minute to two hours in length interviews that were audiotaped by this writer. Interviews were transcribed by a program member who is a trained transcriber. Data reliability was checked and approved by the program evaluator and this author (the lead investigator). Research partners received \$50 gift cards at program completion and upon survey completion as well as a \$25 gift card after the follow-up interviews. Although generalizability is not the project objective, these results may be broadly germane to segments of this populace in the U.S. (Barnes 2023b).

Table 1. Demographic Information of the Research Partners (N = 71).

	Heterosexual	Bisexual	Gay or Lesbian	Other ¹	Total (%)
N (%)	21 (29.6)	12 (16.9)	33 (46.5)	5 (7.0)	71 (100)
Race/Ethnicity ²					
Hispanic/Latinx	13	7	23	4	47 (66.2)
White	3	2	1	1	7 (9.9)
Black/African American	21	12	31	5	69 (97.2)
American Indian or Alaska Native	3	1	1	0	5 (7.0)
Age					
18–21 years	14	7	15	1	37 (54.4)
22–25 years	3	1	12	4	20 (29.4)
26 years and up	3	4	4	0	11 (16.2)
Gender					
Male	17	10	32	2	61 (85.9)
Female	1	0	0	0	1 (1.4)
Transgender	3	1	1	0	5 (7.0)
Non-binary	0	1	0	3	4 (5.6)
Education Level					
High school	11	6	15	4	36 (54.5)
2-year or technical college	0	1	3	0	4 (6.1)
Four-year college or more	8	5	12	1	26 (39.4)
Employment Status					
Full-time (35+ h)	2	3	14	1	20 (28.6)
Part-time (<35 h)	4	3	6	1	14 (20.0)
Unemployed	14	5	13	3	36 (51.4)
Relationship Status					
Single	18	9	26	5	58 (86.6)
In a relationship	2	1	5	0	8 (11.9)
Separated, divorced	0	1	0	0	1 (1.5)

Key: Demographic data overall are missing for 5 participants. Missing data for each variable are: Race [whether Black/African American] (n = 2), Age (n = 3), Education level (n = 5), Employment status (n = 1), and Relationship status (n = 4). ¹ The Other category includes persons who indicated they prefer not to say, are unsure, or other.

² Participants could indicate more than one racial identity. When identifying multiple races, all persons still identified as Black or African American.

7.2. Research Questions and Analytical Approach

This study focuses on results from the following questions and probes: (1) Do you believe in God, a Higher Power, something else, nothing? Why or why not, explain? (2) How would you define yourself—spiritual, religious, Christian, something else, nothing? If you have to define yourself, what would you say, explain? (3) If anything, what can the Black Church do to help Black MSM? Views about Christian ethics were gleaned from their responses. Readers should note that these queries purposely include closed- and open-ended questions. Moreover, questions do not specifically ask about Christian and/or sexual ethics. The open-ended questions are intentionally broad to provide research partners with the ability to share their stories more broadly in the absence of more leading questions. I contend that this is a strength in the study because individuals offered commentary and solutions directly or indirectly linked to ethics—*despite* the absence of a direct, specific question about ethics. Thus, their comments illustrate a certain degree of discernment about moral imperatives they expect and that are often absent in their lives.

Content analysis was employed to identify emergent response themes and patterns (Mayring 2021; Neuendorf 2016). A two-step process was used to systematically study the data. Initially, during open-coding, concepts such as and related to sexual ethics and everyday sacredness presented in the theoretical framework were categorized and labeled, followed by axial coding, in which connections between these concepts were determined to develop phrases. First, line-by-line coding was applied to uncover frequently occurring concepts (i.e., words) and common verbiage that informed the subsequent analysis. This initial stage was significant to identify whether participants referenced terminology associated with everyday sacredness and ethics that they associated with Christianity and/or sexuality (for example, homophobia, right and wrong) as well as other concepts linked to the study questions such as God, Higher Power, religion, and spirituality. These concepts became part of the codebook used during the next analysis phase. As well as detailing specific ways participants described everyday sacredness and ethical issues, this process enabled frequently occurring phrases to be classified. Brief handwritten notes were also taken during and after each interview to include with the interview information (for example, gestures and laughing).

Next, phrases were combined into groups to develop themes; representative quotes were also identified during this second phase. In several instances, I identified and confirmed certain scriptural “addresses” that were paraphrased by participants. The several data stages used during the analysis provide confidence in the most commonly occurring concepts and themes. This analysis benefits from detailed narratives that include whether individuals embrace God and/or a Higher Power, religion and/or spirituality, and if these beliefs influence their lives. Results, including themes and representative quotes⁶ as well as quotes from ethicists, are provided below. Rather than numerous short quotes, this analysis features in-depth representative quotes that illustrate nuanced assessments of Christian ethics. Pseudonyms and self-defined sexual identities are included (Barnes 2023b).

7.3. Positionality Statement

I am a Black, cisgender female, straight, college professor and clergyperson who lived most of my adult life in the South. I was socialized in an historically Black Church that was unwelcoming to members of the LGBTQIA community. I attended welcoming churches as an adult fostered by the desire to be an ally for sexually diverse family members and friends. I did not disclose my sexual or religious identities to research participants; some of this information may have been known to some participants based on their ongoing involvement in the prevention program on which I served as Principal Investigator (PI), lead administrator, and researcher. Their program involvement meant that many

individuals interacted with me over the course of 4–5 years. This rapport may have made many people comfortable sharing their experiences. Yet differences in sexual identity and age likely influenced how much some people disclosed (Barnes 2023b).⁷

8. Findings

A wide range of topics can be associated with Christian ethics; individuals here focus on three themes that influence their lives as religious and/or spiritual beings. These themes are not mutually exclusive, but rather, each emphasizes a different issue related to the Black Church. In the initial theme, *The Black Church as an Ethical Response: “What a Lot of Folks Need Is Comfort That Who They Are Is Not Wrong,”* individuals describe tensions between what is considered right and wrong around sexuality in Black churches. The second theme, *Agape Love as an Ethical Response: “You’re Okay . . . God Still Loves You,”* challenges Black communities, churches, and families to embrace unconditional love, regardless of one’s sexual identity. The final, more pragmatic theme, *“Holistic Health as an Ethical Response: “People are Attempting to Get HIV on Purpose,”* calls into question healthcare inequities experienced by the Black LGBTQIA community. In addition to representative quotes, thumbnail descriptions describe whether persons self-identify as religious and/or spiritual as well as whether they believe in God and/or a Higher Power.

8.1. *The Black Church as an Ethical Response: “What a Lot of Folks Need Is Comfort That Who They Are Is Not Wrong”*

This theme reflects concerns about negative religious experiences documented in existing research (Balaji et al. 2012; Dangerfield et al. 2019; Douglas 1999; Pinn and Hopkins 2024; Quinn et al. 2015; Sorett 2022). It emphasizes acceptance of homosexuality as an ethical imperative despite the tendency to focus on “right versus wrong” during debates and dialogues on the subject. Representative quotes below by Barron and Jonathan critique religion, in general, and the Black Church, in particular, as well as illustrate the everyday sacredness of sexual minorities. Also, this theme contrasts what Black sexual minorities believe they deserve in churches versus what they believe they receive.

8.1.1. Barron’s Voice About Intra-Racial Mistreatment

Barron, a 24-year-old gay college junior, self-identifies as spiritual and believes in God. He is skeptical that the Black Church can move beyond the belief that homosexuality is wrong to actually support this community:

I don’t think the Black Church will ever be able to help Black MSM because in religion, they are taught that Black men who have sex with men are wrong. It’s a sin and we [the Black Church] try to butter it up by saying, ‘We hate the sin, but not the sinner.’ In reality, we can’t separate the two.

In the above comment, Barron critiques Black churches that compartmentalize people and then reduce them to their sexual behavior. Rather than grappling with the issue, he questions long-standing jargon alluded to in Jude 1:22–23 (i.e., “hate the sin, but not the sinner”) used to justify continued disdain for sexual minorities. These beliefs are based on an unrealistic premise that people’s ungodly actions (i.e., “sin”) can be somehow separated from human frailties (Douglas 1999; Sorett 2022). Barron also critiques the tendency to focus on homosexuality while downplaying or ignoring the reality of racial inequities his community also faces:

Number one, Black people have to stop with this whole Black-versus-gay. When they do that, what they’re talking about is White gays. . . The gay struggle is really the White gay struggle. I’m still a minority. I’m still Black. I think Black people get so caught up on gay-gay-gay and what type of sex I have and start

sexualizing me and grossing themselves out and thinking about whatever. But y'all forget that before you knew I was gay, you saw my skin and saw who I was.

Barron considers it wrong to fetishize and objectify sexual minorities without recognizing that the phenotypical nature of race over sexual orientation means that the former characteristic overshadows the latter as a visually based site of marginalization (Hunter 2010).⁸ Moreover, his critique parallels cautions by Townes (2006, p. 53) against ethics that reflect “dominant cultures invested in a choked status quo. . . [but rather to] maintain the rigorous pursuit of identity as a form of resistance to the fantastic hegemonic imagination—wherever it is found.” For Barron, this unethical, illogical fracture ultimately disempowers the Black community:

The Black Church has to realize you're condemning your own people and it's Black people who will never get our power back if all Black people don't have power. Simple as that. You can't help me if you don't like me. You can't help me if you don't know me. You can't help me if I disgust you or if you feel it's wrong to talk to me, to be nice to me or kind to me. You can't help me.

Per Barron, the inability to embrace its diverse members undermines effective collective mobilization and empowerment in the Black community. Moreover, unchecked intra-racial homophobia has resulted in disdain for the LGBTQIA community and ill treatment in the form of isolation, ambivalence, inhumanity, and lack of support. Barron's critique also suggests that such churches violate a key tenet of everyday sacredness; by undermining the liberties of sexual minorities in the Black community, they are inevitably undermining liberties of members of the Black community, in general.

8.1.2. Jonathan's Voice About Biblical Misinterpretation

A similar stance is articulated by Jonathan, a 29-year-old who self-identifies as bisexual. Jonathan is completing a Bachelor's degree, considers himself both religious as well as spiritual, and believes in a Supreme Being that “cannot be boxed in”. His comment below illumines the intersection of race, gender, and religion and associated societal constraints:

So we know that most of our culture, and our structure of life, not Black, but just being American, is given to us by a White supremacist system. So it's given us a concept that man is supposed to do this, a woman is supposed to do that, this is what you can do, this is what you can't do, this is what you should do, this is what you shouldn't.

In the above remark, Jonathan alludes to Du Bois' ([1953] 1996) double consciousness to make distinctions between a Black reality and the influence of racism (i.e., “White supremacist system”). Per Jonathan, racism as a structural force has shaped societal ethics regarding acceptable sexual and gender roles.⁹ He continues by suggesting that these prescribed roles are codified by faulty biblical interpretations:

Even if somethings they'll quote, Leviticus, or certain Romans. . . They are not understanding that those texts, when they quote them, are being used out of context to what the actual scripture is saying. So they miss the whole point of what the Bible is trying to say altogether. It's that was actually like a harmful thing when they were doing it in Leviticus and Romans, that was a whole system, it was called Qedesha, which is, like, a temple prostitute . . . and so they would basically rape them as worship to their gods. And so the Lord was basically like, ‘We not doing that here’. And so, it wasn't against what you see now. It's completely different. Completely separated.

Jonathan's explanation above alludes to Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, as well as Romans 1:18 and 26–27, which he believes have been taken out of context to criticize the LGBTQIA community by conflating inappropriate sexual behavior such as sanctioned rape of temple prostitutes¹⁰ with homosexuality. By providing the context for how such passages have been misinterpreted, Jonathan warns about the dangers of proof-texting that has resulted in the unsubstantiated vilification of sexual minorities in ways that are neither justified nor biblical. Jonathan offers a similar ethical question to that of Jordan's (2002, p. 38) study on ethics and sexuality about the continued use of the Leviticus passage:

Only a long received tradition of interpretation could lead readers to keep using this story in contemporary discussions of homosexuality. When we stand by such interpretations, we say more about the force of reception, about the persistence of systemics of theological topics, than we do about the biblical text.

In his final comment below, Jonathan offers a reminder of what he considers the primary goal of the Black Church:

If the Black Church would just understand that Christ didn't come for those that are doing well or right—He came for those that are lost. So, if they would help those that are lost in their own communities, they would be better off. Because right now we definitely need it. We getting cut on all sides. HIV, COVID, Trump, everybody just coming for us. Overall I think that they [the Black Church] should support instead of denigrate.

Jonathan suggests that even if people are unaware of these scriptural details, they should be aware of New Testament edicts (example, Luke 19:10) that Jesus Christ came to save all of humanity (i.e., "the lost") with no regard for social identities. For him, rather than being preoccupied with homophobia, the Black Church's time would be better spent addressing the litany of problems the Black community currently faces (i.e., "cut on all sides") due to racism as well as health and political disenfranchisement. And these challenges diminish the Black community overall. The following dual ethical reflections support Jonathan's stance. Griffin (2006, p. 22) asserts, "religion is commonly used within cultures to justify oppression. Often, Bible stories are used to construct theological perspectives that define minority groups as being out of God's favor and deserving of a subordinate status and unequal treatment with the dominant group." Yet Douglas (2015, p. 183) offers a counter-narrative: "God's power respects the integrity of all human bodies and the sanctity of all life. This is a resurrecting power. Therefore, God's power never expresses itself through the humiliation or denigration of another."

This theme emphasizes biblically *biased*, homophobic stances in certain Black churches about what is good versus bad and right versus wrong. It is most common for individuals here, well-versed in the Bible, to critique passages they believe are incorrectly exegeted to condemn homosexuality as well as to provide contrasting scripture. Barron and Jonathan offer alternatives to what could be considered immoral sexual behavior in the Bible that they understand differently (Greenway et al. 2022; James and Moore 2005; Pinn and Hopkins 2024; Sorett 2022). Indicative of everyday sacredness, individuals refuse to be reduced to being wrong, evil, or sinful based solely on their sexuality and questionable scriptural interpretations but embrace a positive view of self—despite detractors. Moreover, central to an everyday sacred stance, they question whether such congregations are being truthful about the impetus for their disdain, intra-racial marginalization, and the tendency to reduce the LGBTQIA community to their sexual identities rather than acknowledging their humanity. For individuals like Jonathan and Barron, Black churches should be conduits that foster and uphold the everyday sacredness of sexual minorities

rather than undermine it, particularly in light of the challenges this group experiences in the wider society.

8.2. *Agape Love as an Ethical Response: “You’re Okay . . . God Still Loves You”*

The Greek word “agape” is mentioned at least 300 times in the Bible. Passages such as John 3:16, I John 4:8, I Corinthians 13, John 13:34–35, and Romans 5:8 describe agape love as unconditional, self-sacrificial love, and the highest form of affection that can be exhibited. Like the initial theme, individuals here are critical of the Black Church. However, this theme (slightly longer than the other two thematic sections) emphasizes agape love as an ethical response. Individuals describe the imperative to show such love to all people, regardless of their sexual identity in three domains—the Black community, the Black Church, and the Black family. For Martin, Seneca, and Corey, part of creating welcoming and affirming spaces, inside and outside congregations, requires African Americans to show unconditional love.

8.2.1. Martin’s Voice About the Black Church

Martin, a 25-year-old, self-identifies as queer and has earned a Master’s degree in gender studies. They recall negative experiences in the Black Church that resulted in their exodus from organized religion:

I don’t go to church, but I do meditate and pray and I listen to a lot of like religious music, ‘cause that’s what I grew up with and so when I listen to music, I feel connected to something higher than myself. . . I don’t go to church partially because I didn’t feel accepted in the church that we went to when I was growing up as a queer person. I felt ostracized. I felt like I wasn’t gonna be accepted.

Martin’s experience reflects the common pattern of “the heteronormative, stereotypical gaze upon the Black queer body” (Sneed 2010, p. 184). Despite feeling unwelcome as a child, Martin continues to enjoy Black Church rituals they have been socialized to embrace such as prayer and religious music (Barnes 2023a; Dangerfield et al. 2019), as well as practices associated with spirituality (i.e., meditation) that can promote solace and contemplation (Barnes 2023a; James and Moore 2005). Moreover, Martin believes churches can be more relevant by offering social support that attends to the emotional and psychological developmental needs of the Black LGBTQIA community:

Church can provide some sort of counseling that’s affirming and supportive. . . when I look back, I sometime wonder what it would have been like. . . if I would be more invested in church if had been in a space where folks saw me, because folks called me queer when I was a kid, so saw me and was just like, ‘You’re okay. That’s okay. God still loves you,’ and were able to help me figure out that journey? I think that’s what a lot of folks need, is comfort that who they are is not wrong and not having to defend themselves all the time. . . some space to come together to figure out what it all means, like to be a Black man who sleeps with men and also to be a part of the Black Church and being able to have that affirming space.¹¹

Self-identified as spiritual, rather than religious, Martin believes in a Higher Power that loves all of humanity (Thurman 1999, 2007). Paralleling everyday sacredness as an ethos, childhood reflections of missed opportunities to experience agape love now prompt Martin to both recognize those emotional gaps as well as love and affirm themselves. Moreover, their remark presents agape love as a universal ethic recognized among Christian ethicists:

In *agape*, I no longer identify the other person with the opposition in which he stands for me; nor do I identify him with his functions . . . I see in him the child

of God . . . man can be empowered to possess *agape* only by allowing himself to receive it from God and so pass it on to his neighbor . . . in *eros* [erotic love] the *worth* of the other person is the object; in *agape*, the *authentic being* of the other person is the object . . . it has a liberating effect (emphasis is his) (Thielicke 1964, pp. 28–33).

For Martin, following this ethical edict means love would not be conditioned on behavior (i.e., “functions”) nor passion (i.e., “erotic”), but unconditional based on authenticity. Moreover, Thielicke’s (1964) distinction is germane here given the many prior studies that seem to emphasize the erotic experiences of young Black members of the LGBTQIA populace (Arnold et al. 2014; Arscott et al. 2020; Barnes 2023b; Douglas 1999; Quinn et al. 2020). Yet individuals who share their experiences here desire unconditional love and acceptance. And like Cone (1997), showing *agape* love, particularly toward marginalized people, reflects God’s special concern for the liberation of such groups.

Martin also imagines what their religious life would be like today, if they had been affirmed rather than ostracized in the Black Church. This ethical quandary illustrates some of the tensions between *what is* and *what should be*, as homophobia and heterosexism in certain Black churches resulted in missed opportunities to love, support, and socialize Black sexual minorities (i.e., “comfort” rather than having to “defend themselves all the time”) during the emerging adult development process (i.e., “help me figure out that journey”) (Arnett 2000, 2014; Berk 2018). In this instance, what is ethical is illustrated by an idealized expectation of the Black Church that stands in tension with the reality of Martin’s experiences. Furthermore, central to this theme and indicative of everyday sacredness is their stance that being Black, queer, and Christian are not mutually exclusive identities, despite views in certain congregations to the contrary.

8.2.2. Seneca’s Voice About the Black Community

Although individuals were specifically queried about how the Black Church could better support the Black LGBTQIA community, it was common for people to discuss the need for unconditional love and support from other groups, specifically the Black family and the Black community. Seneca self-identifies as straight; this 18-year-old college freshman is a Christian. His remark below illustrates an abiding belief in God and religious syncretism common among persons who shared their stories here. Seneca is comfortable embracing Christian traditions such as church attendance, while also understanding the spiritual connections to these same practices:

I do practice organized religion, go to church every Sunday, and participate in those regular things. But it’s spiritual, too, because . . . ever since I started trusting Him . . . something that has been different in my life.

Contrary to individuals who point to homophobia and heterosexism in Black churches as primary factors that de-church sexual minorities, Seneca believes dynamics tied to the emerging adult development process such as employment, school, and self-exploration compete for the time and energy of his peers and undermine church involvement (Arnett 2000, 2014; Berk 2018):

I think it’s happening because normally, at that age, they’re trying to experiment with life and see what they’re actually like. And so that deteriorates their focus from church. And they kinda focus on different things and have a lot going on too, in this time. So, like education, work, and a lotta times, people don’t have time to go to church ‘cause they’re often tired or overworked.

Per his thoughts above, challenges associated with learning, living, and navigating the community and society often prevent Black early adults from being active in church. He

suggests that, rather than being de-churched, his peers have merely paused their religious involvement to possibly re-engage later in life (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). Yet Seneca suggests that if more members of the Black community would show sexual minorities unconditional love, Black churches would follow suit:

Support [what Black MSM need], because a lotta people...believe it's a sin, basically. And that shouldn't be something that should be going on, and I think that if the Black community was like, 'Okay, I understand that, but I'm here for you and I still love you,' then I really believe that that would help them a lot better.

Seneca's comment above places the onus on the broader *Black community* to alleviate negative views about homosexuality by providing a clear message of love, empathy, and support in spite of prevailing adverse sentiments. He considers himself an ally for the Black LGBTQIA community by acknowledging both heteronormativity in the Black community and the imperative for unconditional acceptance (Barnes 2023a; Foster et al. 2011; Greenway et al. 2022). Similarly, ethics calls for this type of love that is not a respecter of persons; "the love of God is above all the love which loves that which is like it. It loves in man the *imago Dei* ... He loves him *nevertheless* ... God does not love us because we are valuable and worthwhile; we are worthwhile because God loves us (emphasis is his)" (Thielicke 1964, pp. 31–32). Moreover, both Seneca's (i.e., "I still love you") and Thielicke's (i.e., "He loves him *nevertheless*") remarks reflect the hallmark tenet of everyday sacred that emphasizes the inherent value of all humanity. For the latter writer, such sacredness comes from God; Seneca expects it to also come from the Black community.

8.2.3. Corey's Voice About the Black Family

Corey, a 19-year-old college student who self-identifies as pansexual, supports a similar need for support—from both Black churches and Black families. According to their initial remark below, the inability for Black Christians to accept their homosexual peers is confusing considering their historic difficulties being accepted by the White community (Arnold et al. 2014; Arscott et al. 2020; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Sorett 2022):

What can the Black Church do? Be more accepting. One thing that baffles me and hurts my heart is that we have these churches who know first-hand how Black people struggled so hard for independence, struggled hard for acceptance, equality. But here we are turning our backs to Black MSMs or Black LGBT people, and it hurts. Because, for instance, 'He who is without sin cast the first stone.'

A college student who considers themselves both religious and spiritual, Corey believes in God. Like many participants here, Corey's biblical literacy is apparent as they reference John 8:7¹² as a reminder that everyone is imperfect and in need of love, grace, and forgiveness. Like Corey, Cone's (1997, p. 189) ethical imperative applied here means, "the behavior of Christians is not decided by rational principles that all people accept as good or right. It is decided by God's act of liberation in Jesus Christ to set the captives free." For Corey, intra-racial betrayal that positions race over sexuality diminishes the entire Black community (Cannon 2006; Floyd-Thomas 2006).

Below, Corey also points to an ethical quandary apparent in such hypocrisy and its prevalence in churches:

There's so many things going on in the church that we know are sinful. Sometimes, these pastors are having illegitimate affairs, illegitimate children. The deacon is sleeping with the first lady (laughing). All of that is going down, but somehow they have created, a notion that one sin is greater than the other. But the Bible says, 'For the wages of sin is death.' So all sin is equal—from my understanding.

Infidelity, children out of wedlock, sexual indiscretions by church leaders—are part of Corey’s critique about duplicity they contend is common in Black churches.¹³ In addition, Corey is critical of the man-made tendency to prioritize certain transgressions over others despite scripture that describes the fallibility of all humankind, as the reason for Christ’s sacrifice:

So, if homosexuality is a sin, then you cheating on your wife is a sin, you cheating on your husband is a sin. You committing crimes is a sin. But you committed crime in the name of Jesus is the . . . if there is a bigger sin, you committing crimes and saying, ‘I’m doing this in the name of Jesus,’ that’s the biggest sin. Because you know good and dang well Jesus didn’t tell you to do that.

Corey’s comment above alludes to bible verses such as Romans 3:23 as a reminder of the sin nature in all people and that God does not prioritize transgressions. They are particularly critical of Christians who use the name of Christ to justify indiscretions.

Yet in their final comment below, Corey describes Black parents who defy heterosexism and homophobia by exhibiting agape love to their sexually diverse children:

Not only is the church not accepting, parents are not accepting. You see it now that some parents are becoming a little bit more accepting. For example, Dwyane Wade and Gabrielle Union supporting their child . . . and it’s so beautiful to see that. I think Dwyane Wade has three different children, and I don’t want to misgender their child, because I know the picture, it said, ‘My girls.’ So I’m not sure if they’re assigned, expressed interest in becoming a woman. And it’s beautiful that Gabrielle and Dwyane are supporting them to the best of their abilities and being there for them. And if there were more parents like that because you don’t have to have over \$50 million, and the means that they have to support their children.

Corey presents the choice by a famous Black couple (i.e., sports figure, Dwyane Wade, and actor Gabrielle Union) to support their transgender daughter, Zaya, who came out at 12 years old (Wade and Union 2020). For Corey, unconditional love and empathy, rather than one’s socioeconomic status, are the only prerequisites for acknowledging and supporting sexually diverse people. To them, such families serve as models for Christians and non-Christians alike (Balaji et al. 2012; Garcia et al. 2016). Similarly, Floyd-Thomas (2006, pp. 7, 12) suggests that ethics should champion such behavior by “constructing knowledge. . . with multiple voices, cultures, and experiences . . . to shed light on the inter-structuring of oppressions that affect and distort all people.”

According to this theme, showing everyone unconditional love is the right thing to do (Floyd-Thomas 2006; Thielicke 1964). Martin, Seneca, and Corey contrast this biblical mandate with ill treatment of sexual minorities they believe is all too common in the Black community, churches, and families (Anderson 2004; Douglas 1999; Sorett 2022). Indicative of everyday sacredness, it is also common for individuals to reference specific scripture to illustrate both God’s and Christ’s agape love for humanity as an overarching tenet that must be present in Christianity, in general, and in the Black Church, in particular. Moreover, this form of love would transform adversaries into advocates and allies in ways that could galvanize the Black community.

8.3. Holistic Health as an Ethical Response: “People Are Attempting to Get HIV on Purpose”

Systemic barriers and inequities tied to locality can undermine the lives and holistic health outcomes of Black members of the LGBTQIA community who face scarcity in terms of healthcare access (Centers for Disease Control [CDC] 2020). Moreover, the disproportionate burden of HIV/AIDS can exacerbate their experiences (Arscott et al. 2020; Raifman

et al. 2019). The final theme reflects a more practical example of Christian ethics, as Andrew and Barry describe challenges and unmet needs (Arnold et al. 2014; Barnes 2013, 2023a; Dangerfield et al. 2019). Central to this theme are concerns that Black sexual minorities do not receive the health-related resources and support they need and deserve; individuals are also critical of Black Church inactivity.

8.3.1. Andrew's Voice About Advocates

Andrew, a 29-year-old college graduate in communications, self-identifies as straight and spiritual. He conflates God and the Higher Power and believes that the Black Church could provide more social and health-related support to the gay community:

It does disappoint me because I see a lot of Black churches, they never speak on stuff like that. They never talk about the high STD rates or the HIV rates that are among Black MSMs particularly. They need to have people sit in places to equip and talk to these young men in these churches. Even if it doesn't come from the pastors. It can come from another church leader. It can come from someone coming to speak from the health department that can talk on their behalf. If you don't feel comfortable talking to the pastor or the deacon or whoever, we have this person, Bob, John, whoever, set up that can be a resource to you.

An advocate for open communication and transparency as well as an ally of sexual minorities, Andrew frames the problem in terms of unaddressed health issues (i.e., "high STD rates or the HIV rates") rather than sexual identity. He recommends that young Black sexual minorities have advocates inside and outside the Black Church, including representatives from the health arena. For him, increased communication by designated church personnel may turn the tide on the disproportionate STI rates in the Black gay community. Moreover, some Black ethicists contend that providing such support for sexual minorities would merely reflect the Black Church's linked fate history (Barnes 2020, 2023a; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). For example, Anderson (2004, p. 311) charges, "I do not require the Black Church to be an advocate for our sexual freedom. I only ask that it not hate us when we advocate for ourselves sexual liberty. I want it to be a refuge for us as it is for all its other members." However, Andrew suggests that both church members and members of the LGBTQIA community have difficulty broaching these subjects. He notes reasons for avoidance among members of the former group:

It shouldn't always be, 'No, we're not going to talk about that. Nope, that's taboo. Nope, we're not going to discuss that.' Because then you're adhering to what society is basically saying about us, about people.

The above succinct comment explains reticence (i.e., continual "no's") as churches both avoid so-called forbidden topics and adhere to societal stereotypes and biases (Garcia et al. 2016; Lefevor et al. 2020; Young 2023). Below, Andrew becomes more specific in his critique:

They're afraid that they're going to lose their membership. They're afraid that they're going to turn a lot of people away. They're afraid that the elders of the church is, because they've been set in their ways, they've probably been members of the church, 20, 15 years. Their family has probably been going to the church forever. They're not going to allow that, that type of new behavior, come up and disturb their church. They feel like it is an abomination or it's not of God. They don't want it there. So, that's where you have that line drawn, where it's like, either we're going to face this problem, or we're going to leave it as is.

Andrew suggests that fear, cultural lag, heterosexism, and homophobia in certain Black churches can mean failure to provide needed support and resources (Dangerfield et al. 2019;

Quinn et al. 2015; Sorett 2022. Similar to Jonathan's views in the initial theme, Andrew's imagery also suggests that such decisions are based on a dichotomous way of thinking about good versus bad lifestyles (i.e., "have that line drawn") informed by commonly referenced Old Testament passages (i.e., Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13) interpreted in reductionist ways that ultimately result in simplistic (i.e., yes or no) decision-making. These choices, informed by church cultural traditions and conservative biblical redactions, justify ignoring the health-related needs of this population and squelching their existence in religious spaces (i.e., "new behavior"). For Andrew, everyday sacredness means that Black sexual minorities deserve support specific to meet their unique needs and concerns simply because they are part of the human race—and the Black community. Also, his observation supports Cone (2000, p. 92) that the Black Church's inability to proactively respond constitutes unethical behavior; "the concerns of the Black church should not be in gaining more members for itself, but only in liberating the victims wherever they are found." In this instance, liberation has real-world health implications.

8.3.2. Barry's Voice About Chaser Communities

Barry is a 24-year-old gay college junior who believes in God but identifies as spiritual rather than religious, argues for holistic healthcare and additional preventive programs. He recognizes the systemic constraints that focus healthcare support on HIV-positive people rather than their HIV-negative counterparts:

I know it's impossible to try to get it [resources] from the CDC [Center for Disease Control] because of all kind of BS [expletive]—but we need more incentivized programs for HIV negative MSM, or people on PrEP, because we know that incentives work. Incentivized programs also work for HIV positive people. That's how we get them into care; that's how they stay in care.

Like the applied nature of everyday sacredness, ethical behavior provides a parallel mandate; "the Christian answer to suffering is both practical and spiritual" (Cone 2004, p. 12). Yet for Barry, awareness of culturally informed healthcare locales can provide support that enables HIV-negative people a greater chance to remain negative as well as help improve the quality of life of HIV-positive people (Philbin et al. 2016; Quinn et al. 2020). His remark above does not suggest support for the former group at the expense of the latter, but that assistance is needed for both (i.e., "incentivized programs"). Yet a cultural shift and change in mindset will be required:

We don't use that same ideology when it comes to negative people ... Y'all aren't helping negative people with the same constraints and disparities that the positive people have in transportation, housing issues, education. I think that's why we have a [growth] in the *chaser community*, where people are attempting to get HIV on purpose because I think some people are so down and out. Even with homeless people. Some homeless people say they prefer to go to jail because at least you get three meals a day, a cot, a warm shower. It's getting to that point. So, I think assisting the community equally ... Chaser community is a ... group of people who seek HIV positive men to have unprotected sex with or risky sex with, in search of obtaining HIV for many different reasons. For sense of community, for sense of support, whether that is financial or anything.

Barry's thought above describes poverty that can result in extreme, dangerous decisions and outcomes based on the intersection of sexuality, race, and socioeconomics. To him, support should focus on justice and equality for HIV-negative people similar to their HIV-positive peers. In the absence of the requisite healthcare support, Barry contends that some people (i.e., "chaser community") may intentionally engage in risky behavior to

secure the health resources available to HIV-positive people that are unavailable to their HIV-negative counterparts. He also suggests that these desperate responses to economic and emotional scarcity place people at increased risk in ways that undermine both their life chances and quality of life (Centers for Disease Control [CDC] 2020; Millett et al. 2012). Like Barry, Sneed (2010, p. 184) calls for the practical effects of a Christian ethic that is “more concerned with providing resources for people to think critically about what constitutes fulfillment in this life.”

Barry points to systemic constraints that undermine needed healthcare and manifest as intragroup disparities in the Black LGBTQIA community. He also notes and critiques unequal treatment and resources across two groups of people—people who are HIV negative and positive. His ethical concerns are less directly related to sexuality and more related to the extreme extent some poor Black sexual minorities may go to acquire health benefits that many people take for granted. Barry’s imagery makes comparisons to impoverished sexual minorities and the homeless community and their dire attempts to make it in society (*National Network for Youth* 2023; Price-Feeney et al. 2020). For him, just as society fails the homeless community, they are failing to provide crucial preventative care to his community.

Many healthcare challenges in the Black LGBTQIA populace are a result of structural and sociocultural barriers, more so than individual behavior (Alessi et al. 2020; Quinn et al. 2020). Andrew and Barry cite healthcare inequities as an unethical dimension of life in the U.S. that disproportionately impacts racial and sexual minorities. Also, culturally competent community stakeholders such as healthcare facilities, pharmacies, doctors’ offices, and clinics often understand and help individuals overcome barriers, stigma, and negligence by health facilities that fail to respond to their diverse needs and concerns (Centers for Disease Control [CDC] 2020; Raifman et al. 2019). Both Andrew and Barry are critical of the lack of diverse community resources for them and their peers. They express concerns about society and churches that tend to provide support to groups deemed acceptable while withholding similar resources from those deemed unacceptable. In this theme, everyday sacredness reflects a well-tuned eye to constraints and challenges specific to young Black sexual minorities. In this way, ethics can be a lens through which everyday sacredness can be assessed. Interestingly, sexual identity (Andrew identifies as straight) does not preclude the ability to critique inadequate systems and organizations that fail to do their part to intervene on behalf of vulnerable groups.

9. Discussion and Conclusions

What constitutes Christian ethics for a group of young Black members of the LGBTQIA community? How have their experiences in Black churches shaped their views as religious, spiritual, and/or sexual beings? This study grapples with these queries. This study is in response, in part, to the paucity of scholarship about the young Black LGBTQIA community that does not center their sexual activity and/or HIV. Findings here suggest the need for more work concerning the everyday lives of this populace, in general, as well as studies that document their everyday sacredness, in particular.

The three emergent themes suggest that Christian ethics must address the mind, body, and spirit. They emphasize the centrality of advocacy, agape love, and holistic health as exemplars of Christian ethics. Themes range from theological to practical, from intangible to more tangible, and suggest a charge to the Black Church by Black sexual minorities to better respond to their diverse needs and concerns (Barnes 2023a, 2023b). For some readers, this indictment is not new; yet findings here offer additional insights about this issue from an ethical lens as well as ways in which ethical concerns undergird the emergence of everyday sacredness as an ethos. Individuals critique what the Black Church is not doing as they describe what *they believe* it should be doing on behalf of a vulnerable population.

Common is the emphasis on ethical dichotomies—right versus wrong, good versus bad, sinless versus sinful. Persons challenge and reject the tendency for the Black LGBTQIA community to be continually included in the latter categories in reductionist ways that go against biblical edicts to love one's neighbor. In this way, being a Christian should manifest in the form of solidarity, advocacy, and allyship, in general, and particularly toward historically oppressed groups (Cannon 2006; Cone 1997, 2000; Floyd-Thomas 2006; Ross 2006; Sneed 2010; Thomas 2004; Townes 2006). Although some of these concerns, particularly in the first theme, have arisen in prior studies summarized earlier in the Literature Review, their framing here as both ethical edicts and factors that precipitate everyday sacredness offers a nuanced, innovative, and timely way to consider the thoughts and suggestions of Black sexual minorities.

Another valuable finding in this study on Christian ethics is the universality of many of the ethical assessments (Lehmann 1976; Niebuhr 1932). People believe that their lives do not deserve to be summarily considered wrong. In addition, they deserve unconditional love and to have their holistic health needs met. Readers should note that these concerns could have just as easily been demanded by any social group—poor people, racial/ethnic minorities, homeless persons, and immigrants—and not Black members of the LGBTQIA community. These findings also illustrate that ethics can have religious and non-religious implications and effects—from intangible spiritual outcomes to tangible health outcomes. Because the individuals here are sexual minorities, this study informs Christian ethics as well as Christian *sexual* ethics. Given the increasingly diverse religious landscape in which we live, fruitful future studies should compare and contrast how contemporary issues may cut across different ethical domains. Mixed-methodological research that includes survey data may also broaden our understanding of overarching principles (Lehmann 1976; Niebuhr 1932) and group-specific outcomes (Sneed 2010; Townes 2006). This study relied on detailed, lengthier representative quotes. Their nuanced, layered reflections lent themselves to a more in-depth analysis of the topic and to better understand a broader scope of individuals' thoughts. As suggested in the current analysis, continued research on intersecting ethics is needed (i.e., Christian ethics and Christian sexual ethics) to further complicate what constitutes ethical attitudes and actions and continue to challenge Christian ethicists to include sexual minorities in their work in more culturally sensitive ways (Hollinger 2009; Jordan 2002; Thielicke 1964).

Findings here differ from existing studies due to the existence and application of everyday sacredness as an ethos. This is quite possibly the most important outcome of this query. Individuals vocalized belief in their innate value regardless of sexual identity as well as deservedness for agape love and health services. They wish to be viewed holistically based on their humanity rather than simply for their sexuality (Barnes 2023b; Dangerfield et al. 2019; Quinn et al. 2015; Sorett 2022; West 1993). Everyday sacredness can be quite applied and practical. In this study, it often helped explain the *why* of individuals' insights. Some sentiments are about sexuality; others are not. Some of their concerns are informed by sexual identity, and others parallel those of young adults during the emergent adult development process (Arnett 2000, 2014; Berk 2018). And just as the Bible has been used to critique them, individuals are comfortable exhibiting mastery of the same text to justify inclusivity, equality, and acceptance. Part of their critiques, and also indicative of everyday sacredness, is the ability to call into question and reject reductionist beliefs about what constitutes sacredness.

The diverse concerns that thematically emerged in this study are also examples of ethical challenges people have faced that, in part, ultimately led to everyday sacredness as a resolution. This sacredness means that individuals value themselves, and that sense of value informs their views about the world in general, as well as a bevy of dynamics

that affect their everyday lives, such as religious challenges, race matters, homophobia, and other societal ills. This lens also fosters self-love as well as the ability to find beauty and possibilities in these same societal spaces. Just as Christian ethics can be used to identify forces that are unethical, everyday sacredness cultivates discernment about various dynamics, including churches, practices, and beliefs, that undermine the ability of Black sexual minorities to live their most liberated lives. In this way, an ethical lens, nuanced by varied experiential prisms, undergirds the ability to live out the features of everyday sacredness. Embracing everyday sacredness opens one's eyes such that they question the ethical stances and outcomes of groups and people that directly or indirectly stymie their ability to experience this ethos.

Ethics also shows up across the three themes in terms of aspirations and expectations, where individuals describe their reality versus idealized versions of biblical principles that encourage unconditional love, hospitality, and positive human engagement. Another common feature of this epistemology is the tendency to compare and contrast experiences in homophobic religious spaces with expectations considered evidence of ethical behavior. It will be important to also continue to investigate the salience of everyday sacredness to illuminate the lived experiences and challenges among other historically marginalized groups.

Many participants here did not specifically use the word *ethics* to describe their views about what is morally correct or incorrect but rather described abiding principles and expectations for systemic change in the Black Church. For them, ethics should show up in everyday situations and spaces in terms of how people are treated (Barnes 2023a, 2023b; Cone 1997, 2000; Thomas 2004; Townes 2006). These results illustrate that sexual ethics are not simply concerns based on sexual identity but also include ethical concerns that affect lives in general. Based on their plans and desires, people want to live their lives, successfully complete the daily round, have and raise children, gain access to healthcare, and participate in church like other members of society—without fear of recrimination. These expectations and aspirations are central to everyday sacredness, and suggest that many of their concerns parallel those of people outside the Black LGBTQIA community. Just as individuals acknowledge exposure to systemic challenges associated with racism, stereotypes, and heterosexism that influence their quality of life, their reflections illustrate resilience, intestinal fortitude, savvy, and wisdom needed to navigate the same potential quagmires. Central to these discerning attitudes and behavior is a belief in their abiding importance as members of God's creation.

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Notes

- ¹ This mindset may possibly be applied to other historically marginalized groups. I focus on Black members of the LGBTQIA community because the analysis of their stories was the basis from which this concept and definition emerged.
- ² James and Moore (2005) suggest that the challenges and experiences LGBTQIA persons face mean they can be considered griots in the Black community, “homosexuals (lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered persons included) are more spiritual than other (not-so-gay or lesbian) people If we truly are the shamans of our generation, it’s time we stepped up to the plate and walked worthy of the vocation wherein we are called. Ache!” (pp. 21, 26).
- ³ Henny et al. (2018) describe gay-affirming attitudes and behavior among BMSM. Research shows the benefits and importance of spaces where persons who are Black and LGBTQIA do not have to downplay their multiple identities.
- ⁴ Refer to the Great Commandments in Matthew 22:35–40, Mark 12:28–34, and Luke 10:27.
- ⁵ Due to the timing of birthdays and/or continued participation in the program, a small group of participants were over the age of 24 years old when interviewed. Given the overall small sample size, I elected to retain them in this study.
- ⁶ Several lines from longer quotes are taken from Barnes (2023a).
- ⁷ The remaining research team consisted of a program evaluator (female researcher, undisclosed sexual identity); two male, self-identified gay field workers who facilitated the preventions; and a female, self-identified queer graduate student who performed data transcriptions. Each team member had prior experience working with the young Black LGBTQIA community and received extensive training from the grantor and PI before their involvement in this study.
- ⁸ I refer to the tendency to prioritize race matters over other forms of social inequality as “cause competition” (Barnes 2006).
- ⁹ Moreover, relevant to the current analysis on ethics, racism also undermines a Womanist ethic that is in “pursuit of the authentic and varied identities in Black lives. . . to avoid creating a monolithic identity that fails to represent the true heterogeneity of Black life in the U.S.” (Townes 2006, p. 53).
- ¹⁰ References to Qedesha are found in Deuteronomy 23:17–19, I Kings 14:24 and 15:12, and 2 Kings 23:7.
- ¹¹ Part of this quote is included in Barnes (2023a).
- ¹² The passage in John 8:1–11 focuses on Christ’s challenge to a group of men who accuse a woman of adultery to remember their imperfections, show her mercy, and forgive.
- ¹³ Niebuhr (1932, p. 95) offers a sobering reason for this pattern as a hallmark of unethical behavior: “perhaps the most significant moral characteristic of a nation is its hypocrisy.”

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Article

To Build a Contextual Christian Ecological Ethics in China: A Response to the Encyclical *Laudato Si'*

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Abstract

Drawing on the encyclical *Laudato Si'* issued by Pope Francis in 2015, this paper sketches a Christian ecological spirituality for Chinese cultural contexts. The paper first examines the meaning of ecological spirituality, analyzing its deep biblical roots and subsequent theological implications. It then develops a contextual Christian ecological ethics by exploring the significance of *Laudato Si'* for ecological spirituality in China in conversation with the cultural and philosophical resources of China. The paper argues that ecological spirituality is neither external to Christian ethics nor an ad hoc Christian response to ecological accusations and crises. Rather, ecological spirituality lies at the core of Christian faith and scripture, embodying a deep understanding of the organic and interconnected relationship between God, the natural world, and human beings. With deep Christian roots, ecological spirituality possesses abundant resources in the Bible, the Church Fathers, and the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions. The Christian doctrines of creation, trinity, incarnation, and eschatology, as well as Christian sacramental theology all demonstrate ecological dimensions. Thus, the Christian faith, as evidenced by the encyclical *Laudato Si'*, can respond decisively to the ethical challenges posed by contemporary ecological crises, especially in deep dialogue with local traditions such as the wisdom resources of China.

Keywords: ecological spirituality; ecological theology; *Laudato Si'*; contextualization

1. Introduction

This paper lays the groundwork for a Christian ecological spirituality in China, especially in conversation with the encyclical *Laudato Si'* issued by Pope Francis in 2015. It first looks at how ecological spirituality is inherently embedded in the Bible and was continuously interpreted, enacted, and enculturated by Christian theologians in different eras and places. It then discusses the positioning and meaning of ecological spirituality (and ecological theology in a broader sense) within the framework of Christian ethics, finally looking at how Christian thought can draw upon Chinese cultural resources to respond to ecological problems in modern times. In general, this paper takes up three questions: Firstly, why should we look to ecological spirituality rather than ecological theology when faced with contemporary ecological crises? Secondly, how can we infer the ecological implications of central Christian doctrines such as creation, incarnation, and work? Thirdly, how can Christian ecological spirituality take root in Chinese philosophical and cultural traditions and thereby foster an intercultural Christian ecological ethics in China?

International academic research on *Laudato Si'* has focused on its definition of “the human,” exploring the tension between traditional Catholic anthropology and modern ecological ethics (Edwards 2016; Grey 2019).¹ For some scholars, this extends to deeper challenges regarding the Church’s self-understanding and the concept of revelation (Gruber 2017).² For other scholars, theoretical explorations converge on spirituality and practice, as they have examined how the encyclical guides an ecological lifestyle connected to faith, practice and spiritual transformation (Messias 2024).³

Within contemporary Chinese academic discussions of environmental ethics, some scholars have looked to universal ethics for the general principles and norms governing the relationship between humans and nature (Bian 2024; Tang 2025; L. Zhang 2025).⁴ However, significant research gaps remain in analyzing “cultural traditional consciousness” and responding to specific ethical needs within the Chinese cultural context (Li 2023; Yang and Li 2025).⁵ Since environmental problems are deeply rooted in human understanding of nature, life, and transcendent existence, an ethics that incorporates both religious consciousness and cross-cultural (contextualized) awareness is necessary, one that respects the profound wisdom of nature embedded in different cultural traditions and therefore provides a more inclusive and practical response to global ecological crises.

Dialogue between Christianity and Chinese culture in the field of environmental ethics holds special promise. On one hand, concepts within the Christian tradition such as the universal communion of all creatures resonate deeply with the cosmological vision of the unity of heaven and humanity (天人合一 *tian ren he yi*) in Chinese philosophy, transcending the narrow perspective of anthropocentrism and offering cross-cultural ethical resources and support for building a “community of human and natural life.” On the other hand, such dialogue helps to activate traditional ecological wisdom, enabling its contemporary interpretation and transformation through mutual learning with Christian ecological theology.

2. The Transition from Ecological Theology to Ecological Spirituality

Ever since the mid-twentieth century, as ecological issues have become a common crisis for humankind, scholars have investigated their ideological and cultural roots. Some have accused the ethical tradition of Christianity (White 1967; Sayem 2021; Wojcik 2023; Kaell 2025),⁶ maintaining that certain key concepts in the Christian tradition, when combined with modern rationalism and scientism, constitute the ethical and cultural roots of the current ecological crisis. According to these critics, Christianity is to blame in at least four ways. First, the Almighty God of Christianity is absolutely transcendent, the world his free and accidental creation, with humans at center and apex, representatives of God to keep and manage the things of creation; as a result, Christianity fosters a master-slave relationship between humans and nature, with the latter as a mere means of management and use.⁷ Secondly, in opposing pantheism as idolatry, Christianity removed sacredness from creation, making nature a secular and secondary thing to be used by humans. Thirdly, because of the Christian view of history centered on the incarnation of Jesus and his second coming, Christians tend to conceive an ideal world to come in the “last time,” rendering natural things and social orders of mere instrumental value. Finally, the modern rationalist Christian tradition interprets the “*Imago Dei*” of the Bible as human rationality, largely ignoring the affective and subconscious dimensions of humans, thereby engendering scientism and anthropocentrism, which, when combined with recent technological achievement, has triggered the contemporary ecological crisis.

Due to these critiques and growing ecological issues, Christian theologians began to articulate ecological theologies in the latter twentieth century (White 1967; Moltmann 1985; T. Berry 1988). In contrast to ecology more generally, ecological theology does not focus

on specific ecological issues, scientific and technological interventions, or public policies and regulations. Rather, originating in the basic doctrines of Christian faith, ecological theology grounds ecological awareness and responsiveness in the structure of Christian theology, also developing a social-theological movement (through the social entity of the Church) to support sustainable development goals.

By and large, Christian ecological theology has been “problem-oriented,” guided by the ecological problems faced by humankind; in doing so, it has drawn ecological wisdom from the ancient resources of Christianity to discover cures for humanity, society, and nature, while also revising and renewing Christian theology. Ecological theology has also been “ecumenical-oriented,” refusing to confine itself to specific denominations or to concern itself with denominational disputes, rather encompassing a wide range of theological traditions and reinterpreting the ancient resources of Christianity from an ecological perspective (Bartholomew 2012; Li 2023).⁸ Finally, Christian ecological theology has been “dialogue-oriented,” fostering deep dialogue among the cultural traditions of the world, as ecological care is central to all cultural traditions (Kaoma 2013; Ho 2016).

Due in part to its “problem-oriented,” “ecumenical-oriented,” and “dialogue-oriented” nature, Christian ecological theology has become one of the most dynamic fields of Christian theology. Moreover, since ecological issues relate to core Christian doctrines, these issues have offered opportunities for the renewal and transformation of Christian theology.⁹ Nevertheless, we argue that ecological theology needs to advance into ecological spirituality for four main reasons.

Firstly, to deal with ecological problems in a comprehensive manner, Christianity should not only answer the question of “how to see” ecological crises but also address the problem of “how to do.” Broadly speaking, ecological spirituality is a branch of ecological theology; however, whereas ecological theology promotes “knowing,” ecological spirituality urges “doing,” emphasizing the dimension of life practice, which is the “life philosophy” of Christianity. In exploring the ancient wisdom of the Christian tradition, ecological spirituality underscores how Christian faith can be enacted in the daily lives of believers. Upholding the Chinese maxim to “Reach to the highest and brightest limits, and make focusing on the familiar [中庸 *zhong yong*] their way” (极高明而道中庸),¹⁰ ecological spirituality can transform the worship of God, the imitation of Christ, and the union with the Holy Spirit into daily and relational practices. Indeed, just this was stated by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*:

more than in ideas or concepts as such, I am interested in how such a spirituality can motivate us to a more passionate concern for the protection of our world. A commitment this lofty cannot be sustained by doctrine alone, without a spirituality capable of inspiring us, without an interior impulse which encourages, motivates, nourishes and gives meaning to our individual and communal activity. (Francis 2015, no. 216)

Secondly, although ecological theology responds to ecological dilemmas with rigorous theological argument, ecological spirituality tends to be more constructive in persuading and guiding people to live ecologically sound lives. Put simply, ecological theology is a system of mind-learning, whereas ecological spirituality is a practice of life-cultivation.

Thirdly, in comparison to ecological theology, ecological spirituality is closer to traditional Chinese thinking and spirituality. In general, spirituality has become an area of interreligious dialogue due to its openness and practicality (Jenkins et al. 2017). More specifically, the ecological dimension and practical orientation of Chinese traditional culture commend the transformation of ecological theology into ecological spirituality (Francis 2015, no. 63).

Fourthly, ecological spirituality points more directly to ethical practice and public participation than ecological theology. Ecological theology often stops at conceptual reinterpretation, while ecological spirituality nurtures an inner drive to transform lives and motivate action. A theologically informed public discourse is capable of “naming,” “shaping,” “orienting,” and “negotiating” public issues (Mok 2026). Ecological spirituality, by contrast, motivates a transformative power that reenvision the relationship between humans and nature, shapes the ecological worldview of believers, and guides ethical decisions consistent with faith. From this perspective, the construction of ecological spirituality is foundational work that cannot be bypassed in building a contextual Christian ecological ethics in China.

In these four ways, the encyclical *Laudato Si'* can be regarded as a “classic text” of ecological spirituality (Miller 2017; Pasquale and Perry 2019).¹¹ Named after the hymn of St. Francis, the traditional environmental-protection saint of the Catholic Church, *Laudato Si'* reinterprets the Bible from the perspective of ecological spirituality, also engaging the intellectual resources of the Orthodox Church. It offers a comprehensive analysis of economic and social problems, an incisive diagnosis of these problems from the perspective of Christian theology, and practical political and economic action plans to cure these problems. More importantly, it forwards novel interpretations of several Christian doctrines, encouraging Christians to apply them in their daily spiritual lives, to develop eco-friendly ethical practices, and to make real contributions to the sustainable development of the world.

This paper now analyzes *Laudato Si'*, focusing on its biblically rooted understanding of creation, incarnation, and sabbath, showing how these interact with Chinese ecological philosophy, then sketching a Chinese Christian ecological spirituality.

3. Communion Between God and All Beings: Doctrine of Creation and Its Implication for Ecological Spirituality

In establishing an ecologically oriented and biblically rooted spiritual ethics, *Laudato Si'* turns to the creation narratives of Genesis, focusing on the communion between God and all beings, between humans and nature, and between each creature of nature. The following section of this paper is structured accordingly.

3.1. Communion Between God and All Beings

In traditional theological understanding, God creates all things from nothingness (*creatio ex nihilo*), transcending creation in absolute power and freedom, as is stated in the Ten Commandments: “You shall have no other god before me” (Exodus 20:3). For the critics of the Christian faith, this theological claim allegedly served not only to demystify nature but also to treat it as an object of instrumental value at the disposal of humans. To counteract this criticism, *Laudato Si'* emphasizes the communion relationship between creator and creation, reflecting the deep theological tradition of *perichoresis*.¹²

For starters, the encyclical points out that the Christian tradition uses the term “creation” rather than “nature” to refer to the world around us, implying a relational significance: “Creation can only be understood as a gift from the outstretched hand of the Father of all, and as a reality illuminated by the love which calls us together into universal communion” (Francis 2015, no. 76). To take the world as “creation” is to take it relationally, as “gift and love” rather than as tool or object.

The communal relationship between all beings and God goes both ways. On the one hand, God is in everything: “The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely” (Francis 2015, no. 233). Thus, there is a “continuity of being” between God’s creation and God, as captured in St. Augustine’s affirmation of the traces of the Holy Trinity left by the Creator on everything.¹³ In quoting the teachings of John the Cross, the encyclical goes a step

further, declaring: “This is not because the finite things of this world are really divine, but because the mystic experiences the intimate connection between God and all beings, and thus feels that “all things are God” (Francis 2015, no. 234). From the perspective of reality, things are not gods and cannot be the objects of worship; from the perspective of spirituality, however, things cannot be separated from God and therefore offer a pathway for the spiritual experience of God’s divinity. In this sense, every thing is the spiritual companion of human beings.¹⁴

On the other hand, all things are in God, though not in a way that causes them to lose their own existence. According to the encyclical, “God is intimately present to each being, without impinging on the autonomy of his creature, and this gives rise to the rightful autonomy of earthly affairs” (Francis 2015, no. 80). Although God is present in all things, this does not drown out or swallow up their beauty; rather, it ensures the existence and growth of each being. In this way, all things in nature are God’s “art,” which is engraved in things.

3.2. Communion Between Humans and Earth

When discussing the relationship between humans and the earth, *Laudato Si’* refutes accusations against the Christian tradition that seize on the terms “subdue” and “dominion” in Genesis 1:26–28 to argue that the Bible licenses human domination of creatures and creation. To counter this claim, the encyclical draws inspiration from contemporary Biblical studies, rediscovering the ecological-ethical tradition of Christian theology and developing a communal relationship between humans and the earth from the perspective of ecological spirituality.

The earth is, first of all, a “gift of love” to humans by the creator God. Existing before humankind, the earth was given to humankind (Francis 2015, no. 67). Humans are products of the earth, as our bodies come from and return to dust (Gen. 2:7). Humans are constituted by the elements of the three-tiered cosmos of God’s creation—air, water, and land: “our very bodies are made up of her elements, we breathe her air and we receive life and refreshment from her waters” (Francis 2015, no. 2). The earth itself is the product of water splitting from air, land is formed when the sea recedes, and humans are molded from the dust of the earth.

Secondly, the mission of humans on earth is “to dress it and to keep it” (Gen. 2:15). Although there are two different creation stories in Genesis, with different textual sources and provenances and different theological understandings of humankind’s mission in creation,¹⁵ they are mutually interpretative, with the “to dress it and to keep it” of the second narrative (Gen. 2:15) mirroring the divine mission of “governance and management” in the first (Gen. 1:26–28). According to the encyclical, “to till” means to cultivate or work a piece of land, while “to keep” means “to care, protect, oversee and preserve.” Together, they entail a reciprocal relationship of responsibility between humanity and the natural world (Francis 2015, no. 67).

Finally, Christian theological understanding of the biblical “*Imago Dei*” as rationality suggests that humans should observe the laws of nature and respect the complex balance between all created beings (Francis 2015, no. 68). According to the encyclical, keeping a state of balance in creation means that everything has its own intrinsic value such that “we can speak of the priority of being over that of being useful” (Francis 2015, no. 69). It also shows that everything is interconnected: “that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice and faithfulness to others” (Francis 2015, no. 70). Moreover, the highest level of respect for the complex balance of creation is to invite all things to join in the worship and praise of the creator (Francis 2015, no. 72).

3.3. The Communion of Each Creature Within All Creatures

Laudato Si' also clearly points out that everything in nature exists within a universal net with everything else. This interrelationship is due to the fact that everything maintains a connection with God, as a “caress of God” (Francis 2015, no. 84). In quoting the bishops of Japan, the encyclical claims: “to sense each creature singing the hymn of its existence is to live joyfully in God’s love and hope” (Francis 2015, no. 85). This universal relationship is manifested in the mutual complement of all things. Existence is a relationship; the diversity of each thing lies in its relationship with every other thing (Francis 2015, no. 86). The meaning of each creature therefore resides not only in its engagement with the integrity of the world created by God but also with each other, as that which each creature lacks is completed by something else. No creature is self-sufficient; we exist in mutual interdependence, complementing each other and the whole (Francis 2015, no. 86). Thus, there is a deep identity between our search for our inner selves and our understanding of everything outside us. In quoting Paul Ricoeur, the encyclical states: “I express myself in expressing the world; in my effort to decipher the sacredness of the world, I explore my own” (Francis 2015, no. 85). In every creature, we can listen to the “mysterious and quiet voice” of God (Francis 2015, no. 85).

To sum up, the encyclical *Laudato Si'* builds a theological and philosophical foundation for ecological spirituality with relationship and communion at its core. According to this understanding, the world is an interconnected whole, continuous, dynamic, and organic. This bears resemblance to the Chinese Buddhist and Confucian understanding that creatures not only exist in a mutual relationship with their creator of “non-obstruction between the creatures and reality” but also contain each other within themselves to form a “non-obstruction between creatures.”¹⁶ This integral perspective renews our understanding of the created order, while also proposing an ethical mission for humanity to live out holistic care in communion with all creation.

Based on this understanding and ethics, the goal of “seeking the face of God” through Christian spiritual contemplation cannot exclude the integral relationship between humans and nature. Here, the cultural resources of the Confucian tradition are especially useful for the ecological spirituality of Chinese Christians, as reflected, for example, in the Neo-Confucian Cheng Hao’s (1032–1085) pronouncement: “The person of *ren* forms one body with all things without any differentiation.”¹⁷ In fact, this idea of “one body with all beings” was already present in pre-Qin Dynasty schools of thought. As the late-Zhou Dynasty Confucian Mencius (c. 372–289 BCE) stated, “All the ten thousand things are complete in me. To turn within to examine oneself and find that one is sincere—there is no greater joy than this.”¹⁸ The late-Zhou Dynasty Daoist Zhuangzi (c. 369–286 BCE) went further: “Heaven and earth are born together with me, and the ten thousand things and I are one.”¹⁹ These ideas later coalesced into a mature philosophy and spiritual system in Song Dynasty Neo-Confucianism, as evidenced by the following argument by the early-Song Dynasty Neo-Confucian Zhang Zai (1020–1077):

By enlarging one’s mind, one can enter into all the things in the world [to examine and understand their principle]. As long as anything is not yet entered into, there is still something outside the mind. The mind of ordinary people is limited to the narrowness of what is seen and what is heard. The sage, however, fully develops his nature and does not allow what is seen or heard to fetter his mind. He regards everything in the world to be his own self.²⁰

Thus, we see how the relationship of inner cultivation and external exploration of the world is not a dichotomy for Chinese philosophers. Whether the human mind can reach the ultimate reality depends on whether it can extend itself to all things. Such a “great person” (大人 *da ren*), as proposed by Ming Dynasty Neo-Confucian Wang Yang-

ming (c. 1472–1529), offers a model of the ideal personality for Chinese Christians engaging in ecological spirituality:

Great people regard Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures as their own bodies. They look upon the world as one family and China as one person within it. Those who, because of the space between their own bodies and other physical forms, regard themselves as separate [from Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures] are petty persons. The ability great people have to form one body with Heaven, earth, and the myriad creatures is not something they intentionally strive to do; the benevolence of their heart-minds is originally like this.²¹

The “great person” extends benevolence (*ren*) to reach not just one’s own relatives, but all people, even animals, plants, mountains, and rocks, all of which constitute one body with the great person. Proceeding from the fountain of “the virtue of life and growth” (生生之德 *sheng sheng zhi de*), the “great person” cultivates the virtue of benevolence (*ren*) to express care and concern for all things, rooting human virtue in the cosmic fecundity of Heaven and Earth (H. Zhang 2023). These ideals of communion between and care for all beings in Confucian ethical and spiritual traditions offer a deep resource for the development of an intercultural ecological spirituality for Christianity in China today.

Of course, the theological grammars of Confucian unity and Christian communion are different. In the Confucian framework, the extension of *ren* implies an ontological continuity wherein individual boundaries are ultimately transcended. Christian theology, by contrast, affirms interconnectedness while preserving relational distinctiveness, with the divine *perichoresis* serving as archetype: the persons of the Trinity are perfectly one yet remain distinct, their unity never erasing unique identity. Applied ecologically, this means that the communion of all beings in Christianity is not fused into an undifferentiated whole, but remains a covenantal relationship of love between distinct subjects. The human person, as *Imago Dei*, retains inviolable integrity, even in profound solidarity with all creatures. Chinese Christian ecological spirituality can therefore embrace the Confucian ethos of compassion for all things without dissolving Christian covenantal responsibility towards God and other beings.

In short, this cosmic communion has ethical implications that prevent it from dissolving into abstract mysticism. As *Laudato Si’* states, “The divine Persons are subsistent relations, and the world, created according to the divine model, is a web of relationships” (Francis 2015, no. 240). The true Logos is not outside nature, but immanent in it (Lam 2025). This is not a nebulous unity that ignores differences, but a moral expectation and responsibility that all things fulfill their own nature and find their proper place. The ethical mandate is therefore clear: the human vocation is to become a conscientious custodian of these relationships, actively nurturing the integrity and balance of the entire created community.

4. “The Incarnated Word” Connecting the Heaven and the Earth: A Christology for Ecological Spirituality

If Christian ecological spirituality remains at the level of “God dwells in all things, and all things interpenetrate with each other,” then it is no different from other religious philosophies, such as those found in Jewish and Islamic mysticism and South Asian and East Asian philosophy. Fortunately, however, the encyclical *Laudato Si’* possesses distinctive Christian characteristics, especially in making its ecological interpretation of Jesus Christ the core of the Christian faith.

Traditionally, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ have been understood with respect to human salvation, with different Christian traditions emphasizing different aspects of this saving work, including the forensic and effective dimensions of justification, sanctification, and deification (*theosis*). Recently, however, Christian theologians have be-

gun forwarding a cosmological Christology with ecological explanations of the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection (Sahinidou 2014). Indeed, *Laudato Si'* clearly provides such ecological-ethical explanations of these three fundamental Christological elements.

What is the ecological significance of Christ's incarnation? According to the encyclical, "For Christians, all the creatures of the material universe find their true meaning in the incarnate Word, for the Son of God has incorporated in his person part of the material world, planting in it a seed of definitive transformation" (Francis 2015, no. 235). Here, the doctrine of the incarnation emphasizes that Jesus is not merely a human person but also a tangible, visible, and bodily substance that is part of the created world. In "the Word becoming flesh," all created worlds are transformed into a dwelling place for God. In this way, the "Christ of the universe" (宇宙的基督 *yuzhou de jidu*) is an ecological Christ. Because of the incarnation of Christ, all things are no longer presented in a purely natural way. Christ will lead all things as the Son when he hands over creation to the Father to reach the final summit of redemption—God becoming "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28).

The cross and resurrection of Jesus are also of ecological-ethical significance. Christ entered the world as a creature, assuming the fate of all creatures. When beings in nature suffer, Christ suffers with them. In the crucifixion of Christ, God takes on the suffering of all beings, with Jesus becoming the weakest of all. The air, earth, and water that are "hurt" by people today are the humble, speechless Jesus on the cross who cries out with "sighs too deep for words."²²

But the cross is not the end, for resurrection is the peak of salvation. The encyclical therefore emphasizes, "It also shows him risen and glorious, present throughout creation by his universal Lordship" (Francis 2015, no. 100). Christ personally shoulders this material world, living intimately among all things, surrounding all things with his love, penetrating into all beings with His light (Francis 2015, no. 221). The resurrected Christ embraces all things in a mysterious way, guiding them towards the fulfillment of salvation. As the encyclical states, "The very flowers of the field and the birds which his human eyes contemplated and admired are now imbued with his radiant presence" (Francis 2015, no. 100). Not only resurrected Christians but everything in nature shines under the glorious light of Christ's resurrection, spiritualized in Christ.

The incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus are not just historical events; they are also continuously realized in every moment of life through the liturgical actions of the sacraments. By calling on the Holy Spirit during the Eucharistic celebration (*epiclesis*), the resurrected life of Christ reenters the world of creation. Through material fragments—bread and wine—the power of the Son reaches not only the inner depths of Christians but also the entire created world where Christians live. Worship centered on the sacrament therefore carries cosmological significance as a celebration drama in which all under heaven and on earth receive grace in praising the Lord together. As the encyclical states,

The Eucharist joins heaven and earth; it embraces and penetrates all creation. The world which came forth from God's hands returns to him in blessed and undivided adoration: in the bread of the Eucharist, "creation is projected towards divinization, towards the holy wedding feast, towards unification with the Creator himself." (Francis 2015, no. 236)

Through the celebration of worship, Christians lead all things to the true light, praising the grace of God. This insight deepens the ethical dimension of worshipping Christians, as ecological leaders who are concerned about the environment and care for all beings.

5. An Ethics of Work Based on the Idea of Sabbath

The ecological disasters and social dilemmas in today's world are inseparable from a basic modality of human existence in nature—work. Thus, *Laudato Si'* also proposes an ecotheology of work, making it a central component of Christian ecological spirituality.

In the Christian ethical tradition, work has profound theological significance, with divine creation referred to as the “work” of God, who created the world through the “work” of his Word. According to the creation story in Genesis 1, the structure of the world is divided into sky, water, and land. In terms of elements, it includes space, time, matter, and energy. In terms of partners, it includes plants and animals (birds, fish, and beasts). As the image and likeness of God, human beings can only realize this nature in relationship with these creatures. Work is a way for people to do this, manifesting themselves as “the image and likeness of God” by participating in God's providential creation of this world.

God orders humans “to dress and to keep” everything on the earth (Gen. 2:15). The full meaning of “to dress and to keep” is protection, care, preservation, and guarding. This shows the basic essence of work—to use human intellect to maintain all the creatures of this world by respecting the laws of nature and sustaining the complex balance between all creatures (Francis 2015, nos. 67–68). As a gift given to humans by God, the earth implies two meanings for work. On the one hand, people can use the earth and their surrounding environment for their own well-being through intellectual and manual work; on the other hand, people can use work to ensure that the earth's sustainable and abundant fruits extend to future generations.

Work, however, suffers alienation on three levels after sin enters the world, reaching its peak under the impetus of modern science and technology, consumerism, and capitalism. At the first level, personal motivation, humans no longer see themselves as a “co-worker of God”²³ but rather begin to satisfy personal desires and to realize personal will against the plan of God's creation. Here, the primary purpose of work becomes the satisfaction of one's desires, not being a “co-worker of God.” At the second level, human–nature relationship, work has become a means of arbitrarily exploiting nature, regarding oneself as “master” of all creatures. Here, people come to measure the value of all things according to their own needs, especially what is “useful” for themselves. At the third level, human–human relationship, work has become a tool for people to oppress others. Here, although people use “reason” to design a set of production methods, economic relations, and trade systems in which everyone plays the role of a worker, the final result is the production of a system in which one group of people become “lord” over and oppress other groups of people.

This distorted ideology of work (on all three levels) results in the ecological deterioration described in the first chapter of *Laudato Si'* (paragraphs 17 to 61). The encyclical therefore returns to the ancient Jewish and Christian tradition of “sabbath,” using it to counter this alienated understanding of work, especially as distorted by industrial civilization and consumer society. Sabbath is not just non-working. It has a broader theological significance. The Sabbath, which in the Christian tradition became the “Lord's Day,” is a day when we “heal our relationships with God, with ourselves, with others and with the world” (Francis 2015, no. 237). It is, first and foremost, a day of liberation: “You will toil and do all your work for six days, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God.... The Lord blessed the Sabbath and made it a holy day” (Ex. 20:9–11). According to the encyclical, rest is not the opposite of creation; rather, it is inscribed in the entire plan of God's creation, in fact constituting the peak of creation. During the six-day work week, people participate in God's creation with work, after which they directly meet the Lord on the Sabbath. In the Jewish tradition, the human soul is like a bride, the Sabbath, a bridegroom, with whom the soul enters into union, like a divine marriage, resting in a state of unity.

During the six-day work week, people make a living by toiling the earth and themselves; on the seventh day, the human soul is freed from the created world and meets God in a state of freedom.²⁴

Sabbath is also an occasion for caring for others, especially marginalized people and livestock, allowing these others their freedom. Thus, the fourth of the Ten Commandments declares, “You and your children, servants, servants, livestock, and foreigners living in your city must not do any work” (Ex. 20:10). This means that rest from work is a universal right that should be universally granted to all servants, maidservants, and sojourners, even those working animals who are disadvantaged in modern society.

Rest should also extend into the arrangements of social and cultural systems, becoming a spiritual concept that permeates all of life. Although the Sabbath day is a seven-day cycle, the Sabbatical year, by extension, is a seven-year cycle, according to which the Bible states:

but the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie still; that the poor of your people may eat: and what they leave the beasts of the field shall eat. In like manner you shall deal with your vineyard, and with your olive yard. Six days you shall do your work, and on the seventh day you shall rest: that your ox and your ass may rest, and the son of your handmaid, and the stranger, may be refreshed. (Ex. 23:10–11)

This Sabbatical year extends the spirit of liberation to the earth and the beasts, allowing rest to become a universal principle and practice. This idea of “Sabbath” extends even further to a “Jubilee” every 50 years (i.e., after 7×7 years), a year in which debts are relieved, land is returned to original owners, and slaves are liberated, thereby recreating an originally just and equal society. This idea of Jubilee is later spiritualized into the full liberation and freedom of human beings, as declared by Isaiah: “to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound” (Is. 61:1–2). In the Christian theological tradition, the spirit of the Jubilee was extended to the concept of the “Millennium,” a kingdom during which creation would attain “peace” between humans, between humans and their natural companions, and between humans and God.

Sabbath/rest is therefore the core of ecological spirituality. Work is how we draw from the earth the necessities of life, while Sabbath enables us to dwell joyfully upon the earth. Sabbath is both a temporal arrangement and a festival institution, yet it is even more a spirit of freedom, peace, and justice. As stated in *Laudato Si'*, the system of rest ensures the balance and fairness of our relationships with others and the land on which they live and work, “an acknowledgment that the gift of the earth with its fruits belongs to everyone” (Francis 2015, no. 71). Rest allows Christians to recognize the rights of others, to care about the poor, and to care about nature. In this sense, contemplative rest “is another way of working, which forms part of our very essence” (Francis 2015, no. 237).

With rest as its essence and goal, a theology of work must become an integral part of Christian ecological spirituality. In the context of Chinese culture, the Daoist understanding of nothingness (无 *wu*), tranquility (静 *jing*), and emptiness (虚 *xu*), especially as later absorbed by Neo-Confucians, provides an important cultural resource for this kind of Christian ecological spirituality. For example, the Daoist wisdom of “Governance through Non-interference” (无为而治 *wu wei er zhi*)²⁵ and “Attain Utmost Emptiness, Purest Calm” (致虚极, 守静笃),²⁶ both as found in the *Dao De Jing*, offer an indigenous philosophical and spiritual resource to elaborate the creative significance of Sabbath. With the later convergence of Confucianism and Daoism into Neo-Confucianism, “activity” and “stillness” were understood as the mutual origins of one another: “activity and stillness alternate; each is the basis of the other.”²⁷

This Chinese philosophy can be reinterpreted and integrated into the Christian ethical and spiritual idea of Sabbath/rest. In turn, these traditional Chinese cultural resources, in entering into the Christian tradition of Sabbath, will acquire new meanings and be imbued with new vitality, creatively transformed by Chinese Christian ecological spirituality.

6. Conclusions

Although ecological concerns have only recently become a central focus of Christian ethics, ecological spirituality is neither foreign to Christianity nor an ad hoc response of Christian theologians to recent accusations and crises. Rather, Christian ecological spirituality lies at the heart of Christianity. Christian ecological spirituality does shed new light upon our understanding of the relationship between God, nature, and humans in an ecological, organic, and interconnected way. Nevertheless, it is not a recent invention but is inherent in the Christian Bible, the Old and New Testaments of which have a profound ecological–spiritual orientation (not to mention the rich theological resources of the ancient Church Fathers and the later denominational traditions). Ecological spirituality is embedded in Christian ethical life and its core doctrines concerning creation, Christology, the Trinity, and the sacraments. *Laudato Si'* shows that all these resources can help Christians respond to contemporary ecological crises, fostering new vitality in their ethical and spiritual lives in communion with the Triune God. This ecological spirituality can be further vitalized through the inspiration of Chinese cultures and philosophies, developed into an intercultural Chinese–Christian ecological ethics and spirituality that contributes to the sustainable development of the world.

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Notes

- ¹ Denis Edwards systematically outlines three theological threads concerning the “natural world” in *Laudato Si'*—the intrinsic value of other creatures, other creatures as a locus of divine revelation, and the “sublime communion” between humanity and all creatures in God; see (Edwards 2016). Carmody Grey confronts the tension between the anthropocentrism of the Second Vatican Council’s *Gaudium et Spes* and the intrinsic value of all creatures affirmed in *Laudato Si'*, drawing on the traditional concept of the human being as microcosm to reconcile this divide; see (Grey 2019).
- ² Judith Gruber proposes “ecosystem” as a metaphor for understanding church–world relations, subverting the traditional linear and unidirectional view of the Church, instead focusing on how ecclesial tradition is shaped in interaction with ecology; see (Gruber 2017).
- ³ Teresa Messias astutely captures the semantic evolution of the concept of “spirituality”—from a religiously exclusive category to one shared in secular contexts—arguing that *Laudato Si'* has fostered an “ecospirituality,” the spiritual insights of which are suggestive for interreligious dialogue; see (Messias 2024).
- ⁴ Bian Jingyi reviews the theoretical lineage of modern ecological ethics, analyzing the “paradigm debate” between anthropocentrism and ecocentrism and proposing a “paradigm shift” through the concept of “a community of human and natural life”; see (Bian 2024). From the perspective of environmental virtue ethics, Tang Jianbo explores how to rethink core questions such as “what kind of person should one become” and “what is a good life,” doing so within the vision of an ecological community; see (Tang 2025). Zhang Lin focuses on the debate between the paradigms of anthropocentrism and non-anthropocentrism,

pointing out that both are “based on the confrontation between humans and nature” and therefore exhibit a crisis of humanity characterized by the “absence of the human”; see (L. Zhang 2025).

- 5 Although the Chinese academic community has recognized the importance of Chinese cultural traditions, this work remains at an exploratory stage. In an interview, Yang Tongjin reviews the development of Chinese environmental ethics, pointing out that deepening current research requires accelerating the study of the philosophical foundation of “harmonious coexistence between humans and nature” and exploring the resources of traditional Chinese environmental ethical thought; see (Yang and Li 2025).
- 6 The pioneering critique by Lynn White Jr. in his seminal 1967 article “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis” directly challenged the “Judeo-Christian tradition,” arguing that its anthropocentric doctrine—which posits human dominion over nature—fostered exploitative attitudes toward the environment; see (White 1967). Decades later, the debate initiated by White remains vibrant and unresolved. As Abu Sayem observes in his 2021 retrospective, White’s thesis continues to serve as a “touchstone” in discussions of religion and ecology, and White’s claim that “Christianity bears a huge burden of guilt” remains a potent and challenging proposition, even if often subjected to simplified criticism; see (Sayem 2021). Wojcik’s (2023) cross-cultural study tests the “Lynn White Hypothesis” against the “Big Gods Hypothesis,” revealing a complex and paradoxical relationship in which personal religiosity sometimes fosters pro-environmental attitudes, even while denominational affiliation does not; see (Wojcik 2023). Theoretical interventions such as (Kaell 2025) also engage White’s legacy, critically reexamining how Christian ethics structures human–nature relations.
- 7 For Church Fathers such as John Chrysostom, all things revolved around human beings as their center. As Chrysostom wrote, “As evidence, after all, that every-thing was placed under the human being’s control, listen to Scripture saying, ‘He brought the wild animals and all the brute beasts to Adam to see what he would call them.’ And seeing the animals near him, he didn’t shrink back, but like a master giving names to slaves in his service, he gave them all names.” See (Chrysostom 1986, p. 122).
- 8 Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of the Eastern Orthodox Church, a significant promoter of contemporary ecological theology, embodies this cross-denominational orientation; see (Bartholomew 2012). For the most recent Chinese academic research of Orthodox ecological theology, see (Li 2023).
- 9 The Chinese translation of Jürgen Moltmann’s *God in Creation: An Ecological Doctrine of Creation* has opened a trend of Chinese inculturation of Christian ecology; see Moltmann (2002); also see Moltmann (2015) (*The Living God and the Fullness of Life*).
- 10 Thus exemplary persons (君子 *jun zi*) prize their natural tendency towards excellence (德性 *de xing*) and practice the way of study and inquiry, extending this path to the furthest quarters and exhausting its every detail; see (Ames and Hall 2001, pp. 108–9).
- 11 Since its promulgation, *Laudato Si’* has elicited extensive and deep response across multiple disciplines, establishing itself as a canonical text in the dialogue between contemporary Catholic social thought and global ecological ethics; see (Miller 2017; Pasquale and Perry 2019).
- 12 *Perichoresis* is a theological term denoting the mutual indwelling and interpenetration of the three divine persons of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—each person fully containing and contained by the others while remaining distinct; it extends to the interconnection of all beings as “vestiges of the Trinity” (*vestigia Trinitatis*). For the historical study of *perichoresis*, see (Harrison 1991). For a general review of *perichoresis* in recent theology, see (Otto 2001).
- 13 For the consequences of a trinitarian understanding of nature for ecological theology, see (Florio 2015).
- 14 Here, it is necessary to distinguish panentheism from pantheism. Christian ecological spirituality affirms that the world exists in God, but is not itself God. As *Laudato Si’* states, God is intimately present to each being, without impinging on the autonomy of his creature (Francis 2015, no. 80). God is the transcendent Creator who calls the universe into being *ex nihilo*, whereas the reverence Christians show to nature is directed toward the *vestigia Dei*, the traces of the Creator in creation, which cannot be confused with the divine essence.
- 15 For the connections between the two creation stories of Genesis, see (Fried 2019; You 2016, pp. 164–65).
- 16 The two terms *li shi wu ai* (理事无碍) and *shi shi wu ai* (事事无碍) originate from Huayan Buddhism. *Li shi wu ai* (理事无碍) means “non-obstruction between reality [*li*] and creatures [*shi*],” indicating that ultimate truth and worldly manifestation interpenetrate without conflict. *Shi shi wu ai* (事事无碍) means “non-obstruction between all creatures,” expressing the idea that all things interpenetrate harmoniously within a unified reality. For an interreligious dialogue between Christian *perichoresis* and Huayan Buddhism, see (Lai 2004). For a general study of Huayan Buddhism (华严宗 *Huayan Zong*), see (Cook 1977).
- 17 仁者与天地万物为一体 (Chan 1963, p. 523). The person of *jen* (仁者 *ren zhe*) is the Confucian ideal of one who has fully cultivated *ren* (benevolence). This cultivation expands one’s care from self and others outward, ultimately realizing a state of unity and moral identification with all people and the cosmos, thereby “forming one body with Heaven, Earth, and all things.”
- 18 万物皆备于我矣，反身而诚，乐莫大焉。 From Mencius’s chapter on “Exhausting the Mind” (尽心 *jin xin*); see (Bloom 2009, p. 144).
- 19 天地与我并生，万物与我为一。 From Zhuangzi’s chapter on “Equalizing Assessments of Things” (齐物论 *qi wu lun*); see (Ziporyn 2020, p. 17).
- 20 大其心者则能体天下之物，物有未体，则心为有外。世人之心，止于闻见之狭。圣人尽性，不能见闻梏其心，其视天下无一物非我。 From Zhang Zai’s book of “Correcting Youthful Ignorance” (正蒙 *zheng meng*); see (Chan 1963, p. 515).

- 21 大人者，以天地万物为一体者也，其视天下犹一家，中国犹一人焉。若人间形骸而分尔我者，小人矣。大人能以天地万物为一体也，非意之也，其心之仁本若是，其与天地万物而为一也。 From Wang Yangming's chapter of "Questions on the Great Learning" (大学问 *da xue wen*); see (Ivanhoe 2009, pp. 160–61).
- 22 Romans 8:26, NRSV. Theologians tend to draw Christological and Pneumatological inspiration from this Biblical verse; see (D. Berry 2020).
- 23 For the ecological significance of human beings as "co-worker," see (Guess 2014).
- 24 For a profound and systematic study of the Sabbath tradition in the Hebrew Bible and Rabbinic Judaism, see (Heschel 1994).
- 25 "The Daoist accomplishes through Non-Action, and all is well ruled. (为无为，则无不治). From Laozi's *Tao Te Ching* (道德经 *dao de jing*); see (Minford 2018, p. 11). *Wu wei er zhi* (无为而治) means "action without forced effort" — acting in harmony with the natural flow of things, like water flowing downstream without resistance.
- 26 From Laozi's *Tao Te Ching* (道德经 *dao de jing*); see (Minford 2018, p. 55).
- 27 Zhou Dunyi (周敦颐, 1017–1073), posthumously honored as Master Lianxi (濂溪先生), was a seminal Northern Song philosopher and the founder of Neo-Confucianism (宋明理学). His brief but profoundly influential treatise *Taiji Tushuo* (《太极图说》, *Explanation of the Diagram of the Supreme Ultimate*, c. 1070), which comprises a mere 249 Chinese characters, established the metaphysical foundation for Neo-Confucianism; see (Chan 1963, pp. 463–65).

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Article

Redeeming Politics: An Appraisal of the Wesleyan Political Theology of Theodore R. Weber in a Time of Christian Nationalism

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Abstract

Theodore R. Weber, founding member and past president of the Society of Christian Ethics, developed a distinctive political theology based on John Wesley's soteriology. Weber argued that a fully developed concept of the political image of God, which humans reflect in their social and institutional contexts, would move beyond the individualistic focus of Wesley's *ordo salutis*, allowing Wesleyans a shared language to talk about political institutions and social ethics distinct from the order of preservation and order of creation approaches. Weber's understanding of political sanctification, in which individuals and institutions contribute to God's redemptive work of reconciliation, is a unique contribution to political theology. Weber argued that politics is part of discipleship but cautioned against attempts to Christianize society. His Wesleyan political theology provides parameters for faithful political action in refuting and working against a Christian Nationalist agenda in the United States of America. This article offers an appraisal of Weber's Wesleyan political theology through an extensive review of his writings on the topic. The method engages in close textual readings of Weber's publications, providing a clear synthesis of the major themes in his scholarly writings spanning over four decades. The purpose is to provide a cogent overview of Weber's perspective and approach so that his legacy of writings may continue to inform new scholarly audiences.

Keywords: political theology; Theodore R. Weber (1928–2023); Methodism; Wesleyan theology; social ethics; Christian Nationalism; image of God; sanctification

1. Introduction

Theodore R. Weber (1928–2023), Professor Emeritus of Social Ethics at Emory University and founding member and former president of the Society of Christian Ethics, explored the relation between politics and theology throughout his career. A lifelong Methodist, Weber began preaching at the age of 16 and served as a pastor prior to his graduate work at Yale University with H. Richard Niebuhr. For fifty years, he wrote about the ethics of war and peace, revolution and liberation, and international security, examining themes such as power, authority, rights, truth, and reconciliation. His reflections on national and international politics were shaped by the exigencies of Cold War and post-Cold War realities, as well as his experiences working for racial integration in Atlanta and at Emory University during the 1960s. He continued to teach and participate in adult Christian education in his United Methodist congregation well after retirement. Invariably, he brought a deeply theological perspective to his analyses, challenging his students, readers, and colleagues to identify what is Christian about Christian ethics—and then to live it out.

When trying to identify what is Christian about Christian ethics from a Wesley perspective, however, Weber found Methodism impoverished, since the tradition lacks a distinct political language. During the 1990s and into retirement, he sought to develop a political theology rooted in but not limited by the theology and politics of John Wesley. His approach was unique, and his book, *Politics in the Order of Salvation: Transforming Wesleyan Political Ethics*, remains the definitive treatment of Wesley's political theology and ethics (Weber 2001). At the time of his death in 2023, he was still developing the implications of this research, actively working on an unpublished book manuscript titled "The Political Image of God and Wesleyan Theology" (Weber n.d.; personal communication with the author).

This article offers an appraisal of Weber's Wesleyan political theology through an extensive review of his writings on the topic. The method engages in close textual readings of Weber's publications, providing a clear synthesis of the major themes in his scholarly writings spanning over four decades. Thus, this article hews closely to Weber's writings, presenting his thoughts in his own words whenever possible. The purpose is to provide a cogent overview of Weber's perspective and approach so that his legacy of writings may continue to inform new scholarly audiences.

This article begins with the problem of deriving a political theology from John Wesley, whose political commitments were not shared by later generations of Methodists. The heart of this article presents Weber's development of a distinctive Wesleyan understanding of humanity's political nature, based on the full image of God, and God's redemptive work through human institutions, expanding the *ordo salutis* beyond an individualistic purview. Weber's understanding of God's work of reconciliation yields a method of concrete transcendence for understanding the work of political institutions. Placing politics within the order of salvation may seem to exacerbate the problem of Christian nationalism, but Weber develops the concept of redeeming politics within a Wesleyan language of institutions, countering theologically unmoored attempts to appropriate Christianity for a nationalist project. The essay concludes by way of example, drawing on Weber's Wesleyan political theology as a resource for faithful political action in refuting a Christian nationalist agenda in the United States of America.

2. Revisiting John Wesley's Politics

Methodists inherited no common political language from their founder. John Wesley was a conservative Tory who supported the English monarchy and spoke against democracy. He viewed political authority as coming from God directly to the government and "denied a political role to the people" (Weber 2001, p. 32). In contrast to the staying power of his soteriology, Wesley's politics proved inflexible; it was too historically and contextually situated to adapt to new political realities (Weber 2001, p. 23).

Methodists on both sides of the Atlantic broke with Wesley's politics. Wesley's political perspective was a non-starter to patriots in the American Revolution. American Methodists repudiated his monarchist politics almost immediately, severing their formal ties to Wesley at the same time the former colonies established their independence from the British crown. In England, Wesley's politics resulted in a political posture of "passive obedience and nonresistance" among English Methodists after Wesley's death in 1791: those who followed Wesley's politics were "antirepublican, antidemocratic, and aggressively respectful of the social order" (Weber 2001, p. 20). British Methodists shed the "conservative and repressive character" of Wesley's politics by the mid-nineteenth century; it was not an enduring posture (Weber 2001, pp. 19–20, 23). Having jettisoned Wesley's politics, Methodists were left with no distinctive way of discussing government and other social institutions. In contrast, Lutherans have their "Two Kingdoms" theology; Roman Catholics have natural law; and Calvinists have their covenantal theology (Weber 2001, p. 25).

Later generations of Wesleyans experienced “a fundamental conflict” between Wesley’s political philosophy and the Wesleyan theology they embraced (Weber 2001, p. 26). According to Weber, Wesley’s politics contradicted his soteriology in two important ways:

“One is the concept of God. The God of Wesley’s politics is a hierarchical first person of the Trinity—above us, judging, dispensing, disposing. The God of the order of salvation, by contrast, reflects primarily the immanent second and third persons of the Trinity—God with us, not above us—sacrificing, sharing, participating, empowering. The second point is the contrasting roles of the people in politics and salvation. In politics, the people have no role, whereas salvation is for all the people. The differences are theological, not practical. In politics, divine authorization descends from above, electing those who are to rule, and excluding the rest. In the way of salvation, God elects the entire human race, and offers to equip each person for participation in the work of God. These are fundamental differences, requiring in both cases a transformation of the understanding of the relationship of God to politics, and therefore of the understanding of politics itself.” (Weber 2001, p. 35)

The democratizing tendencies inherent to Wesley’s insistence on universal grace would not be constrained by his own political views to the contrary. Thus, Methodists adopted Lockean and other political philosophies that differed considerably from Wesleyan theological anthropology and its emphasis on original sin (Weber 2001, p. 27). Despite this history, Weber saw in Wesleyan theology sufficient resources to develop a political ethic and method, declaring “a Wesleyan political language is both necessary and possible” (Weber 2001, p. 27).

Weber sought not to reproduce Wesley’s politics but rather to construct a political language via “political exegesis of the grand themes of salvation” in the Wesleyan tradition (Weber 2001, p. 33). He proposed to offer an “evangelically derived politics,” showing how “Wesley’s doctrines of assurance, spiritual equality, and universal grace” yield “doctrines of universal suffrage, popular sovereignty, and representation” (Weber 2001, pp. 33–34). Weber intended this theological construct to enable Wesleyans to interpret “political reality and responsibility” from the standpoint of their own theological tradition and to address a comprehensive range of topics in social ethics: “political authority and obligation”; “the nature and purpose of state and government”; “rights and liberties”; “the mandates of justice”; and “the moral imperatives of peace and war” (Weber 2001, p. 37). Weber also claimed that such a social ethic would bolster confidence in “representative and democratic political institutions” even as it “will not *require* democracy as a theologically necessary or pertinent system” (Weber 2001, p. 37, original emphasis). He began this task by exploring the full image of God.

3. The Full Image of God in the Order of Salvation

Weber retrieved Wesley’s basic understanding of human nature and its end: humans are created in the threefold image of God—natural, moral, and political—and salvation entails recovery of the whole image of God (Weber 2001, pp. 28, 38). Based on John Wesley’s sermon “The New Birth,” Weber argued that the natural image provides humanity the capability of being in relationship with God, entailing “understanding, freedom of will, and various affections” (Weber 2001, p. 393, citing Wesley 1760, pp. 26–27). This capability sets humans apart from the rest of the created order (Weber 2001, p. 393, citing Wesley 1782).¹ Through the political image, humans exercise the vocation of humanity: “benevolent and productive care of creation” (Weber 2001, p. 36). Furthermore, in his *Notes on the Old Testament*, Wesley asserted human self-governance as the quintessential expression of the political image: “his government of himself by the *freedom of his will*, has in it more of

God's image, than his government of the creatures" (Weber 2001, p. 403, original emphasis, citing Wesley 1765, p. 7). The moral image reflects God's love through human obedience in relationship with God, recovery of which is holiness (Weber 2001, p. 394).

Through the Fall, the moral image is lost entirely because humanity is cut off from God: the relationship is severed and humans cannot but sin, except as empowered by grace.² The natural image remains after the Fall but lacks the "capability of God," rendering the will subject to misguided ends (Weber 2001, p. 394, citing Wesley 1782)—a teleological view consistent with Augustine. The political image also remains, but human dominion is expressed as exploitation rather than the responsible stewardship of creation (Weber 2001, pp. 395, 405). Self-interest replaces obedience to the will of God: "the political image of God is not lost, but it has become dysfunctional" (Weber 2001, p. 395). The political image is dependent on the restoration of the moral image for its "normative orientation": "a benevolent and stewarding exercise of power based on loving consent" (Weber 2001, p. 414). Thus, Weber asserted that "the key to political understanding is the image of God in its fullness" (Weber 2001, p. 398). All three aspects of the image of God are necessary for right relationship and governance and the process of salvation/wholeness (Weber 2001, pp. 398, 414).

Wesley, however, did not develop the image of God in its fullness. Instead, he expended most of his evangelistic energies focusing on the recovery of the moral image, limiting the application of his theological perspective in the political realm. Weber explained the following:

"[Wesley's] neglect of the political image blocked the integration of his politics and his understanding of the way of salvation. It hindered the formulation of a Wesleyan social ethic by focusing on an individualistic concept of Christian love largely incapable of dealing with questions of institution and power. It encouraged controversies over the meaning of Christian perfection and entire sanctification that often were sterile because their *moral image* concerns had no inherent or integral social and relational dimensions." (Weber 2001, pp. 36–37, original emphasis)

Weber noted that the political image is a corporate concept, restoration and renewal of which involves "the perfection of the whole of humankind in relation to the perfection of the whole of the remaining animate world" (Weber 2001, pp. 414–15, see also 418). In this sense, salvation is a process of all things becoming reconciled with God—a process that begins within history, includes political institutions among "all things," and is culminated when God is "all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28, NRSVUE; Weber 1995, p. 552). Thus, "God's prevenient grace is diminished when confined to the order of salvation of individual persons" (Weber 2001, p. 412). A fully developed concept of the political image of God, which humans image in their social and institutional contexts, must go beyond the individualistic focus of Wesley's *ordo salutis*.

If God's work of creating, redeeming, and sustaining is not limited to the individual but encompasses all human life in its social fullness and, indeed, the entire cosmos, then political participation must find a place in the order of salvation. Weber attempted to recover "the unity of the divine image in humankind" in light of the Trinity, the order of salvation, and Wesley's commitment to universal grace (Weber 2001, p. 411). For Weber, "the theological foundation of government is the Trinity in being and action"; governance is therefore defined in reference to the doctrine of God: "*what God does* in ordering, preserving, and developing the creation" (Weber 2001, p. 396, original emphasis). Humans can only understand the work of God rightly, however, because of the divine initiative to renew the fallen creation through "the work of God in Christ" (Weber 2001, p. 396). Political sanctification is a process of maturation in which humans individually and institutionally

share responsibility for self, society, and creation through their vocation to image God in three persons (Weber 1995, p. 552).

Situating politics within the order of salvation allows for a transformational political ethic in which society can experience glimpses of God's redemption through grace. Weber saw evidence of prevenient grace in the political development of humankind: "when emerging public consciousness discerns the purpose of government to be service to the members of the political community and not to their rulers"; the discovery of rights and the need to protect those rights; and "the necessity [of drawing] the people into the political process" (Weber 2001, p. 412). Through justifying grace, not only the moral image but also the natural and political images are restored, renewing humanity's political vocation and shared identity (Weber 2001, p. 413). Sanctifying grace nurtures not only individuals on personal paths of holiness but also institutional developments such as "transforming power from predominance of force into predominance of consent"; moving from "the rhetoric of human rights . . . to their solid embodiment"; and full, responsible political participation (Weber 2001, p. 414). This participation gives meaning and concreteness to the concepts of love and justice in the lives of Christians: "Because grace is sanctifying, it develops the spirit of love and justice in relationships" (Weber 2007, p. 227). Thus, the Wesleyan idea of "going on to perfection" involves a "call[s] to political involvement" (Weber 2001, p. 418). However, Weber disavowed any possibility of achieving institutional- or societal-level Christian perfection: "there is no historical event of 'entire sanctification'" (Weber 1995, p. 552; see also 1991, pp. 17 and 19). Weber expected to see political progress, based not on optimism in human potential but on faith in God's plan for redemption.

4. Redeeming Politics

Weber critiqued Wesley's politics through his soteriology, demanding coherency between his beliefs in God and his assumptions about political participation, authorization, and institutions. Wesley understood political institutions as "analogical instruments of divine action" and "elements of community" for the purposes of keeping the peace and protecting basic liberties (Weber 1995, p. 546). Weber noted, "This relationship of institution to community was fundamental to Wesley's own thinking, and it must also be basic to any reformulation of a Wesleyan political theory" (Weber 1995, p. 546). However, Wesley's understanding of institutions was historically and contextually bound, and he failed "to translate the commitment to liberty into a political ethic" (Weber 1995, p. 546). The task, as Weber understood it, involved creatively employing Wesley's analogical method to transform his political theology.

A Wesleyan political theology, based on analogy with God, begins with God's nature and action rather than the human condition. Thus, Wesley's political logic does not fit neatly into order of creation or order of preservation approaches. Weber claimed that Wesley's belief in original sin was too deep to countenance a political theology arising from the order of creation, such as those based on natural law (Weber 1995, p. 540). The order of preservation model comes closer to Wesley: "There is no doubt that Wesley thought of preservation and protection as the primary work of governments" (Weber 1995, p. 543). However, Weber denied "the simple linking of political institutions with original sin as their source" in Wesley's thought, explaining that humanity's fallen condition was not Wesley's starting point for thinking about politics (Weber 1995, p. 543). Instead, for Wesley, "Normative political knowledge is derived analogically from the character and kind of God's relating to the world" (Weber 1995, p. 544). Thus, politics is not a human-focused activity but an expression of divine governance. God's work, then, becomes the model for human political relations: "Political institutions represent ways in which God organizes the fallen world to work with human power to serve God's purposes" (Weber 1995, p. 544).

Wesley's mode of political theology "calls on political leaders and institutions to image the qualities and ways of God's relating to the world" (Weber 1995, p. 545). This means, however, that "the theological understanding of political institutions can shift radically with a change in the understanding of God" (Weber 1995, p. 545). This potential shift is where Weber found traction within Wesley's theology to challenge Wesley's politics.

Weber found Wesley's political analogies deficient in their depiction of God (Weber 1995, p. 546). Wesley understood political authority to be conferred top-down, from God to the King, and saw no political role for the people as such (Weber 2001, p. 32). Weber noted that these features of Wesley's politics, derived from an exclusively hierarchical understanding of the first person of the Trinity, contradict his soteriology, which reflects the immanence of the second and third persons of the Trinity (Weber 1995, pp. 538, 548; 2001, p. 35). Weber's reformulation begins by "read[ing] political reality from the standpoint of the saving work of God in Christ" (Weber 1995, p. 548). In the *ordo salutis*, "God elects the entire human race, and offers to equip each person for participation in the work of God" (Weber 2001, pp. 35, 399). Focusing on redemption, God's offer of grace to all of humanity through Jesus Christ yields a radically democratic understanding of politics—"authority is given to the people as a whole, not directly to the rulers"—thus authorizing all persons to exercise political responsibility (Weber 1995, pp. 548, see also 538). This Weber understood to be the normative understanding of politics: "exercising shared responsibility for the governance of the created order" (Weber 1995, p. 551). In Weber's reformulation, persons may exercise political responsibility directly or indirectly, by delegating that authority to leaders or developing political institutions, a view of political authorization consistent with Wesley's support of the English constitution and Parliament (Weber 2001, pp. 400–2). In fact, Weber considered this aspect of his political reformulation more "authentically Wesleyan" than Wesley's own political assertions (Weber 2001, p. 403).

Political institutions are included in God's salvific work. Viewing politics through Wesley's soteriology "draw[s] institutions as well as individual persons into the order of salvation, thereby making full political use of the Trinity" (Weber 1995, p. 545). Politics can be redeemed: "Jesus speaks to us and calls us *politically*, not just individually" (Weber 1995, p. 551, original emphasis). Because all of humankind images God through political responsibility for creation, Weber saw "shared responsibility [as] the governing principle in all institutional action" (Weber 1995, p. 549). The loss of the moral image after the Fall distorted this principle: humanity is now directed by other motivations, such as egoism and fear (Weber 1995, p. 550). Nevertheless, shared responsibility remains from the original creation, in the political image of God. All persons persist in political participation, even if institutions are now bent toward "protection and punishment" rather than imaging divine governance (Weber 1995, p. 550). The need for force, order, and protection is a consequence of the Fall.

Through God's grace, this situation can be righted. Justification, which includes the restoration of the political image of God, "provides the necessary context for understanding the true nature and purpose of political institutions" even if political institutions remain mired in power and force rather than cooperation and consent (Weber 1995, pp. 550–51). Sanctification enhances the human capability for shared responsibility (Weber 1995, pp. 551–52). Institutions are a means by which humans organize their collective task of responsibility for creation, as the political image is restored within each of us. Thus, political institutions must be understood and measured in light of "the whole-making work of God" (Weber 2001, pp. 407–8).

5. The Whole-Making Work of God

Weber was not just an astute interpreter of John Wesley; he was a constructive political theologian and social ethicist in the Wesleyan tradition. He grounded his method “with an understanding of God as reconciler,” taking inspiration from 2 Corinthians 5:18–19 (Weber 2015, p. 27n1, also pp. 27–32). He defined reconciliation as “the renewal of fallen creation” and “the recovery of the human purpose of imaging God,” and he understood God’s work of reconciliation to be “the interpretative principle” for biblical narrative and salvation history (Weber 2015, pp. 3 and 28). According to Weber, the eschatological New Creation is accomplished by God through “a reconciling process, a whole-making, peacemaking process” that redeems history even though it is not fulfilled in history (Weber 1995, p. 552). Weber’s reformulated Wesleyan political theology is oriented toward God’s reconciliation and shalom, encompassing God’s work of creation, preservation, redemption, and renewal.

His was a unique voice among his contemporaries and forerunners. While often identified as a Christian realist, he considered this label misleading; he distinguished his approach from Reinhold Niebuhr (and, by association, also from Paul Ramsey), claiming to be “more directly christological” and “more inferential from the reconciling history of the work of God” (Weber 1989, p. 56; 2015, p. 3n3).

“My approach to political ethics, as to all questions of human responsibility, begins with Christology and the divine work of redemption. It places politics—and everything else—in the context of reconciliation, of God’s work in Christ restoring and redeeming the *kosmos* in its relationship to the divine selfhood and to its own created purpose.” (Weber 1989, p. 56; 2015, pp. 2–3n3)

The difference with Niebuhr, he claimed, was evident in his understanding of civilizing power along a continuum of force and consent, contributing to the work of reconciliation (Weber 1989, pp. 56, 61, 75). He differed from the pacifism of John Howard Yoder (and, by implication, also from Stanley Hauerwas) in “defending the role of preservation in the historical work of peacemaking and reconciliation” (Weber 2015, pp. 8, 160). To Weber, peacemaking is not the absence of violence but rather involves “civilizing the organization of power” toward greater consent and greater freedom to be vulnerable: “Every peace is some particular combination of force and consent” (Weber 1989, pp. 61, 70, 75). In relation to the work of José Míguez Bonino, he considered liberation “an essential element” but “not sufficient as a constructive concept” for political theology (Weber 1989, p. 72). He also differentiated his trinitarian approach from Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who based their political theologies “in Christ”; in contrast, Weber attended equally to God’s creating and sustaining work through the first and third persons of the Trinity (Weber 2001, p. 398).

Weber claimed distinct insights from his Wesleyan political theology compared to the traditional order of creation and order of preservation models. He contrasted his approach to the Thomistic natural law rooted in the order of creation (exemplified by Jacques Maritain and Catholic Social Teaching), claiming that government derives fundamentally not from “the social and rational character of human nature” but from the nature of God (Weber 1987, p. 91; 2001, p. 397). Contra Aristotle, the government does not derive from humanity’s nature as “political animal” and corresponding needs but rather from humanity’s creation in the divine image and vocation to imitate divine governance (Weber 2001, pp. 400, 407). For Weber, justice is not a natural virtue but an aspect of the moral image of God (Weber 2001, p. 397). In contrast to ethics rooted in the order of preservation (exemplified by Lutheran tradition, Helmut Thielicke, and Paul Ramsey), Weber understood the exercise of government as not a result of the Fall but rather a facet of God’s good creation (Weber 1987, pp. 82, 86n13; 2001, p. 397). Governments exist not only to restrain sin through order and defense but also to image God’s good stewardship and promote the common good (Weber 2001, pp. 397, 406). For example, redressing environmental degradation is one way

that governments can imitate the “renewing and redeeming work of God” (Weber 2001, p. 406).

Instead of prioritizing the order of creation or the order of preservation as a theological starting point, Weber insisted on reading history backwards, from the standpoint of the order of redemption—the redemptive work of Christ and the whole-making work of God through reconciliation and shalom (Weber 1987, p. 98). Weber described this method as “concrete transcendence.” He asserted, “What is truly definitive of political reality is the process whereby the restatement and renewal of humanity in Jesus Christ come to expression in, through, and beyond the particular arrangements that human beings fashion” (Weber 1987, p. 97). Concrete transcendence “includes and reinterprets the elements of creation and preservation, but gives both primacy and historical force to the divine work of redeeming through reconciling and making whole” (Weber 1987, p. 97). Through concrete transcendence, the state and other institutions are expected to contribute to “limited and imperfect achievements of human community” (Weber 1987, p. 97). Political institutions function in “the persistent struggle to bring the human oneness established in Christ to transforming historical concreteness in the relationships that actually exist among human beings and their groups” (Weber 1987, p. 98). Thus, concrete transcendence offers “real, although limited, possibilities of progress in enlarging the reach of human community and enhancing its quality” (Weber 1987, p. 97). In the context of Wesleyan soteriology, political institutions contribute to God’s renewal of all creation and “disclose the social meaning of ‘going on to perfection’” (Weber 2001, p. 408). Extending the order of salvation to society and political institutions might appear to be grist for the mill of Christian nationalism. Yet, Weber’s political theology provides a clear rebuke.

6. Resisting Christian Nationalism

The phenomenon of Christian nationalism serves as a brief example of the ongoing relevance of Weber’s political theology. Christian nationalism has deep roots in US culture, and its current manifestation is decades in the making (Goldberg 2006; see also Cooper-White 2022, pp. 13–38).

To focus the present discussion, I follow the sociological approach of Samuel L. Perry and Andrew L. Whitehead, who defined US Christian nationalism as an ideology and cultural framework regarding “historical identity, cultural preeminence, and political influence” (Whitehead and Perry 2020, p. x). They explained, “Christian nationalism is a cultural framework—a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems—that idealizes and advocates a fusion of Christianity with American civic life” (Whitehead and Perry 2020, p. 10). Drawing on national survey data collected by researchers at Baylor University between 2007 and 2017, Whitehead and Perry rated Christian nationalist sentiment according to the respondent’s level of agreement to six statements (Whitehead and Perry 2020, pp. 7–8):

1. “The federal government should declare the United States a Christian nation.”
2. “The federal government should advocate Christian values.”
- *3. “The federal government should enforce strict separation of church and state.”
4. “The federal government should allow the display of religious symbols in public spaces.”
5. “The success of the United States is part of God’s plan.”
6. “The federal government should allow prayer in public schools.”

(* Note that responses to the third statement were reverse-coded). The researchers then grouped respondents into four “orientations” toward Christian nationalism: Rejecters, Resisters, Accommodators, or Ambassadors (Whitehead and Perry 2020, pp. 7–10).

The salience of this model lies in its predictive power. Whitehead and Perry showed that all four orientations to Christian nationalism are present across various typical group-

ings of US society (Whitehead and Perry 2020, pp. 38, 44). The authors were careful to point out, for example, that Christian nationalism does not equate to white evangelicalism—though there is high correlation (Whitehead and Perry 2020, pp. 44, 154). Instead, they argued that Christian nationalism is restructuring the US religious landscape in socially and politically significant ways (Whitehead and Perry 2020, p. 153).

“Simply put, knowing you are an Ambassador or Rejecter of Christian nationalism can now tell us far more about your social and political views than knowing what denomination you affiliate with, how often you attend church, and even whether you identify as Democrat or Republican.” (Whitehead and Perry 2020, p. 44)

They observed that “Christian nationalism expresses a particular racialized understanding of national identity”; promotes authoritarian control; and advocates for a hierarchical relationship between men and women (Whitehead and Perry 2020, pp. 16–17).

This depiction of Christian nationalism does not discover or attribute a distinct theological viewpoint to Accommodators and Ambassadors. Although the symbols and narratives of Christian nationalism “express a specific vision of Christianity’s relationship to American identity and civic life,” the authors explained that “Christian nationalism is not ‘Christianity’ or even ‘religion’ properly speaking” (Whitehead and Perry 2020, pp. 2, 20). In fact, they showed a negative correlation between Christian nationalism and religious practice on most social issues (Whitehead and Perry 2020, p. 20). This disconnect provides Rejectors and Resisters a window of opportunity to defend their Christian faith against the idolatry of Christian nationalism—if they are sufficiently equipped to articulate a coherent political theology arising from their religious beliefs. Weber’s Wesleyan language for societal redemption provides such a tool.

7. Redeeming Society

Weber was careful not to equate renewal of the political image with efforts to Christianize or democratize society (Weber 2001, p. 417). The realist in him heeded Niebuhr’s warnings about self-deception and group egoism, and he voiced explicit concern about “the messianism of American political consciousness” (Weber 1989, p. 73; 2007, p. 233). Such fantasies, he observed, are “the motors of militaristic policies” (Weber 2015, p. 149). Extending “the order of salvation . . . from the realm of the individual salvation to that of societal transformation,” Weber outlined the “possibilities and limits in a Wesleyan social theory” (Weber 1991, p. 4). Specifically, he explored the idea of a redeemed society through the concepts of justification and sanctification.

Recognition of common humanity is fundamental to Weber’s Wesleyan political theology. He declared the following affirmation to be “the starting point for all theological thinking about politics”: “humankind has become one in the reconciling deed of God in Jesus Christ, and that through the power of God the powers of this world have been put in subjection to Christ” (Weber 1987, p. 96). Implied in Weber’s reformulation is a belief in prevenient grace: justification “makes all of humanity one people before God. . . . this work is for the whole creation, not only for . . . believers” (Weber 1991, p. 14). All of this is based on “the conviction that God has acted in Christ for the salvation—the *wholemaking* of the world,” calling us “to seek the good of the neighbor even when there is little or no prospect of good results” (Weber 1991, p. 19, original emphasis). Thus, the process of social redemption is “the cancelling of the self-endowed merit” of various groups, “breaking the power of this cancelled merit (read sin),” and “transcending . . . previous animosities” to enable “genuinely human fellowship” (Weber 1991, pp. 18–19). As a result of this process, redeemed relationships can increase freedom and justice and “extend and enhance consent as a primal element in social power” (Weber 1991, p. 19).

Can society be freed from the power of sin? Weber believed so, arguing from a standpoint of justifying grace. Necessary to any political theology within a Wesleyan framework is attention to the “persistent and pervasive effects” of sin, understood as “the individual will in rebellion against God” (Weber 1991, p. 7). The effects of sin extend to groups and institutions—but so does God’s grace. Weber asked, “Can a social theory be Wesleyan if it holds out no hope for breaking the power of cancelled sin in groups and institutions...?” (Weber 1991, p. 8). Instead of establishing a basis for collective guilt—a path he considered a theological dead-end, Weber explored the idea of corporate redemption (Weber 1991, p. 10). He observed enmity arising between persons because of their distinctive corporate identities and concomitant perceptions of “corporate merit” in relation to each other, for example, the enmity reported between the identities “Jew” and “Greek” in Ephesians 2:11–22 (Weber 1991, p. 10). Group identities that elicit valuation of persons in terms of the relative merit of those groups to which they belong undermine the equality inherent in the new identity in Christ. The problem, on a social level, is “the pride and power of corporate identity,” which may exist independently of individual actions (Weber 1991, p. 11). Here, Weber provided groundwork for addressing racism and White privilege, in particular. Thus, he named corporate merit as sin and interpreted “justification in corporate terms as the cancelling of corporate merit and the conferring of a fully human status before God” (Weber 1991, pp. 10–11). This denunciation of group pride does not erase all group distinctions, only those that engender “self-justifying merit” in the place of “common humanity under God” (Weber 1991, pp. 11–12, 14).

Having identified sin and justification in the realm of the social, Weber then considered sanctification in both its critical and constructive modes. In a Wesleyan framework, sanctification functions both to “break the power of cancelled sin” and to enable “going on to perfection” (Weber 1991, p. 13). Critically, this means that any remaining corporate identity must be understood within “the context of a common humanity under God,” limiting the power and value of any “ideological structure” of the group (Weber 1991, p. 14). Specifically, the “songs, flags, scriptures, uniforms, and heroes” of the United States, when elevated to sacred status, become idolatrous—such as would have been the case under a proposed US constitutional amendment “prohibiting and punishing the desecration of the national flag” (Weber 1991, pp. 14–15). Weber warned against attempting “to unite the cause of Christ with the national cause” as an idolatry in the form of “the religion of nationalism” (Weber 2007, p. 235). Thus, Weber would have rejected the Christian nationalist claim, “The success of the United States is part of God’s plan” (Whitehead and Perry 2020, p. 8), as a deception while also asserting that all governments have the potential to participate in God’s work of reconciliation. Any corporate identity—such as US Christian nationalism—that demands unqualified devotion, unquestioned loyalty, or ultimate power is sinful.

While Christians may embrace a distinctive vocation or identity, even this identity does not confer any special merit (Weber 1991, p. 14). Any pretension by Christians to a favored status should be unmasked as a form of religious tribalism at odds with God’s saving work in Jesus Christ. The power of the state or other political institutions in the divine plan is limited by its responsibility not only to its citizens but also to common humanity: “the process of concrete transcendence relativizes the sovereignty of states without negating state responsibility” (Weber 1987, p. 97). Thus, Weber argued for “some degree of authorization from those who are not members of that particular society, but whose being and well-being are affected” (Weber 1987, p. 98). The authority of power is rooted in “the human community,” not in particular societies or religions (Weber 1987, p. 98)—and clearly not in the combined form of US “Christian nationalism.”

Constructively, sanctification allows the new humanity to grow and mature in Christ. While individuals may expect to be made perfect in love in this life, Weber was quick

to point out the impossibility of entire sanctification for groups, societies, and nations: “The process of social transformation must be seen in eschatological terms” (Weber 1991, pp. 17, 19; 1995, p. 552). Weber specifically denied “equating liberation . . . with salvation”: societies may overcome certain forms of oppression but never be entirely free from injustice (Weber 1991, pp. 17–18). Growth and maturation at a societal level entails a continued need for checks on power and commitments to individual rights (Weber 1991, p. 17).³ Specifically, Weber rejected any expectation that societies could be freed from the need to use force to maintain political order (Weber 1991, p. 18). Just as the individual experiences sanctification not as unbridled freedom but rather as the freedom to obey God’s law, social sanctification entails a freedom circumscribed within a more just social order rather than the absence of institutional power and structure (Weber 1991, p. 18). This “order of preservation” function, however, must be interpreted within the whole-making work of God: “the ordering functions of government are also for the eliciting of community and not only for the restraint of sin” (Weber 1987, p. 89).

Political institutions have positive responsibilities. To emphasize this point, Weber redefined patriotism not as individual loyalty to one’s country but as protecting, strengthening, and developing the *patria*, “the nation, its people, institutions, ethos, and traditions” (Weber 2007, pp. 226, 239). He viewed the *patria* in the context of grace while being clear about its place in God’s work of redemption: “The *patria* is not the Kingdom of God, although the inflated rhetoric of religious nationalism tends to equate the two. It is essential to maintain this critical distinction and to hold the former over the latter as both judgment and limited possibility” (Weber 2007, p. 228).

“we never are justified in treating the *patria* itself as holy and according it a degree of loyalty that belongs only to the divine. . . . the *patria*—in this case, the United States—is merely temporal, limited, relative and nothing more. It is true that we meet the holy in the experience of the body politic, but our first encounter with it is as a word of judgment that denies any basis for national exaltation or political self-righteousness.” (Weber 2007, p. 238)

Thus, Weber was keenly aware of the history of injustices upon which the United States has been built—including the extermination of native populations, the slave trade, and ongoing patterns of structural racism—and understood the work of redemption to include identifying and calling them out as sin.

The “limited possibility” of the *patria* is its contribution to human fulfillment—recognized and articulated in the preamble to the US Constitution, Weber observed (Weber 2007, p. 240n4). Since patriotism involves both preservation (defense) and constructive efforts toward the common good, political institutions have a role “in generating, shaping, integrating, and extending community” (Weber 1987, p. 96). Weber set out the following agenda: pursuing common interest; including in community those previously excluded; “full and collegial participation”; power used to benefit the weakest members; “healing old wounds”; and enhancing freedoms with support (Weber 1991, p. 16). This agenda directly rebuts the “assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity, along with divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism” discovered among Christian nationalists (Whitehead and Perry 2020, p. 10).

8. Practical Implications

Weber insisted that politics be interpreted within the theological context of God’s reconciling activity in Jesus Christ, work which is ongoing and which will not be completed in human history (Weber 2015, pp. 148–49). War, peacemaking, lawmaking, patriotism, and all other aspects of political life must be interpreted within this theological context; the refusal to submit human action to the judgment and creative potential of God’s redemptive

plan is to place oneself in the place of God. His realism mixed pessimism with hope, sin with grace, belief with action—rooted in a deep faith in what God is doing today as well as in the eschaton. Such an all-encompassing perspective on political theology invites critiques of universality over particularity, a grand narrative over diverse human contexts, assumptions of power over experiences of marginalization, and intellect over embodiment. However, he also emphasized everyday discipleship, providing specific guidance to churches and church leaders.

Church leaders must stand boldly in the context of grace. Within the tension of the dual citizenships of *patria* and the Kingdom of God, he recognized several temptations (Weber 2007, p. 235). The temptation of Christian nationalism is to allow national symbols to take on a sacred character undifferentiated from faith in Christ. One can witness this syncretism on full display in the way many US congregations celebrate the national Independence Day as if it were part of the liturgical calendar—and with greater fervor than their observance of Pentecost. To test the congregational temperature, one needs only to ask whether the US flag should be displayed in the sanctuary—simply to raise the question is a heretical act to Christian nationalists. Another temptation is to limit the political discourse about “values” to only a few wedge issues rather than the wider scope of human responsibility, “such matters as poverty, environment, rights of women and minorities, and restraints on the use of military force” (Weber 2007, p. 235). Thus, for example, mercy has a necessary place in theo-political discourse when resisting Christian nationalism (Wise 2025).

To refute Christian nationalism and other sinful expressions of group merit, Weber encouraged churches and church leaders to speak out and to act out. Political theology is a practice of thinking politically within a theological context, one that centers reconciliation in every church activity and all aspects of life in Christ (Weber 2015, pp. 150–51). Thus, for example, reconciliation should be “the constant theme of all preaching,” not just a reaction to abuses of power or unjust uses of state violence (Weber 2015, p. 154). Lifelong Christian education about grace, redemption, and reconciliation should provide a bulwark against the ideology and idolatry of Christian nationalism. Weber understood this kind of formation to occur, in part, during the worship and liturgical life of Wesleyans. For example, he claimed that the sacrament of Holy Communion should relativize the self-serving claims of “the religion of nationalism,” instead subjecting them to the larger themes of God’s work in Christ (Weber 2007, pp. 235, 237–38). Thus, faithful church leaders can resist Christian nationalism through worship and preaching, Christian education, the sacrament of Holy Communion, prophetic criticism, and public policy statements (Weber 2007, pp. 234–38; 2015, pp. 152–58).

9. Conclusions

Weber made a compelling case for a trinitarian, redemption-focused political theology—inclusive of individuals as well as institutions—based on the *imago Dei*, God’s gracious activity in human history, and the ministry of reconciliation to which Christians are called. He spoke to and from a position of privilege to hold those in power—persons such as himself in countries such as the United States—accountable to God and neighbor. His political theology provides a clear refutation of US Christian nationalism, and he complemented his rhetoric with social action in political institutions and through the church, attempting to live out the theology he espoused. As his political theology is put in critical conversation with other Wesleyan scholars as well as representatives of other theological traditions, the full impact of his intellectual legacy will become clearer.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

NRSVUE	New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition
US	United States (of America), adjectival

Notes

- ¹ Weber observed that Wesley's rendering of the natural image of God locates humanity in the Great Chain of Being, an ancient, hierarchical scale based on rational capacity. Thus, Wesley's theological presuppositions exhibited an inherent anthropocentrism, although he was open to entertaining the possibility that "inferior creatures" might have souls. This valuation of humans need not lead to the abuses of speciesism; rightly understood, dominion is to be exercised for the good of creation, not its exploitation (Weber 2001, pp. 407, also 395 and 405).
- ² Theologians who take issue with Wesley's depiction of humanity as totally depraved after the Fall will, of course, desire a different starting point—one that would be a rejection of Wesley's theology rather than a transformation of it.
- ³ On this point, Weber found liberation theology an insufficient political theology, lacking the tools "to discern and describe the political conditions of peace" (Weber 1989, p. 72).

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Article

The Features of Christian Belief in a Just World: A Psychological Examination Based on American Christians

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Abstract

While divine justice is central to Christian faith, theologians disagree about its nature and dimensions. This study examines Christian belief in a just world (CBJW) as a psychological belief system through which Christian believers construe justice in the world by referring to God's Justice. Drawing on the psychological concept of belief in a just world, which emphasizes deservedness, we develop and validate a measure of CBJW. In the pilot study, 34 items were selected from biblical texts with the help of an expert review. In Study 1, exploratory factor analysis supported a four-factor solution—God's Punishment, Reward, Sovereignty, and Forgiveness—yielding a 27-item scale. A confirmatory factor analysis indicated good fit, and internal consistency was strong. These results suggest that CBJW functionally overlaps with secular BJW in its emphasis on reward and punishment while adding theologically distinctive dimensions of sovereignty and forgiveness. Moreover, in Christian belief, justice is construed as distinct from divine love and is oriented toward an eschatological horizon, thereby differentiating CBJW from secular conceptions of justice.

Keywords: belief in a just world; Christian belief in a just world; divine justice; forgiveness

1. Introduction

This article examines the features of Christian belief in a just world (CBJW) from a psychometric perspective. Considering long-standing debates over the nature and dimensions of divine justice within Christianity, we draw on the social-psychological construct belief in a just world (BJW) to probe how Christians psychologically construe justice in the world through their beliefs about God's justice. As established by Lerner (1965, 1970, 1980), BJW is a psychological orientation in which individuals assume that people generally get what they deserve and deserve what happens to them. Although it is often a protective illusion, BJW can also help people make sense of innocent suffering.

Because deservedness is central to many biblical portrayals of retributive justice, we developed a measurement of Christian belief in a just world (CBJW) grounded in texts that emphasize accountability and rectification. The final item set and its dimensional structure illuminate key features of Christian belief in a just world.

Notably, although the dimensions identified in the present study are labeled with reference to divine attributes, the construct under investigation is not a theological account of God's justice but a psychological account of believers' representations of divine justice. In this sense, CBJW captures how Christian believers organize beliefs about justice in

the world by referencing God's actions, authority, and moral order. Such representation functions analogously to secular BJW by providing expectations of deserved outcomes, even though their content is explicitly theological.

Two brief reviews frame the present study: (1) BJW and its measurement and (2) theological discussions of divine justice.

1.1. Belief in a Just World and Its Measurement

In his initial research, Lerner used BJW to explain people's seeming "indifference" to victims of injustice, including those who suffer from poverty or illness (Lerner 1965, 1970, 1980; Lerner and Miller 1978). According to Lerner, when confronted with the suffering of innocent victims, people attempt to restore justice in one of two ways: either by compensating the victim or by persuading themselves that the victim somehow deserves their suffering. The latter tendency is central to the just-world belief. Lerner further proposed that the psychological development of BJW unfolds in three stages. In the first stage, children adopt what Piaget called "immanent justice," which is the belief that transgression automatically brings punishment (Lerner 1980, p. 15). In the second stage, as people mature, they discover that the world is not consistently just: erring individuals may prosper, for example. In the third stage, however, because BJW is so "central a part in the organization of the human experience," the child's belief in a world of "immanent justice" is not abandoned but rather modified to another form, "the unassailable assumptions of 'ultimate justice'" (Lerner 1980, p. 26).

Since the publication of Lerner's foundational work, research on BJW has advanced in multiple directions. A major line of BJW research has focused on self-report scales (Furnham 1998). Rubin and Peplau (1973, 1975) introduced an early comprehensive measure spanning domains such as health, family, school, politics, and criminal justice (Rubin and Peplau 1975, p. 69). Dalbert and colleagues later proposed a general BJW scale in German (Dalbert et al. 1987) and an expanded English version (Dalbert 1999), distinguishing personal and general BJW. Lipkus (1991) introduced a global BJW measure and worked with colleagues to refine it by separating BJW-Self and BJW-Others into parallel eight-item scales (Lipkus et al. 1996). This self-other bidimensional model has been widely adopted (Bègue and Bastounis 2003; Sutton and Douglas 2005; Sutton et al. 2017) and converges with Dalbert's personal-general distinction (Chobthamkit et al. 2022).

Subsequent work added nuance. Lucas et al. (2007, 2011) differentiated between procedural and distributive justice. Researchers have also incorporated religious and cultural perspectives: White et al. (2019) developed a Karma Scale grounded in South Asian traditions, while Linhares et al. (2022a, 2022b) measured BJW using popular sayings that may resist social desirability bias, including religious aphorisms (e.g., "Live by the sword, die by the sword," Matt 26:52; "You reap what you sow," Gal 6:7). Relatedly, some Asian studies interpret similar sayings as karmic expressions (Duong et al. 2024). In short, whereas early BJW measures were strictly secular, newer approaches tend to draw on religious and cultural resources—providing precedent for an explicitly Christian measure.

However, our point is not that there is a functional analogy between Karma and God's justice. Rather, our point is that these developments suggest that BJW is not confined to secular formulations but can be meaningfully expressed through culturally and religiously embedded narratives of moral causality, thereby providing a methodological precedent for an explicitly Christian operationalization of just-world belief.

1.2. Theological Discussions of Divine Justice Within Christianity

The following overview is theological, but it is not intended as a normative account of divine justice. Rather, it provides a conceptual map of the belief content that informs how Christian believers interpret justice, deservedness, and moral order in lived experience.

Simply speaking, Christian thought has oscillated between retributive and restorative emphases of divine justice. Although the traditional view asserts that Christian justice requires retributive punishment, some scholars argue for the opposite position (e.g., Wolterstorff 2011). However, it is important to note that retributive justice emphasizes deservedness more than punishment. People can easily find that the Bible contains robust retributive motifs—God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked—not only in Deuteronomistic theology but across the canon. Such motifs presuppose deservedness. For example, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount invokes giving each their due (Thom 2009, p. 338). Similar ideas appear in the Old Testament: "Whoever digs a pit will fall into it . . ." (Eccl 10:8); "The righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own" (Ezek 18:20). In this regard, retributive justice resonates with the psychological concept of BJW.

The emphasis on restorative justice complicates the picture in at least three ways, all calling for clarification. First, some construe restorative justice as God's pardoning and restoring offenders. Yet forgiveness is commonly conditioned on repentance. For instance, the book of Isaiah states, "Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness. But rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together, and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed" (Isa 1:27; cf. Matt 13:43). In this sense, restoration remains tied to deservedness.

Second, restorative justice can be framed eschatologically: full rectification occurs at the end of time rather than being exhausted by present outcomes (Volf 1996; Wolterstorff 2011). Thus, Paul instructs believers to defer vengeance to God, entrusting ultimate judgment to the divine (e.g., Rom 12:19: "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'"). This emphasis does not conflict with retribution, which also has an eschatological horizon (e.g., Rev 22:12: "See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone's work").

Third, appeals to restorative justice often link divine forgiveness to mercy. For instance, it is argued that God is just and merciful at the same time because a perfectly just God can consistently spare a sinner who deserves eternal condemnation (e.g., Mann 2019). However, as noted, forgiveness is typically conditioned by repentance and cannot be taken for granted (Wiegman 2017, p. 213). Divine mercy is thus framed by divine justice.

Alongside retributive/restorative debates, biblical discourse also raises distributive and procedural concerns at various points in the canon and tradition. For example, "Let justice roll down like waters . . ." (Amos 5:24) addresses distributive/procedural justice, as does Isa 1:17: "Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." Scholars note that this social-ethical dimension is especially prominent in the Old Testament (Adam 2015; Raphael, p. 11). While retributive and distributive/procedural justice have different foci, they are not contradictory, as oppressors are to be punished. For instance, Paul taught that "it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us" (2 Thess 1:6–7; cf. Rev 22:12; 2 Pet 2:9). In this way, retributive justice addresses distributive injustice, even if they are not identical.

1.3. Purpose of the Present Study

Building on the BJW literature reviewed above, we conceptualize CBJW as a psychologically structured belief system through which Christian believers interpret justice in the world by reference to God's justice. We develop and validate a CBJW scale grounded in biblical texts, with the aim of clarifying the dimensions through which Christian believers construe deservedness, accountability, and ultimate rectification. Rather than offering a theological theory of divine justice, the present study provides an empirical framework for examining how Christian beliefs about God shape the believers' just-world reasoning. Our whole study consists of two sub-studies. Some of the data from the study involves informed consent and is temporarily not fully disclosed.

2. Pilot Study: Item Selection

The pilot study selected items for the Christian belief in a just world scale (CBJWS) from biblical texts, with an assumption that Christians in general are more familiar with the Bible than with theology based on it. The item selection process proceeded in four stages.

2.1. Initial Identification (57 Biblical Passages)

A comprehensive reading of the Bible (NRSV) was conducted to identify passages explicitly referring to retributive justice. The focus was on passages rather than narratives because otherwise there would have been too many candidates, including the Eden story and flood narrative, etc. Additionally, the selection was based on the concept of retributive justice, specifically the notion of deservedness, rather than the term "justice" itself, as this term can have multiple meanings, including social justice or a relationship with God, in its Hebrew or Greek counterparts. Lastly, because Deuteronomistic Theology emphasizes retributive principles, some closely related passages were consolidated to reduce redundancy. This process yielded an initial pool of 57 passages.

2.2. Refinement (45 Biblical Passages)

The initial list was narrowed to 45 passages by removing near-duplicate passages from the same biblical book and excluding those focused primarily on legal justice (e.g., lex talionis formulas such as "eye for eye, tooth for tooth"). These 45 passages were then classified into three conceptual categories: (a) Christian general belief in a just world (20 items), (b) Christian belief in a just world for self (13 items), and (c) Christian belief in a just world for others (12 items). The former category is based on some passages that deal with humanity in general, and the latter two correspond to the bidimensional model of BJW.

2.3. Simplification (36 Statements)

To improve clarity and readability, the 45 passages were paraphrased into concise statements with the aid of the Simple English Bible and consultation with a native English speaker, who is also a Christian and an elementary school English teacher. This step involved reducing the number of items to 36, with redundant items being combined.

2.4. Expert Review and Finalization (34 Initial Items)

The 36 statements were reviewed with two biblical scholars from the Catholic University of America, two theologians from Baylor University and Hong Kong Baptist University, and one philosopher of religion from Wake Forest University. All interviewees had known the first author for at least three years and were familiar with this study. The reviews focused on which items should be deleted and whether any items should be added.

Both theologians stated that God's love should be considered when discussing God's justice. Similarly, the philosopher mentioned the comprehensive characteristics of God. Accordingly, two items were added: "Whether I love God or not, God still loves me," and "Whether other people love God or not, God still loves them."

The theologian from Baylor University stated that God's main characteristics for this study, namely that God is just, should be added. This comment resulted in one additional item: "God is just."

Both biblical scholars mentioned the biblical bias; that is, the potential participants of the survey might choose to agree with the contents of the items merely because they were from the Bible instead of because they aligned with their beliefs. Thus, some items were rewritten to avoid the biblical bias. For the same reason, we replaced the terms "righteous people" and "evil people" with "good people" and "bad people." Due to a concern that the participants might be confused about who was a good person and who was a bad person, we also added a new item: "God judges who is good and who is bad."

Overall, four items were added, and redundant items were combined, resulting in an initial 34-item scale divided into three conceptual categories. A native English speaker from Hong Kong Baptist University, who is also a theologian and familiar with this study, helped revise the items to make them readable and understandable. This 34-item version of the CBJWS (see Appendix A) served as the basis for Study 1.

3. Study 1: Christian Belief in a Just World Scale

3.1. Method

3.1.1. Participants

Three rounds of surveys were conducted using Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) and Prolific, two widely used online participant recruitment platforms. All procedures were approved by the University's Ethics Committee, and questionnaires were administered through Qualtrics.

Participants were recruited from Christian populations in the United States, including Catholics, Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox adherents. Data collection yielded three independent samples (see Table 1):

- Sample 1: A total of 258 responses were collected through Prolific. After excluding participants who failed the embedded attention check or displayed extreme high or low values, 18 invalid responses were removed, resulting in 240 valid cases (a 93% effective response rate).
- Sample 2: Of 832 responses collected through MTurk, 94 were excluded for failing the attention check or exhibiting extreme values, resulting in 738 valid cases (88.7% effective rate).
- Sample 3: A total of 413 responses were collected through Prolific, of which 51 were excluded due to attention check failure or outlier status, yielding 362 valid responses (87.7% effective rate).

All participants were at least 18 years old and had completed a minimum of a high school education.

3.1.2. Materials/Measures

Christian Belief in a Just World Scale (CBJWS). The initial 34-item version of the CBJWS, developed in the pilot study, was administered. Items were designed to measure three assumed preliminary dimensions of Christian belief in a just world.

Table 1. Sample demographic characteristics.

Characteristic		Sample 1	Sample 2	Sample 3
Source		Prolific	MTurk	Prolific
N		240	738	362
Gender	Male (%)	93 (38.75%)	461 (62.47%)	163 (45%)
	Female (%)	147 (61.25%)	277 (37.53%)	199 (55%)
Age		>18	>18	>18
Religious (%)	Catholic	107 (44.58%)	665 (90.11%)	22 (6.08%)
	Orthodox	19 (7.92%)	54 (7.32%)	1 (0.28%)
	Protestant	114 (47.5%)	19 (2.57%)	339 (93.64%)
Education Level (%)		High school education and above	High school education and above	High school education and above

Religious Commitment Scale (RCS). The Religious Commitment Scale was utilized, with minor revisions for Christians, to assess the criterion-related validity of the Christian belief in a just world construct. The scale demonstrated high internal consistency, with a Cronbach's α coefficient of 0.688 (Koenig and Büssing 2010). Higher scores on this scale indicate more frequent participation in religious practices and activities.

3.1.3. Statistical Analysis

All analyses were conducted using SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 29.0. Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was performed on Sample 1 ($N = 240$), while confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted on Sample 2 ($N = 738$) and criterion validity testing and inter-correlation analysis were performed on Sample 3 ($N = 362$).

3.2. Results

3.2.1. Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics for the finalized Christian belief in a just world scale (CBJWS) are presented in Table 2. These statistics are based on the two independent samples used for validation purposes after the scale's factor structure was established through exploratory analysis: Sample 2 (CFA) and Sample 3 (criterion validity testing). The means and standard deviations provide a reference for the distribution of scores in validation contexts. (The initial exploratory sample, Sample 1, is not included in this table as it was used for scale development prior to structural finalization).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of CBJWS across samples.

Variable (Scale)	Sample	N	M	SD
Punishment	2	738	3.872	0.592
	3	362	3.334	0.767
Reward	2	738	3.965	0.568
	3	362	3.773	0.725
Sovereignty	2	738	3.924	0.569
	3	362	4.178	0.635
Forgiveness	2	738	3.907	0.654
	3	362	4.540	0.558
CBJWS	1	240	-	-
	2	738	3.914	0.528
	3	362	3.801	0.545

3.2.2. Discriminant Validity

Item analysis was conducted on the initially developed Christian belief in a just world scale (CBJWS) using Sample 1. Critical ratio (CR) values were calculated to evaluate item

discrimination. The total scores of all items were summed, and participants were divided into high- and low-score groups based on the 27th and 73rd percentiles. An independent samples *t*-test was then performed to compare the differences between these two groups. The results indicated a statistically significant difference between the scores of the high and low groups ($p < 0.001$), demonstrating strong discriminant validity.

3.2.3. Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

Factor Analysis Suitability Test. The suitability of the data from Sample 1 for exploratory factor analysis was evaluated. The results indicated a Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin (KMO) value of 0.877 (exceeding the threshold of 0.8), and Bartlett’s test of sphericity yielded a χ^2 value of 4554.769 ($df = 351$, $p < 0.001$), confirming that the data were appropriate for factor analysis.

Principal Component Analysis. Principal component analysis was employed to perform EFA on the data from Sample 1. Initial results indicated the presence of eight factors with eigenvalues greater than 1. After several iterations, during which items with factor loadings below 0.5 or cross-loading on multiple factors were progressively removed, seven items were eliminated: Items 1, 8, 10, 15, 21, 26, and 32.

Item Analysis. Prior to the exploratory factor analysis (EFA), standard item analysis was conducted on the initial 34 items to refine the scale. This process combined three methods: critical ratio (CR) analysis using independent samples T-tests, item–total correlation screening (retaining items with $r > 0.40$), and assessment of internal consistency. Based on these criteria, seven items (1, 8, 10, 15, 21, 26, 32) were removed due to low correlations or unclear factor loadings. The remaining 27 items were retained for subsequent EFA.

Exploratory Factor Analysis. A subsequent EFA was conducted on the remaining 27 items. The results (see Table 3) revealed four factors with eigenvalues exceeding 1, which collectively accounted for 63.527% of the total variance. Based on the factor loadings and conceptual alignment, the four dimensions of the CBJWS were identified as God’s Punishment, God’s Reward, God’s Sovereignty, and God’s Forgiveness. The assignment of items to each dimension and their corresponding codes are presented in Table 4.

Table 3. Results of EFA for CBJWS ($N = 240$).

Factor Names	Eigenvalues	Cumulative Contribution Rate %
God’s Punishment	9.611	19.381
God’s Reward	3.104	38.398
God’s Sovereignty	2.741	54.402
God’s Forgiveness	1.696	63.527

Table 4. The structural matrix of CBJW after rotation ($N = 240$).

Item	Component			
	God’s Punishment	God’s Reward	God’s Sovereignty	God’s Forgiveness
Q2	-	-	0.557	-
Q3	-	-	0.735	-
Q4	-	-	0.757	-
Q5	-	0.751	-	-
Q6	0.607	-	-	-
Q7	-	0.660	-	-
Q9	-	0.760	-	-

Table 4. Cont.

Item	Component			
	God's Punishment	God's Reward	God's Sovereignty	God's Forgiveness
Q11	-	-	-	0.807
Q12	0.580	-	-	-
Q13	-	-	0.603	-
Q14	-	-	0.721	-
Q16	0.562	-	-	-
Q17	0.663	-	-	-
Q18	-	0.741	-	-
Q19	-	0.758	-	-
Q20	0.772	-	-	-
Q22	0.799	-	-	-
Q23	-	-	-	0.884
Q24	-	-	0.664	-
Q25	-	-	0.703	-
Q27	0.595	-	-	-
Q28	0.655	-	-	-
Q29	-	0.765	-	-
Q30	-	0.737	-	-
Q31	0.718	-	-	-
Q33	0.760	-	-	-
Q34	-	-	-	0.881

Extraction Method: principal component analysis. Rotation Method: Kaiser Normalized Varimax Rotation. Rotation converged in 9 iterations.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted on the CBJWS using the maximum likelihood method. The results indicated that the four-factor model (see Figure 1) demonstrated a good fit to the data. Specifically, the comparative fit index (CFI = 0.942), the normed fit index (NFI = 0.899), the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI = 0.936), the incremental fit index (IFI = 0.943), and the goodness-of-fit index (GFI = 0.936) all exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.80. Additionally, the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA = 0.040) was below the criterion of 0.06, and the ratio of χ^2 to degrees of freedom ($\chi^2/\text{df} = 2.182$) further supported the model's acceptable fit (Hu and Bentler 1999). All standardized factor loadings were significant and substantial, and the communalities indicated that a significant portion of each item's variance was explained by its respective latent factor (see Tables 5 and 6). These indices collectively indicate that the four-factor structure of the CBJW is well supported.

Internal Consistency Reliability. The scale's reliability was assessed using multiple indices. For the full 27-item scale, Cronbach's α was 0.929 in Sample 2 ($N = 738$), indicating excellent internal consistency. The Cronbach's α for the subscale Punishment was 0.837; for Reward, it was 0.789; and Sovereignty was 0.770, exceeding the 0.70 threshold, which showcased the adequate reliability of these latent constructs. The Cronbach's α for the 3-item Forgiveness subscale was 0.600, which was marginally acceptable (See Table 6).

Table 5. Confirmatory factor analysis results of CBJW ($N = 738$).

Fit Indices	χ^2/df	CFI	NFI	TLI	IFI	GFI	RMSEA
Fit Values	2.182	0.942	0.899	0.936	0.943	0.936	0.040

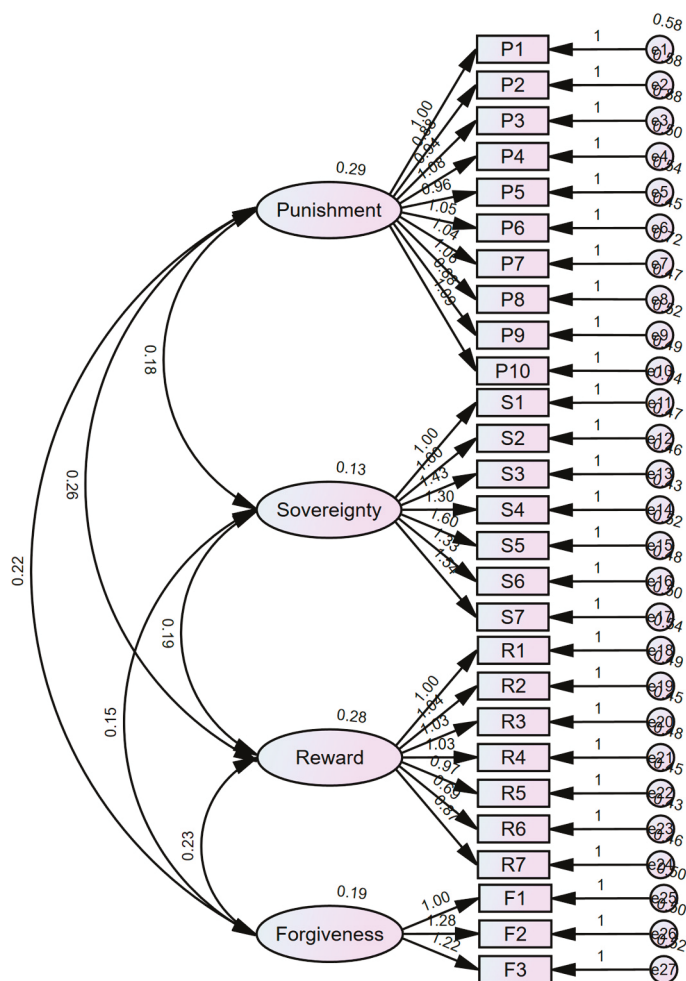


Figure 1. The validation path diagram of CBJW.

Table 6. Confirmatory factor analysis results: factor loadings, communalities, and psychometric properties of CBJWS ($N = 738$).

Latent Factor and Items		Std. Loading (λ)	Community (h^2)	Cronbach's α
Punishment	P1	0.579	0.336	0.837
	P2	0.530	0.281	
	P3	0.478	0.229	
	P4	0.633	0.401	
	P5	0.574	0.330	
	P6	0.644	0.415	
	P7	0.554	0.307	
	P8	0.641	0.411	
	P9	0.551	0.304	
	P10	0.646	0.417	
Reward	R1	0.587	0.345	0.789
	R2	0.622	0.387	
	R3	0.632	0.400	
	R4	0.620	0.384	
	R5	0.611	0.374	
	R6	0.490	0.240	
	R7	0.565	0.320	

Table 6. Cont.

Latent Factor and Items	Std. Loading (λ)	Community (h^2)	Cronbach's α
Sovereignty	S1	0.385	0.148
	S2	0.641	0.411
	S3	0.603	0.364
	S4	0.578	0.334
	S5	0.622	0.387
	S6	0.569	0.324
	S7	0.616	0.379
Forgiveness	F1	0.524	0.274
	F2	0.619	0.383
	F3	0.593	0.351
Total	-	-	0.929

Note: All standardized factor loadings (λ) were statistically significant at $p < 0.001$.

3.2.4. Criterion-Related Validity and Inter-Correlation Analysis

Criterion-Related Validity. To examine the criterion validity of the CBJW scale, Pearson correlation analysis was conducted on Sample 3 ($N = 362$). As shown in Table 7, the total score of the CBJWS demonstrated a significant positive correlation with scores on the RCS ($r = 0.420, p < 0.01$). This provides strong evidence for the scale's criterion-related validity. At the subscale level, all four dimensions were also significantly and positively correlated with religious commitment. The strength of association varied across dimensions, with God's Sovereignty showing the strongest correlation ($r = 0.462, p < 0.01$), followed by God's Forgiveness ($r = 0.320, p < 0.01$), God's Punishment ($r = 0.287, p < 0.01$), and God's Reward ($r = 0.272, p < 0.01$). These results collectively confirm that the CBJW construct, both globally and in its specific dimensions, is meaningfully related to a core aspect of religious engagement.

Table 7. Correlation analysis between CBJWS and RCS ($N = 362$).

	RCS	CBJWS	Punishment	Reward	Sovereignty	Forgiveness
RCS	1	-	-	-	-	-
CBJWS	0.420 **	1	-	-	-	-
Punishment	0.287 **	0.864 **	1	-	-	-
Reward	0.272 **	0.800 **	0.539 **	1	-	-
Sovereignty	0.462 **	0.758 **	0.470 **	0.480 **	1	-
Forgiveness	0.320 **	0.388 **	0.132 *	0.249 **	0.395 **	1
N	362	362	362	362	362	362

Note: ** $p < 0.01$ (two-tailed). * $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed).

Inter-correlation Analysis. The inter-correlations among the four dimensions of the CBJW scale and its total score were also analyzed (see Table 7). The total score was strongly correlated with each of its constituent dimensions, and the correlations among the four subscales were all positive and statistically significant. This pattern of moderate inter-correlations provides empirical support for the distinctiveness of the four proposed dimensions while confirming their shared relationship with the overarching CBJW construct. The correlation between God's Punishment and God's Forgiveness was the weakest ($r = 0.132, p < 0.05$), suggesting these two dimensions represent more distinct theological facets within the belief system.

4. Discussion: The Features of Christian Belief in a Just World

The above results indicate the internal reliability and validity of the developed scale for CBJW, which has 27 items distributed across four dimensions. The significant positive asso-

ciation between CBJW and religious commitment further supports the convergent validity of the CBJW scale, suggesting that individuals who exhibit higher levels of commitment to their faith also tend to more strongly endorse Christian belief in a just world.

The following discussion interprets the findings within a psychological framework. Although the CBJW scale employs language drawn from Christian theology, it assesses not divine justice as such, but Christian believers' psychological representations of divine justice; that is, how Christian believers construe justice, deservedness, and moral order in the world by reference to God.

4.1. Divine Justice and Christian Belief in a Just World

The present study does not seek to define divine justice as theological reality but to examine how Christians psychologically construe justice in the world through their beliefs about God. In this sense, Christian belief in a just world (CBJW) should be understood as a belief system that mediates between theological concepts of divine justice and everyday just-world reasoning. While divine justice refers to God's moral governance as articulated within Christian theology through biblical texts, CBJW captures believers' representations of that governance as it relates to deserved outcomes, moral accountability, and ultimate rectification. The distinction is that the CBJW scale assesses not what divine justice is, but how beliefs about divine justice function psychologically to organize meaning and expectations of justice in Christian believers' daily lives.

This framing helps clarify why the dimensions identified in the present study are labeled with reference to divine attributes. These labels reflect the content of belief representations rather than doctrinal claims about God, and they indicate how theological concepts are appropriated within believers' psychological frameworks.

Notably, throughout the present study, references to belief in a just world (BJW) serve as a theoretical and conceptual function rather than an empirical one. The CBJW scale was developed within the broader BJW tradition, drawing on established theoretical accounts of deservedness, moral order, and outcome justice. Accordingly, when parallels are noted between certain CBJW dimensions (e.g., beliefs concerning reward and punishment, as will be discussed in Section 4.5 below) and existing BJW constructs, these similarities are intended to indicate conceptual and functional overlaps, not empirical equivalence or direct scale comparison. Empirical comparisons between CBJW and established BJW measures remain an important task for future research but fall beyond the scope of the present initial validation study.

4.2. Theoretical Expectations and Empirical Refinement of CBJW

The initial conceptualization of the CBJW scale was informed by established research on belief in a just world, particularly the distinction between beliefs oriented towards self, others, and the world in general, which we have described in the Introduction. This tripartite framework has proven theoretically fruitful in secular BJW research and therefore served as a heuristic starting point for item development in the present study.

However, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses did not support this distinction as an organizing principle for Christian just-world belief. Instead, items clustered according to their theological content, yielding four dimensions: God's Punishment, God's Reward, God's Sovereignty, and God's Forgiveness. This finding suggests that, in Christian belief representations, just-world reasoning is structured less by the target of belief (self vs. others) and more by the perceived modes of divine action through which justice is enacted.

Notably, this result should not be interpreted as contradicting the self–other distinction that is central to BJW research, but rather as indicating, perhaps, that this distinction operates at a different analytical level. Whereas the present scale captures content-based

dimensions of belief about divine justice, self/other-oriented just-world beliefs may emerge as secondary differentiations within these dimensions. The absence of explicit self–other subscales in the current instrument thus reflects a feature of the empirical structure rather than a conceptual oversight. Thus, future research may build on the present findings by developing subscales that integrate content-based dimensions with self–other distinction, thereby allowing a more fine-grained analysis of how Christian just-world beliefs operate across interpersonal contexts.

4.3. *The Relationship Between Divine Justice and Divine Love*

As briefly surveyed in the introduction of this paper, it is debatable whether the feature of divine justice should be discussed together with divine love. If they should go together, then it is more appropriate to speak of comprehensive divine attributes rather than analytically independent ones. However, the present findings suggest that, at the level of belief representation, Christian believers may psychologically distinguish between justice-related beliefs and beliefs concerning unconditional divine love.

Our initial item pool, resulting from the pilot study, included two explicit statements of unconditional divine love (“Whether I love God or not, God still loves me”; “Whether other people love God or not, God still loves them”). Both items concern divine mercy. In the factor analyses in Study 1, neither item met the loading threshold and so both items were dropped. Why would explicit love statements fail to function as indicators of justice belief?

Seen from the measurement perspective, the deletion does not imply that respondents rejected divine love. Instead, it indicates that such items were psychologically organized as adjacent to, but not diagnostic of, latent justice constructs. In other words, participants distinguished between (a) God’s unconditional benevolence and (b) beliefs about rectification—God’s governance, judgment, and restoration. This is a healthy sign of construct specificity.

Theologically, love and justice are perfections of the same God, not rivals. Love names God’s self-giving benevolence, while justice names God’s rectifying work. If unconditional love items failed to load, a plausible explanation is ceiling/consensus effects (near-universal assent reduces covariance) combined with the fact that justice beliefs are teleological—concerned with how God makes things right, not simply that God loves. In other words, justice and love could be independent characteristics of God; Christians can talk about one characteristic without necessarily mentioning the other.

Although the present account of the relationship between divine justice and divine love is theoretical in nature, it lends itself to empirical examination in future research. Subsequent studies may operationalize beliefs about divine love using established measures of perceived divine love or benevolence and examine how these beliefs relate to different dimensions of Christian belief in a just world. Such research could clarify whether representations of divine love function primarily as a moderating, mediating, or complementary factor in just-world reasoning, particularly in relation to forgiveness and perceived moral order.

4.4. *Divine Justice and Secular Justice*

Two retained items in the initial 34-item scale were drawn from wisdom traditions where moral cause-and-effect is often stated without explicit invocation of God. These are Item 7, “Anyone who works hard will have a good life,” and Item 9, “Good people will receive the rewards that they deserve.” That these items loaded well indicates that Christians recognize certain moral regularities that are intelligible even when stated proverbially. For Christians, such regularities are ultimately grounded in God’s governance, but they can be expressed in public or “secular” idioms (Barton 2003; Davis 2000). According to the

comments of two biblical scholars on our initial 34 items, Christians believe that practical wisdom from the Christian wisdom tradition is universal rather than merely for Christians.

Notably, two other items from the wisdom tradition were deleted: Item 8, “Anyone who does not work hard will have a bad life,” and Item 10, “Bad people will receive the punishment that they deserve.” These item behaviors may indicate two features of Christian understanding of practical life concerning justice.

First, there is an asymmetry related to the connection between one’s work and one’s life. While Item 8 was deleted, Item 7 was retained, as discussed above. This contrast suggests the following belief: that hard work leads to a good life does not necessarily mean that lack of hard work leads to a bad life. Determining how to define a “bad” life is crucial, because such a definition could be highly personal.

Second, deleting Item 10 is more conceptually revealing because two similar items were retained, although they were not from the wisdom tradition. Item 6 states, “When bad people do bad things, God will curse them,” and Item 12 claims, “If a good person starts doing bad things, God will punish them.” Thus, the point here may be related to the ambiguity of the term “bad people” in Item 10, as opposed to “bad things” in Items 6 and 12.

One more point in this regard deserves a brief discussion. As mentioned in the Introduction, Brazilian scholars (Linhares et al. 2022a, 2022b) have developed measurements for BJW based on popular sayings. A couple of items from their scales are from biblical texts, such as “Live by the sword, die by the sword” (Matt 26:52) and “You reap what you sow” (Gal 6:7). Interestingly, some Asian studies interpret similar sayings as karmic expressions (Duong et al. 2024). These parallels suggest that religious belief in a just world, including the Christian one, overlaps with secular belief in a just world. The reason behind this might be the fact that the just-world belief is fundamental in human hearts, whether they are religious or not.

However, rather than suggesting a direct equivalence between karmic and Christian frameworks, the similarity mentioned may point to the possibility that just-world reasoning is grounded in shared moral intuitions that are variously articulated across religious traditions. From this perspective, religiosity may function as a culturally structured medium through which fundamental human intuitions about justice, deservedness, and moral order are expressed and sustained.

4.5. Two Unique Features of Christian Belief in a Just World

In our scale for CBJW, the content of the items in the dimensions of God’s Punishment and God’s Reward resembles the corresponding content in most items of existing scales for BJW, except that the punishment and reward there are not performed by God (e.g., Lipkus 1991; Lipkus et al. 1996; Lucas et al. 2007, 2011; White et al. 2019). Both frameworks, CBJW and the existing scales, emphasize expectations of deserved outcomes—negative consequences following wrongdoing and positive outcomes following moral behavior—as central elements of just-world reasoning. We understand that this resemblance is intended in a conceptual and functional sense rather than as an empirical or item-level equivalence.

At the same time, our analyses identified two distinctively theological dimensions—God’s sovereignty and God’s forgiveness—that are not reducible to secular BJW.

God’s Sovereignty. This feature distinguishes CBJW from BJW, just as the concept of Karma makes the belief in Karma different from BJW (White et al. 2019), despite similarities between them.

Theologically, God’s sovereignty can be seen as the teaching that all things come from and depend upon God, and God judges his creation on the basis of his profound moral character (Leonard 1991). Philosophically, God’s sovereignty means that by virtue of his

creative activity, God is solely responsible for the world and its entire history (McCann 2012). No matter how one defines it, sovereignty is central to Christian faith; it is accepted by all denominations, despite some minor differences regarding how to define it (Pinnock 1996). Also, it is clearly expressed in some biblical texts, such as Job 42:2: “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.” Thus, the inclusion of this dimension of Christian belief in a just world reflects the significance of God’s sovereignty for Christian faith, making this belief unique and distinct from secular BJW.

Notably, the factor of sovereignty contains items expressing the eschatological vision of Christian faith. In the initial items, there are three eschatological ones: Item 4, “When Jesus comes again, he will reward the good people and punish the bad people,” Item 14, “When Jesus comes again, he will give me what I ought to receive,” and Item 25, “When Jesus comes again, he will give other people what they ought to receive.” Initially, these items corresponded to the distinction between BJW for self, BJW for others, and BJW in general. However, the EFA and CFA support the distribution of these three items in one dimension instead of three. This result does not merely reveal a unique feature of Christian belief in a just world but also indicates the eschatological dimension of God’s sovereignty.

Interestingly, the eschatological element of Christian belief in a just world resonates with a unique dimension of the belief in Karma, which involves the future life, expressed in items such as “If a person does something bad, even if there are no immediate consequences, they will be punished for it in a future life” (White et al. 2019, p. 1187). The condition “in a future life” sounds like the counterpart of the condition “when Jesus comes again” in CBJW. Both items indicate the uniqueness of religious belief in a just world compared to the secular belief in a just world. At the same time, however, these two items have different contents, indicating the difference between Christianity and South Asian religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, and Jainism) regarding their understanding of justice.

God’s Forgiveness. Another unique feature of Christian belief in a just world is its dimension of God’s Forgiveness, which connects retributive justice with restorative justice in Christianity.

Theologically, there is consistency between divine justice and sin-bearing divine forgiveness (Mihut 2023). At first glance, divine forgivingness seems to be in tension with the demands of God’s retributive justice to punish people according to what they deserve. However, a closer examination reveals the association between the two because “divine retributive justice entails that God, as the ultimate moral legislator, fittingly visits intentional and proportionate harm upon sinners because of their sin” (Mihut 2023, p. 77).

Divine forgiveness in Christianity is restorative because, according to the doctrine of original sin, the human heart and mind work in a world that is fragmented through sin and thus invite a compassionate God to offer redemption (Ely 2018). As another theologian has pointed out, “it is necessary to restore right relationship with God through forgiveness” (Wiegman 2017, p. 187). Therefore, the dimension of God’s Forgiveness in CBJW speaks to the Christian understanding of the human–God relationship and God’s function in maintaining this relationship. It portrays the Christian understanding of Divine justice as different from the secular one.

Psychological research has reported numerous findings about the correlation between BJW and forgiveness, which indicate an asymmetry between the BJW–self and BJW–others regarding their association with forgiveness (Lucas et al. 2010; Strelan 2007; Strelan and Sutton 2011). Because the measurement developed in this study did not emphasize this distinction between self and others, it becomes challenging to explore the correlation between Christian belief in a just world and forgiveness. The subscales discussed in Section 4.2 above will help in this regard.

5. Limitations

While helping to clarify the features of Christian belief in a just world, the present study has some limitations in both its methods and theoretical assumptions.

Methodologically, the samples were drawn exclusively from American participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to Christians from other cultural contexts. Moreover, the use of self-report data may have introduced social desirability bias, particularly given the religious content of the items, although we have tried our best to avoid biblical bias. Finally, as detailed in Section 4.2 above, the CBJWS does not explicitly distinguish between self- and other-oriented just-world beliefs, as proposed in the bidimensional BJW model and anticipated by our initial distribution of 34 items into three categories. Future research would benefit from developing subscales to separately assess Christian beliefs in a just world for self, for others, and for humanity in general.

Theologically, although it makes sense to focus on retributive justice when discussing Christian just-world belief, the former does not exhaust all the dimensions of the latter. It will be constructive to integrate restorative justice and distributive justice into the definition of divine justice. In doing so, a discussion of the features of Christian belief in a just world, or Christian justice belief, will be more comprehensive.

In addition, the present study did not consider cross-cultural and denominational differences in the understanding of retributive justice. Nor did it explore how unique the Christian understanding of the belief in a just world is, compared to the understanding within other religious traditions, like Buddhism. Thus, it will be beneficial to research Christian belief in a just world across various Christian denominations and across Christianity in different cultures. It will also be helpful to compare Christianity and Buddhism in just-world beliefs further, as other dimensions of comparison have yielded interesting results (White and Norenzayan 2022).

Lastly, as the present study represents an initial stage of scale development, our approach to external validity was intentionally conservative. Rather than employing multiple external measures, we selected the Religious Commitment Scale (RCS) as a well-established and psychometrically reliable criterion to provide initial evidence of convergent validity. Although relying on a single external criterion is necessarily limited, using a robust and theoretically relevant measure at this early stage helps ensure that observed associations are interpretable and not confounded by measurement error. In this sense, the present findings should be understood as establishing preliminary validity rather than offering a comprehensive validation of the CBJW scale. Broader examinations of external validity, incorporating additional constructions and comparison measures are important for subsequent research.

6. Conclusions

The present study sets out to examine the features of Christian belief in a just world (CBJW) by developing and validating a psychometric scale grounded in biblical texts and informed by belief in a just world theory. Conceptualizing CBJW as a psychological belief system through which Christian believers construe justice, deservedness, and moral order by reference to God, the study identified a four-dimension structure comprising God's Punishment, God's Reward, God's Sovereignty, and God's Forgiveness. The findings indicate that Christian just-world belief overlaps with secular BJW in its emphasis on deserved outcomes, while extending it through theologically mediated dimensions that enable believers to sustain just-world reasoning in the face of delayed, hidden, or eschatological justice. In this way, CBJW represents a distinctive form of just-world belief shaped by religious content but operating through familiar psychological functions.

By clarifying the structure and features of CBJW, this study contributes to research on belief in a just world, psychology of religion, and interdisciplinary dialogue between psychology and theology. Future research may further refine the scale by incorporating self–other distinctions, examining convergent validity with established BJW measures, and exploring denominational and cross-cultural variations in Christian just-world belief.

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Appendix A. Initial Items for Christian Belief in a Just World Scale

Christian general belief in a just world

1. God is just.
2. God judges who is good and who is bad.
3. God rewards and punishes people justly.
4. When Jesus comes again, he will give people what they ought to receive.
5. When good people do good things, God will bless them.
6. When bad people do bad things, God will curse them.
7. Anyone who works hard will have a good life.
8. Anyone who does not work hard will have a bad life.
9. Good people will receive the rewards that they deserve.
10. Bad people will receive the punishments that they deserve.
11. If a bad person confesses their sins to God, God will forgive them.
12. If a good person starts doing bad things, God will punish them.

Christian belief in a just world for self

13. God rewards and punishes me justly.
14. When Jesus comes again, he will give me what I ought to receive.
15. Whether I love God or not, God still loves me.
16. If I reject God, God will reject me.
17. When I experience misfortune, that is God’s punishment because of my previous behavior.
18. When I experience good fortune, that is God’s reward because of my previous behavior.
19. If I do good things, God will reward me.
20. If I do bad things, God will punish me.
21. If I obey God, God will reward me.
22. If I disobey God, God will punish me.
23. If I confess my sins to God, God will forgive me.

Christian belief in a just world for others

24. God rewards and punishes other people justly.
25. When Jesus comes again, he will give other people what they ought to receive.
26. Whether other people love God or not, God still loves them.
27. If other people reject God, God will reject them.
28. When other people experience misfortune, that is God's punishment because of their previous behavior.
29. When other people experience good fortune, that is God's reward because of their previous behavior.
30. If other people do good things, God will reward them.
31. If other people do bad things, God will punish them.
32. If other people obey God, God will reward them.
33. If other people disobey God, God will punish them.
34. If other people confess their sins to God, God will forgive them.

Appendix B. Christian Belief in a Just World Scale

Christian Belief in a Just World Scale	
All items were rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)	
Factor I God's Punishment	
5	When bad people do bad things, God will curse them.
9	If a good person starts doing bad things, God will punish them.
12	If I reject God, God will reject me.
13	When I experience misfortune, that is God's punishment because of my previous behavior.
16	If I do bad things, God will punish me.
17	If I disobey God, God will punish me.
21	If other people reject God, God will reject them.
22	When other people experience misfortune, that is God's punishment because of their previous behavior.
25	If other people do bad things, God will punish them.
26	If other people disobey God, God will punish them.
Factor II God's Sovereignty	
1	God judges who is good and who is bad.
2	God rewards and punishes people justly.
3	When Jesus comes again, he will reward the good people and punish the bad people.
10	God rewards and punishes me justly.
11	When Jesus comes again, he will give me what I ought to receive.
19	God rewards and punishes other people justly.
20	When Jesus comes again, he will give other people what they ought to receive.

Christian Belief in a Just World Scale

Factor III God's Reward

- | | |
|----|---|
| 4 | When good people do good things, God will bless them. |
| 6 | Anyone who works hard will have a good life. |
| 7 | Good people will receive the rewards that they deserve. |
| 14 | When I experience good fortune, that is God's reward because of my previous behavior. |
| 15 | If I do good things, God will reward me. |
| 23 | When other people experience good fortune, that is God's reward because of their previous behavior. |
| 24 | If other people do good things, God will reward them. |
-

Factor IV God's Forgiveness

- | | |
|----|---|
| 8 | If a bad person confesses their sins to God, God will forgive them. |
| 18 | If I confess my sins to God, God will forgive me. |
| 27 | If other people confess their sins to God, God will forgive them. |
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Article

Assisted Reproduction in the Abrahamic Religions: Ethical Contributions for a Pluralistic Society

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Abstract: Recent advances in reproductive science have prompted a profound reexamination of some of the most fundamental anthropological aspects of human life: the value of nascent human life, the meanings of motherhood and fatherhood, and the concept of family. Abrahamic religious traditions in particular offer a rich moral heritage, developed over centuries, that can significantly contribute to ethical reflection on assisted reproductive technologies. This article examines the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions, which are predominant in the Western cultural context and greatly influence the lives and moral frameworks of more than half of the world's population. The study underscores the strength of the ethical foundations shared across these religious traditions and common values, principles, and moral concerns, while also seeking to understand and integrate the distinctive nuances that differentiate them.

Keywords: assisted reproduction; motherhood; human embryo; family; religions

1. Introduction

The origin of human life has always occupied a central place in the hearts and minds of humanity. Understanding our beginnings and ensuring the continuation of our lineage has been a constant concern throughout the history of every civilization. In the twentieth century, science and technology have made it possible to fulfill human reproductive desires in ways previously unimaginable: for infertile couples, same-sex couples, single women, widows, and even elderly women; using gametes from a spouse or a donor, and gestation in another woman's womb. Today, nearly anything seems possible in the realm of reproduction. The desire to become a parent, to have a child, is deeply cherished, and the modern market economy is increasingly willing to satisfy this desire under any circumstance.

However, not everyone interprets this desire through an economic lens, nor do they seek short-term answers to the profound questions surrounding the mystery of human origin and destiny. The world's major religions, as they have always done, engage with the new realities shaped by science and technology, offering ethical responses rooted in faith to billions of people. These responses aim to safeguard some of humanity's most ancient and cherished values and desires: life, love, family, and more.

This article explores the perspectives of the major Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. It would be impractical to address all world religions within the scope of this study, and doing so would detract from the article's primary objective: to highlight the profound commonalities that unite us and to understand the more peripheral differences that distinguish us. Moreover, this study seeks to shed light on how more than half of the world's population views issues that are deeply rooted in human anthropology.

Religious traditions can make a significant contribution to public moral reflection by offering their millennia-old wisdom and the ethical experience of millions of believers throughout history. Their specific proposal in a pluralistic society centers on the defense of life—especially its most vulnerable forms—the value of conjugal love, the institution of the family, and the common good. At the same time, the concrete moral life of each believer can become a transformative force within society, contributing to the humanization of science and technology—an imperative that bioethics has emphasized since its inception (Cahill 2003).

To achieve this, we will examine the key ethical foundations that shape each religion's approach: first, the origin and value of human life; second, the meaning of motherhood and fatherhood, ancestry, and family; and finally, the role of science in the act of creation. All of this is aimed at offering their millions of followers a meaningful ethical framework and a vision of the “good life”: one that contributes to building a better world for all, including future generations.

2. Assisted Reproduction in Judaism

The human being is considered the most precious of all God's creations, composed of a physical part, *basar*, and the breath of life infused by Yahweh, *nefesh*. Based on this foundational belief, Judaism is not a religion fully anchored in the past, limited to the Torah, the Mishnah, or the Talmud. Rather, it seeks to offer responses to the evolving challenges of society throughout history (Tapia 2016, p. 224). Specifically, assisted reproduction has been the subject of reflection beginning with the Talmud and more recent sources, but concrete ethical guidance is ultimately provided by contemporary rabbis. This has led to the emergence of diverse and, at times, even opposing interpretations and ethical norms. While the main legal principles are found in the Jewish *Halakha*, there is no absolute consensus. Below, we will examine the key anthropological issues and how they translate into concrete positions regarding assisted reproductive technologies (ART).

2.1. The Origin of Human Life and Humanity's Role in Creation

Halakha initially considers heterosexual marital relations as the normative means of conceiving new life, though this is not regarded as a moral absolute. The moral evaluation of reproductive procedures is entrusted to rabbinic authorities, rather than individual conscience—since the obligation to procreate may override the normative preference for natural methods (Grazi and Wolowelsky 2008).

Although the human being is seen as God's unique creation, Judaism views scientific and technological advances as a way of complementing God's creative work. This aligns with the collaborative role that Yahweh assigned to humanity in the development of the world and its stewardship. Consequently, ARTs have not been broadly questioned within Judaism, as they enable the fulfillment of the first divine commandment recorded in the Torah: “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28).

2.2. Motherhood, Fatherhood, and Ancestry

In modern-day Israel, becoming a parent is, in itself, a normative step in the transition to full adulthood. At the same time, a complete family is generally understood to be one with at least two children. In general, there is broad acceptance of these techniques; in fact, when a couple is unable to conceive, in vitro fertilization (IVF) is not only permissible but may even be considered mandatory when medically indicated (Silber 2010, p. 476).

However, some controversy remains regarding gamete donation. Orthodox Judaism (which represents approximately 10% of the Jewish population) regards gamete donation as a form of adultery, referencing the Torah (cf. Lev 18:20), and simultaneously questions

the reliability of fertility clinics in ensuring that the gametes used truly belong to the spouse. For this reason, Orthodox Jewish women are often present during the procedure to verify the spousal origin of the gametes, when this is both possible and desired by the couple.

In contrast, Reform Judaism—the majority denomination worldwide—interprets the prohibition of adultery strictly literally. Therefore, the use of donor gametes in ART is not considered adulterous. Rabbis such as Moshe Tendler and Moshe Feinstein leave the decision to use donor sperm to the private discernment of the couple (Sallam and Sallam 2016, p. 35).

It is also important to note that Jewish identity is matrilineal, a principle known as the “law of the womb.” To ensure the child’s Jewish identity, the oocyte must come from a Jewish donor. The most complex case arises with surrogacy, which is permitted by Reform rabbis, provided the surrogate is Jewish and unmarried.

Regarding male gametes, for practical reasons, it is often preferred that the donor not be Jewish to avoid potential issues of consanguinity in future generations. This concern is also highly relevant to the Samaritans of Israel, a related ethnoreligious group with strong risks for genetic inbreeding. A particular complication arises when the legal (but not genetic) father belongs to the *kohen* or *levi* clans. If the donor is anonymous, the child is classified as *yisrael* and cannot fulfill the religious duties associated with those clans. Nevertheless, due to the stigma surrounding infertility, ART is often pursued in secrecy, as being perceived as fertile is often prioritized over whether the child is biologically one’s own (Inhorn et al. 2017, p. 47). Regarding inheritance, Judaism generally defers to the civil laws of each country, and in most cases, the father is considered to be the one who raises and supports the child, rather than the biological progenitor, though rabbinic opinions may vary on this point.

2.3. The Protection of Unborn Life

The use of assisted reproductive technologies (ART) raises a deeper ethical issue: the destruction of embryos, whether due to morphological abnormalities, genetic anomalies, or simply because they are surplus and no longer desired after implantation. In Judaism, it is believed that the soul does not enter the human embryo until forty days after conception. Therefore, all procedures involving the destruction of pre-implantation embryos, such as embryo cryopreservation, preimplantation genetic diagnosis, embryo selection, and embryonic research, are generally permitted.

Sex selection is allowed only when the couple already has four or more children of the same sex and under certain additional religious conditions. In general, the pre-implantation embryo is considered to deserve greater respect than ordinary human tissue, but it is not equated with a person. To minimize the need for embryo reduction, it is recommended to follow national legislation, which typically limits the number of embryos transferred to two or three.

After the forty-day threshold, abortion is only permitted when the mother’s life is at risk; it is never allowed for economic or convenience-related reasons. In general, Jewish law permits abortion between forty days and twelve weeks of gestation (Tapia 2010, p. 23).

2.4. The Underlying Concept of Family

Despite the diversity of rabbinic opinions on this matter, it can be broadly stated that the divine command to procreate takes precedence over other considerations. Nevertheless, the religious and ethical ideal remains that human life should originate from the union of a married heterosexual couple. From this starting point, alternative possibilities are considered as nature presents obstacles to the ideal.

Same-sex couples are allowed access to ART in Israel. Surrogacy has been legal in Israel since 1996. In 2018, the law was extended to include single and infertile women, and since 2020, to single men and same-sex couples (Singer et al. 2021). However, implementation has been gradual. In all these cases, there is no universally binding religious norm; rather, each rabbi evaluates the situation individually.

In summary, the ethical framework of Judaism regarding assisted reproduction rests on three main pillars: the divine command to procreate, the concept of Hebrew marriage and family, and the protection of life-likely in that order. First, the *obligation to procreate* means that any technique aiding in the fulfillment of this command is seen as a good and necessary complement to God's creative work, albeit with certain limits. Second, *the Jewish understanding of marriage* significantly influences the identity and life of the child. Thus, concerns about the potential for adulterous origins (use of donor gametes), incestuous relationships (possible when both parents were conceived via donor gametes), or non-Jewish lineage (if the oocyte comes from a non-Jewish donor) may result in the child being classified as a *mamzer* (bastard), which would restrict their social standing and future ability to marry within the community (Godoy 2013, p. 108). Third, *human life* is the supreme value to be protected, beginning with the mother and, naturally, the unborn child. Embryos under forty days of development are not considered to possess a human soul and therefore do not fall under the same level of protection.

3. Assisted Reproduction in Islam

Attempting to present a single Islamic ethical stance on assisted reproductive technologies (ART) is, paradoxically, a fruitless task. Due to the absence of a centralized Muslim religious authority, ethical positions vary significantly between Sunni and Shia Islam, and within each tradition, individual Islamic countries establish their own laws and religious rulings.

In general, Sunni positions on reproductive matters are guided by two key *fatwas*: one from Al-Azhar University (Cairo 1980) and another from the Islamic Fiqh Council (Mecca 1984), along with two additional guidelines issued by the Islamic Organization for Medical Sciences (Kuwait 1991) and the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Rabat 2002). In contrast, Shia Islam does have a supreme religious authority (Aga Khan V), and in matters of ART, adheres to the fatwa issued by Ayatollah Ali Hussein Khamenei (Qom, Iran 1999) (Sallam and Sallam 2016, p. 42). As we will see, the primary dispute between these traditions lies in the permissibility of using donor gametes.

3.1. The Origin of Human Life and Humanity's Role in Creation

According to Sharia law, all creation is the work of divine omnipotence, and the human being is God's creature, over whom the Creator holds full rights. Human action must therefore aim to respect and protect the body. God is seen as the source of both illness and healing, and science and technology are expected to serve as intermediaries in this divine process (Ladeveze 2019, p. 37). In reproductive matters, the main concern is the elimination of sexual relations; however, when ART involves the gametes of the married couple, it is understood as a medical aid to fertilization, with Allah ultimately responsible for the creation of life. The divine authorship of human life remains unquestioned.

Several contextual factors shape reproductive ethics in the Islamic world:

- (a) Infertility is a significant issue among Muslim couples, often due to male factors. This is largely attributed to the high prevalence of consanguineous marriages (between cousins or children of siblings), which are religiously permitted to preserve paternal lineage, promote family solidarity, and retain wealth within the family. Rates of such marriages range from 16% to 78% depending on the region (Inhorn et al. 2017, p. 43).

Infertility carries a heavy social stigma, especially for women, who may be accused of lacking femininity and subjected to various superstitions. As a result, infertility is often kept hidden (Zaviš et al. 2019, p. 23).

- (b) Adoption is not permitted in most Islamic countries; only the practice of *kafala* (guardianship) exists. Adoption is seen as problematic because it obscures *nasab* (genealogy) and may be unjust to the child, who cannot inherit from non-biological parents and may unknowingly commit incest. Adoption is legal only in Shia Islam, Tunisia, and Turkey, but remains rare and culturally unpopular due to the limited number of adoptable children (Büchler and Kayasseh 2018).
- (c) Islam is deeply pronatalist. Every marriage is expected to produce children to preserve humanity and fulfill the number of souls Allah has destined to enter the world (Zaviš et al. 2019, p. 48). Procreation is a social obligation that ensures lineage continuity, provides support in old age, and contributes to the family's labor force.

These three factors help explain the broad acceptance of ART in the Islamic world as a means to preserve marriage, alleviate suffering, and fulfill the divine mandate to procreate, albeit within certain limits. Consequently, the reproductive industry in many Islamic countries is among the most advanced globally, with some of the highest per capita rates of in vitro fertilization (IVF) cycles (Inhorn et al. 2017, p. 43).

3.2. Parenthood, Motherhood, and Filiation: The Importance of Genetic Lineage

This is where the most significant difference between Sunni and Shia Islam emerges, a difference rooted in cultural conceptions of kinship.

Sunni Islam places strong emphasis on *nasab* (biological lineage) and genealogy as a moral imperative for establishing legitimate identity. In this patrilineal society, knowing and securing genetic paternity is essential. The use of donor sperm is therefore strictly prohibited, as it disrupts *nasab*, violates the child's right to know their father, poses a risk of future incest, and is often equated with adultery, rendering the child illegitimate. As a result, gamete donation is categorically forbidden.

Shia Islam, by contrast, is guided by *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), which allows for diverse and context-sensitive interpretations of Islamic texts. Prominent Shia jurists (*maraji*) may issue differing, even contradictory, rulings. Couples and physicians are free to choose which *marja* to follow (Inhorn et al. 2017, p. 45). Thus, in Shia contexts, the use of donor sperm is permitted, preferably from a close relative to preserve family genetics, though this perpetuates the risk of incest and genetic endogamy.

Regarding female gametes, there is no objection as long as the arrangement is formalized through *mut'ah* (temporary marriage), in which the oocyte donor and the male partner enter into a time-limited marriage contract in exchange for a fixed sum of money. Once the term ends, the marriage is dissolved (Sallam and Sallam 2016, p. 43). In other cases, the concept of the milk mother (*madare rezayi*) is invoked, whereby a woman who breastfeeds a child is considered equivalent to a biological mother in terms of kinship.

Surrogacy is also permitted in Shia Islam, preferably within the framework of temporary marriage, to avoid the charge of adultery when a woman's gamete is gestated in another woman's body.

The legal consequences of gamete donation in Shia contexts are clear: the child may inherit from the biological mother (the oocyte donor), may bear the name of the infertile father, but can only inherit from the sperm donor, as the infertile man is considered an adoptive father in legal terms.

In general, it can be said that most of the Islamic world does not approve of sperm donation, as neither Sunni nor Shia traditions fully recognize the child born through such means as a legitimate offspring. Nevertheless, some authors offer more nuanced and

comprehensive perspectives by asserting that social pressures, individuals' desire to have children, the decline in human fertility, and broader socioeconomic and sociopolitical realities must also be acknowledged (Padela et al. 2020, p. 18; Ghaly et al. 2020, pp. 24–25).

3.3. *The Protection of Unborn Life: The Principle of Maslahah or Public Interest*

Classical Islamic understanding describes the development of nascent human life in three stages: (1) the gathering of the substance in the mother's womb, lasting approximately forty days from fertilization; (2) the stage of the clot (*mudgha*), lasting another forty days; and (3) the stage of the lump of flesh (*alaqa*), also lasting forty days (Sahîh Al-Bukhari by Imam Muhammad ibn Isma'îl Al-Mughîra Al-Bujârî (2003, p. 209). After these 120 days, an angel is believed to descend and breathe the spirit into this previously biological substance (Zaviš et al. 2019, p. 43). Based on this framework, abortion is generally considered permissible within the first 120 days of gestation. In any case, legislation varies across Muslim-majority countries depending on their Islamic affiliation and the national *fatwas* that have recognized various grounds for legal abortion: to save the life of the pregnant woman, to preserve her physical or mental health, in cases of fetal malformation, incest or rape, and for social or economic reasons (Mahmoud 2022, p. 34).

Today, however, many Muslims affirm that "Fertilized eggs surplus to the requirements of IVF possess no privileged status and enjoy no sanctity before their implantation." (IOMS 2007, p. 3). This position was articulated during the International Seminar on "The Dilemma of Stem Cell Research, Future and Ethical Challenges", organized by the Islamic Organization for Medical Sciences in collaboration with the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean (EMRO), UNESCO, the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), and the Islamic Fiqh Council in Jeddah.

A key concept that helps clarify ethical decisions in this domain is *maslahah*, or public interest. Islamic law defines "good" as that which benefits the entire Muslim community, and this principle is central to determining the permissibility or prohibition of actions. It is based on five essential goods: faith, life, intellect, progeny, and property (sometimes including honor) (Zaviš et al. 2019, p. 24). Within this framework, the sanctity and inviolability of human life created by God are affirmed, and compassion is owed to it from the moment of conception. However, when the mother's life is at risk, her well-being takes precedence over that of the fetus, invoking the principle of public interest.

This reasoning has also led to the acceptance of techniques such as embryo reduction when the viability of transferred embryos is compromised. Sex selection is permitted under specific conditions: to fulfill a religious or familial obligation, to protect a woman with high-risk pregnancies, and only in families with multiple children of the same sex who strongly desire a child of the opposite sex. However, sex selection is rejected when used for choosing the sex of a first child or for producing children of a single sex, as this is presumed to reflect a discriminatory bias against females (Serour 2008, p. 36).

3.4. *The Concept of Marriage and Family*

Marriage holds great significance in Islamic society, understood as the primary means of transferring wealth across generations. As previously noted, heterosexual and fertile marriage is considered a personal, social, and religious good to be preserved. Consequently, the use of ART by single women or same-sex couples is deemed *haram* (forbidden) and is not permitted under any circumstances. Embryo transfers must occur within the context of a valid marriage. They may be performed in widowed women only if the embryo is genetically related to the deceased husband and prior consent was given.

In conclusion, the ethical framework surrounding reproduction in Islam is fundamentally oriented toward values and goods similar to those found in Judaism: *lineage, marriage,*

and the sanctity of life. From these moral principles, diverse norms may emerge, but they are always directed toward the pursuit of the common good, understood as a good that lies at the heart of every man and woman.

4. Assisted Reproduction in Christianity

From the earliest days of Christianity to the present, Christian churches have consistently upheld the protection of God's most precious gifts: the sanctity of all human life, the dignity of conjugal love, and the family.

Although the theological and anthropological foundations are largely shared across Christian denominations, centuries of sociopolitical developments have shaped distinct worldviews within each tradition. With the emergence of assisted reproductive technologies (ART) in the twentieth century, the various churches have developed different ethical responses, all rooted in these common principles.

To better understand this diversity of perspectives, we begin with the foundational teachings of the Catholic Church's magisterial documents. From there, we will explore the specific normative criteria adopted by other major Christian traditions, namely, the Orthodox Churches and the Evangelical and Protestant ecclesial communities, in evaluating reproductive technologies.

It is important to clarify that what will be presented reflects the official ethical positions of the different Christian confessions, even though, on certain issues, the private moral stance of many believers—particularly Catholics in Europe and North America—has become more permissive and diverged from these official teachings. It should also be noted that there is considerable diversity among the various Christian traditions, which cannot be fully captured in this article, especially within Mainline Protestantism, as will be indicated.

4.1. The Origin of Human Life and Humanity's Role in Creation

All life, from the moment of conception, originates in God. In this creative act, the couple also plays a role, as collaborators and interpreters of God's love as Creator (Second Vatican Council 1965, no. 50). This collaboration is expressed through the sexual union of the spouses, a unique and indissoluble act of love that is open to the generation of new life. However, as is often the case, sexual relations do not always result in the desired conception. Until the advent of ART, couples could do little more than entrust themselves to God, the only one who "opens the closed womb" (cf. Gen 20:18). With the birth of Louise Joy Brown in 1978, the first "test-tube baby", humanity had effectively declared its independence from God's will in reproduction: it became possible to reproduce despite infertility (through ART) and to avoid conception despite fertility (through contraceptive methods).

The *Catholic Church* places great value on science and technology, provided they fulfill their proper mission: to contribute to the integral good of human life and to respect its dignity, recognizing that only God, and not humanity, determines the origin and destiny of human beings (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith 1987, Introduction, 3).

In the specific context of human procreation, the Church identifies two fundamental values that guide the ethical evaluation of reproductive techniques: the life of the human being and the unique way in which that life is transmitted within marriage (*Donum Vitae*, Introduction, 4). Therefore, every human life should be born from a loving act within marriage that is open to life. When this is not possible, science may play a decisive role, but only to treat, heal, or reduce the causes that prevent fertilization from occurring through sexual union. Thus, any surgical, pharmacological, or other method aimed at this goal, such as surgery to correct anatomical malformations, ovulation inducers, or NaProTechnology, is considered ethically acceptable.

The key to understanding the Catholic ethical position lies in discerning which techniques assist and which replace the sexual expression of conjugal love open to life. This is clearly stated in the evaluation of homologous artificial insemination (AIH): “Homologous artificial insemination within marriage cannot be admitted except for those cases in which the technical means is not a substitute for the conjugal act but serves to facilitate and to help so that the act attains its natural purpose” (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith 1987, II, B6; 2008, no. 22). Therefore, AIH may be considered morally licit only when it does not substitute for the couple’s sexual union.

A similar perspective is presented by the *Eastern Orthodox Churches*, which view the origin of every human being as the image of God manifested in the union of human will with divine will. In this sense, modern technology may represent “a great blessing of God to man, if it is used with prudence and respect; at the same time, however, it could give man the possibility to oppose God’s will as this is expressed through His natural laws” (The Holy Synod of the Church of Greece 2007, no. 19). The challenge, then, is to exercise free will faithfully, without falling into the greatest threat we face: relying solely on human will while disregarding the divine).

In the field of assisted reproductive technologies (ART), the Greek Orthodox Church expresses similar reservations to those of the Catholic Church. It holds that a new human being is conceived in a context detached from the sexual expression of conjugal love, and therefore is no longer born “naturally but he is being manufactured artificially” (The Holy Synod of the Church of Greece 2007, no. 37a). From this understanding arises the ethical legitimacy of medical and surgical treatments for couple infertility, as well as homologous artificial insemination (HIA), but not of in vitro techniques that separate human conception from the sexual act.

A different approach is taken by the *churches of the Reformation*, where a wide range of views exists, with emphasis placed on personal conscience and responsibility. Nonetheless, the use of ART in cases of infertility is generally accepted (Second European Ecumenical Assembly 1997). The Anglican Church, for example, holds science and technology in high regard, stating: “Scientific research and therapy are profoundly religious enterprises, ways in which we respond to God’s promptings in us to bring healing and reconciliation to a fallen world” (Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council 2004, no. 34).

4.2. The Protection of Unborn Life

This is the principal criterion by which the *Catholic Church* evaluates ART. It holds that human life, genetically distinct from its parents, begins at fertilization and must be protected from that moment onward (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith 1974, no. 13; John Paul II 1995, no. 60). Any technique that endangers the life of the pre-implantation embryo, the implanted embryo, or the fetus is considered ethically illicit. Thus, IVF and its derivatives, embryo selection, preimplantation genetic diagnosis (when used to eliminate affected embryos), cryopreservation, and embryo reduction are all excluded for Catholic couples experiencing infertility.

In the 1980s, theologians discussed the so-called “simple case”: an IVF procedure in which all fertilized embryos are transferred, and the sperm is collected through a conjugal act open to life. However, the instruction *Donum Vitae* clearly rejected this possibility, stating that it “deprives human procreation of the dignity which is proper and connatural to it” (DV II, B5), despite earlier acceptance of this method by some episcopal conferences (Massé 2015).

The *Eastern Orthodox Churches* also prioritize the ethical protection of human life from the moment of fertilization. Their arguments regarding the ontological and ethical status of the human embryo closely mirror those of the Catholic Church. They affirm that

from fertilization, the embryo “is a perfect human being in regards to its identity, and is constantly being perfected as per its phenotypic expression and development” (The Holy Synod of the Church of Greece 2007, no. 27). Therefore, they initially recommend adoption to infertile couples and, as a last resort, permit only those techniques that do not involve embryo destruction, provided that all embryos created from the couple’s gametes are transferred, as affirmed by Bishop Gregorios of the Coptic Orthodox Church (Gregorios 1988).

Among *Protestant churches*, once again, there is no unified position. There is general agreement among many Evangelical churches that the human embryo deserves respect from the moment of fertilization, and especially from implantation, but there is no consensus on how that respect should be concretely expressed (Cruz 2003, p. 103). Those who accept IVF and its derivatives (including cryopreservation and embryo donation) typically do so only within marriage, provided that all embryos are transferred and no embryo reduction is performed (Sallam and Sallam 2016, p. 37).

The *Anglican Church*, for its part, draws a clear distinction between the ontological and ethical status of the human embryo. On the one hand, it affirms that scientific knowledge of the embryo, together with theological reflection from Scripture and Tradition, should inspire “an attitude of profound respect, love and wonder at the sheer mystery and intelligence of creation and life” (Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council 2004, no. 38). On the other hand, it does not derive any specific ethical obligation from this attitude. Instead, it encourages each believer to form their conscience through teleological or ontological reasoning, discerning the truth while respecting differing moral conclusions (Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council 2004, no. 42). As a result, while affirming the sanctity of the human embryo and the need to treat it with profound respect, most Anglicans subordinate this to other goods and values, such as alleviating human suffering (General Synod of the Church of England 2003). The Church maintains that an evolutionary view of human personhood has always been present in Christian thought. Therefore, it sees no ethical problem in using IVF and its derivatives, even when embryo destruction or research is involved, provided it occurs within the first fourteen days of development and is pursued for “serious purposes that otherwise would be unattainable” (Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council 2004, no. 50).

4.3. *The Dignity of Conjugal Love*

This is the second fundamental criterion by which the *Catholic Church* evaluates ART. The dignity of conjugal love implies that “the gift of human life must be actualized in marriage through the specific and exclusive acts of husband and wife, in accordance with the laws inscribed in their persons and in their union” (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith 1987, Introduction, 5).

This argument mirrors the one formulated in the ethical evaluation of contraception, namely, that there should be no sexual act without openness to life (Paul VI 1968, no. 12), but applied in reverse to ART: every human life must be the fruit of a specific conjugal act (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith 1987, II, B4a).

Accordingly, for the Catholic Church, any intervention by third parties (through gamete donation or gestation) in the conception of new life constitutes a grave violation of the dignity of the couple and of the child’s right to be conceived through an act of love between their parents (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith 1987, II, A1). The concern here is not about lineage, inheritance, or even genetics, but rather the illegitimate intrusion of a third party, genetically and necessarily, into the conception of a new life. There is no fatherhood apart from genetic fatherhood, nor motherhood apart from biological and genetic motherhood, though adoption remains a legitimate and valued exception.

Once again, we find significant convergence between Catholic and Orthodox ethical perspectives. The *Greek Orthodox Church*, for instance, states that “every form of heterologous assisted fertilization degrades the concept of motherhood and fatherhood” (The Holy Synod of the Church of Greece 2007, no. 42), as they involve the necessary intervention of a third party in the process of human reproduction and in the mystery of marriage, though not considered a form of adultery. Surrogacy, while potentially seen as a way to achieve motherhood through love, is ultimately deemed unjust to both the genetic parents and the child, as it denies them the essential bond formed during pregnancy. More importantly, it disrupts family unity, leading the Church to express its “difficulty in giving Her blessing to such a deviation from the natural pregnancy procedure” (The Holy Synod of the Church of Greece 2007, 46).

In contrast, the *Evangelical Church* departs from the Catholic position by emphasizing not fidelity to natural law, but the overall well-being of all persons involved. Assisted reproduction is understood as an act of love in which the husband acknowledges his biological limitations and offers his wife the opportunity to become a mother. The couple’s loving intention becomes the ultimate criterion for ethical evaluation. As such, ART is generally viewed positively within marriage. Even in cases involving donor gametes, the ethical question becomes: what is better for the couple who desires children but cannot conceive, having a child or not? And for the future child, living or not living?

The *Anglican Church*, consistent with its previously stated principles, accepts gamete donation, while affirming that each Anglican must discern whether or not to make use of this option. In such cases, the ability to know the genetic origins of children conceived through these techniques is considered important.

Among the wide range of *other Christian denominations*, it is generally accepted that IVF using the couple’s own gametes and without embryo loss is permissible, while gamete donation is not. For example, the Church of Christ, Scientist, does not approve of IVF due to its reliance on medications and surgical techniques, although the final decision is left to the couple’s conscience.

Thus, we observe a shared desire among Christian churches to protect and uphold the dignity of conjugal love, though each tradition expresses this in different ways through its ethical teachings. Unlike other religions that emphasize patrilineal inheritance or the biological transmission of faith, Christian ethics, whether absolutely or significantly, prioritize the expression of conjugal love and its intimate connection to God’s creative will.

4.4. The Family as a Value to Be Protected

In this area, we find one of the most consistent points of agreement among Christian denominations: the belief that new life should be born within a family formed by a heterosexual marriage open to life (Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith 1987, Introduction, 5).

The *Orthodox Church* expresses a similar view: “The law of God designates that each human being be born out of profound marital love and not just out of the artificial union of genetic cells (gametes)” (The Holy Synod of the Church of Greece 2007, no. 38). Consequently, they reject the use of ART in cases involving single parents, same-sex couples, widows, or even elderly women. In the latter case, they argue that such a conception is centered on the woman’s selfish desire to have a child, which is unjust to the newborn (The Holy Synod of the Church of Greece 2007, 48).

Churches of the Reformation also affirm that the ideal context for the birth of new life is the natural expression of love within a heterosexual marriage. However, while this is considered the best context, they acknowledge that other situations may be ethically permissible to avoid greater harm. Nonetheless, there is near-unanimous ethical rejection

of ART for single women, same-sex couples, or widows, based on arguments similar to those of the Orthodox Church: the self-centered desire to avoid loneliness or the need for both maternal and paternal figures for the child's psychosocial development (Cruz 2003, pp. 89–90). At this point, many mainline Protestants in recent years have indeed differed substantially from the Catholic and Evangelical positions presented.

The *Anglican Church* has also expressed concern about the use of ART by single women or same-sex couples. In its response to the *Joint Committee on the Draft Human Tissue and Embryos Bill* (2007), the Church of England clearly stated that a child's right to have a father outweighs any so-called right to have a child. A law permitting otherwise would signal that fathers no longer matter and that children have no right to the best possible start in life (Church of England Mission and Public Affairs Council 2007).

As we can see, the concept of family and the need to protect it represent the most unified area of agreement among Christian churches in the field of reproductive ethics. From different arguments and foundations, whether ontological or teleological, Christians understand that life is born from the fruitful love of a heterosexual marriage, in which the spouses live their vocation to motherhood and fatherhood through the generous gift of self in founding a family, rather than through a desire to have a child as a means of personal fulfillment.

5. Conclusions: The Contribution of Abrahamic Religions to the Ethical Reflection on Assisted Reproduction

In today's technologized world, where scientific and technical advances often seem ethically justified simply by their capacity to fulfill human desires, religions still have much to offer. Many men and women of faith turn to their religious traditions in search of a voice that gives meaning to their deepest human dimensions: life, motherhood, fatherhood, and family.

The Abrahamic faiths, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, offer ethical frameworks that, at their core, share more common ground than might initially appear, even if their normative expressions differ. At a time when the mystery of life's origins seems to have been unveiled, the treasure that Jews, Muslims, and Christians alike are called to preserve becomes all the more valuable. This *shared legacy* includes:

(a) The protection of conjugal love and the family. The love between spouses is a sacred space that deserves full respect and protection, whether from the intrusion of third parties (a reality present in all times and cultures), from the threat infertility poses to the couple's relationship, or from the risk of family breakdown and the fragmentation of communal bonds. Today, more than ever, voices are needed to defend the couple and the family, especially as infertility and the reproductive industry risk reducing this institution to the mere fulfillment of a reproductive desire. With their distinct emphases and nuances, the Abrahamic religions consistently affirm the value of the family, founded on a couple whose expression of love is open to life, even if not always successfully.

(b) The defense of human life. Human life is a gift from God and must be protected. While there is no consensus on the ontological status of the human embryo, its genetic humanity and potential to become a person warrant special protection, whether total and unconditional from the moment of fertilization (as proposed by the Catholic and Orthodox Churches), or gradual, evaluated in relation to other values and goods in conflict (as proposed by other Christian communities, Islam, or Judaism).

(c) The protection of the child and their personal and social future. The desire to become parents is not an absolute right. Any couple's reproductive project must always consider the well-being and rights of the future child, viewed through the richness of diverse traditions and cultures: the right to be born into a context of love, to grow up with

parental figures, to fully belong to a family tradition, to know one's origins, to inherit, not only material goods but also religious duties and obligations, to recognize their identity, and to one day form a family without compromising their religious conscience or genetic health. ART must serve the couple and the children born through it, not turn children into a means of fulfilling personal desires.

The ethical proposals of the religious traditions analyzed here reveal *the richness of religious diversity*, new perspectives on a new reality, shaped by centuries of wisdom. Below are a few ethical insights that may enrich and inform our own worldviews:

(a) The value of group identity and belonging to a long-standing tradition. This is what Judaism seeks to preserve by ensuring Jewish identity through maternal lineage, and what Islam protects through *nasab*, which legitimizes the child's identity. Just as parents must provide food, clothing, and education, they must also safeguard their child's religious identity and sense of belonging to a human community that welcomes, socializes, and protects them from meaninglessness. In a society where everything seems subject to individual choice, religions offer what the market cannot: group solidarity, a millennia-old journey undertaken as a family through adversity, and the conviction that, no matter what happens, we are not alone in this life.

(b) The personal and conjugal vocation to be fruitful, to give life, to participate in the work of Creation. This is the shared response of all the traditions studied to the divine imperative of Genesis: "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28). With varying nuances, each ethical framework emphasizes the need to be active participants in God's creative work, assuming personal and conjugal responsibility, and making free, autonomous, and value-consistent decisions. It is no longer about reproducing irrationally or irresponsibly, but about making love fruitful in a way that seeks the good of all: children, families, society, and religious communities.

(c) Reproduction is not solely a personal or even conjugal vocation; it is a social responsibility. This is the lesson of the Islamic concept of *maslahah* (public interest), which closely resembles the ethical principle of the lesser evil (or greater good) when values and stakeholders are in conflict. In reproductive ethics, countless scenarios arise in which major goods must be weighed: the life of the mother versus the child; the life of one embryo versus the chance that at least one survives in a multiple pregnancy; the life of the embryo versus the social exclusion of the mother or her entire family, and so on. Often, the ideal option is not available, and one must choose the greater good or the lesser harm.

In politically polarized Western societies, religious discourse has gained renewed prominence. Social tensions are increasing, hindering the integration of Jews, Muslims, and Christians into societies that have traditionally not been Jewish, Muslim, or Christian. Within this context, there remain areas where we can still think together: the service of life, the dignity and eternity of love, and the meaning of family. Perhaps by thinking together, we may also learn to build together a more human and fraternal society.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

AIH	Homologous Artificial Insemination
ART	Assisted Reproductive Technology
Gen	Genesis
IOMS	Islamic Organization for Medical Sciences
IVF	In Vitro Fertilization
Lev	Leviticus

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Article

Should the State Still Protect Religion *qua* Religion? John Finnis Between Brian Leiter and the “Second Wave” in Law and Religion

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Abstract: This article offers a Thomist response to Brian Leiter’s *Why Tolerate Religion?*, challenging his claim that religion does not merit distinct legal protection. While Leiter assumes religion to be epistemically irrational—defined by existential consolation, categorical demands, and insulation from evidence—this article draws on John Finnis’s interpretation of Saint Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) to reconstruct religion as a basic good of practical reason. It proposes a three-tiered model of religion—as human quest, natural religion, and revealed religion—which clarifies religion’s internal structure and civic relevance. Developing this model against Leiter’s critique, this article shows that religion, so understood, can be legally protected even on Leiter’s liberal terms, through both Rawlsian and Millian frameworks. The article also extends its argument to “second-wave” law-and-religion controversies, illustrating how a Thomist framework illuminates debates about ideological establishments, identity politics, and public reason. Through original syntheses and rigorous normative analysis, this article advances a conceptually fresh and publicly accessible model of religion for law and public policy. It also speaks to pressing constitutional debates in the U.S. and Europe, thus contributing to transatlantic jurisprudence on religious freedom and the moral purposes of law. Religion still matters—and must be understood—not as conscience, but *qua* religion.

Keywords: religious freedom; John Finnis; Brian Leiter; toleration; natural law; Thomas Aquinas; religion

1. Introduction

As Marc DeGirolami (2024) has recently argued, the field of law and religion is undergoing a “second wave” (p. 37). Where first-wave scholars focused on exemptions, neutrality, and pluralism within liberal frameworks, second-wave debates concern contested political and cultural establishments—often ideological rather than religious in a traditional sense. Yet beneath these shifting concerns, foundational questions persist. Two questions, arguably at the heart of the discipline, continue to demand attention: What is religion? And what interest does the state have in protecting it still? This essay argues that even in the second wave, the liberal state requires a coherent definition of religion. The issues may be shifting, but the state—as an enduring political community—must still know what it is protecting and why it should do so.

To these ends, this essay takes as its focal point one of the most prominent rejections of religion’s distinct legal status: Brian Leiter’s 2013 book *Why Tolerate Religion?* (WTR). Writing in a recognizably first-wave register (Marc DeGirolami 2024, p. 17), Leiter argues that religion does not warrant special legal accommodation. Rather, he treats it as a subset

of conscience-based commitments—distinguished by traits such as existential consolation, categorical demands, and insulation from evidence—and concludes that religion should be tolerated only *qua* conscience, not *qua* religion (Leiter 2013).

Although many critiques of WTR already exist (see, e.g., Adams 2013; Bonotti 2016; Mendus 2013; Perez 2014; Urbaniak 2013; see also Leiter 2016), this article offers the first sustained Thomist response that I know of. Drawing on the work of John Finnis—whose interpretation of Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) has significantly shaped legal and moral theory—I argue that religion, understood as a basic good of practical reason, possesses a rational structure that grounds its distinctive legal relevance. Rather than challenge Leiter’s political and moral assumptions about the liberal state, I offer a constructive normative account of religion’s place in law. At the center of that account is a three-tiered model, drawn from Finnis’s writings: religion as (i) human questing, (ii) natural religion, and (iii) revealed religion. This model not only clarifies religion’s internal rationality but also offers a conceptually fresh alternative to models such as Leiter’s.

This intervention is timely. Cases such as *Oklahoma Statewide Charter School Board v. Drummond*, 605 U.S. __ (2025) illustrate that liberal democracies continue to wrestle with religion’s civic significance and meaning in law. While current debates increasingly concern identity, dissent, and ideological establishments (Marc DeGirolami 2024), they continue to rely on deeper assumptions about what religion is and whether it merits distinct treatment. Here, too, the law cannot function without an operative concept of religion. In short, the second wave still needs answers to first-wave questions.

Before outlining the structure of my argument, it is helpful to preview Finnis’s position on the legal solicitude of religion—and how Leiter engages with it, albeit somewhat hastily, in WTR. In “Does Free Exercise of Religion Deserve Constitutional Mention?” (2009), Finnis writes the following:

Religion deserves constitutional mention, not because it is a passionate or deep commitment, but because it is the practical expression of, or response to, truths about human society, about the persons who are a political community’s members, and about the world in which any such community must take its place and find its ways and means. Even the many seriously misguided religions tell in some respects more truth about the constitution’s ultimate natural (transcendent, supra-natural) foundations than any atheism or robust agnosticism can. (p. 56; quoted in Leiter 2013, p. 88)

At the heart of Finnis’s claim lies the idea that religion is a “practical expression” of human reason—or, differently put, a “response to truths” that human reason discerns by engaging with and reflecting upon reality (Finnis 2009, p. 56). Leiter, of course, disagrees. Focusing on Finnis’s tacit affirmation of natural theology, Leiter (2013) writes the following:

[t]here are not, contra Finnis, any “lines of thought that converge on the conclusion that one should affirm a transcendent cause.” What there is, instead, is actual scientific practice that finds that a combination of deterministic and probabilistic laws describe[s] wide swaths of natural phenomena, and the recognition that some phenomena have no causal determinants at all. (p. 90; quoting Finnis 2009, p. 49)

Leiter, therefore, concludes that one cannot “salvage an argument for appraisal respect of religion” (Leiter 2013, p. 90); that is, one cannot affirm religion as something to be morally valued. On his account, religion—being epistemically insulated from scientific evidence—is undeserving of constitutional mention. At best, it may be tolerated alongside other irrational secular beliefs.

What we have here is not merely a disagreement over religion's constitutional status but a deeper clash between rival accounts of its rationality. Leiter dismisses religion as epistemically deficient without engaging seriously with the Thomist tradition, which frames religion as a reasoned, action-guiding good. While Finnis articulates this view across several works, it has yet to receive systematic development in direct response to Leiter. This essay offers that development. By reconstructing Finnis's account into a succinct three-tiered model—religion as (i) quest, (ii) natural religion, and (iii) revealed religion—I aim to clarify religion's rational structure and show how it can ground principled legal protection, even within liberal frameworks that Leiter himself accepts.

My argument proceeds as follows: Section 2 reconstructs and compares Leiter's and Finnis's accounts of religion, culminating in a Thomist, three-tiered model. Section 3 applies this model to Leiter's legal arguments—particularly his reliance on Rawlsian and Millian assumptions—demonstrating that religion, properly defined, can merit legal protection even on liberal terms. Section 4 expands the analysis to second-wave law-and-religion debates, illustrating how the Thomist model retains relevance in contemporary controversies involving identity, ideology, and establishment. It concludes by reaffirming the essay's central claim: that religion is not an irrational holdover from a premodern past, but a rational and public good that the state can still recognize and protect.

Before proceeding, two preliminary points are worth noting. First, because Leiter's argument against legal solicitude hinges on a reductive account of religion, it is sufficient for my purposes to defend religion as a normatively distinct and rationally intelligible good within his own liberal framework. This demonstrates that the task of definition remains vital—even prior to questions about the state's deeper moral commitments. While broader Thomist critiques of liberalism are undoubtedly important (see, e.g., Vermeule 2022), they are not the task of this essay. Instead, I focus on what even a minimally liberal state needs to understand about the nature of religion. Second, since Leiter targets Finnis directly and treats him as a representative of Thomist natural law theory, this essay focuses exclusively on Finnis's account. Some have questioned whether Finnis's Thomism remains faithful to Aquinas (e.g., Biggar and Black 2000). But that debate lies beyond the scope of this essay. Here, I treat Finnis as a principal interlocutor and offer a Finnis-inspired response (other broadly Thomist responses to Leiter-like positions exist (see, e.g., Moschella 2017)).

2. Defining Religion

Pace Leiter, this essay argues—*cum* Finnis—that the state should protect religion *qua* religion. To make this case, I first distinguish Leiter's and Finnis's views on religion. The primary aim is to assess the moral intelligibility and reasonableness of religion as a legally relevant category. I begin by examining their respective accounts of religion's "origin" before turning to a comparison of their views on its essential character.

2.1. The "Origin" of Religion

I place the word "origin" in inverted commas because neither Finnis nor Leiter directly poses the question "Whence comes religion?" Neither offers an anthropological or etymological genealogy of the term. Nevertheless, both comment on its importance to human beings and thereby imply different accounts of its origin. Finnis's account is the more sophisticated.

For Finnis, the importance of religion derives from its status as a basic good of practical reason. This idea is often misunderstood (e.g., Biggar and Black 2000), so a brief explanation is in order. Finnis follows the Thomistic division of human rationality into two modes: theoretical reason and practical reason. Theoretical reason concerns what is—it pertains to the nature of things, the principles of logic, and knowledge of the arts and sciences (Finnis

1998, pp. 20–23). Practical reason, by contrast, concerns what ought to be—it addresses human willing and the goods worth pursuing through free human choice. Morality thus falls within the scope of practical reason.

Importantly, for Finnis, practical reason is seen to have two functions: one pre-moral, the other properly moral (Finnis 2011e). The pre-moral function identifies the goods toward which humans naturally incline. The moral function, by contrast, discerns right action with respect to those goods. For present purposes, I focus on practical reason’s pre-moral function.

This pre-moral task involves identifying ultimate rational grounds for action (Grisez et al. 1987, p. 106). These are not derived from theoretical argumentation. One need not study biology to know why one eats, for example. Rather, practical reason engages with natural dispositions—such as the appetite for food or aversion to harm—and proposes action in light of these. For example, the awareness of hunger leads practical reason to propose that eating is to be pursued, and starving is to be avoided (see Finnis 2011e, p. 63). This proposal can be probed further. Why eat? To preserve life. Hence, practical reason’s foundational principle is here something like “life is a good to be pursued, and death is to be avoided.” Such a principle is rightly called a first principle of practical reason: it (i) proposes action, (ii) is known directly through awareness of natural inclination, and (iii) is foundational. The good it identifies—life—is accordingly a basic good of practical reason.

The same analysis applies to religion. Religion, too, can be recognized as a basic good. If so, then practical reason must be able to grasp the proposal “religion is to be pursued, and irreligion avoided” through an awareness of a natural human disposition. This proposition does not yet define what religion is (see Section 2.2), but it grounds its importance. Religion originates, so to speak, from within the structure of practical reason itself.

Leiter offers a much thinner account than Finnis. Across two pages in WTR, he explains religion’s centrality by appealing to its function of “existential consolation”—its capacity to “render intelligible and tolerable . . . suffering and death” (Leiter 2013, pp. 52–53). Religion, then, matters because it soothes. Leiter offers no further account of its “origin,” except to quote J.L. Mackie—via Alex Byrne (2009)—that belief in God is “a kind of miracle because it is so unsupported by reasons and evidence” (see Leiter 2013, p. 80). Hence, the contrast is sharp. For Finnis, religion is rooted in human inclinations and practical judgment. For Leiter, it is a persistent but epistemically defective coping mechanism.

2.2. *The Essential Character of Religion*

I now turn from origin to essence. Leiter defines religion via three features; Finnis offers a three-tiered alternative.

Alongside existential consolation, Leiter identifies two further features: (i) categoricity of commands—“demands that must be satisfied no matter what an individual’s antecedent desires and no matter what incentives or disincentives the world offers up” (Leiter 2013, p. 34), and (ii) insulation from evidence—beliefs that reject the “ordinary standards of evidence and rational justification” used in science and common sense (Leiter 2013, p. 34). Leiter considers but rejects a fourth feature: metaphysics of ultimate reality. He deems metaphysics reducible to insulation from evidence and sees “ultimate reality” as a matter of moral value, tied to categorical demands (Leiter 2013, p. 47). In short, metaphysics collapses into the other two features.

Finnis, by contrast, recognizes a metaphysical dimension. As already seen, he defines religion as a basic good of practical reason. But this good has substantive content. His account can be reconstructed into a three-tiered structure.

At Level 1, religion is experienced as a “tension with the wider reaches of reality” (Finnis 2011e, p. 90). This evokes practical responsibility to shape one’s life in accordance with what one discerns about the cosmos. It includes questioning whether that cosmos

bears any relation to a transcendent order or intelligence (Finnis 2011e, p. 89). Notably, however, no affirmative answer is required. This level represents religion as a human quest: a searching for “the truth about reality’s most fundamental shape,” and a practical response to that discovery (Finnis 2011a, p. 29; 2011g, p. 35).

Level 2 is natural religion. Religion, Finnis argues, cannot be reduced to mere questing—it must also engage with “reasons that point . . . to the existence of God as proper and real object of such questing” (Finnis 2011a, p. 29). Through philosophical reflection on actuality, order, and directedness, one may reasonably infer a divine source: “there exists a reality such as is everywhere referred to by the name ‘God’” (Finnis 2011g, p. 81).

Level 3 is revealed religion. Reasonable inference from natural religion leads one to seek out potential evidence of divine self-disclosure. Revelation, if judged not to contradict reason, opens a new domain. The propositions of revelation are not verified philosophically, but they are not irrational either. Their content—if consistent with reason—can be treated as morally axiomatic (Finnis 2011g, pp. 80–84). It is here especially, along with Level 2, where Finnis would recognize the metaphysical dimensions of religion.

Thus, Finnis’s three levels may be summarized as follows:

- Level 1: Religion as human questing;
- Level 2: Religion as natural religion;
- Level 3: Religion as revealed religion.

By contrast, Leiter’s three central features are as follows:

- Existential consolation;
- Categoricity of commands;
- Insulation from evidence.

Two points bear emphasizing. First, Finnis’s tiers are distinct but nested. Level 3 includes but transcends Levels 1 and 2. A religious believer may operate at any or all levels. The model is expansive, not restrictive. Second, even at Level 3, Finnis insists on rational accessibility. True religion, he argues, “holds out its moral teachings as a matter of public reason”—as “accessible and acceptable by a purely philosophical inquiry and only *clarified* and/or made *more* certain by divine revelation” (Finnis 2011g, p. 102, emphasis in original). Moral teachings on euthanasia (Finnis 2011b), abortion (Finnis 2011c), and marriage (Finnis 2011d) are, therefore, defensible by natural reason. Revelation strengthens, but does not replace, their rational basis (Finnis 2011f, p. 48).

This offers a striking contrast with Leiter’s view. What Leiter regards as insulated fideism, Finnis frames as reasoned commitment. Religion, far from being epistemically suspect, emerges as a structured moral pursuit—grounded in human rationality and intelligible in law.

3. Protecting Religion *qua* Religion

Section 2 compared Finnis’s and Leiter’s respective conceptions of religion, noting especially Leiter’s emphasis on insulation from evidence. If religion is indeed epistemically insulated, then it may be unfit for a state that values beliefs justified by the standards of modern science. Alternatively, we might conclude that religion is not meaningfully distinct from deeply held secular moral commitments. In either case, would religion *qua* religion deserve express legal protection? Leiter thinks not. This section evaluates his arguments—offered under two distinct moral frameworks (Millian utilitarianism and Rawlsian deontology)—and critiques them through the lens of Finnis’s Thomistic account. I do not reject Leiter’s utilitarian and deontological frameworks outright. It is enough to show that even on his own terms, religion may in principle warrant legal protection.

3.1. The Moral Position of Leiter's Ideal State

Leiter assumes that a state may rightly adopt two moral frameworks: Rawlsian deontology and Millian utilitarianism. These choices are not neutral. They implicitly suggest that other moral systems lack legitimacy for a modern constitutional democracy. However, Leiter's deeper reason for selecting these frameworks is strategic: they purportedly offer no justification for the special legal protection of religion *qua* religion. I take up his arguments in turn.

The first—what I call the Rawlsian Argument—derives from a well-known passage in John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971). The argument runs as follows: because (i) citizens hold religious and moral convictions, and because (ii) they do not know whether these convictions will be favored in the majority or discriminated against in the minority, it follows that (iii) equal liberty of conscience is the “only principle” that persons concerned about religious and moral freedom can acknowledge in the original position (Rawls 1971, p. 207; quoted in Leiter 2013, p. 15).

Leiter then underscores that there is nothing in this argument that singles out religion as eliciting a distinct form of freedom. As he writes, “the argument, as Rawls says quite clearly, is on behalf of rights securing ‘*liberty of conscience*,’ which can include, of course, matters of conscience that are distinctively religious in character but are not limited to them” (Leiter 2013, p. 16, emphasis added; quoting Rawls 1971, p. 206). In this, Leiter affirms that religion gives rise to categorical demands of conscience but insists that such obligations are not unique to religion. Secular moral convictions, too, oblige conscience in similar ways. Hence, persons in the original position would adopt a general principle of “equal liberty of conscience,” not a distinct right to religious freedom.

Leiter's second set of arguments draws on Millian utilitarianism. The first of these—what I term the Argument from Existential Consolation—addresses one of religion's purported benefits. Leiter reasons that because (i) existential consolation may arise through both religious and non-religious means, and because (ii) it is unclear whether religion in fact produces more consolation than harm, due to its categoricity, it follows that (iii) there is no obvious reason why the state should favor, or tolerate, religion *qua* religion (see Leiter 2013, pp. 31–35).

However, Leiter places more weight on the Argument from Insulation from Evidence. Here his reasoning is as follows: because (i) religion entails insulation from evidence and, as such, (ii) is precluded from the only epistemically relevant standards secured through the scientific revolution, it follows that (iii) religion is unable to “promote knowledge of the truth” (Leiter 2013, pp. 54–56). He briefly entertains the possibility that a Millian epistemic libertarianism might permit “alternative epistemic methods,” i.e., “methods that *purport* to have epistemic payoffs,” on the grounds that this would spur the search for truth (Leiter 2013, p. 56, emphasis in original). But he quickly dismisses the idea, citing Mill's insistence that “there is no epistemic reason for the ‘free market’ of ideas” (Leiter 2013, p. 56; quoting Mill 1978, p. 35). As Mill says, “there is nothing at all to be said on the wrong side of the question [in the case of geometry]. The peculiarity of the evidence of mathematical truths is that all the argument is on one side” (Mill 1978, p. 35; quoted in Leiter 2013, pp. 56–57). There is, Leiter concludes, no place for a “mathematics based on faith” (Leiter 2013, p. 57). Religion, therefore, is unwelcome in a Millian state.

Yet Leiter recognizes that this conclusion may go too far. Instead of demonstrating why religion fails to warrant legal solicitude, the strong epistemic claim seems to imply that religious belief is intolerable altogether. Seeking a way out, Leiter introduces a “weaker” epistemic argument. As he writes,

So perhaps there is a weaker but still pertinent response . . . For *even if* we allow that there is an epistemic reason to tolerate purportedly epistemically relevant

considerations different than those that figure in common sense and the sciences, there will now be nothing in this argument that singles out religious ‘faith’ for special solicitude, since it is only one of a multiplicity of nonstandard methods that purportedly provide access to truths (consider telepathy, talking with the dead, clairvoyance, etc.). *Even if* there is a viable epistemic argument for toleration of beliefs insulated from the familiar standards of evidence and reasons, that argument does not help single out religious belief for special protection. (Leiter 2013, p. 58, emphasis added)

Two things happen here. First, through dialectical argumentation (Leiter 2016, p. 548), Leiter appeals to a hypothetical weaker epistemic argument without developing its premises. Second, he groups religious belief with “telepathy, talking with the dead, [and] clairvoyance” (Leiter 2013, p. 58), suggesting that religion belongs among a range of purportedly irrational epistemic methods. As the next subsection shows, both moves are problematic—logically and morally speaking.

3.2. Responses to the Utilitarian and Rawlsian Arguments

Leiter’s arguments against legal solicitude for religion rely heavily on his definition of religion as epistemically deficient. As demonstrated in Section 2, Finnis’s Thomist account contests this framing. In what follows, I take the moral frameworks of Millian utilitarianism and Rawlsian deontology as given—not because they are above critique, but because Leiter adopts them as normative foundations for the liberal state. I argue that even within these frameworks, religion as defined by Finnis can be shown to merit legal protection.

Leiter’s Argument from Insulation from Evidence concludes that religion, because of its insulation from scientific reasoning, lacks epistemic value and thus deserves neither toleration nor legal protection. Yet, in recognizing the excessive strength of this conclusion, Leiter introduces a hypothetical weaker epistemic argument—without elaborating its structure—and then classifies religious belief alongside “telepathy, talking with the dead, [and] clairvoyance” (Leiter 2013, p. 58). Both moves are unsatisfactory.

First, consider the latter move. As shown in Section 2.2, Finnis’s conception of religion explicitly affirms its rational status. Religion, for Finnis, is not an irrational leap but an exercise of practical reason, grounded in reflection upon the world and one’s place within it. It may culminate in claims that exceed empirical verification, but that does not render them epistemically arbitrary. Indeed, even if religion produced only a “Level 1” form of self-knowledge—knowledge of oneself as a finite and responsible being—that would still constitute a meaningful epistemic good. To dismiss this as equivalent to clairvoyance is not merely unfair; it presumes the very conclusion Leiter is trying to establish.

Second, the hypothetical nature of the weaker epistemic argument undermines Leiter’s claim to have demonstrated a “credible *principled* argument for tolerating religion *qua* religion” (Leiter 2013, p. 7, emphasis in original). Leiter fails to show that Millian epistemology cannot accommodate religion. Instead, he sketches a speculative objection and leaves it undeveloped. If the goal is to show that religion lacks any claim to special protection, then an undeveloped hypothetical will not suffice—especially not when the alternative, as argued by Finnis, is that religion constitutes a basic good of human fulfilment (Finnis 2011e, pp. 89–90).

In this light, Leiter’s rejection of religion on epistemic grounds appears overhasty. If religion is understood as a rational search for transcendent meaning and moral orientation, then even a Millian calculus—concerned with human satisfaction, flourishing, and truth—should be open to its public and legal value. On utilitarian grounds, then, religion can be one among several goods (e.g., autonomy or conscience) that deserve constitutional mention.

Turning now to the Rawlsian Argument, we recall that Leiter holds religious freedom to be redundant under a general liberty of conscience. On this view, religion elicits categorical moral claims, but so do secular ethical systems. Therefore, a single liberty of conscience suffices to protect both.

This reasoning is mistaken on two fronts. First, it rests on an agnosticism that fails to engage the internal rationality of religion. Leiter (and Rawls) focus on the moral command-structure of religion while abstracting from the truth-claims on which those commands rest. As Roger Trigg notes, religion is not merely about conduct but about “a claim to objective truth” (Trigg 2014, p. 175). It involves what Finnis describes as a “response to . . . truths about human society, about the persons who are a political community’s members, and about the world in which any such community must take its place and find its ways and means” (Finnis 2009, p. 56). Religion, in this view, concerns the shape of reality, the moral structure of the cosmos, and the proper end of human life. These are not merely categorical imperatives but existential insights into human nature.

Second, Leiter’s argument depends on the assumption that freedom of religion and freedom of conscience must compete for legal recognition. But as Finnis argues, religion and conscience are distinct basic goods. Conscience concerns the internal act of reasoning and self-governance—“the good of being able to bring one’s own intelligence to bear effectively (in practical reasoning that issues in action) on the problems of choosing one’s actions and life-style and shaping one’s own character” (Finnis 2011e, p. 88). Religion, by contrast, involves an outward orientation toward ultimate reality and divine truth. The two are neither reducible to one another nor interchangeable. As Finnis puts it, they are “equally fundamental” and incommensurable (Finnis 2011e, p. 92).

A state concerned with justice and human flourishing should, therefore, protect both. This is not a speculative hope, but an already existing legal norm. Article 9(1) of the European Convention on Human Rights states the following:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, *conscience* and *religion*; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance”. (Council of Europe 2021, emphasis added)

And while the U.S. Constitution explicitly protects religious exercise in writing, secular moral commitments are granted similar protections through statutory laws (e.g., see those implicated in *United States v. Seeger*, 380 U.S. 163 [1965]), the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, and through Supreme Court jurisprudence which interprets the religion clauses of the First Amendment as applicable to secular moral beliefs (e.g., see *Gillette v. United States*, 401 U.S. 437 [1971]; see also Witte et al. 2022, chap. 6).

In short, contemporary legal systems already recognize that religion and conscience are distinct but coexisting domains of moral life. The law reflects this distinction not only to avoid unfair treatment but to uphold a more comprehensive vision of human dignity. If Finnis is right that religion is a basic good grounded in reason, then its legal protection is not a concession to tradition or sentimentality. It is a rational response to the kind of beings we are—persons that incline towards certain incommensurable goods.

In sum, if religion is rightly understood—as a basic good of practical reason with its own intelligible structure and moral seriousness—then even the liberal state envisioned by Leiter has grounds for recognizing and protecting it *qua* religion. Neither Millian nor Rawlsian principles, properly interpreted, necessitate religion’s exclusion from legal solicitude. On the contrary, both frameworks can accommodate religion’s unique contributions to human flourishing and public reason. With my conceptual and normative case now in place, we are equipped to turn to contemporary debates in second-wave law and religion,

wherein the meaning of religion and its civic significance remain deeply contested. It is there, amid shifting ideological establishments, that our Finnis-inspired Thomist model may yet prove illuminating.

4. Second-Wave Law and Religion

With the main argument of this essay now complete, I turn from internal analysis to external relevance. Having shown that religion—understood with Finnis—can withstand Leiter’s critique even on liberal terms, this concluding section steps back to consider the wider stakes. The field of law and religion may have entered a “second wave” (Marc DeGirolami 2024, p. 22), marked by concerns over ideological establishments and civic identity, but the questions at its core remain unchanged: what is religion, and why does it matter for the state? The three-tiered model developed here provides a durable conceptual grammar for addressing that question. By clarifying religion’s internal rationality, it equips legal theorists and policymakers to navigate new controversies with greater philosophical precision. And by framing religion as a basic good, it renews the case for its continued protection—still *qua* religion—even in a transformed cultural landscape.

Consider, for example, what Marc DeGirolami (2024) calls the “new disestablishments,” i.e., spaces in which sub-cultures (often conservative and religious) protest against overbearing moral majorities (often secular and progressive) (p. 38). A relevant case is *St. Isidore of Seville Catholic Virtual School v. Drummond*, 605 U.S. __ (2025)—involving what could have been the first publicly funded religious charter school in the United States. Opponents—including Oklahoma’s Supreme Court—argued that such funding violates the Establishment Clause (Dunbar 2025); proponents claimed it vindicates educational pluralism and corrects the exclusion of religious institutions from facially neutral public-funding schemes (Gryboski 2025). What both sides often lack is a coherent account of what religion is and why it might matter civically. The Thomist framework offers precisely that: religion, understood as a basic good of practical reason, is not reducible to dogma or identity. It entails the public, rational pursuit of ultimate truth—a pursuit intelligible even to those who reject its conclusions.

This framing enables a more principled analysis of religion and school choice. Admittedly, some religious schools may promote teachings that seem morally troubling to certain parties—such as the omission of “secular” subjects, such as mathematics, in certain Yeshivas (National Secular Society 2024). But religion, viewed through a Thomistic lens, remains open to moral reasoning (Finnis 2011g). Even controversial doctrines can, in principle, be interrogated through reasoned discourse—particularly if they operate at Level 1 or Level 2 of the model. The law need not accept all religious claims as sacrosanct, but neither should it presume them irrational. Instead, it should engage them with the tools of public reason.

The same framework helps assess appeals to science as an allegedly neutral arbiter of public policy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, restrictions on religious gatherings were often justified by reference to “essential” secular activities, while religious objectors were portrayed as anti-scientific or irrational (David 2023). Here, too, the three-tiered model offers a corrective. Religion as quest (Level 1) and as natural religion (Level 2) both involve reflection on mortality and health. These are not in principle opposed to scientific knowledge; they integrate it within a broader vision of the good. Grounding religion in practical reason resists the caricature of religion as fideistic defiance and helps restore its credibility in public discourse. This is particularly resonant in traditions like Catholicism, which explicitly affirm the compatibility of faith and reason (John Paul II 1998). But as Aquinas would argue, all people—whatever their religious conclusions—share the same

rational nature (see, e.g., Pasnau 2002). That shared nature makes rational engagement possible even amid deep differences.

The model also addresses the identity turn in contemporary politics, where religion is increasingly treated as one subjective commitment among many. As Marc DeGirolami (2024) observes, “religion” is now deployed rhetorically to entrench cultural priors or delegitimize opponents (p. 29). While this reflects real disaffection, it risks collapsing religion into sheer assertion. The Thomist account resists that collapse. It distinguishes between identity claims and intelligible goods and asks the following: What reasons underlie these identities? What goods are being pursued? Such questions do not dismiss identity concerns (concerning gender and sexuality, for instance), but they insist that discourse remain rational and reason-giving. This, too, is a civic and legal contribution.

Finally, the Thomist model sheds light on the very concept of establishment. Marc DeGirolami (2024) encourages law-and-religion scholars to move beyond the Establishment Clause and examine how establishments—political, cultural, and institutional—are formed, justified, and sustained (p. 38). He notes that the term “establishment” appears multiple times in the U.S. Constitution, including in Article VII, which states that ratification by nine states “shall be sufficient for the Establishment of this Constitution”—signaling, he argues, that the Constitution itself is a political establishment (quoted in Marc DeGirolami 2024, p. 38).

From a Thomist perspective, such an establishment is not normatively neutral. As Aquinas writes, law is “an ordinance of reason for the common good, made by him who has care of the community, and promulgated” (*Summa Theologiae* I–II, q. 90, a. 4). Finnis affirms this view, locating the legitimacy of legal systems in their orientation toward basic human goods. If constitutional government is to retain moral force amid civic fragmentation, it must remain tethered to publicly intelligible standards of justice and human flourishing. The three-tiered account of religion, grounded in Thomistic practical reason, offers one such standard: a rationally structured, morally serious vision of religion vis-à-vis the common good. As new establishments emerge—whether ideological, technocratic, or even theological—this model helps us evaluate their legitimacy and to insist that law continues to ask what religion is, and why it still matters.

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Article

A Preservationist Christian Sexual Ethic: Verifying and Vindicating a Contested Perspective

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Abstract: A preservationist Christian sexual ethic affirms *heterosexuality* as the only normal and natural expression of wholeness in human intimacy, relationships, and lifestyle. However, revisionist critics would maintain that the central problem of the preservationist perspective is the perceived lack of a compelling verifier. A revisionist Christian ethic embraces *homosexuality* as an alternative form of wholeness in human relationships and lifestyle. Preservationist critics would maintain that the central problem of the revisionist perspective is the perceived lack of a compelling verifier. They would also identify an additional problem for the revisionist position, namely, the perceived problem of self-contradiction. It may seem to some that problems alleged for a particular side cannot be leveraged to the advantage of the opposing side in this debate. Moreover, even the external judgment that a problem exists for a perspective is disputed within that perspective. This may seem to lead to stalemate between the opposing perspectives. However, it may be that a verifier or vindicator exists for one of these perspectives that would commend that perspective as more acceptable than the other. A vindicator for a perspective need only to reinforce that perspective, while a verifier must be an empirically attested ground for the perspective. In this article, I will compare verifiers and vindicators on each side of the debate and inquire whether there is an ace to be found in any of these arenas. I find that a preservationist Christian sexual ethic speaks for itself when its vehicles of verification and vindication are addressed in dialogue with a revisionist perspective. My aim is to increase the possibility of moving the discussion forward in the debate over normative human sexuality.

Keywords: commonsense; congruence; ethics; heterosexuality; homosexuality; preservationist; revisionist; verifier; vindicator

1. Introduction

A preservationist Christian sexual ethic speaks for itself when its vehicles of verification and vindication are addressed in dialogue with a revisionist perspective.¹ Pursuing this thesis may only be a small step toward re-vivifying the preservationist perspective given the adversarial context in which it occurs, but it would be forward movement nevertheless. A vindicator for the preservationist Christian ethical perspective need only to reinforce the perspective, but a verifier for the perspective must be an empirically attested ground for the perspective. For our purposes, a verifier is an empirically attested phenomenon whose support for a perspective can only be denied at the sacrifice of reason. Alvin Plantinga does not speak specifically of a Christian ethic of human sexuality, but he does speak of the conditions under which a perspective is defeated. Plantinga speaks of this situation in terms of defeaters that make it impossible for someone to rationally hold a belief. He says, "Defeaters of this kind are *rationality* defeaters; given belief in the defeating proposition, you

can retain belief in the defeated proposition only at the cost of irrationality. There are also *warrant* defeaters that are not rationality defeaters” (Plantinga 2000, p. 359). A warrant defeater is a circumstance that undermines belief in a proposition, while a rationality defeater is actual evidence against the proposition. Plantinga’s terms “rationality defeaters” and “warrant defeaters” respectively correspond to my terms, “verifiers” and “vindicators.”

This article is written for the inquirer who seeks ground for choosing between the preservationist and revisionist perspectives; however, it is written from the preservationist perspective. My method is to broadly describe the verifiers and vindicators that undergird the preservationist perspective, on the one hand, and the revisionist perspective on the other, and then ask about the potential for honoring the former perspective above the other.

To speak of a verifier for a preservationist Christian ethic may have faint echoes of logical positivism and its verifiability principle, but no more than faint echoes. Logical positivism has long fallen out of favor for the most part, but the idea that propositions must be verified by experience remains commonplace. Moore and Bruder say, “Today few philosophers would call themselves logical positivists. But most philosophers would still maintain that *empirical* or *factual* propositions must in *some* sense and to *some* extent be verifiable by experience” (Moore and Bruder 1999, p. 425).

In more nuanced treatments, moral intuitions themselves must be verified by experience. Kevin Jung speaks of intuitions as moral beliefs and, more specifically, as *prima facie* justified beliefs. “This means that intuitions must have experiential grounds, though the normativity of intuitions is not reducible to the latter. Experience serves as a necessary *source* of intuitions but does not justify them. What justifies the intuitions is the rationally apprehended self-evidence of intuited moral beliefs” (Jung 2015, p. 70). Jung shares a programmatic perspective on the role of nature in verifying moral belief. He says, “Natural facts provide us with evidential data necessary for us to form justified moral beliefs. More importantly, natural facts are publicly accessible and intelligible” (Jung 2015, p. 165). We are interested then in one or more verifiers (i.e., natural facts) as an empirical base for preservationist moral belief about normative human sexuality.

The terms “warrant” and “evidences” are also used in the sense that I use verifier. Plantinga described a warrant as that “quality or quantity. . . which distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief.” He says, “a belief has warrant only if it is produced by cognitive faculties that are functioning properly” (Plantinga 2000, p. 153). In his study of Plantinga, Pieter de Vries observes that “‘Warrant’ means that a person who has knowledge can furnish ‘evidences’. However, it is *not* necessary that everyone can verify these ‘evidences’; doing so requires a properly functioning knowledge-producing capacity or faculty” (de Vries 2024, p. 81). Given the use of “a properly functioning knowledge-producing capacity or faculty,” an ethical perspective can be warranted by empirically attested phenomena. This also means that an ethical perspective can be cognitively grounded or based upon knowledge (Plantinga 2000, p. 335).

We are also interested in a *vindicator* for preservationist Christian ethics. A vindicator is a vehicle or occurrence that can be referenced in support of a perspective, although it may not be a ground for the perspective. The terms “warrant,” “authorization,” and “justification” have sometimes been used in the way I use “vindicator” (Gustafson 1975, pp. 123, 169).²

Jung says, “Cognitive science involves a *non*-normative concept of sensory evidence, whereas epistemology requires a *normative* concept of evidence. It is one thing to use the former kind of evidence in support of the latter but quite another to replace the latter with the former” (Jung 2015, p. 104). My use of the terms verifier and vindicator corresponds, respectively, to Jung’s “normative concept of evidence” and “non-normative concept of sensory evidence.” A vindicator supports a verifier but does not replace it.

I use the terms verifier and vindicator to indicate what a process, event, structure, experience, text, statement, or other vehicle does *within* an ethical perspective. A vehicle may not be accepted as a fulfiller of either of these functions by those who disavow the perspective, but that does not make the vehicle go away. At the very least, one's credibility in a community of inquiry would require some engagement with the vehicle. A vindicator for the preservationist Christian sexual ethic directly or indirectly depends upon the verifier for its relevance. It is the verifier that serves as evidence for the perspective. Jung draws a distinction between "*the state of being justified*" and "*the activity of justifying*" (italics in the original). He says, "The two senses of justification—one normative and the other descriptive and explanatory—can be made compatible with each other only if we use the activity of *justifying* in the service of the state of *being justified*" (Jung 2015, p. 73). Jung's *state of being justified* and *activity of justifying*, respectively, correspond to my terms, "verifier" and "vindicator," or to the activities indicated by these vehicles.

2. The Meanings of Normal and Natural

In this presentation, the term preservationist Christian ethics includes a sexual ethic that holds *heterosexuality* as the exclusively normative form of intimate human relationships that unfold in the sequence of courtship, marriage, childbirth, and family. In a preservationist perspective, the term "normative" is inclusive of both terms "normal" and "natural." This use of the term "normative" seems to be typical (Lerner and Hofman 2011, p. 405). When preservationists speak of something being *normal*, they usually mean that it conforms to social convention and to established patterns of behavior, human experience, corporate expectation, and the regularity of those patterns over time. They also mean that it conforms to nature and that it bears the trait of congruency. When preservationists speak of something being *natural*, they mean that it too conforms to nature and that it bears the trait of congruency. It is significant in preservationist thought that the meanings of both "normal" and "natural" include conforming to nature and bearing the trait of congruency. *Nature* itself is the simultaneous external and internal ordering of all that materially exists with all of its particular appearances. These are observations that preservationists partially owe to Aristotle (*Physics* 8). He said, "If then it is both by nature and for an end that the swallow makes its nest and the spider its web, and the plant grows leaves for the sake of the fruit and send their roots down (not up) for the sake of nourishment, it is plain that this kind of cause is operative in things which come to be and are by nature" (Barnes 1984, p. 340). It is normal for a swallow to build a nest. It is also natural. Nest-building is an extension of what it means to be a swallow. Stephen Pope said, "Aristotle's conception of nature included a strongly normative component, and this is the basis, for example, of the famous axiom that we are to live 'according to nature' (*kata physin* or *secundum naturam*)" (Pope 1997, p. 92).

3. The Meaning of Congruency

When we speak of "congruency" in the shared meaning of normal and natural, we are referring to the circumstance in which particular purposes and functions are the extension of universal ones. *Heterosexuality*, for example, is the extension of the more universal purpose of species propagation. Heterosexuality is congruent with the universal purpose of species propagation.

Congruence is spoken of in different contexts. Paul Wendland speaks of the "congruence" between nature and Scripture when addressing the subject of transgenderism. However, he only uses the term "congruence" once. He says, "I am also inclined to believe that there will at least be some congruence between what we see in the world and God's creative will expressed in Scripture" (Wendland 2020, p. 15). He then shifts to arguments from

commonsense and natural law for the congruence between “gender identity, physiology, anatomy, chromosomes, and DNA” (Wendland 2020, pp. 15, 17).

The term “congruency” and its cognates do not occur in all discussions of the relationship between normal and natural. Nevertheless, the idea of congruency between normal and natural can still be expressed or alluded to in these discussions in other terms.

David Jones referred to congruence when he spoke of “a conceptual relationship” between the normal social and cultural expression of gender and the basis of that expression in biology. He says, “There is a conceptual relationship between sex and gender, in that gender is the social and cultural expression of a sexual identity that is given biologically” (Jones 2020, p. 13). This would make gender both social and biological.

Henrik Lerner and Bjørn Hofman speak of the congruence between normal and natural in terms of “overlaps.” They say, “Moreover, there are overlaps between some notions of normal and natural” (Lerner and Hofman 2011, p. 403). They speak of several understandings of “natural,” but one is “the normative conception of natural,” which “sees natural behavior as relative to human norms and values” (Lerner and Hofman 2011, p. 405). This would mean that some theorists at least recognize a genetic connection between the normal and the natural.

Ted Peters uses other expressions for congruency between the normal and natural when he explores multiple meanings of nature. Three of these meanings are nature as *comprehensive cosmos*, *essence*, and *guide*. These three meanings are closely related. Regarding the first meaning, Peters says, “Because Homo sapiens are a product of both cosmic and biological evolution, we are natural.” He continues saying that realizing this “may become a moral imperative.” As *essence*, nature refers to both the “basic characteristics” and “the transcendental characteristics of an entity or species.” As *guide*, nature is “the inspiration for directing moral affairs.” Peters feels that these three meanings constitute the “religious naturalist’s worldview” (Peters 2017, pp. 305–6).

I am not suggesting anything regarding how Peters would assess my argument in this article, nor am I indicating any judgment regarding his theory of evolution. Nevertheless, I find Peters’ idea of nature as “minimalist” essence (the basic characteristics of something) and “sublime” essence (the transcendental characteristics of something) very instructive for how a preservationist understanding of the relationship between normal and natural can be described. I also find his strongly implied link between the “minimalist” and “sublime” levels of nature instructive for a preservationist understanding of congruence. In different terms, he implies a link between the “biological” and “cosmic,” or between the “basic” and the “transcendental.” I call this link “congruence.” The minimalist, biological, and basic aspect of nature is what preservationists take as normal. The sublime, cosmic, and transcendental aspect of nature is what preservationists take as natural. They see a link between the two. Part of what normal means is to be conformed to nature. To the point, congruence between gender role, gender identity, and gender morphology is normal. It is also natural.

On the other hand, Judith Butler denies the idea of congruency between gender expression and biology. She says, “When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one” (Butler 1999, p. 10). For Butler, there is nothing natural about the connection between masculinity and maleness, nor that between femininity and femaleness. Whether or not Butler should be described as a revisionist, her thought has been embraced by revisionist thinkers.

4. Aims and Problems

In the preservationist perspective, heterosexuality serves the ultimate goals of procreation, child raising, and child development. Despite variations in how heterosexuality is practiced and affirmed across cultures, the ultimate purposes of procreation, child raising, and child development remain universal (Labuschagne 2021, p. 4). Heterosexuality, in this perspective, is, therefore, exclusively normal and natural—in a word, normative.

Moreover, in the preservationist perspective, procreation is the ultimate aim of heterosexual morphology, biology, and activity, although not their only aim. Heterosexuality also has the aims of love, bonding, companionship, security, fulfillment, pleasure, comfort, contentment, and completion. These other aims, however, are not necessarily what makes heterosexuality exclusively normative. Heterosexuality is exclusively normative because it is prerequisite for the survival of the species—in a phrase, necessary for procreation—and this is whether procreation occurs in a particular heterosexual union or not (Davis 2004, p. 121). Procreation occurs in enough heterosexual unions to fulfill the mandate for the survival of the human species, making it unnecessary for the mandate to be fulfilled in every single union. This is collective compensation for those singular situations in which the mandate for species survival is for whatever reason not fulfilled, and it is the heterosexual collectivity, or at least heterosexual activity, that accomplishes this compensation. This is enough to establish heterosexuality per se as exclusively natural and normal from where the preservationist stands.

However, revisionist critics would still maintain that the central problem of the argument for heterosexual normativity is the perceived lack of a compelling verifier. This criticism is implied in the response of Philippa Evans to the Church of England's statement on human sexuality. She says:

Firstly, the mode of thinking employed here, namely an appeal to natural law, sees a prescriptive statement arise from a descriptive statement about the world. They are moving from an 'is' to an 'ought'. The authors of *Issues* are moving from statements which they present as fact—that children may result from sexual intercourse or that male/female anatomy fits together for procreation—to arguing that this prescribes appropriate moral action, namely heterosexual union. This would be considered an illogical transition to a different type of statement. (Evans 2024, p. 255)

Preservationists would instead see the transition that Evans describes as both logical procedure and standard practice. There is congruency between "what is" and "what ought to be." The argument rejecting the move from "is" to "ought" would be a strange, meritless one from the preservationist perspective. Moreover, revisionists who oppose an argument from "is" to "ought" fail to show how their arguments from "is not" to "ought" are more adequate.

Heterosexual morphology, reproductive biology, and procreation are taken in preservationist thinking as empirically attested phenomena whose verification of the exclusive normativity of heterosexuality can only be denied at the sacrifice of reason (Ramsey Colloquium 2006, pp. 128–29; Levin 2006, pp. 132–33). Preservationists, moreover, understand that these verifiers have an absolute reference point. Peters is again helpful at this point. His "basic" or "biological" aspects of nature refer to "cosmic" or "transcendental" aspects of nature (Peters 2017, pp. 305–6). Those who deny that certain "basic" or "biological" aspects of nature verify that heterosexuality is exclusively normative must also necessarily maintain that "cosmic" or "transcendental" grounds for these aspects of nature do not exist. This denial frequently takes the more generic form of arguing that there are no absolutes or that truth does not exist. Jung addresses this denial in the context of moral belief. He does

not explicitly and directly speak of a preservationist Christian sexual ethic but refers in a general way to the challenge the preservationist perspective faces. He says:

Works by Foucault, MacIntyre, Milbank, and Stout have been influential among many religious thinkers. Common to these genealogists is the conviction that there is no objective way of justifying moral beliefs. They argue that the picture of morality obtained by their genealogies is not one of a movement toward a single, universal morality that is intelligible and valid for all, but of a fragmented conceptual world in which there are rival moral traditions that vie for self-legitimation and power. (Jung 2015, p. 20)

When Jung refers to “genealogists” he means those who choose historical, socially conditioned explanations of morality, in contrast to those who describe an “ahistorical foundation” for moral knowledge (Jung 2015, p. 19). This genealogical approach to ethics leads to the denial that one or more verifiers exist for a preservationist Christian sexual ethic.

Critics of revisionism have, in turn, maintained that it is really the *revisionist* Christian sexual ethic that lacks a verifier, particularly for its embrace of *homosexuality* as an alternative form of wholeness in human relationships and lifestyle. This criticism has been expressed at a conciliar level:

We cannot settle the dispute about the roots—genetic or environmental—of homosexual orientation. When some scientific evidence suggests a genetic predisposition for homosexual orientation, the case is not significantly different from evidence of predisposition toward other traits—for example, alcoholism or violence. In each instance we must still ask whether such a predisposition should be acted upon or whether it should be resisted. (Ramsey Colloquium 2006, p. 129)

We should not ignore the word “dispute” as a descriptor for this issue.

However, preservationist critics also see that this perceived problem of an absent verifier is accompanied by yet another problem for homosexual apologetics. That is the perceived problem of self-contradiction. When revisionists deny that there are verifiers for the exclusive normativity of *heterosexuality*, they do so on the premise that there is no external or absolute grounding for *any* perspective. This means that there are also no verifiers for the alternative normativity of *homosexuality*. Yet revisionists nevertheless argue for the normativity and acceptability of homosexuality based on human autonomy, freedom, human or civil rights, happiness, love, genetics, God’s will, intersex physiology, and other external principles, circumstances, and influences. Since they base their perspective upon absolutes after arguing that there are no absolutes, their arguments are invariably self-contradictory.

Mary Ford frames the revisionist problem within the broader context of postmodernism and ethical relativism and the challenge these movements pose. She says:

Particularly, important for our topic is the Postmodernist belief that ‘all, or nearly all, aspects of human psychology are completely socially determined’ (Duignan 2019), which implies that one can choose to ‘determine’ things quite differently from the way those coming before you have done without any detrimental effects.³ This also implies that there is no such thing as human nature. Second, this implies the denial that there are any ‘objective, or absolute, moral values’—a belief also known as ethical relativism. Postmodernists argue that because cultures have differing ethical values, none of them can be ‘absolute,’ and no ethical values can be said to be better than others.

This is all related to the Postmodernist belief that we cannot know anything with absolute certainty—although they perhaps hope that no one realizes this means that their own system is just as uncertain as any other, so why should anyone bother to accept it? (Ford 2020, p. 301)

Ford then exposes the further problem of self-contradiction in postmodern revisionism and relativism when she observes how the way they act and speak is contrary to the claims they make. She cites their care for “the victim” as an implicit contradiction. She says:

However, Postmodernists do not really act, or promote their ideas as, though there were no moral absolutes (this tendency to be contradictory is characteristic). One of the major ways they obtain people’s sympathies for their causes is to highlight the sole moral value that they do treat as an absolute. That moral value is concern for the victim, the marginalized, the one who has not had a voice, and/or who has been oppressed (here is one of the important connections of Postmodernism with Marxism and the Marxist reading of the philosopher Hegel). (Ford 2020, p. 302)

I think that there are other moral values besides concern for the victim that revisionists or postmodernists treat as absolutes (e.g., autonomy, acceptance, tolerance, and freedom), but Ford’s indication of inconsistency between their words and actions remains a valid point.

David Detmer also addresses the perceived problem of self-contradiction in revisionist thinking when he refers to their embrace of relativism and social constructionism. He says, “The first point to be made about this form of relativism is that it appears to be self-referentially inconsistent.” He continues, saying, “to put the point another way, social constructionism seems to be an incoherent doctrine: it asserts what it denies and denies what it asserts and thus fails to communicate any clear meaning at all” (Detmer 2003, pp. 37, 38). Despite revisionists’ denial of engaging in self-contradiction, preservationists insist that they are, and revisionists have not been able to argue them into silence.

5. The Question of Truth

Since the question of truth lurks in the background of this discussion, it should be addressed more directly. Plantinga defines “truth” as “*the way things are*” (emphasis original) (Plantinga 2000, p. 425). He certainly rejects postmodernist claims that there is no truth and “that there are no ‘objective’ moral standards” (Plantinga 2000, p. 424). Plantinga particularly rejects Rorty’s assertion that “truth cannot be out there” because “sentences cannot so exist, or be out there” (Plantinga 2000, p. 434).⁴ In summary form, Rorty contended that truths are sentences, sentences are human creations and, therefore, truths are human creations (Plantinga 2000, p. 434). Plantinga’s objections to Rorty are (1) that sentences are not the only things that are true or false, “*Beliefs* are also true or false” (emphasis original) (Plantinga 2000, p. 434), and (2) for a sentence to be true (i.e., ‘there were once dinosaurs’), there must have been something “out there” that we did not create (i.e., dinosaurs) (Plantinga 2000, p. 435). This is a correspondence theory of truth. Although Plantinga is not in this context discussing preservationist Christian sexual ethics, such ethics are based upon this understanding of truth. Social constructivism, an opposing take on the truth, has emerged in revisionist thinking.

6. The Constructivist Theme

Butler maintains that the norms that undergird heterosexuality, masculinity, femininity, and even gender and sexual differences are socially constructed. That is, they are not grounded in a fixed, external rule like nature, biology, anatomy, or morphology, but they are constructed by a shifting network of politically invested humans. In her words, a norm is a “socially

produced and variable framework" (Butler 2015, p. 46). Masculinity, for example, is a "fragile and fallible construct" (Butler 2015, p. 90). By implication, the same is true of femininity. She had earlier referred to these norms as "fictions" and "hallucinatory" (Butler 1999, pp. xv, 6, 44). She refers to the manufacturers of these norms in various ways, as "juridical systems of power," "the state," "the cultural matrix of power relations," "structures that support normalcy," and "various social supports" (Butler 1999, p. 4, 2015, pp. 90, 95, 116).

A problem for Butler is that she recognizes the need for norms, such as when we hold criminals accountable for breaking the law. However, if norms have no grounding outside of a social matrix, how do we justify them even for subjecting criminals to "normalizing procedure"? Butler seems to settle on "collective contexts" in which we agree on "modes of deliberation and reflection" as the only grounding available (Butler 2015, p. 36). Butler's forum of justification, therefore, seems normatively if not morally equivalent to "the state" or "cultural matrix of power relations," which she critiques.

Still, she says, "Through recourse to norms, the sphere of the humanly intelligible is circumscribed, and this circumscription is consequential for any ethics and any conception of social transformation" (Butler 2015, p. 36). She calls this "the doubleness of the norm" (Butler 2015, p. 206). Butler contends for the inclusion of homosexuality, transsexuality, "queer-crossings," and non-monogamous "kinship" arrangements in "the sphere of the humanly intelligible" (Butler 2015, pp. 6, 80, 115). She means that these practices should be considered "normal" and that those involved in these practices should be "recognized" and treated as humans (Butler 2015, pp. 2, 336). But for Butler, the acts of "recognition" and "humanization" cannot happen without "normalizing." Butler also includes intersex persons in this sphere (Butler 2015, p. 4), although intersexuality is an anatomical matter and not a sexual practice or behavior (Wendland 2020, p. 10).

Butler struggles to argue for the norms of self-determination, social transformation, the human, freedom, a livable life, autonomy, intelligibility, and recognition for homosexual persons and others "who live at some distance from gender norms" (Butler 2015, pp. 7, 13, 21, 22, 31, 33, 39, 117, 207), but seemingly she has no grounds for doing so beyond a "collective context" to make her case. In other words, by virtue of her own argument, these notions as well as her notions of "the state," "homosexual normalcy," and "multiple genders," appear just as "variable," "socially produced," "fictive," "free-floating," and "hallucinatory" as the gender binary, heterosexual norms she rejects (Butler 2015, p. 31). Under these circumstances, there can be no verifier for either a preservationist or revisionist sexual ethic.

Yet Butler and others argue as if homosexuality is normative and that there are absolute grounds for this normativity. Regarding a previous work, Butler says, "My effort was to combat forms of essentialism which claimed that gender is a truth that is somehow there, interior to the body, as a core or as an internal essence, something that we cannot deny, something which, natural or not, is treated as given" (Butler 2015, p. 212). It seems that Butler thinks that she was telling the truth when she denied that "gender is a truth that is somehow there." It seems that she believes that she is telling the truth when she characterizes norms like heterosexuality and gender as social constructs. If she is doing what she seems to be doing, it is hard to see how she is not implicitly contradicting herself. She seems to be presupposing an external, objective standpoint to say that there are no external, objective standpoints.

We can see that each side of the debate has its own problems. Normally, a problem on one side would provide an advantage for the opposing side. From a hypothetically disinterested point of view, that does not seem to be the case in this debate. From this view, it would seem that evidence does not matter as much as politics, and truth does not matter as much as ideology in this particular cultural climate, and in the clash between preservationist and revisionist Christian sexual ethics.

7. The Preservationist Resistance

Preservationists nevertheless insist that there *is* external verification for the exclusive normativity of heterosexuality. The different but complementary morphology of male and female bodies is baseline confirmation of exclusive heterosexual normativity. Reproductive biology has nothing other than a heterosexual form in the human species and, for that matter, most other species. From these phenomena and processes, the exclusive normativity of heterosexuality is more than obvious to some, it is axiomatic.

The preservationist Christian sexual ethic is not the natural law argument, an argument originally informed by medieval science, medieval social perspective, medieval ecclesial tradition, and medieval biblical interpretation, but like natural law, the preservationist perspective recognizes the foundational significance of nature as a guide for normative behavior. In that regard, it may be considered an heir of natural law. Jung acknowledged that any comparison between intuitionism (commonsense morality) and natural law is complicated by the variety of natural law interpretations and the disagreements between them, yet there is, generally speaking, convergence between natural law and intuitionism on the shared belief that “natural facts” have “ethical significance” and that most human beings are rationally able to discern moral truth by reflecting upon nature (Jung 2015, p. 134).

Thomas Aquinas held that the natural law includes all that to which human beings are naturally inclined, especially the inclination to self-preservation, doing good, and acting according to reason. Aquinas said:

Because in man there is first of all an inclination to good in accordance with the nature which he has in common with all substances: inasmuch as every substance seeks the preservation of its own being, according to nature: and by reason of this inclination, whatever is a means of preserving human life, and of warding off its obstacles, belongs to the natural law. (Aquinas 2006, *Summa Theologica* 2A. Q94. Art.2)

Aquinas drew upon Aristotle (*Phys* 2.1) to explain the meaning of natural. “We speak of that as being natural, which is in accord with nature” (2A. Q31. Art.7). Aquinas referred to preservation of the species through sexual intercourse alongside preservation of the body through food, drink, and sleep as natural (2A. Q31. Art.7). The union of male and female is natural and is required by nature to procreate (1. Q98. Art.2).

Homosexuality is against reason and against nature (2A. Q94. Art. 3). Whether male with male or female with female, as the Apostle describes in Rom 1:27, homosexuality is against right, reason, and nature (2B. Q154. Art 11). The prohibitions against homosexuality and bestiality would occur by natural reason (commonsense) even if they were not included in the Mosaic Law—Lev 18:22–23 (2A. Q100. Art 11).

Paul Gondreau maintains that Aquinas is of highest importance for us because “his position on sexual difference adheres closely at all points to human biology.” Aquinas is invaluable for recovery of an “old” and “saner philosophy of sexuality” (Gondreau 2021, p. 179). Gondreau acknowledges that Aquinas’ understanding of sexual difference is based upon Aristotle’s outdated biology (i.e., the idea that women are “*vir occasionatus*”) (Gondreau 2021, pp. 180, 181).⁵ Nevertheless, Gondreau says, “By insisting that the differences between male and female, man and woman, are grounded *au fond* in human biology (even a faulty biology), Thomas Aquinas aligns himself with the position that today we would consider a truly scientific one.” Gondreau bases his views upon recent breakthroughs in “neurobiology and genomics” that “unequivocally confirm the biological basis of binary sexual difference” (Gondreau 2021, p. 180).

For his neurobiological and genomic discussion, Gondreau draws upon Geary (2021), Cahill (2017), Sax (2017), and Murray (2020) (Gondreau 2021, pp. 189 n47, 190 n48).

Gondreau provides details about differences in male/female brain size, in cellular structures within male/female brains that are connected to brain functioning and sensory response, and in “hardwired biological adaptations for parenting” in girls that are missing in boys and men, although these differences lessen with age (Gondreau 2021, p. 190). He moreover calls attention to differences in “wiring” between the hemispheres of male/female brains that determine levels of “left-brain” or “left-right brained” thinking (Gondreau 2021, pp. 190–91). He also discusses hormonal differences (testosterone vs. oxytocin) that shape sexuality and interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, he affirms that these differences between male and female brains are complementary and originate in the prenatal period (Gondreau 2021, p. 192). Gondreau, like others, shows that advocacy of the exclusive normativity of heterosexuality is not just based on casual pedestrian observations, but on extensive, scientific studies. These studies, by extension, become verifiers of heterosexual normativity.

8. Genetics and Homosexuality

Revisionists have tried to answer these scientific observations with their own biological or genetic reasons for homosexuality. Despite revisionist claims about the conclusiveness of the scientific evidence, preservationists and others have found these claims untenable. Pieter Labuschagne, for example, draws upon McHugh and Mayer to challenge these claims. He says:

McHugh and Mayer (2016, pp. 8, 86) point out that the *born-that-way* hypothesis—sexual identity is biologically determined—is an oversimplification of the matter and is not supported by scientific evidence. An opposing view of *born-that-way* is that sexual orientation is a free choice. (Labuschagne 2021, p. 3)

Jeffrey Satinover brings science and theology into dialogue on the issue of homosexuality, but it may be that his most compelling arguments have to do with genetic science. He observes that genetic traits are coded in the body by genes, which are “divided into twenty-three pairs of matched, physically distinct structures called *chromosomes*” (Satinover 1996, p. 72). These genetic pairings are the basis of *inherited* genetic traits, but not all innate traits are genetic. Behavioral traits can be influenced by genetics, but that does not mean that the traits themselves are genetic. Satinover provides the examples of “when tall athletic individuals become basketball players or when short athletic people become jockeys” (Satinover 1996, p. 75). Satinover makes the distinction between genetic and behavioral traits to show what it would really take to prove the existence of “a gay gene.” In short, it would take years of work, millions of dollars, and the testing of human subjects numbering in the tens of thousands to prove the existence of a “gay gene.” No study of homosexuality has even come close to meeting these requirements (Satinover 1996, p. 76).⁶ However, a good beginning would be “identical twin studies.” The procedure that Satinover projects is too complicated and variable to rehearse here, but he does have what I would call a “bottom line.” He says:

If ‘homosexuality is genetic,’ as activists and their media supporters repeatedly claim, the *concordance rate* between identical twins—that is, the incidence of the two twins either both being homosexual or both being heterosexual—will be 100 percent. There would *never* be a *discordant* pair—a pair with one homosexual twin and one heterosexual twin. (Satinover 1996, p. 83)

The results of the few identical twin studies that have allegedly proven a genetic basis for homosexuality have had concordance rates of less than 50 percent (Satinover

1996, p. 84). After comparing other studies, Satinover arrives at another “bottom line.” The concordance rates that emerge, however small they are, are better understood as indicators of environmental and social-cultural influences (Satinover 1996, pp. 89, 93). Satinover does not rule out the possibility of “biologic,” “innate,” or “genetic” contributors to homosexuality (analogous to how height and athleticism may predispose someone to playing basketball), but states that it is choice and environment, not genetics, that determines homosexual behavior (Satinover 1996, p. 117).

Satinover calls attention to the practical implications of these investigations. He notably highlights the documented, but suppressed, evidence that homosexuality can sometimes be “healed.” He acknowledges the educational loss that results from this censorship. He observes, “Since the professional normalization of homosexuality, we no longer hear of the many successful programs that continue to ‘cure’ homosexuality nor of the deeply moving stories of those who have successfully negotiated this difficult passage” (Satinover 1996, pp. 169–70). Satinover is especially committed to addressing the spiritual dimension of healing in the treatment of homosexuality. While “secular” approaches to therapy have a significant success rate, he attributes the most effective treatments to faith-based programs because of their focus upon spirituality (Satinover 1996, pp. 196–97).

Neurobiological, genetic, and other scientific data serve as verifiers for the preservationist position on human sexuality, but the natural law argument would be a vindicator. There are other vindicators for the preservationist perspective as well, such as Scripture and commonsense.

9. Scripture as Battlefield and Vindicator

Preservationist Christian ethics is richly informed by the Bible. Scriptures like Gen 2:23–24; 19:1–11; Lev 18:22; 20:13; Deut 22:5; Rom 1:24–27; 1 Cor 6:9, and 1 Tim 1:10 are frequently referred to as touchstones in the development of a biblical position on human sexuality. Preservationists find that the Scriptures certainly convey an overwhelmingly negative view of homosexuality. Revisionists have responded to this situation. One procedure is to sacralize references to homosexuality in Scripture. The Levitical texts are particularly said to refer not to unadorned homosexuality, but to sexual acts that occur in the context of idolatrous worship or temple prostitution (Boswell 1981, pp. 100–2). The goal is to draw a distinction between the “sacred” homosexuality of ancient times and homosexuality in the alleged contemporary context of loving relationship between two consenting adults.

Another type of argument delimits references to homosexuality in the Scripture. The Pauline texts are particularly said to refer not to homosexuality but to “homosexual *acts* committed by heterosexual persons” (Boswell 1981, p. 109), or to specific cases like pederasty (Scroggs 1983, pp. 116, 120). Much is also made of the circumstance that the biblical writers know nothing of sexual orientation, and allegedly this alone makes their references to homosexuality irrelevant for homosexual relations today (Brownson 2013, pp. 229, 255). However, preservationist Christian ethicists would maintain that there is no evidence that these references to homosexuality refer only to homosexual acts in specific contexts like idolatrous worship, temple prostitution, or pederastic relationships. Even if they did, there is no justification for believing that the Bible drives a wedge between unadorned homosexuality and these more specialized homosexual expressions (Gagnon 2003, p. 204; McQuilkin 1995, p. 250). Preservationists maintain that even if the biblical writers were fully versed in the idea of homosexual orientation, it would make no difference in their assessment of homosexuality (Davis 2004, p. 130; McQuilkin 1995, p. 253).

Preservationists note those who make much of the non-occurrence of the word “homosexual” in the Bible (Boswell 1981, p. 92). They see this as an attempt to obscure the occurrence in the Bible of the idea or concept that we today call “homosexuality.” The Greek

terms *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* (1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10) are clear references to homosexuality (McQuilkin 1995, p. 252; Davis 2004, pp. 127–28). Preservationists also criticize what they perceive as attempts to evade the evidence. For example, it is argued that the people of Sodom in Gen 19:1–11 were not condemned for their homosexuality, but for their lack of hospitality (Boswell 1981, pp. 91–94). However, the threat of homosexual rape (Gen 19:5) is strongly implied in the text (Otey 2024, p. 33; McQuilkin 1995, p. 251; Davis 2004, pp. 122–23).⁷

Preservationist Christian ethicists acknowledge that Jesus did not speak directly about homosexuality (Grenz 1998, pp. 60–61). They make this acknowledgement in response to revisionists who take this to mean that Jesus would not have disapproved of homosexuality. Jesus did not speak directly about homosexuality because the status of both heterosexuality and homosexuality were unquestioned axioms in his culture (Gagnon 2000, pp. 207–8; Grenz 1998, p. 61). All of Jesus’s references to sexuality and marriage presuppose the exclusive normativity of heterosexuality (Matt 19:1–9; Mark 10:2–9; John 4:16–18).

Preservationists nevertheless surmise that Jesus’s response to homosexuality and homosexual persons would have been no different than his response to everyone else. That response was unconditional acceptance with an invitation to transformation. As the saying goes, “Jesus accepts us as we are, but Jesus does not leave us as we are” (Lucado [1998] 2003, pp. 4, 174; Waters 1998, p. 5).⁸

The prohibitions of Leviticus 18:22; 20:13 and exclusive normativity of heterosexuality were never questioned by Jesus, nor the culture that surrounded him (McQuilkin 1995, p. 251). The same could be said about Paul the Apostle and his formative culture (1 Cor 9:5; Eph 5:21–33; 1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:6; 2:4).⁹ All of Paul’s references to sexuality and marriage also presupposed the exclusive normativity of heterosexuality (1 Cor 7:1–16; Eph 5:21–33). However, unlike Jesus, Paul travelled the Roman Empire, and in these travels, he became aware of sexual practices that were “against nature” (Rom 1:27). Paul, therefore, spoke directly of homosexuality, and not merely of homosexuality as a component of idolatrous worship, temple prostitution, or pederasty (Rom 1:24–27; 1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10). He spoke of homosexuality as an unqualified, undifferentiated phenomenon (Gagnon 2000, p. 204; McQuilkin 1995, pp. 252–53). Moreover, Paul’s teaching in Gal 3:28 does not call for the erasure of ethnic and gender identity, although it requires the erasure of social hierarchy and, therefore, slavery. Paul here speaks of our unity and equality in Christ, not the erasure of ethnic and gender identity.

10. Commonsense as Vindicator

Preservationists also see mainstream commonsense as a vindicator of their perspective.¹⁰ This is not a recent stance. Decades ago, Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse made the common-sense observation, “while it is true that sexuality is not reducible to its biological aspects, it is inarguable that the heterosexual disposition is that which biology dictates, and unless there is an inhibiting disturbance in the acculturation process, people do not become fixed in an adult homosexual adaptation” (Barnhouse 1977, p. 156).

Commonsense is a set of inherited, widely affirmed communal notions and convictions. Commonsense is frequently characterized in revisionist thinking as a non-reflective, non-critical, unquestioned legacy (Clifton-Soderstrom 2017, p. 108). Preservationists reject this characterization. They seize upon history and social science to show that commonsense is the culmination of a long, arduous process of dialogue, reflection, trial and error, and critique (Neuhaus 1991). In their view, commonsense is shaped, vindicated, and validated by generations of experience. It is the shared depository of history and inherited tradition. It is tested by time. It is self-critical and self-correcting. It is proven by its results. Commonsense, characterized as a mainstream attribute, is another source of reliable knowledge.

However, there are more refined views of commonsense that are acknowledged. William Hathaway uses the terms “common sense,” “moral sense,” “natural moral sense,” and “common sense moral realism” interchangeably. He holds that “the moral sense, like the other senses, involve a God given ability to perceive a true aspect of the external world” (Hathaway 2001, p. 245). Hathaway is helpful in disavowing the notion that commonsense is consensus. The natural moral sense can produce beliefs that are “not widely held” (Hathaway 2001, p. 241). Hathaway’s treatment of commonsense establishes it as a valid means of knowledge and moral guidance.

Jung also upholds a refined view of commonsense as a base of knowledge and moral guidance. He argues, “that there exists a morality that can be known to all rationally capable human beings and that is true of all cultures and societies. I shall call this morality ‘commonsense morality’” (Jung 2012, p. 560). Jung further argues, “commonsense morality holds that there are some self-evident moral truths that are knowable a priori. It is these moral truths that ought to play a central role in the justification of other moral beliefs” (Jung 2012, p. 565–66). Jung refers to the theory behind commonsense morality as “ethical intuitionism” or simply “intuitionism” (Jung 2012, p. 560).

In his more comprehensive work, Jung expounds upon foundationalism as the view “that there are some basic beliefs whose justification does not depend upon other beliefs, and that every justified belief depends directly or indirectly for its justification on these basic beliefs” (Jung 2015, p. 15). Jung acknowledges that most philosophers writing in the postmodern continental tradition have “assailed” foundationalism (Jung 2015, p. 15). Jung, however, argues that foundationalism is a viable theory of ethical knowledge and the most widely accepted method of defending objective, justifiable belief (Jung 2015, p. 41).

Contrary to the critics, contemporary foundationalist thought does not claim to be infallible nor free from error (Jung 2015, pp. 31–32). Foundationalists can accept that some beliefs are socially constructed without denying that other beliefs are cognitively non-inferential (Jung 2015, p. 36). Foundationalism is based on a “moral realism” that is not grounded in Wittgensteinian “language games” or the Christian’s social world (Jung 2015, pp. 49, 54), but in “the existence of moral properties independent of human attitudes.” For Jung, these properties are “perceived,” and not merely “conceived” (Jung 2015, p. 63).

Jung criticizes the notions that morality is the fruit of emotions (Jung 2015, pp. 78, 87). He contends that moral intuitions are “intellectual perceptions” (Jung 2015, p. 88). He also criticizes ethical naturalism, the idea that moral beliefs and practices can be explained by reference to a “naturalistic worldview” or “empirically explainable phenomena” (Jung 2015, pp. 98–99). For cognitive naturalists, these phenomena are natural properties existing in the natural world; for non-cognitive naturalists, these phenomena exist in human attitudes (Jung 2015, pp. 105, 110). The former fail to satisfactorily answer the question of “ought.” The latter are practically indistinguishable from social constructivists (Jung 2015, p. 107).

Jung defends intuitionism as a viable alternative to ethical naturalism (Jung 2015, p. 112). Moral intuitions are “evidential grounds for moral knowledge.” They are “intellectual perceptions” that involve “rational reflection.” Jung says, “intuitionists believe that moral facts *supervene* upon natural facts” (Jung 2015, p. 110).

Jung argues for “a universal, objective morality” that does not depend upon someone’s moral tradition, social practice, or linguistic context, a morality that is “more congruent with how most ordinary people come to make basic moral judgments,” “a morality which all human beings share by virtue of being human.” Jung calls this stance “commonsense morality.” Intuitionism is the ethical bedrock of this morality (Jung 2015, pp. 117–18).

Jung holds that “commonsense knowledge” is comprised of propositions that can be received as true based on intuitions (Jung 2015, p. 120). Jung defines these intuitions as “initial appearances of things to our consciousness.” They could be understood as “direct

apprehension” of a concept, property, or relation, or as the property of “intuitiveness” in propositions, arguments, and “other intellectual phenomena” (Jung 2015, pp. 118–19). Intuitions are non-inferential and non-propositional beliefs, and as such, they are evidence for “some basic moral truths” (Jung 2015, pp. 119, 125). Within these theoretical parameters, preservationists affirm commonsense as a reliable guide for moral belief and normative sexual practice.

Preservationist Christian ethicists clearly dispute both the claim that they lack a verifier for the exclusive normativity of heterosexuality and that they have no vindicators for their thought. Their challenge, however, is to persuade the general population, mostly in North America and Europe, that the preservationist view of human sexuality is our most accurate and defensible account of human sexuality as it should be.

11. The Revisionist Perspective

On the other hand, revisionists insist that their arguments for homosexuality as an alternative form of normative sexuality are sound, coherent, and consistent. These arguments are countercultural, anti-authoritarian, and revolutionary. They reflect the spirit of the times. They appeal to a new generation. They break new ground and require unconventional ways of expression. We can see these sentiments implied in the way Vicki Kirby defends Butler against harsh criticism:

Not surprisingly, the reception of Butler’s prolific contribution to theoretical and political life depends on the importance attributed to such concerns. However, for those who appreciate the associated difficulties that *must* attend it—the sometimes awkward expression, the tendency toward ambiguity and open-ended conclusions, the technical terms and so on—there is a readiness to perceive the business of interpretation as a working opportunity to redefine the field of value and possibility. For others, however, the difficulty can be put down to ‘bad writing’, and Butler is routinely accused of this by those who denigrate certain styles of political and theoretical criticism, and by other academics, often on the left, who regard the use of ‘alienating language’ as an abrogation of social responsibility. (Kirby 2006, p. 130)

What appears then to be “bad writing” is only an appearance in this case. Those who look deeper see otherwise.

Revisionists will further argue that homosexuality exists in nature, therefore, homosexuality is natural. On the other hand, whether something is normal is an arbitrary matter of social convention (Gould 2007, p. 534). It has little or nothing to do with nature.

James Gould comments on one definition of “natural” as “based upon the operations of the physical world.” He argues, “If this is the case, then homosexuality is not unnatural, for animals are part of the physical world, and such mammals as mountain goats are well known for their homosexual behavior, as are other creatures” (Gould 2007, p. 534). This would seem to be a bedrock justification for homosexuality in past and present culture.

In recent times, there has been interest in establishing a genetic basis for homosexuality. Apparently, it is felt that this would prove once and for all that homosexuality is not a matter of choice, but a predetermined orientation. Julia Smith is representative of the case made for homosexual orientation based on biology and genetics. She says, “While sexual orientation has no single or simple causation, a considerable body of research has established that orientation is affected by genetic, hormonal, and even epigenetic processes” (J. Smith 2021b, p. 299).

Smith refers to the findings of Bailey et al. (2016), Roselli (2018), and five others to support her statement. She names correlates that indicate biological factors for homosexual

orientation, such as fraternal birth order, ratio of index to ring finger (similar to straight women in gay men and to straight men in gay women), prenatal hormones with slight variations in androgen/estrogen levels, “maternal immune response,” “maternal stress during gestation,” and “prenatal exposure of synthetic chemicals” (J. Smith 2021b, p. 299). She concludes that “Biological processes effect sexual orientation even from the earliest weeks of human life. While not ruling out a potential role for cultural factors, such findings suggest that same-sex orientation is a given and not a choice” (J. Smith 2021b, p. 300). Smith’s observations are significant because a genetic basis for homosexuality would serve as a verifier for homosexual orientation.

Moreover, Scripture has not been abandoned in revisionist ethics. Interpreters have tried to vindicate the revisionist perspective by uncovering homosexual and other alterity models in Scripture. This comes under the heading of “queer readings” of the Bible (Vorster 2012, p. 607). Using a “hermeneutic of cispicion,” Georgia Day suggests that Jesus was an intersex transman (Day 2023, p. 175). Eric Smith uses a form of “queer reading” to argue that 1 Cor 11:17–31 is Paul’s rebuke of a Corinthian congregation who abandoned the “queer meal” practice that Paul himself advocated (E. C. Smith 2021a, p. 121). Clarissa Breu interprets the metaphor of female seed in Rev 12:17 as biblical support for “queer kinship,” in accordance with Butler’s idea of the imaginary phallus and its reterritorialization (Breu 2022, pp. 98, 100). Revisionists, therefore, claim verifiers of their own in genetic science, with Scripture as a vindicator.

Revisionists do not seem to have a comparable role for commonsense in their deliberations. Usually, when they refer to commonsense, they do so in adversarial terms. Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom, for example, disavows “commonsense assumptions around gender and sexuality that exclusively privilege dominant voices” (Clifton-Soderstrom 2017, p. 102). She especially rejects “three commonsense assumptions,” namely, that “Gender is binary, sex is primarily for procreation, and Christian marriage is between a man and a woman” (Clifton-Soderstrom 2017, p. 108). In this context, Clifton-Soderstrom and other revisionists seem to be referring to a mainstream understanding of commonsense, and not to the more refined understanding we encounter in intuitionist Christian ethics. However, it appears that revisionists would also reject the more refined intuitionist understanding of commonsense as well.

12. A Way Forward, Maybe

As someone who is convinced by the way preservationists frame their understanding of normative human sexuality, I am also convinced that this perspective is sufficiently verified by nature and science, and sufficiently vindicated by Scripture, natural law theory, and commonsense. My reference to nature and science includes medical, biological, neurological, genetic, and psychological studies. However, I also realize that there are at least some in the revisionist camp who will not be persuaded by preservationist arguments, just as there are at least some in the preservationist camp who will not be persuaded by revisionist arguments. Nevertheless, I am still interested in finding a way past the deadlock, however small the step might be.

It may be that a way forward lies not in a verifier, but in a vindicator. I am not speaking of a way forward in proving the truth of preservationist sexual morality. That can only be accomplished by apprehending a verifier, and I think this has been accomplished despite the denials. I am speaking of a way forward in gaining more support for the preservationist perspective. That might be accomplished by calling attention to a vindicator.

In more recent times, relative to this article, we have opportunity to ponder a vindicator like the results of the November 2024 presidential election in the United States.¹¹ In this election there were both preservationists and revisionists on the winning side, and both

preservationists and revisionists on the losing side. The divide between preservationists and revisionists does not occur along political party lines (de la Fuente and Erickson 2024). Nevertheless, the narrow majority vote and political commentary in the aftermath seem to indicate a rejection of revisionist thinking.

Like other commentators, Shane Goldmacher addressed this situation diplomatically in terms of the Democratic Party being “out of touch.” He said that “Evidence abounds that the party’s brand is seen as out of touch with the country’s concerns. Voters in a recent New York Times and Ipsos poll said they believed the two most important issues to the Democratic Party were abortion and L.G.B.T.Q. policy—neither of which were among the five most important issues to voters overall” (Goldmacher 2025, p. A1). This kind of evidence also explains low Democratic voter turnout in 2024 (Battistoni et al. 2025, p. 47).

Matthew Continetti also suggested a public disavowal of the revisionist perspective, which he described as “doubling down on identity politics.” He said:

The Democrats’ polls are dismal, too. According to CNN, 48 percent of Americans hold an unfavorable view of the Democrats. According to Quinnipiac, that number is 57 percent. YouGov’s tracking polls put Democratic unfavorables at 59 percent. Yet numbers don’t capture the full extent of the problem. Democratic elites are doubling down on identity politics at precisely the moment when the public is telling them to stop. (Continetti 2025, p. 10)

When Continetti called attention to a New York Times poll, he further clarified his reference to “identity politics”:

The poll asked Americans to name Democratic party priorities. Voters replied that the Democrats stand for abortion rights and LGBTQ rights, and oppose climate change—which is a fair summary of what Democratic elected officials and their media chorus talk about daily. (Continetti 2025, p. 10)

Notably, this slight shift in American politics appears to be part of a global populist movement, as acknowledged by commentators like Jonah Goldberg. He said, “For instance, another important factor is that MAGA is part of a larger global phenomenon. Populism and nationalism have been on the rise in Europe, Latin America, and India” (Goldberg 2025).

This circumstance of possible preservationist resurgence should not be overstated. The shoe has been on the other foot. A rejection of preservationist thinking occurred a decade earlier in the United States. On 26 June 2015, when the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in favor of the plaintiff in the landmark case *Obergefell v. Hodges* and legalized “same-sex marriage” nationwide, we saw widespread affirmation of revisionist thinking. There have been other events at the center of political and ideological shifts in the United States relating to human sexuality, such as the Stonewall Inn Uprising in New York City’s Greenwich Village on 28 June 1969 and the American Psychiatric Association’s removal of homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* list of personality disorders in December 1973. Preservationists should also not ignore the possibility that the results of the 2024 presidential election may portend future developments in both domestic and foreign policy that are unwanted by majorities in both preservationist and revisionist circles.

In any case, a small political and ideological shift occurred leading up to the 2024 presidential election in America and elections in other countries. This may show that the arena for establishing a prevailing perspective on human sexuality may not be that of

empirical evidence and truth, but that of politics and ideology, at least for the time being. I am not implying that this is a satisfactory or favorable possibility. That is because this would seem to be yielding to unstable political and ideological shifts as the ground for moral guidance and education. Nevertheless, as unsatisfactory and unfavorable as this appears, it may be all we can have at this time.

In the meantime, we can still hope that in the future there will be a more cognitively grounded shift toward the preservationist perspective (this pivotal occurrence may even become a verifier). Ethical engagement with the issue of normative human sexuality must continue with this hope before us if for no other reason than because grassroots cognitive stability on an ethical issue is preferable to unstable political and ideological shifts. In this case, grassroots cognitive stability only requires a critical mass of popular consent and support. Since achieving a critical mass of popular consent and support may be possible, Christian ethicists are obligated to keep trying to achieve it.

13. Conclusions

In this article, I have tried to let the preservationist perspective on Christian sexual ethics speak for itself, but in dialogue with the revisionist perspective. I have done so by drawing out the broad contours of preservationist thought as illustrated by insights from selected panelists. Those insights are the congruency between the normal and the natural, the exclusively heterosexual prerequisite for human procreation; heterosexual morphology, reproductive biology, and again procreation as clear verifiers for the preservationist view of human sexuality; the specialized insights of the physical, psychological, and medical sciences as verifiers, and the vindicating support of Scripture, natural law theory, and commonsense. Even though I do not claim to be impartial, I have also tried to give the revisionist side a hearing as well. Revisionists make the case for the socially constructed character of gender, gender roles, and gender behavior, the existence of homosexuality in nature, a genetic basis for homosexuality, and homosexual and other alternate sexual models in Scripture. They openly reject what they consider to be mainstream commonsense assumptions about gender, sexuality, and marriage.

The problem of the preservationist perspective is the perceived elusiveness of a verifier that would totally deflate the revisionist position. The revisionist position also has its problems, such as the perceived lack of a verifier for its claims as well as the perceived recurrence of inconsistency and self-contradiction. From a hypothetically disinterested point of view, none of these problems have put their respective sides at an overwhelming disadvantage. The two sides appear to be at a stalemate in the current cultural climate. Yet politically and ideologically speaking, there may have been a slight majority shift in 2024 toward rejection of the revisionist perspective. If this was in fact the case, this would mean the emergence of a vindicator for preservationists in the form of a political event. At least some preservationists might wish for more substantial progress at the grassroots cognitive level. For the time being, a fickle change in the political climate may be the best we can have. But this is no reason to abandon the quest for more widespread cognitive consent to a preservationist Christian ethic of human sexuality.

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Notes

- ¹ I want to be forthcoming about a particular issue for this discussion. Violence against homosexual persons is to be decried and opposed at every turn. To no measure should this discussion about normative sexuality be construed as justification or encouragement for violence against homosexual persons; not even if the conclusion of this study is that homosexuality is neither normal nor natural. The violence we decry also includes verbal abuse like name calling and demonization. It also includes social violence like denial of employment, denial of housing, denial of medical care, denial of education, and criminalization.
- ² The term “warrant,” and the other terms for that matter, can be used in the sense of either verifier or vindicator.
- ³ Here, Ford is referencing Duignan (2019).
- ⁴ Plantinga quotes from (Rorty 1989, p. 5).
- ⁵ See Aristotle, *Gen.an.*2.737.28 and Aquinas ST 1.Q92. Art 1. The Latin term *vir occasionatus* has been translated as “misbegotten male” or “defective male.” Gondreau acknowledges Michael Nolan’s attempt at a less offensive translation of *occasionatus* as “unintentionally produced” or “departure from type” (Gondreau 2021, p. 181).
- ⁶ On this point, Satinover quotes Brian Suarez, whose speech was previously quoted in (Mann 1994, p. 1688) (See Satinover 1996, p. 257, n.1).
- ⁷ However, rape is no more integral to homosexuality than it is to heterosexuality.
- ⁸ Lucado uses the phrase “God loves” rather than “Jesus accepts” in his variation of the saying, but the basic meaning is the same.
- ⁹ The perennial debate over Pauline authorship of Pauline texts need not distract us at this point.
- ¹⁰ In the literature, “commonsense” and “common sense” are two different spellings of the term. I prefer the former, but, of course, I retain the author’s spelling in direct quotes.
- ¹¹ My purpose in this section is not to endorse any political party or personality, nor is it to disparage the indispensable work of justice for anyone discriminated against on the basis of race, sex, national origin, immigration status, or special needs. My purpose is only to acknowledge a particular instance of public response to the revisionist movement in sexual ethics.

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Article

Some Reflections on the Moral Reality of Social Power

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Abstract: Power is often understood as the sheer use of force in social relations. While power is frequently expressed and experienced in these terms, it is also necessary for the generation, sustenance, and enhancement of life in all its forms. This means that, in a very basic way, power is constitutive of personhood and society. Understood and exercised in this way, power affirms the dignity of individual persons and promotes bonding between and among persons. Therefore, ethically, social power must be viewed as essentially relational and intended to be reciprocal, community building, and accountable. Contrarily understood and exercised, power gives rise to bondage through denial of the responsibility in its constitutive and relational character. Here, the emphasis on domination and power becomes alienating and irresponsible. The purpose of this article as a whole is to undertake an ethical analysis of social power that furthers exploration of the principles and implications of nonviolent strategies for the exercise of social power.

Keywords: power; domination; ontology; relational; violence; force; legitimacy; responsibility

Probably the best known and most widely used definition of social power is that provided by Max Weber:

By *power* is meant that opportunity existing within a social relationship which permits one to carry out one's own will even against resistance and regardless of the basis on which this opportunity rests. (Weber 1963, p. 117)

The understanding expressed in his definition has led to the tendency among most political and social scientists to view power solely from the vantage point of *domination*, setting up a powerful/powerless dialectic as the defining description of power relations. This understanding of power as such constricts too narrowly, I believe, the field of investigation of social power. It also creates a language barrier in discussing the phenomenon of power for those seeking to do power analysis from the underside of power imbalances.

A further consequence of the domination theory of power is a misplaced debate concerning whether, in ethical terms, power should be regarded as essentially immoral or amoral. The former view arises in critical analyses of unjust economic and political power arrangements. The injustice of these structures is treated as a property of the power wielded within them, such that it becomes an intrinsic factor of that power itself, implying that the sheer exercise of power is inherently unjust and, therefore, immoral.

This understanding is, necessarily, countered by *realists* who view power as inherent in social life and capable of being employed for moral purposes as well as often fostering negative consequences for the poor and disinherited classes within societies.

Those who hold this view maintain that, where used at all with respect to power, moral categories apply to specific exercises of power rather than to power itself.

My contention in this article is that the domination theory of power does not take account of the fact that power imbalance¹ does not mean that only dominant forces have

power in the relationship. I further contend that the moral measures commended in this article are intrinsic to the nature of power itself, rather than externally imposed, which is implied in both the immoral and amoral understandings of the nature of power.

1. Ontological Aspects: Human Being Actualized Through Self-Affirmation and Social Bonding

It is significant that Weber's definition essentially describes *one form* of power relations and delineates the conditions necessary for that form to exist, implying that, unless one participant in a power relation is dominant, no one in the relation has power. Even granting an imbalance such that one side in the exchange has more leverage than the other, the condition of carrying out "one's own *will* even against resistance" is not met if the weaker side is able to prevent the stronger from achieving desired goals, even though the stronger maintains its advantage in the relationship.

Moreover, the definition offers no way of understanding the relation itself as a power relation except as a contest for dominance. Thus, Weber's definition cannot be accepted as answering the question of the nature of power itself, although it gives a sufficient description of power as domination.

Overcoming the problem presented by Weber's widely accepted definition requires undertaking an *ontological analysis* of power, defining power in terms of the primary structures and processes of *being qua being* rather than, secondarily, as a condition of structural relations among human beings. As Paul Tillich points out, ontology raises the prior question to those ordinarily addressed in physical and social science research:

Ontology does not try to describe the nature of beings, either in their universal, generic qualities, or in their individual, historical manifestations. It does not ask about events and those who act within these events. This is the task of scientific analysis and historical description. But ontology asks the simple and infinitely difficult question: What does it mean *to be*? What are the structures, common to everything that is, to everything that participates in being? (Tillich 1954, p. 19)

From the vantage point of this inquiry, the basic question is what does *being* have to do with power and, vice versa, what does power have to do with being? My response to these questions is that power is the basic condition *of being*; put negatively, without power there is *no being*. *Power is necessary for the generation, sustenance, and enhancement of life in all its forms.*

Although not using Tillich's existentialist language with respect to non-being, this perspective does agree with his basic understanding that "Being is the power of being" (Tillich 1954, p. 37)². Power is one of the basic "structures, common to everything that . . . participates in being" (Tillich 1954, p. 19).

However, in Tillich's view, human being is not fulfilled in mere existence; it must be actualized through personal self-affirmation. Thus, Tillich writes the following:

Every being affirms its own being. *Its life is its self-affirmation-* even if its self-affirmation has the form of self-surrender. Every being resists the negation against itself. (Tillich 1954, p. 39)

The form that self-affirmation takes in Tillich's analysis needs further comment.

Considering the paradigm proposed in this section of the article has made me acutely aware that the analysis undertaken here draws its methodology and data from the Western (Euro-American) cultural context within which Weber's definition, and my own scholarship and research interests, have been formed. Thus, as an ontology, it is particularly *relative*³ to the Western socio-cultural context and cannot claim to be universal, i.e., an analysis of human *being* wherever humans are found.

Contrary to the claims of ontologists, such as Tillich, Heidegger, Sartre et al., the conflict structures of human existence that they explore are not universal. They are products of the ontologists' native socio-cultural context, and the challenges they pose to the achievement of the ontologists' understandings of authentic existence are features of their context.

Significantly, the ontological findings of these religious and secular philosophers correlate with Erik Erikson's finding of the need to resolve a structural "identity crisis" in human psychosocial development (McLeod 2024). Erikson's theory is based on a psycho-biographical study of young Martin Luther, in which Luther's growth to responsible adulthood required overcoming an intense authority conflict with his father, grounded in the broad cultural shift from feudal to industrialized societies and from tradition-directed to inner-directed (authoritarian) normative personality structures (Reisman and Glazer 1961, p. 427).

The point of the preceding discussion is not to deny that the affirmation of being is necessary to actualize a person's power of being but to emphasize the relative character of the content of affirmation. Clearly, it makes a difference in that content whether the context prioritizes the individual, as American society does, or the community, as is characteristic of many indigenous African societies. This point needs to be made because the content of personal and group self-affirmation is particularly significant for *social bonding* as an essential component of power as a social reality. The reference here is not simply to power as an aspect of social interaction but to collective social expressions of power.

Affirmation of one's personal power of being is necessary, but, alone, it is not a sufficient condition for social power in the collective sense to exist. That existence, minimally, requires that self-affirmation be joined to affirmation of the power of being of one's social group, inclusive of but separate from one's individual power of being. As such, social power is a *unique quality* of the group as a whole and not simply a sum total of the power of being of the individuals in the group. From this vantage point, the existentialists' understanding of *self-affirmation* as the end point in actualization of the power of being fails to resolve the issue of positive relations to "the other", and to others, thereby negating and ignoring the power of being of "the other" and of social realities.

In a curious way, without sharing the presuppositions of existentialist ontology, the understanding of power in American society duplicates the negation and neglect expressed in the existentialist focus on self-affirmation. The breakdown occurs largely, as a result of taking the individual-in isolation, or a de-personalized model of society, as the starting point for defining, analyzing, and acting toward social reality. Thus, in the American context, ideological individualism and deep-seated anti-societal attitudes make it difficult to accept the social bonding necessary to positive expressions of social power.

For this reason, American activists and mainline social theorists affirm Weber's domination model as *the* understanding of power as such rather than, as I have suggested, the description and specification of conditions for a particular form of social power to exist. The prevalence of this understanding among activists is highly visible in public discourse in the United States both in political circles and in the media. Thus, in the Congress, domination theory "all or nothing" strategies are employed as means to sheer political advantage, suspending all meaningful action on a plethora of vital policy issues pending seizure of control of the policy-making apparatus.

Taking this approach in understanding and action denies the intrinsically social foundations buried within an individual's power of being, along with the hidden structural advantages underlying the success of privileged groups and power elites. It also makes power essentially anti-social, having maximum effect in the subjection of persons outside the dominant group to that group's effective will, denying both the dignity of subordi-

nated persons and the implicit claims of human solidarity (social unity) on the dominant group's actions.

This situation makes clear that affirmation of one's personal power of being must be joined to affirmation of the power of being of one's social group *and* the power of being of humanity as a whole to fulfill the ontological and ethical conditions for social power. Its optimal form of being is "power with" rather than "power over". The prevalence of the latter understanding in established social theory and most fields of human action obscure and undermine strategies based on the moral reality of power.

Contrarily, the position taken in this article is that power is not simply a personal ontological phenomenon. Social development and the broadest social exercise of power, as described above, are its optimal expressions. Domination resists, at best, and prevents, at worst, power's optimal expression. This opposition results in attitudes and actions that contradict power's moral reality.

I believe that the understanding of power should begin, not with structured power relations as Weber does, but with appreciation for power's essentially *relational* character (Lee 1995, pp. 169–202)⁴. This means understanding that power is *constitutive* of personhood and society and, being so, affirms the *dignity* of individual persons while promoting *bonding* between and among persons. In this context, power is *reciprocal, community building, and accountable*. Contrarily, within the context of domination, power gives rise to *bondage* through denial of the responsibility intrinsic to its constitutive and relational character, thus becoming *irresponsible and alienating*.

2. Antithetical Correlates: Violence and Force

Further evidence of the moral reality of power is in the recognition that violence and force are antithetical correlates to power, although both are generally recognized as primary instruments in exercising power and, often, are regarded as primary forms of power as such. Indeed, in the domination theory, violence and force are *viewed as maximal forms of the power relation*.

However, in her treatise *On Violence*, the social philosopher Hannah Arendt distinguishes power from violence in conceptual terms:

Power is indeed the essence of all government, but violence is not. *Violence is by nature instrumental*; like all means, it always stands in need of guidance and justification through the end it pursues. And what needs justification by something else cannot be the essence of anything. (Arendt 1969, p. 51)

She then goes on to describe violence as the *opposite* of power and *as an instrument of force* that destroys power:

Power and violence are opposites; where the one rules absolutely, the other is absent. Violence appears where power is in jeopardy, but left to its own course it ends in power's disappearance. . . Violence can destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it. (Arendt 1969, p. 56)

Arendt concludes that resorting to violence by any parties in a power relation results from a sense of impotence rather than a conviction of potency:

We know, or should know, that every decrease in power is an open invitation to violence—if only because those who hold power and feel it slipping from their hands, *be they the government or be they the governed*, have always found it difficult to resist the temptation to substitute violence for it. (Arendt 1969, p. 87)

The implications of Arendt's analysis confirm the antithetical relationship of violence to power in terms of a *negative relationship* between violence and power. Violence is not the antithesis to power in the Hegelian sense because violence contravenes the interactive

processes intrinsic to power struggles. Violence resolves the issues and values at stake in power conflict in terms of which participant is able to achieve physical, political, or military dominance in the relationship.

Arendt's analysis also suggests that there are practical as well as ethical limitations to the use of force in exercising power. Her conclusion regarding reasons for resorting to violence implies that *reliance on sheer force* in power relations is to take a "slippery slope" toward impotence.

This does not mean that there is no element of force in power. Compulsion and coercion are important relational aspects in the dynamic processes of social power. However, implementing coercion and compulsion strategies in power relations is not the same as *relying* on force.

3. Power Dynamics: Toward a Relational Theory of Power

Having worked through the ontological analysis of power and having considered violence and force as antithetical correlates of power, it occurs to me that referring to Weber's definition as stating a domination theory of power is no mere incidental comment. As previously indicated, Weber's definition implies equivalence between domination and power such that the two may be regarded as one and the same. Focus on "power over" in the definition accords with the tendency toward *hierarchy* in most prevailing social power arrangements. Domination, however, explicitly expressed in the defining condition of "the opportunity... to carry out one's own will even against resistance", is not a universal characteristic of hierarchical forms of social power.

Thus, domination is a sufficient, but not a necessary, condition of hierarchical power. This means that Weber's definition does not, in fact, account for all forms of social power and, applying it as if it does so is to employ an inadequate *theory* of power.

I believe that beginning with an understanding that *all forms of social power are essentially relational in character* can yield an alternative, and more adequate, theory of power than the domination theory based on Weber's definition (and conventional wisdom).

Social power is essentially relational because all social power is *in relation* to others who are part of a social interaction. There is no social power that is not actualized in social relationships (Weber 1963, p. 117)⁵. Being relational, power is a dynamic rather than a static reality. Although power arrangements—as social structures—may be relatively stable, social power is actualized through *social interactions* that are always occurring.

Moreover, the stability of particular power structures is, from time to time, disrupted by conflicts that must be resolved in some way for the power structure as a whole to be re-stabilized. This means that social conflict, though often disruptive, performs a very important role in maintaining the *effectiveness* and *order* achieved and sustained in social power arrangements. Thus, social conflict must be considered a very important form of social power relations and not just an aberrant event within social power interactions. Its potential, and real, destabilizing effects do not disqualify its concrete manifestation of social power interaction. A more adequate, relational, theory of power must take account of the dynamic role of social conflict as a *form* of social power relations.

Combining these insights with the preceding ontological analysis yields a triad of relational forms of social power that comprise the core of a relational theory of power: *hierarchy*, *conflict*, and *co-operation*. Hierarchy focuses on the structural characteristics of most social power arrangements. It describes and fulfills the criterion of order achieved in social power arrangements but does not always consider the correlated criterion of effectiveness (Weber 1963)⁶.

The purpose of social power arrangements is not merely to establish power elites but also to foster effectiveness in sustaining society's order by fulfilling the requirements for

the well-being of the society as a whole. Inequality of human dignity, economic injustice, and competition for societal goods often evoke social conflict within societies aimed at resolving the conditions that are the sources of tensions causing conflict. Often, however, that aim is either not stated explicitly, nor expressed through programmatic implementation strategies⁷, or it is diverted into a contest for dominance, causing the opportunities for social reform to be missed. If, notwithstanding, strategies for implementation of programmatic remedies are effectively negotiated, the third form, co-operation, becomes manifest.

This triad will be more thoroughly explored in subsequent writing and research on the subject of this article. I must confess that it is a surprising finding, resulting from the analysis arguing the case for the moral reality of power; so, I was not prepared from the outset to delve further into this topic. I do feel that the finding helps to clarify and guide further work on the project⁸.

4. Responsibility: Norm and Ethical Criterion of Power Relations

The foregoing analysis of the relational nature of power infers an ethical norm that appropriately takes account of its inherently *social* character. Indeed, Weber's definition, while placing primary emphasis on the dominant(s) in power relations, implies that power would not exist if there were not another, or some others, to be dominated. Thus, power is not a possession, though some participants in the interactions may have more resources for influence than others possess. Rather, power is the consequence of interactions within a social system that yields results based on the ability of dominants or other actors to essentially determine the outcome of the interactions.

In this regard, the Christian social ethicist Walter G. Muelder offers the following extended definition of power:

Power is an ambiguous term. Like the Greek word *dynamis* it may mean moving, determining energy, as in the natural sciences. It may refer to the actual ability of a person to determine a course of action from among various alternatives. Being is power. Ultimately being is divinely personal power. Abstractly considered power is morally neutral, but *it enters as a constituent in every moral situation*. No one can be morally obligated to do what he cannot do. Duty implies ability. The ethical is always the possible. On the other hand, power also refers to the actual ability of a person or persons to determine the will of another person either through persuasion, or response to love and the good, or through manipulation. Here ethical issues of respect for personality are deeply involved. Power also may refer to the ability of a person to require obedience to his imperative demands by threat or fear. The fact of obedience by others constitutes power. In concrete historical situations physical, political, and moral meanings of power interfuse. (Muelder 1959, p. 108)

That power "enters as a constituent in every moral situation" is due to its relational nature, particularly since power affects the dignity, welfare, and well-being of persons. Thus, with reference to political power, Muelder further states the following:

The moral and legitimately political use of power always refers to a norm, never simply to private wish or the interests of a power group. Political power properly defined rests on obedience by free rational beings and refers to the ends for which the group exists and the law under which power is controlled and criticized. Political power in this sense is *responsible* to rightful authority and presupposes the communitarian interdependence of its members, their mutual duties and rights. True political power is contradictory to power politics. (Muelder 1959, 108f)

Thus, social power intrinsically involves *responsibility* as a condition of its legitimacy in every form that it takes, political, social, economic, or interpersonal. In his discussion of the meaning of responsibility, H. Richard Niebuhr describes it as “a relatively late-born child. . . in the family of words in which duty, law, virtue, goodness, and morality are its much older siblings”:

The word *responsibility* and cognate terms are widely used in our time when men (sic) speak about that phase of human existence to which they customarily referred in the past with the aid of such signs as *moral* and *good*. The *responsible citizen*, the *responsible society*, the *responsibilities of our office* and similar phrases are often on our lips. This meaning of *responsibility* is of relatively recent origin. There was a time when *responsible* meant *correspondent* as in the statement ‘The mouth large but not responsible to so large a body.’ But its use in sentences such as ‘The great God has treated us as responsible beings,’ seems to have become common only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (Muelder 1959, p. 47)

Niebuhr’s reference to *the responsible society* relates to the middle axiom adopted by the World Council of Churches at its First Assembly in 1948, which also served as the touchstone for Muelder’s writing. This action by the World Council was prompted by an awareness on the part of delegates to the Assembly that, at that time, the Churches had to

“learn afresh to speak boldly in Christ’s name both to those in power and to the people, to oppose terror, cruelty and race discrimination, to stand by the outcast, the prisoner and the refugee [and] . . . to make of the Church in every place a voice for those who have no voice, and a home where every man (sic) will be at home”. (Muelder 1959, 18f)

This concern gave rise to the following presuppositions and definition of “the responsible society:

Man (sic) is created and called to be a free being, responsible to God and his (sic) neighbor. Any tendencies in State and society depriving man (sic) of the right from Paul and . . . God’s work of salvation. *A responsible society is one where freedom is the freedom of men (sic) who acknowledge responsibility to justice and public order, and where those who hold political authority or economic power are responsible for its exercise to God and the people whose welfare is affected by it.* (Muelder 1959)

This statement is clearly dated, as the lack of inclusive language and the omission of gender and sex discrimination—among other contemporary concerns—make clear. Also, as subsequent debate in the World Council proved, responsibility to public order should not be taken as a limiting condition inhibiting revolution against unjust regimes. Nevertheless, the accountability of power at both the human and the ultimate level of responsibility to God is needed as much today as it was in the previous century. The norm of responsibility makes its demand on and provides a basis of critique of every concrete expression of social power.

5. Some Theological Considerations

Apart from Paul Tillich’s lectures on love, power, and justice (Tillich 1954), social power had not been a primary topic of theological inquiry until James Cone’s groundbreaking analysis in his magnum opus book *Black Theology and Black Power* (Cone 1969). Unlike Tillich, Cone was not simply concerned with power as an ontological phenomenon but with the social movement implied in the cry “black power” that erupted in the civil rights movement during the March Against Fear initiated by James Meredith in 1966.

Careful reading of Cone’s analysis, however, makes clear that Cone was not writing about the actual social movement, that was very diverse and of limited effectiveness, but

about black power as a concept portending effective physical opposition to the forces of white oppression. Cone did not engage in social power analysis or strategic reflection. Rather, he described black power as an appropriate and potentially effective strategic response to white racism and certified it as ethically and theologically warranted.

Thus, Cone's analysis is not specifically relevant to the social power analysis undertaken in this article, though its ethical and theological norms are relevant to the strategic reflections that follow.

However, Walter Wink's three volume study based on the language of power in the New Testament provides a theological analysis that is directly relevant to the issues raised in this article (Wink 1984). On the other hand, in this article, my concern has been to challenge the prevailing social science point of view that exercises of social power, as such, should not be subject to ethical analysis and critique, though it is acknowledged that the consequence of such exercises might be. Wink is concerned to demonstrate that the spiritual powers spoken of in the New Testament should be viewed.

... not as separate heavenly or ethereal entities but as *the inner aspect of material or tangible manifestations of power*. I suggest that the "angels of nature" are the patterning of physical things—rocks, trees, plants, the whole God-glorifying, dancing, visible universe; that the "principalities and powers" are the inner or spiritual essence, or gestalt, of an institution or state or system; that the "demons" are the psychic or spiritual power emanated by organizations or individuals or subaspects of individuals whose energies are bent on overpowering others; that "gods" are the very real archetypal or ideological structures that determine or govern reality and its mirror, the human brain; that the mysterious "elements of the universe" (*stoicheia tou kosmou*) are the invariances (formally called "laws") which, though often idolized by humans, conserve the self-consistency of each level of reality in its harmonious interrelationship with every other level and the Whole; and that "Satan" is the actual power that congeals around collective idolatry, injustice, or inhumanity, a power that increases or decreases according to the degree of collective refusal to choose higher values. (Wink 1984)

Thus, beginning with theological reflection, Wink's analysis provides a needed bridge between the primarily secular social ethical analysis in this article and a normative theological framework for ethical analysis and critique (Wink 1984).

I am also indebted to a peer reviewer of this article for referring me to James F. Keenan's work on vulnerability as foundations for Christian theological ethics. He describes his discovery of the importance of vulnerability in observing why some of his students responded to the needs of others while others failed to respond. This led him to see vulnerability to the needs of other human beings as a precondition in conscience formation leading to conscientious moral acts. Describing his move from seeing conscience as the beginning point of moral response to the needs of another, he writes:

I think the problem is that we think of the beginning of the moral life is the conscience, but I now believe that the beginning of the moral life is first being vulnerably disposed to the other, and then acting in conscience. (Keenan 2023)

Vulnerability is rooted in and manifests our connectedness as human beings and, as a quality of God's relation to human beings through creation, redemption and covenant; it is the essence of the *imago dei* in human beings. I would add that the quintessential manifestation of divine vulnerability is the crucifixion of Jesus as an act of political and religious expediency. From this act arises one important caveat regarding divine vulnerability in the resurrection of Jesus. The joining of crucifixion and resurrection into a singular cross event reveals a fundamental tension in divine vulnerability. God, who is almighty, chooses to be

vulnerable to sinful human beings in order to redeem humanity from slavery to sin and enlist human beings in a mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ and join God and Jesus Christ in the struggle to resist and overcome the human propensity to build structures of social domination that fundamentally undermine God's call to love God and neighbor.

This theological perspective is not only friendly to the preceding social ethical analysis, but it affirms this article's claims regarding the relational nature of social power and the significance of nonviolence as a lifestyle and a strategy for achieving social change.

6. Some Strategic Implications: The Power of Nonviolence

I believe the foregoing analysis has important, fruitful, implications for the "struggle" and "black empowerment" concerns that led me to undertake a study of the Boston school controversy as my dissertation project (Brown 1973) and to give these concerns priority throughout my professional career as a seminary professor and a pastor. Just a few brief observations on some strategic implications of the analysis:

6.1. Implications for "Struggle/Empowerment"

Further reflection on the triad of social forms of power relations in my proposed theory suggests that, from the point of view of actors (active participants) in power *relations* there are *correlate strategic orientations* to each of the social forms: "power over" (hierarchy), "power against (conflict), and "power with" (co-operation). "Power against" is of particular interest because it describes, in different conceptual terms, the stance and strategies of *resistance* to domination. "Power against" strategies offer an *interactive*, rather than a structural way, of understanding resistance, focusing on the resources and capabilities of actors typically viewed as so disadvantaged in hierarchical power relations structures and processes that they are essentially powerless. For this reason, "power against" is the characteristic strategic orientation of the community organizing movement.

Utilizing a "power against" strategic orientation, community organizing practitioners take conflict seriously as a form of social power relations, employing confrontational tactics and techniques within a strategic calculus designed to evoke negotiated concessions from relevant public and private sector authorities. While the major difficulties for community organizing turn on small gains and whether coerced concessions are, in fact, implemented and the relationship is transformed into genuine *co-operation*, the effectiveness of this approach demonstrates that "struggle" need not degenerate into *defeatism*. Those at lower levels of hierarchical power structures can "engage the powers" (Wink 1992) and win real victories.

6.2. Implications for Reconsideration of Nonviolence

In Hannah Arendt's statement on the opposition of violence to power, she offers the following observation on nonviolence: "This implies that it is not correct to think of the opposite of violence as nonviolence; *to speak of nonviolent power is redundant*" (Arendt 1969). Having said *violence is not power*, Arendt now says *nonviolence is power*. I wish she had said more on this. As far as I can tell, Arendt's view of the equivalence between nonviolence and power is not widely shared by activists and constituents of subordinated disadvantaged communities. Indeed, many of these equate nonviolence with nonresistance and renunciation of power. Both of these understandings could not be further from the truth. Careful reading of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's classic exposition of nonviolent protest strategy, "The Letter from a Birmingham Jail" makes clear that the strategy of "Project C (for confrontation)"—SCLC's designation of the Birmingham protest—was power-conscious and intentional in building and exercising power to force change in Birmingham. Critiques of nonviolence as unrealistic and unsophisticated with respect to power stem from uncriti-

cal acceptance of the domination model and its implicit equation of violence with maximum power. Ironically, as Gayraud Wilmore observed in his seminal work *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, the only *black* power late 1960s Black Power advocates had observed was that generated in the Civil Rights nonviolent protest movement. Unfortunately, it was too readily assumed that acting in terms of the conventional, domination, understanding of power would yield better results than the disciplined methodology and unitive end game outlined in King's letter.

Domination strategies from below, being based in a "power over" strategic orientation, eventuate in "power over" results favoring, usually if not always, those already dominant in the power relation. Organized nonviolent resistance, designed to build power/momentum toward effecting a negotiated settlement, and operating in the "power against" seeking "power with" mode, offers better opportunity to achieve the goals of resistance movements. As suggested earlier, "Occupy Wall Street" made a good beginning but failed for lack of an end-game. What is needed today are efforts to implement nonviolent strategies designed to achieve current justice priorities under *present* social conditions.

6.3. Role of a Justice—Mandating "Third Force"

This final observation is a kind of caveat that I am not yet sure how to assess. It grows out of looking at two effective nonviolent movements that have been critically important. The first is the Civil Rights nonviolent protest movement of the 1960s. It is not often recognized that a major element of the strategy of the Civil Rights movement was to pit United States federal constitutional authority against their opponents in local communities and the states of the South, where effective pressure could be brought to bear on local officials through disruptive and even violence-provoking tactics, that were publicized through national media, combined with actions to force federal authorities and the Supreme Court to compel compliance with constitutional provisions. Protesters often succeeded in achieving accommodation to many of their demands. Where federal law did not apply directly to the claimed violations of rights, such as *de facto* segregation protests in Boston and other mostly northern cities, and where liberal allies could not overcome conservative resistance to change, outcomes were disappointing. This is underscored in the present situation in which the Supreme Court itself has struck down key enforcement provisions of the Voting Rights Act and Congressmen and Senators who could get together to sing "We Shall Overcome" on the 50th anniversary of the passage of the Public Accommodations Act are unable and, mostly, unwilling to enact remedial legislation. New strategies will have to take full account of the difference in this situation, finding ways to target and build up the power of justice mandating forces.

The second movement result is the transformation of South African politics through the negotiations that led first, to the release of Nelson Mandela from prison and, subsequently, to his election as president of South Africa. Both Mandela's nonviolent resistance to the injustice and brutality of, not only his imprisonment, but that of his comrades and the company of those imprisoned with them, and the pressure brought to bear by the *grass-roots* generated economic boycott of South Africa led to this outcome. The international boycott served to provide the justice-mandating third force that the United Nations could not provide through its council, assemblies, agencies, and offices. Clearly, the quality of the outcome of this convergence made a difference in reducing bloodshed and providing for the work of reconciliation that has taken place. While more certainly needs to be done to effect political and economic justice in South Africa, what has been achieved thus far is remarkable.

But what are the prospects for the intervention of such a third force on the international level in the future? The United Nations remains our best hope, despite its institutional

weaknesses, if for no other reason than the *ethos* for justice sustained by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, debates in the General Assembly and, sometimes, in the Security Council, as well as the supra-national missions of critical United Nations agencies. Similarly, the World Council of Churches, global denominations, and other socially conscious supranational church institutions, remain significant despite diminishing commitment and interest in global ecumenism. Be this as it may, the South African case offers further evidence of the potential vital role that can be played by justice-mandating third parties at the international as well as the national level. The importance of this role should not be overlooked in developing strategies for the achievement of social justice. Choosing where and how to begin will depend on the context of emerging power relation conflicts of vital interest to Christian communities.

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Notes

- ¹ I prefer the term “power imbalance” as a further specification of domination because it acknowledges that the “dominated” possess ontological and relational power, however diminished these may be within particular power relations.
- ² On reflection, I realize that Tillich’s statement introduces a metaphysical/theological source of the power of being, which I did not intend when I chose this reference. As a person of faith, I have no problem with that understanding. However, I believe it is possible to affirm being’s dependence on power ontologically without resolving the metaphysical question of the ultimate source of power.
- ³ I am using “relative” here in the sense described by H. Richard Niebuhr in his brief essay “On Christian Moral Philosophy”, the prologue to his lectures posthumously published as *The Responsible Self* (Cone 1969). Pointedly Niebuhr writes “The *historical qualification* of my relation to (God) is inescapable. I cannot presume to think as a Jew or a Mohammedan would think about God, though I recognize that they are thinking about the same God about whom I think. Nor can I presume to rise above those specific relations to God in which I have been placed so as to think simply and theistically about God. There is no such being, or source of being, surely, as a Christian God (though there may be Christian idols); but there is a Christian relation to God and I cannot abstract from that, as no Jew or Mohammedan can abstract from a Jewish or Muslim relation”. (p. 44 *£*, italics added).
- ⁴ After I had written this section I obtained a copy of Bernard Loomer’s “Two Kinds of Power” which contains a similar critique of what he calls, “unilateral power” and an affirmation of his understanding of relational power presented as “an alternative conception of power”. His views and conclusions are substantively the same as mine.
- ⁵ This understanding is expressed, though not emphasized, in Weber’s definition where power is described as an opportunity “existing within a social relationship”.
- ⁶ These reflections bring into view important considerations that I did not recognize during the preparation and presentation of the paper: Weber’s reference to the “basis” on which the opportunity of power rests. The diversity of forms of hierarchical power arrangements may be distinguished by the bases on which these forms rest. For example: domination rests on *force*; forms of power exercised by “power elites” rest on *social control*; political and police powers rest on *legitimacy*; power in conflict relations rests on *contention*; cooperative forms of power rest on *collaboration*. At least, these five commonly understood bases for the exercise of power indicate need for further analysis and critique of Weber’s definition in the process of developing an alternate theory to the one involved in his definition. Attention should also be paid to Weber’s designation of power as an existing “opportunity”.
- ⁷ As in the case of “Occupy Wall Street”.
- ⁸ Again, as was true with the preceding section, I was made aware of Michel Foucault’s work on relational power in his studies of human sexuality after completing this section of the paper. Preliminary investigation of his analyses and findings indicate that his approach to relational power resonates with the understanding of power as essentially relational and the criticisms of domination and structural theory expressed in this paper. Foucault also provides a penetrating analysis of resistance as an intrinsic element in power relations, but he does not pursue development of a full blown alternative theory of power such as that begun here. Nevertheless, more in depth investigation will likely provide further clarity and greater theoretical integrity to the anticipated manuscript project.

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Article

Barth's "Alternative" Follower: Stanley Hauerwas and the Traditions of 20th-Century North American Theology and Ethics

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Abstract: This paper explores Stanley Hauerwas's unique perspective on the traditions of 20th-century North American theology and ethics, particularly his similarity to Karl Barth in viewing theology and ethics as inseparable. Although deeply influenced by Barth, Hauerwas defends this view in the American context in a manner distinct from Barth's theological approach. Additionally, Hauerwas critiques Barth's ecclesiology, which leads him to attempt to transcend some limitations of Barthian theology by developing a theological ethics "system" that emphasizes the practicality of the church.

Keywords: Stanley Hauerwas; Karl Barth; Protestant liberalism; theology; Christian ethics; practical theology

1. Introduction

Hauerwas describes himself as a Barthian, a declaration that is not made casually (Hauerwas 2010, p. 87). While some scholars disagree with this characterization, a notable example is the perspective developed by Nicholas Healy in his work, *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction*. Healy initially expresses sympathy for Hauerwas's encouragement of a shift from solving social ethical issues through abstract principles to focusing on concrete existence, sense of place, and character development. However, his agreement stops there. Healy argues that Hauerwas's theology is ecclesiocentric, substituting discourse about the church for discourse about God. Although Hauerwas rejects the idea of creating a "systematic" theology, in practice, the church serves as the organizational center of Hauerwas's theological network. He terms this as "ecclesism"—a simplistic focus on the church, making it the center and structural place for all theological inquiries. In other words, theology is simplified to ecclesiology, shifting from being about God to being about the church, effectively re-enacting the Protestant liberalism that Barth opposed (Healy 2014, pp. 17, 38, 40, 48–51).¹ Healy points out that, compared to Barth, Hauerwas is closer to Schleiermacher in his approach. Like Schleiermacher, Hauerwas starts with a non-theological description of human collectives, then specifies how Christians differ from others. Both view the church as a community that forms the identity of its members—Schleiermacher through self-awareness and Hauerwas through embodied existence. Both exhibit a trend of turning towards the church, moving away from a primary focus on God (Healy 2014, pp. 42–44, 49–50, 72–73). However, other scholars hold different views, notably Hunsicker in his seminal work, *The Making of Stanley Hauerwas*. Hunsicker provides a detailed argument on Barth's profound influence on Hauerwas, as well as how Hauerwas has transcended Barth in the American context. He addresses what he calls the "Schleiermacher thesis" and "Ritschl thesis", indicating that Barthianism and postliberalism work together without contradiction in Hauerwas, thereby identifying Hauerwas as a Barthian postliberal. Hunsicker's compelling analysis demonstrates the significant influence of Barth on Hauerwas, particularly in their shared rejection of Protestant liberalism (Hunsicker 2019).² This paper argues that the influence of Barth on Hauerwas and the fundamental alignment of their spirits are quite evident. Chronologically speaking, although Hauerwas's early works

already cited Barth, Barth really assumes a major role in Hauerwas's corpus beginning with several key publications at Duke University, such as *Christian Existence Today*, *Against the Nations*, and *With the Grain of the Universe*, the latter emerging from his Gifford Lectures. In *Christian Existence Today*, Hauerwas integrates Barth's rejection of Protestant liberalism with his own descriptions of the Christian community and its enactments, mirroring Barth's *Theological Existence Today* (Hauerwas 1995). In *Against the Nations*, Hauerwas interprets Barth's rejection of Nazism as an example of how theological beliefs translate into moral action. Hauerwas sees Barth's critique of Protestant liberalism as pivotal, enabling him to identify the theological failings of Nazism, where his own teacher, Adolf von Harnack, and other liberal theologians faltered (Hauerwas 1988). In *With the Grain of the Universe*, Hauerwas prefers Barth over Reinhold Niebuhr, yet he also articulates a significant critique of Barth. Hauerwas argues that Barth did not sufficiently focus on the transition from Christian moral agency to the practices of a witnessing church (Hauerwas 2001). Many of Hauerwas's works, including these, display his fundamental alignment with Barth, specifically in their mutual rejection of Protestant liberalism. However, this paper argues that Hauerwas's rejection of Protestant liberalism and its characteristic separation of theology and ethics takes a distinctly different form than Barth's. Hauerwas narrates the story of how American Christian ethics became "American" rather than "Christian", articulating his critique of Protestant liberalism and the separation of theology and ethics. In other words, this represents an American version of Barth's critique of Protestant liberalism, though the spirit is consistent. As Halden Doerge correctly says, "Hauerwas understands his own work to exist along the trajectory of Barth's own work in some significant sense, carrying it in a way that exceeds Barth's own limitations" (McMaken and Congdon 2014, p. 116). Furthermore, this paper will present Hauerwas's more stringent critiques of Barth towards its conclusion, highlighting their nuanced yet significant differences.

2. The Narrative of the Separation between Theology and Ethics in North America

Hauerwas's initial narrative describes how Christian ethics in twentieth-century America became more "American" rather than "Christian", a transformation that mirrors the fundamental narrative of Protestant liberalism (Zhao 2016, pp. 15–31).³ This story begins with Rauschenbusch's *Christianizing the Social Order* and ends with Gustafson's *Can Ethics Be Christian?* (Hauerwas 2000, pp. 64–65).⁴ If Protestant liberalism is the story of how humanity replaces God as the subject of theology, then its American manifestation is America replacing the church as the moral-shaping community, Hauerwas's American version of Barth's rejection of Protestant liberalism in the German context. In this process, Barth and Barth-influenced thinkers like Jenson and Yoder greatly inspired Hauerwas.

Rauschenbusch, a leading figure of the Social Gospel movement, sought to bring the sinful America back to God's kingdom (Hauerwas 2000, p. 71). To his contemporaries, Christianity was about saving souls, not societies—the latter being political. But Hauerwas points out that Rauschenbusch opposed this apolitical description of Christianity (Hauerwas 2000, pp. 72, 75, 77; Rauschenbusch 1912, p. 93).

Therefore, Hauerwas notes, including Rauschenbusch, a large group of Protestant pastors felt they had discovered an ancient truth—the essential feature of Christianity is the insistence on the organic unity between religion and morality and theology and ethics (Berkman and Cartwright 2001, p. 56). For the Social Gospel, Christian ethics was not primarily a development of a reflective discourse pattern, but its purpose was to mobilize the church's energy and power for social renewal (Berkman and Cartwright 2001, p. 56). There was no clear boundary between his theology and ethics, just as he saw no clear separation between Christianity (the church) and politics (society). However, ironically, the democratic society Rauschenbusch aspired to made his descriptions of Christianity and the church difficult to understand. Especially in his view, there was an important connection between the Christian faith in the kingdom of God and social vision. The subsequent ethics that constantly tried to remedy Rauschenbusch's failure to see that no ethical position follows Christianity confirmed this (Hauerwas 2000, pp. 95, 107).

Reinhold Niebuhr entered the scene with a transformation from an advocate of the Social Gospel to its most powerful critic. His ethics required a realistic acceptance of the inherent sinfulness of human nature, developing an “Christian realism” ethical stance. His realistic ethical stance led him to criticize the Christianized social order. In his view, the good pursued by Christian ethics in the social order was always relative, even a lesser evil, but by no means the complete realization of God’s kingdom. Therefore, his disagreement with Rauschenbusch centered on how these fundamental theological beliefs were translated into the social order (Hunsicker 2019, pp. 32–33). In Hauerwas’s view, although Reinhold Niebuhr criticized liberalism, he never rejected liberalism as a fundamental theological strategy like Barth did (Hauerwas 2001, p. 139; Hunsicker 2019, pp. 34–35). He continued some of the basic habits of Protestant liberalism, such as the separation of theology from ethics and the translation of theological discourse into “common language”.

Compared to his brother, Richard Niebuhr was more focused on the theological dilemmas prompted by the Social Gospel movement. Hauerwas points out, influenced by Richard Niebuhr, Christian ethicists sought philosophical bases for theological claims, highlighting the compatibility of theology and ethics. However, this approach inadvertently turned Christian ethics into a nonhistorical meta-ethics, an outcome Richard Niebuhr did not intend, as he valued theological foundations in ethics. Richard’s Niebuhr’s project sought to explain humanity’s relative existence theologically, with an understanding of finitude in relation to God. Yet, Hauerwas notes that Richard Niebuhr’s theology, constrained by liberalism, limited its view of God, hindering its ability to address human existence’s relativity (Hauerwas and MacIntyre 1983, p. 26; Berkman and Cartwright 2001, pp. 62–63). Richard’s students, to some extent, inherited his task of theologizing Christian ethics, one of the most successful being Ramsey.

Hauerwas points out that in Ramsey’s era, there was no hope of changing the American political system but only to maintain it against the growing tide of relativism and consequentialist moral theories (Hauerwas and MacIntyre 1983, p. 26; Ramsey 1950, p. 100).⁵ Ramsey did not find an adequate framework to regulate ethical debates in the works of the Niebuhr brothers and general Protestant thought, so he turned to the Catholic tradition of casuistry. However, influenced by the Niebuhrs, Ramsey could not accept the Catholic assumption of the relative autonomy of natural law and ethics. In his view, Ramsey’s work clearly showed the inherent tension in the development of Christian ethics: on the one hand, a concern for providing theological narratives for moral life, but on the other, downplaying its theological significance for the purpose of public discussion. Ramsey, in a sense, continued the Social Gospel movement (Berkman and Cartwright 2001, pp. 64–66). In his medical ethics, he most clearly articulated the following idea: the covenant love between God and humans serves as the fundamental guiding principle for medical practices such as organ transplants, euthanasia, and informed consent (Ramsey 2002, pp. xiii, xiv, xvii).⁶ However, Hauerwas points out that there is no reason to explain why the commitment to duty ethics requires the maintenance of the special theological view of covenant love; this is merely a philosophical issue. Thus, theologians of Ramsey’s era increasingly turned to philosophical sources to help clarify the logic of ethical commitments, making it increasingly difficult to understand the contribution of Christianity to ethics (Berkman and Cartwright 2001, p. 66).

Therefore, throughout the 1970s, the distinctive nature of theological ethics continued to be expressed not through any unique faith but rather through a series of issues discussed by theologians. Drawing ongoing inspiration from the Social Gospel, theologians remained focused on topics such as social and economic justice, marriage and family, and the status of nation-states—topics that philosophers have historically tended to overlook. But Hauerwas points out that with the publication of Rawls’s works and the rise of journals like *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, theologians even lost this uniqueness (Rawls 1971). The remaining options seemed to be to retreat to confessional stances, analyze methodological issues, or alternatives, which were primarily conducted by Gustafson (Hauerwas and MacIntyre 1983, p. 29; Berkman and Cartwright 2001, pp. 66–67).

Gustafson focused on the internal history and current choices of theological ethics to seek to maintain the vitality of discourse. He turned his attention to the significance of morals, namely character and virtues, as the proper background for assessing the significance of theological discourse on moral actions. His work *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* expressed his attempt to unify theology and ethics (Gustafson 1981, 1984). Hauerwas points out that Gustafson's work revolves around one question: can ethics be Christian? His view is that since God's purpose is for the welfare of any creature, in most cases, the reasons that justify any moral action will also justify a Christian's moral action, with the only exception being some Christians committed to nonviolent resistance to evil, where the reasons for such responses necessarily rely on some religious reasons beyond what we call morality (Hauerwas and MacIntyre 1983, p. 29; Berkman and Cartwright 2001, p. 67; Gustafson 1975, p. 163).

Hauerwas's overview of the development of 20th-century American Christian ethics led him to realize that the major theological theme of "how to keep Christian ethics Christian" is the result of the church's historical and sociological position relative to American society. As American society became increasingly secular, Christian ethicists saw that if they wanted to continue playing a political role, they had to transform Christian beliefs into a non-theological vernacular. Apart from being a manifestation of social strategy, there were theological difficulties. The restoration of the ethical significance of theological discourse is part of an internal Protestant theological movement that largely seeks to avoid the assertions of more traditional Christian particularism. Additionally, the success of such a discipline of Christian ethics would only reinforce an assumption: more vigorous theological beliefs have little to no impact on the status quo or what it should be like (Berkman and Cartwright 2001, pp. 68–69).⁷

3. The Narrative of Rejecting Protestant Liberalism in North America

In Hauerwas's view, what underpins and supports the separation of theology and ethics is Protestant liberalism. Protestant liberalism not only erroneously separates theology from ethics but also makes theology appear more 'fundamental' through a theoretical and applied approach. In the context of North American theology and ethics, Hauerwas's critique of Protestant liberalism has two key allies: Robert Jenson and John Yoder.

Hauerwas points out that Jenson did not do "ethics" because, in his opinion, if Christians obtained God wrong, then their lives would also be wrong. He refused to make theology something like a theoretical "ethics". Thus, for him, correctly discussing God already meant doing "ethics". Jenson's approach to theology propelled Hauerwas's plan to reclaim the theological center of Christian ethics, which, of course, was not Protestant liberalism (Hauerwas 2000, pp. 117–20). Their consistency in the plan came from what they learned from Barth: God matters (Mangina 2004, p. 134).⁸

Hauerwas's way of studying ethics was proper theology, and Jenson's theology was his ethics. Therefore, Hauerwas notes that to narrate Jenson's ethics, one must start from his discourse on God (Hauerwas 2000, pp. 121–22). What Jenson and Hauerwas mean here is just that when Christians have a correct understanding of God, they will realize their creatureliness and rightly handle their relationship with God, thus changing their behavior accordingly. In this sense, there is no distinction between theology and ethics.

Thus, in Hauerwas's view, where Jenson seems to do ethics is just an aspect of his ecclesiology. His ethics being situated in the context of the church does not mean that the Christian way of life must be uniquely theirs but reflects Jenson's belief that ethical reflection depends on a group discovering and choosing its future politically. Jenson's critique of America was severe, as he saw America as not really political. It began with the great hope of political expansion called democracy, leading to a specific modern society, which evolved into the existence of a "new tribe" (Jenson 1999, pp. 79–80; Hauerwas 2000, p. 122).

Hauerwas notes that to understand Jenson's ethics, one needs to recognize that the above quote is not Jenson's understanding of the current state of American politics but

his theological politics (Rasmusson 1994).⁹ Jenson believed America's attitude towards abortion clearly showed it was just a "tribe", a society that legally kills unborn children based solely on the pregnant person's decision, abandoning the moral consistency necessary for the judgment of a political form. But the good news is that Christians have an alternative choice—the church. The church is God's politics, committing itself to what Jenson calls "moral consistency" through the practice of commandments. Therefore, the church as a political form has boundaries; when its members' lifestyles do not align with the church's mission requirements from the Holy Spirit, the church must separate from them; otherwise, the church itself is unfaithful, and excommunication becomes the ultimate act of peace. One might say commandments prescribe the conditions for the survival of politics outside the church, while inside, they acquire positive significance as virtues (Jenson 1999, pp. 203–5; Hauerwas 2000, pp. 123–24). Therefore, Hauerwas concludes the following: Jenson's theology and his ethics are inseparable, just as Christians' opposition to abortion is inseparable from their worship of the triune God. Jenson and Hauerwas both see that what Christians learn to say and do is inseparable from their correct naming of God in the church as this politics.

Yoder was another key figure who significantly influenced Hauerwas's critique of American Protestant liberalism. As Wells stated, Yoder was the fundamental watershed in Hauerwas's relationship with Niebuhrian thought. Yoder was not deceived by the mainstream story of 20th-century American Christian ethics; he consistently wrote Christian ethics from the Mennonite tradition, aimed at a church audience that had no particular vested interest in supporting the American liberal democratic society. Hauerwas, alongside Yoder, pursued the authenticity and visibility of the church, not dominated by demands for its eternal relevance, as shown in the "relationship" between theology (or dogmatics) and ethics (Wells 1998, p. 10). Therefore, Yoder was a key figure for Hauerwas in making a decisive turn in the entire story of the development of 20th-century American Christian ethics. Barth played an important role in Yoder and Hauerwas's rejection of Protestant liberalism (Hauerwas 2010, p. 136).

Hauerwas points out that Yoder's *The Politics of Jesus* will be seen as a new beginning in retrospect of 20th-century American theology, because before Yoder, the theme of American Christian ethics was always America. Yoder helped him see the (residual) power and (inevitable) end of the Protestant liberal tradition represented by Niebuhr (Hauerwas 2000, p. 129). Yoder opposed their dichotomy between faith and history, the way they dehistoricized Christian faith. Like Barth, Yoder did not read Luke's Gospel with the assumption that Jesus and political ethics were unrelated. This reading of Jesus' politics challenged Niebuhrian depoliticization and the individualistic understanding of redemption. Because the Niebuhrians presupposed the inevitability of coercion and violence in politics (in the name of peace), Yoder perceived in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus a politics of nonviolence. (Yoder 1994, p. 129; Hauerwas 2000, pp. 129–31).

Yoder's emphasis on the politics of Jesus is a reminder to Christians that they have been embedded in a societal practice that assumes Jesus' life, death, and resurrection have no impact. This forces people to choose between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith, the individual and society, theology and ethics, and so on. However, Yoder rejects the existence of such choices; in his view, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection have already revealed a kind of kingdom politics, to which he invites Christians to share. He has exemplified the way of life of the kingdom, and his victory over death shows the disciples that peace has triumphed over coercion and violence. Therefore, Yoder would see Jesus as the new possibility for human, social, and political relationships (Hauerwas 2000, pp. 132–33).¹⁰

4. The Similarities and Differences in the Discourses of Hauerwas and Barth

4.1. Eliminating the "And" of Theology and Ethics

Hauerwas prefers to identify as a theologian rather than an ethicist. In his view, ethics is what Christianity is left with after theological convictions have retreated from the public square, inseparable from the work of Kant (Hauerwas 2015, p. 59). He unabashedly

expresses the inseparability of theology and ethics, a division stemming from humanity's abstract conception of God and the divergence from how God reveals Himself, which is precisely the result of the loss of Christian politics—the church. He aims to show that theological convictions need to be embodied in church life; in his words, the “truthfulness of theological claims entails the work they do for the shaping of holy lives” (Hauerwas 2001, pp. 16–17). Hauerwas's belief in the inseparability of theology and ethics and Barth's insistence on the indivisibility of dogmatics and ethics are of the same lineage, their propositions rooted in a shared rejection of Protestant liberal theology.

For Barth, theology and ethics cannot be separated; when people ask about the “relationship” between doctrine and ethics, the problem has already arisen (Barth 1957, p. 518; Hauerwas 2016, p. 21). Hauerwas points out that this is the mistake contemporary Catholics and Protestants or liberals and conservatives make. The task of theologians is not to separate theology and ethics for some limited purposes but to deny their so-called ontological and independent nature (Hauerwas 2016, pp. 22–23). In other words, the “faith” and “actions” of Christians in the church are inseparable. Hauerwas points out that there was once no Christian ethics, and to demonstrate this point, he outlines the historical process of this separation.

Hauerwas points out that Christians shaped by this separation would think there is a “problem” between Paul's discussion of justification in Romans 5:1–11 and his “moral” teachings in chapters 12–14, the former being theology and the latter ethics. Christian ethics, therefore, had the task of providing some explanation for this “problem”. However, he believes Paul would not see a tension between the two because, for Paul, the church is the subject of God's command. Paul believes that God is creating a covenantal community. The church, in its collective life, is called to embody a different order, serving as a sign of God's redemptive purpose in the world. Christians now find it necessary to question the relationship between doctrine and ethics, indicating that Christians live within a set of church practices entirely different from those assumed by Paul. This reminds people that the question of the relationship between doctrine and ethics is not merely about the relationship between “ideas” but rather reflects the ever-changing practices of the church. Moral exhortations are not mainly about individual character but about the church's collective obedience to God. Hence, the problem lies not with Paul but with the current practice of the church (Hauerwas 2016, p. 26). Besides the Bible, the church fathers also did not make this distinction, even though they wrote about specific moral topics. For example, Hauerwas notes, Augustine argued that the fourfold division of pagan virtues can only be correctly understood as forms of love directed towards God (Hauerwas 2016, p. 26; Hunsicker 2019, p. 24). Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* is seen by Hauerwas as better representing the unity of theology and ethics in Christian life. Hauerwas views the structure of the *Summa Theologica* not as an argument for the independence of ethics but as placing the Christian journey towards God directly within the doctrine of God (Hunsicker 2019, p. 29).¹¹

He believes the Reformation reshaped the relationship between theology and ethics, marking the beginning of their modern separation (Hauerwas 2016, p. 31). Luther's distinction between the law and the gospel, the two kingdoms, mirrored the distinction between theology and ethics. This meant that the gospel was about who God is and how he saves, a soteriological claim, while actions were about human obedience or disobedience to the law. Christian communities lived a dual life, obeying the gospel spiritually and the law physically (Hunsicker 2019, p. 26). Hauerwas sees Calvin's emphasis on justification by faith producing similar results (Hauerwas 2016, p. 31).

Secondly, Hauerwas believes the Reformation changed the relationship between the church and the world. Before the Reformation, Christians' understanding of life could be expressed in the language of natural law, but natural law was understood as part of divine law mediated by the church. After the Reformation, Christians lost this understanding of the church, no longer seeing it as an indispensable environment for ordering Christian life (Hauerwas 2016, p. 31). Moreover, the Reformation broke the unity of the Christian

kingdom. The named schism of the Reformation overly emphasized the discontinuity between theologians like Luther, Calvin, the practitioners, and Roman Catholic theologians (Wells and Hauerwas 2004, p. 48).¹² The competitive theological claims combined with politics formed violence, and if theology created division and violence, then ethics had to be separated from theology.

This pursuit was named the Enlightenment, with Kant as a typical representative. He distinguished between noumena and phenomena. This distinction also applies to knowledge about God (theology) and knowledge about humanity, which is essentially ethical and experiential (Wells and Hauerwas 2004, p. 4). Since humans could not have definite knowledge of God, Kant turned religious studies towards moral issues, showing how the historical figure Jesus represents the true embodiment of the moral law. In doing so, Kant rescued Christianity from philosophical criticism. This foundation of ethics is reason, not religious belief, his response to the chaos caused by the collapse of the Christian kingdom (Hunsicker 2019, p. 27).

After briefly combing through the history of the “relationship” between theology or dogmatics and ethics, Hauerwas’s insight is as follows: for most of Christian history, Christians did not think they could easily distinguish between what they believe (faith, theology, or dogmatics) and what they do (actions, ethics).

Hauerwas finally returns to Barth, pointing out that for Barth, ethics is theology, elucidating how the word of God in Jesus Christ not only provides its own foundation but also the basis for everything Christians know and do. Barth returned theology to its proper role as the servant of the church proclaiming Jesus Christ, as his *dogmatics* could not attain higher or better knowledge than that of the church proclaiming the God worshipped by Christians as the Trinity. What Barth tried to conduct in his *Church Dogmatics* was nothing more than replace human self-consciousness, conceived as independent of God’s revelation in Christ, with a legitimate concept of ethics. He denies that people can predetermine what should be conducted before God’s command. Barth begins his *dogmatics* with the doctrine of the Trinity because it is from this doctrine that one actually understands who the self-revealing God is, thereby allowing it to be expressed as an interpretation of revelation. For Barth, “ethics” is merely a component of the dogmatic task and cannot be regarded as an independent subject. In doing so, Barth returned theology to its original assumption: there is no “ethics” separate from theology or no ethics outside of theology, especially when theology is understood as the activity of the church (Barth 1960, p. 358; Hauerwas 2016, pp. 36–37).¹³

4.2. Barth on “Ethics as Theology”

If Hauerwas elucidates the inseparability of theology and ethics from the historical perspective of their “relationship”, Barth, in contrast, argues more from within theology itself, particularly through its dialectical nature, that ethics must be theological. As Barth articulated, “Dogmatics itself must be ethics, and ethics can only be dogmatics” (Barth 2009, p. 795). This is primarily because theology expounds on how God’s word in Jesus Christ establishes everything people know and do, thereby necessitating the theologization of ethics. Moreover, theology is not merely an intellectual exercise but involves a way of life; thus, theology must be ethical. Barth demonstrates a form of Christian moral reasoning through his discussion of the Chalcedonian doctrine of anhypostasis and enhypostasis. When Christians understand who Christ is, they understand their own identity, which in turn informs their actions.

Anhypostasis denies the independent existence of Jesus’ humanity, rejecting the view that God assumed a person with a predetermined identity. Enhypostasis, on the other hand, posits that Jesus’ humanity exists within the divine person, indicating that the humanity of Jesus Christ is not a universal essence. Barth explains the following:

God and man are so related in Jesus Christ, that he exists as man so far and only so far as he exists as God, i.e., in the mode of existence of the eternal Word of God. What we thereby express is a doctrine unanimously sponsored by early theology in its entirety, that

of the anhypostasis and enhypostasis of the human nature of Christ. Anhypostasis asserts the negative. Since in virtue of the became, i.e., in virtue of the assumption, Christ's human nature has its existence—the ancients said, its subsistence—in the existence of God, meaning in the mode of being (hypostasis, “person”) of the Word, it does not possess it in and for itself, in the abstract. Apart from the divine mode of being whose existence it acquires it has none of its own; i.e., apart from its concrete existence in God in the event of the union, it has no existence of its own, it is anhypostatic. Enhypostasis asserts the positive. In virtue of the became, i.e., in virtue of the assumption, the human nature acquires existence (subsistence) in the existence of God, meaning in the mode of being (hypostasis, “person”) of the Word (Barth 2009, p. 163).

Barth argues from the doctrine of anhypostasis that Jesus, conceived by the Virgin Mary, was always the Son of God. The incarnation disrupts history, breaking the continuation of sinful disobedience. From the standpoint of enhypostasis, Barth asserts that Jesus was fully human but existed as a human only in his existence as God. Jesus' humanity is entirely subordinate to his divinity, finding its end and purpose within it. How does this relate to ethics?

We cannot overlook Barth's fundamental premise: if people know who they are and what their ultimate purpose (telos) is, they can know how to act rightly. Barth presents the task of ethics within the context of Christology, noting that ethical issues, i.e., questions about right action, are issues of human existence. The question of whether and to what extent human actions are right is the question of whether and to what extent human existence is right. When theology or dogmatics raises ethical questions, it is actually raising questions about human existence (Barth 2009, p. 793). Jesus exemplifies what human existence or “life” is, as humans recognize their existence as creatures in the natural universe, obedient to God. Humans can only be fully blessed by the miracle of the incarnation as such creatures. Recognizing the identity of humanity as restored by Jesus prevents humans from viewing themselves as Kantian man-gods. Jesus' life of obedience to God's commands defines humanity as an existence of faithful obedience. Humans do not follow an internal law of conscience or reason but follow God's commands, as Jesus did.

In this way, Barth connects the anhypostatic–enhypostatic Christological doctrine with Christian life. The anhypostatic–enhypostatic doctrine defines human identity as God's creatures, a life granted by grace, with Christians existing (moving) within the space of grace. Using a phrase Hauerwas might prefer, Jesus Christ came to humanity as the kingdom of God, and to be redeemed is to enter the kingdom and behave as its citizens. How to act is demonstrated in Jesus' life and teachings, which is particularly evident in Hauerwas's discussion of the Sermon on the Mount (Hauerwas 2016, pp. 60–67).

Therefore, Barth can consider worship as the beginning of ethical behavior. He notes that prayer is an eschatological act realized in the here and now. Prayer is not about fulfilling the Christians' own will but about accomplishing God's will. In other words, Christian action must align with their true relationship with God. In liturgical acts such as prayer, Sabbath observance, and confession, Christians act according to how they were created. Through this, Christians find their ultimate purpose in Christ and realize their true self—responding to their Creator as creatures.

Thus, as Hauerwas might point out, the church does not have a social ethic; the church is a social ethic. Barth also emphasizes that social action is not the entirety of Christian life, and liturgical acts like prayer, Sabbath observance, and confession cannot be simplistically categorized as “theology”. In this way, we see that both Hauerwas and Barth conclude that theology and ethics are inseparable, but they arrive at this conclusion in very different ways.

5. Hauerwas's Critique of Barth

Hauerwas, in his Gifford Lectures, did not hesitate to express his admiration and praise for Barth. For Hauerwas, Barth's life and work were a witness, which Niebuhr could not imagine, that Barth really believed theology was about God (Hauerwas 2001, p. 146). However, Hauerwas also recognizes Barth's challenges and presents his own critique.

His criticism of Barth's ecclesiology, though brief, is substantive. Moreover, his critique largely draws on the work of Healy, Hütter, and Mangina, so it is necessary to trace back to Hauerwas's sources for his critique of Barth's ecclesiology (Healy 1994, 2004; Mangina 1999; Hütter 1999).¹⁴

5.1. "No Salvation Outside the Church"

In Hauerwas's view, the core of Mangina's critique is whether Barth is sufficiently catholic. He means Barth's critique and rejection of Protestant liberalism make it difficult for him to acknowledge, through the work of the Holy Spirit, the church becoming a part of God's care for the world. Barth would not deny that the church is constituted by the proclamation of the Gospel, but he could not acknowledge that the church is a component of that proclamation (Barth 1957, p. 160; Hauerwas 2001, pp. 144–45).¹⁵

Mangina believes Barth's understanding of the church's position in the economy of salvation as "intrinsic and analytic, rather than extrinsic and synthetic" subordinates the church to Christ's prophetic function. This is to say, while humans can do nothing in their justification and sanctification, they are still called to witness Jesus Christ, and the church is the fellowship of those who obey this call. Mangina then analyzes the two moments of Jesus' work of reconciliation: the Judge judged in our place (the narrative history of Jesus culminating in Golgotha) and the resurrected life. He points out that theologians like Moltmann and Sölle have criticized Barth's treatment of resurrection that for Barth, the resurrection strictly speaking adds nothing new to the event of the cross (Moltmann 1993, pp. 230–31; Soulen 1996, pp. 89–94; Sonderegger 1992; Mangina 1999, pp. 274–75). Despite Barth's corresponding discourse on the resurrection, his comprehensive interpretation of the cross may render the post-resurrection history superfluous. The cross, as the decisive end of history, seems to suggest that all important things have already happened so that neither the Holy Spirit nor the church have real roles to play (Mangina 1999, pp. 278–82).¹⁶

In Hauerwas's view, Barth certainly agrees that the church's task is to witness for Christ, but as he and Mangina both believe, it is unclear how much the church's configuration as a human practice influences the task of witnessing, Barth's understanding of the church vacillating between its essential claim (the body of Christ) and merely incidental and experiential claims (Hauerwas 2001, p. 192; Mangina 1999, p. 278). Hunsicker also points out that Barth confuses the similarities between Protestant liberalism and Catholicism, leading him to reject any sense of the Holy Spirit's presence and activity in the church's liturgical practices, resulting in the church becoming an incidental event in the economy of salvation (Hunsicker 2019, pp. 64–65). Therefore, Hauerwas points out, in Barth's view, those aspects of the church are largely irrelevant and devoid of theological significance. However, such an understanding of the church fails to explain why and how the church is necessary for people to understand the world.

As Hauerwas questions, "the world would not necessarily be lost if there were no Church", so then what difference does the church make to how people understand the world and how they must live in it (Barth 1962, p. 826; Hauerwas 2001, p. 193)? Unlike Barth, Hauerwas, from early in his work, is deeply concerned with the practical power of Christian faith, such as the shaping of the church and Christians. He opposes the false universalism and abstract reductionism of modernity, focusing on the possibility of growth in Christian moral life, the importance of Jesus for ethics, and the centrality of the church for Christian faith and theological reflection. He aims to connect Christian language with practice, demonstrating that the moral life of the church is not unrelated to its very existence. Therefore, Hauerwas takes the temporal and historical dimensions of the church seriously. The Christian community is actually participating in the story of Jesus, setting the backdrop for divine action in the church. In fact, according to Mangina, the "Christian story" in Hauerwas's work is not just a formal concept but is based on a clear (though not fully developed) Christological foundation (Mangina 1999, p. 278; Hauerwas 2001, p. 285).¹⁷

5.2. The Practical Specificity of Church Witness

Hauerwas points out that the entire *Church Dogmatics* is Barth's ethics, as Barth rightly saw the truthfulness of Christians' word about God as a question of authentic witness. Due to the ministry of Christianity, God is known in the world, making the existence of Christians as witnesses not only possible but necessary. Even if Christians and the church are often unfaithful, it does not mean their existence is unnecessary; their unfaithfulness also witnesses that God will not give up on creation. Being a Christian, being a member of a finite and prophetic minority, is like being a peculiar person. Their prayers and praises are prophetic, and the ministry of witnessing can be unsettling. Moreover, Christians do not witness as individuals because they are always in the church, and individual witnessing is part of the church's larger witness. The church as a necessary visible witness exists where the Holy Word chooses and calls. Therefore, Hauerwas points out, for Barth, a church can be doctrinally completely orthodox, which is a good thing, but if it lacks faithful witness, it is no longer a church (Hauerwas 2001, pp. 195–99).

So far, Hauerwas and Barth have no fundamental disagreement, both agreeing on the necessity of the church witnessing for God. However, in Hauerwas's view, Barth's problem is that while he thinks the church's task is to witness God's self-revelation, Barth fails to show the church. He turns to Mangina's critique that "it is not clear that the church as a configuration of human practices makes much difference to this task" (Mangina 1999, p. 278; Hauerwas 2001, p. 192). Therefore, Hauerwas intends to show that Barth failed to demonstrate the role of the church in establishing the uniqueness of Christian proclamation about God (knowledge of God or Christian beliefs) and the moral life that results from this proclamation (Hauerwas 2001, pp. 145, 192; McCormack and Anderson 2011, p. 355). Hauerwas lists examples from Barth of the two extremes that Christian responses to the world must exclude: a too negative view of the world leading to monasticism or crusades and a too positive view, simply accepting the world's secularity, damaging the church itself. Barth advocates a "middle way" between these extremes, not simply combining the two extremes to "solve the problem" but maintaining the "freedom to take some steps along any one of the paths if necessary" (Hauerwas 2001, p. 201). Hauerwas points out that Barth intentionally describes the "middle way" as unstable, but instability can lead to either loyalty or disloyalty. Barth's attempt to walk a "middle way" between monasticism and a free embrace of the secular is just another side of his overly cautious description of the church's role in God's economy of salvation. Regarding this middle way, Hauerwas notes that Barth does not specify the material conditions supporting his "middle way" (Hauerwas 2001, p. 202). Hauerwas, using Marshall's arguments, points out that Christians' belief that the world is structured in a particular way depends on "the attractiveness and the habitability of the world they describe" (Marshall 2000, pp. 204–5; Hauerwas 2001, p. 214).

So, what is Hauerwas's explanation of the material conditions or "habitability" that Barth lacks, as Marshall describes? Hauerwas notes that Barth challenged the adaptive presuppositions of Christian theology set for the real world; his intellectual performance is astonishing but just that—an intellectual performance—because in Hauerwas's view, without the witness of Yoder, John Paul II, and Dorothy Day, Barth's achievements would lose their vitality. They represent the revival of church politics, helping people understand why witness is not just what Christians do but central to understanding how Christian witness is real. If their lives were not truly real, Hauerwas believes his argument would be merely idealistic (Hauerwas 2001, pp. 216–17).

In brief, Yoder's work, especially his core writing *The Politics of Jesus*, compels people to recognize that the issue of Christian faith's authenticity is inseparable from the church's witness, and this witness must be nonviolent. The doctrine of God and nonviolence are mutually constitutive, as God chooses nonviolence as his method of redemption, and the foundation for Christians' nonresistance is the character of God revealed by Christ. The link between Christian obedience and ultimate efficacy has been severed because God's victory comes from resurrection, not effective sovereignty or assured survival. Thus, the

relationship between Christian obedience (nonviolence) and the sword of victory in God's cause is not causal but the relationship of the cross and resurrection. Moreover, Christian commitment to nonviolence does not mean withdrawal from the world. As Yoder points out, without the church, there is no world; the church is epistemologically prior to the world. Under Constantinianism's influence, Christians tried to make Christianity necessary, but this led to the church being assimilated by the world and witness no longer being needed. Therefore, when Christians think they must translate the church's language into the dominant language around them for the sake of "proving" Christian faith or for the interest of "responsibility" to society, they are mistaken. Lastly, Hauerwas notes, Yoder's witness directs people's attention to his Anabaptist ancestors and the God who made their lives and deaths possible. Their nonviolent witness is the argument for Yoder's stance; further, their and Yoder's witness is the argument for Hauerwas's stance (Hauerwas 2001, pp. 218–25).¹⁸

Pope John Paul II renounced Constantinian ambitions. Hauerwas notes that Weigel even describes him as the first "post-Constantinian pope" (Weigel 1999, pp. 295–99; Hauerwas 2001, p. 226).¹⁹ In the opening of his first encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* (The Redeemer of Man), he states that the redeemer of mankind, Jesus Christ, is the center of the universe and history. He expresses hope for Christian unity and how such unity among all in Christ is realized through nonviolence. Hauerwas points out that for John Paul II, the church as an agent of truth is an alternative to violence. This is based on the pope's analysis of modernity's pathology, namely that fear characterizes modern life, a culture of death. People fear what they produce, afraid that human creations will turn against them, becoming unimaginable tools of self-destruction.²⁰ Furthermore, the pope sees Christian life as inevitably a life of witness, where a witness is always a potential martyr (Hauerwas 2001, pp. 226–29).²¹

Finally, Hauerwas points out that although he has not compared the lives and work of Yoder and John Paul II, they both represent the Christ-centered restoration of church life and witness, inevitably requiring the church to be a witness of peace, an alternative to death controlling world life. The commonality between Yoder and John Paul II goes beyond differences, embodied in their respective authentic lives and that of Dorothy Day.²² Day's effort was simply to emulate Jesus' life, "practicing the works of mercy daily" (Maurin 1984). Thus, in Hauerwas's view, Day's life's existence shows that the church witnessed by Yoder and John Paul II is not some ideal but an undeniable reality (Hauerwas 2001, p. 230).

6. Conclusions

It is now time to address the critiques of Hauerwas presented by Healy and Biggar at the outset of this article. This paper argues that while they accurately recognize the church's pivotal role in Hauerwas's theological discussions, their labeling of his theology as "ecclesism" and as a deviation from Barth significantly exaggerates the issue. Hauerwas occupies a crucial position within the twentieth-century North American tradition of theology and ethics. His works vividly demonstrate Barth's theological influence, especially in the distinction between theological ethics and the fundamental rejection of Protestant liberalism. However, unlike Barth's strong "dialectical" characteristic, Hauerwas starts from the historical "relationship" between theology and ethics in the North American context, defending the inseparability of theology and ethics. From different contexts and in different ways, both theologians show substantial theological consensus. Yet, Hauerwas does not shy away from critiquing Barth. In Hauerwas's view, while Barth certainly agrees that the church's mission is to witness for Christ, it is unclear how much the church as a configuration of human practice influences this mission. Barth's understanding of the church swings between its essential claim (the body of Christ) and merely contingent and experiential assertions. On the other hand, Hauerwas believes that although Barth agrees the church's mission is to witness God's self-revelation, Barth fails to demonstrate the church, lacking a practical concreteness. By showcasing Hauerwas's similarities with and

critiques of Barth in the North American tradition of theology and ethics, this article aims to contribute to the future development of theological ethics.

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Notes

- ¹ Apart from Healy, Biggar also criticizes Hauerwas’s work for lacking a sufficient doctrine of God. In 1986, when Hauerwas traveled to the UK to attend the centennial commemoration of Barth’s birth, Biggar, during a conversation with Hauerwas, subtly suggested that Hauerwas was using the church to discuss matters that Barth would have discussed in theological terms related to God (Hauerwas 2016, p. 41).
- ² Hunsicker references McCormack’s classification framework for Barthian academic research. McCormack points out that Barthians need to have a “real understanding” of Barth’s thought, which he believes requires one to follow Barth’s interpretation as a “critical realist dialectical theologian”. This includes three aspects of Barth’s theology: First, unlike early English interpreters’ understanding of Barth, McCormack insists that Barth’s theology maintained its dialectical nature from his early works to his mature works. Second, Barth’s theological assertion that God is real; that is, God exists beyond the limits of human thought. Third, Kant’s view in *The Critique of Pure Reason* is correct; that is, humans cannot know the true nature of God, because God exists beyond the limits of human knowledge. If there is a “real understanding”, it belongs to the category of “direct influence” as called by McCormack; otherwise, it is “indirect influence”. According to this classification, Hauerwas falls into the category of “indirect influence”, because Hauerwas is a student of Frei and Gustafson, inheriting the neo-orthodox interpretation of Barth, which is the early English world’s interpretation of Barth that McCormack opposes. However, Hunsicker points out that Hauerwas’s early works indeed rely on the neo-orthodox interpretation of Barth, but his understanding of Barth’s theology grows and adapts as the field itself develops. Although Hauerwas may not fit the pattern of a “critical realist dialectical theologian”, McCormack’s category of “indirect influence” clearly cannot fully describe Hauerwas (McCormack 2008, pp. 158–64; Hunsicker 2019, pp. 3–6).
- ³ Zhao Wenjuan briefly reviews the Protestant ethical thought in North America in her book *A Critical Comparison of Stanley Hauerwas’ and T.C. Chao’s Character Ethics*, covering representative figures such as Kant, Troeltsch, Rauschenbusch, the Niebuhr brothers, Ramsey, and Gustafson (Zhao 2016, pp. 15–31).
- ⁴ Hauerwas originally planned to write a book on the development of American Christian ethics, to present Christian ethics as a convincing way of developing a constructive theological agenda. He aimed to demonstrate through this narrative that ethics can and should be theological. Despite his critical attitude towards the liberal political and theological assumptions that gave rise to Christian ethics, and the various limitations in the development of Christian ethics from Rauschenbusch to Yoder, he regarded it as a set of identifiable skills, worthy of being called a discipline. Moreover, this discipline is inevitably theological, even if the inevitable theology is liberal. However, as Hauerwas reflected on the development of Christian ethics, he came to believe that Christian ethics, as a distinct discipline, was not worthy of transformation. Instead, it presented a problem: the theme of American Christian ethics has always been America, not Christianity (Hauerwas 2000, pp. 64–65).
- ⁵ Ramsey agrees with some of the basic points of Fletcher’s situational ethics but notes two untested assumptions that warrant attention: first, that Christian love itself does not match the breadth and personal depth implied by rules and second, that love’s “homeland” is only in the reality of the neighbor, in that moment of concern. Unlike the notion that ethics are a product of social evolution or a general assertion of human values, Ramsey contends that Christian ethics (as per the authors of the Bible) are founded in God’s nature and activity. The appreciation of rules is based on the appreciation of the actions themselves, leading Ramsey to reject any teleological or goal-oriented ethics. In his view, God calls people to obey in love, so Christian responses to God’s commands are not determined by isolated situations but are based on traditions of action and belief. Ramsey’s understanding of Christian love is deontological; the motive behind acts of love is not evaluated by the achievements obtained. Christian love is manifested in love for one’s neighbor, not in a general sense towards all humanity, nor in a special sense towards individuals. Thus, Ramsey sees situational ethics as a form of “selfish sociability”, which misunderstands the meaning of selfless love as demonstrated in the New Testament (Ramsey 1950, p. 100).
- ⁶ In 1969, under the direction of James Gustafson, then head of the Department of Religion at Yale Divinity School, a week-long series of lectures was organized. The lectures brought together researchers from diverse fields including theology, philosophy,

medicine, law, and the clergy, to discuss and debate key ethical issues arising in the context of medical care and research. These lectures, part of the renowned Lyman Beecher Lectures, were delivered by Ramsey. The outcome of this lecture series was the publication of “The Patient as Person”. Ramsey introduced a unique Christian perspective into the discussion of medical ethics, centering around the biblical concept of covenant, which for him should also be a criterion of loyalty, faithfully adhered to. Although the theme of the covenant recedes after the first part of “The Patient as Person”, it remains a thread throughout the structure of the book. Accompanying this is a value recognition of the sanctity of life and the loyalty obligation to commitment relationships (doctor–patient). In the book, Ramsey also explores issues such as pediatric research, end-of-life care, deceased organ transplantation, human subject research risks, and the allocation of scarce medical resources. These issues, since his research was published, have not only persisted but have continued to expand (Ramsey 2002, pp. xiii, xiv, xvii).

Hauerwas expressed a similar critique in his article “Christian Ethics in America (and the JRE)” (Hauerwas 1997, pp. 57–76).

Jenson was deeply influenced by Barth and indeed published several major interpretations of Barth’s theology. He creatively utilized key Barthian themes such as eschatology, trinitarianism, criticism of religion, and the order of creation and covenant. However, Mangina points out that one teaching Jenson did not accept is Barth’s identification of reconciliation with the very being of Christ, which he considers a primary theological error (Mangina 2004, p. 134).

In his book *The Church as a Polis*, Rasmusson provides a detailed analysis of “political theology” and “theological politics” (Rasmusson 1994).

Reinhold Niebuhr criticized Barth’s theology as a theology of the tomb, not adequately dealing with each cultural discipline (Niebuhr 1959, pp. 141–96). Similarly, O’Donovan criticized Hauerwas’s Christian faith as some kind of return to the tomb (O’Donovan 1996, p. 116). Although they made such assessments for different reasons and may not be entirely objective, such an interesting contrast and similar assessments they draw can further explain why Hauerwas identifies himself as a Barthian. This is not to say that Reinhold Niebuhr’s and O’Donovan’s critiques of Barth and Hauerwas are entirely accurate, but at least in the degree of “misunderstanding”, it also shows some similarities in their thoughts.

Because it seems that the second part deals with moral issues more specifically and directly, Hauerwas points out that Aquinas deeply drew on Aristotle’s description of virtue, believing that even the so-called natural virtues must be shaped by love, if these virtues are to guide Christians towards God (Hauerwas 2016, pp. 20–31).

Hauerwas also points out that this “unity” often concealed the divisions and diversities that permeated the medieval period. Other global factors also propelled this process, such as the invention of printing (Wells and Hauerwas 2004, p. 48).

Hauerwas mentions McClendon’s three-volume plan, which includes *Ethics*, *Doctrine*, and *Witness*. Hauerwas believes that McClendon does not think that starting with ethics is a delay of the theological task but rather begins with ethics to remind people that theology gains its comprehensibility through the practices of the church. He does not assume that Christian theology can be simplified into ethics but rather seeks to reclaim theology’s role in shaping Christian life. Therefore, McClendon’s ethics, much like Barth’s, requires a discussion of baptism and forgiveness, the cross and resurrection, and also revolves around the lives of Jonathan and Sarah Edwards, Bonhoeffer, and Dorothy Day. These lives are shaped by an understanding of Christian doctrine, which in turn shapes the understanding of Christian doctrine (McClendon 1986, 1994, 2000; Hauerwas 2016, pp. 38–39).

Mangina’s view on Barth’s understanding of the church is primarily shaped by Hütter and Healy (Mangina 1999, p. 278; Hütter 1999; Healy 1994). Healy describes three rules of Barth’s ecclesiology: the creedal rule, the human agency rule, and the Christological primacy rule. These rules collectively influence his choice of “Christ” as the definition of the church. In the Bible, the term “body” primarily refers not to the church as a “social group” but indicates that the church is derived from Christ’s own body. When Christ’s body was nailed to the cross, the “body” as a human group was just a dead body. It is through the resurrection and the work of the Holy Spirit that the body lives (creedal rule). Only in this way can Christ’s body be equated with the Christian community and the invisible reality be equated with the visible human group (human agency rule). In this sense, the metaphor or symbolic meaning of “the church is the body of Christ” can be used. Hiebert notes that Barth’s use of this phrase is concerned with avoiding talking about the essence of the church; the church does not “possess” an essence that can be called the body of Christ. The church as a human entity is a concatenation of sinful human activities, but it becomes the body of Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit and its relationship with Christ. Thus, the primary reality of the church is its relationship with Christ, and the phrase “the church is the body of Christ” is an expression of this relationship. In this way, Barth can express a very “high” ecclesiology while avoiding ecclesial triumphalism. This line of thought is related to a core element of Barth’s agenda, promoting God’s freedom and sovereignty, opposing the overly close connection between God and humanity found in Protestant liberalism (Healy 1994, pp. 255–57). Healy points out that the result of this understanding is a strong tendency towards an abstract and simplified ecclesiology. Barth believes that the church can avoid becoming “abstract” only by following the creedal and Christological primacy rules. An abstract ecclesiology, in his sense, focuses only on human institutions and provides a partial and insufficient explanation, as it describes and explains the identity of the church using simplified and non-theological terminology. Barth argues that only theological concepts should be used to describe the true church (Barth 1961, p. 725; Healy 1994, p. 263). While Barth avoids the error of a one-sided sociological description of the church’s identity, he commits the error of a one-sided doctrinal description. His ecclesiology is insufficient to satisfy the human agency rule, using abstract categories to describe the reality of the church, making it difficult to describe the church’s response to Jesus Christ as a human response (Healy 1994, pp. 263–264).

- 15 However, Hauerwas also points out the complexity of this issue. He notes that Barth explicitly states that “ The church is the historical form of the work of the Holy Spirit and therefore the historical form of the faith” (Barth 1957, p. 160; Hauerwas 2001, pp. 144–45).
- 16 Mangina uses Barth’s handling of the apostolicity of the church as a test case. For Barth, the relationship between the church and Christ is not direct but indirect, mediated through the relationship between the apostles and the church. The church finds itself in the “school of the apostles” and through imitating their service to Jesus. Mangina points out the strength of this approach is its adherence to the Reformation principle of “Sola Scriptura”—the testimony of the Scriptures provides those moments of “otherness” relative to the community, enabling the church to fulfill its mission of humble service. However, on the downside, Barth says too little about the church. On one hand, there is Christ’s presence in the apostolic witness and on the other hand, the “Sola Scriptura” rule, which strips the term “Church” of its ordinary referential sense. The church is no longer a perceivable community existing over time, a subject of its own actions, but merely a predicate of divine action. The human community, institutional structures, sacraments, and moral actions referred to as “the Church” are only potentially so. Consequently, it is hard to see how the existence of the church could impact the life of believers in Christ (Mangina 1999, pp. 278–82).
- 17 If Hauerwas had developed his pneumatology and sacramentalism more fully, this Christological foundation would be more complete.
- 18 However, it must be noted that Yoder’s sexual abuse scandal severely undermined the authenticity and nonviolence of Christian living as argued in his works. In his 2017 response to the revelations of Yoder’s misconduct, Hauerwas condemned Yoder’s actions and noted his own lack of clarity in speaking because the abuse was so appalling. He acknowledged that he did not become aware of the extent of the problem until 1992, and he had been overly positive in his descriptions of the disciplinary process. Hauerwas tried to articulate how he believed his own theology differed from Yoder’s: Yoder thought that only a sense of communal belonging could shape a person’s desires, whereas Hauerwas believed that intentional training and discipleship were necessary to shape moral imagination. Belonging alone could not change a person. Beyond this reasoning, Hauerwas suggested that one should read Yoder not to pinpoint the problems but to seek what is missing in Yoder’s work. In defence of “our respectable culture”: Trying to make sense of John Howard Yoder’s sexual abuse, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/in-defence-of-our-respectable-culture-trying-to-make-sense-of-jo/10095302>, accessed on 11 June 2024.
- 19 Hauerwas clarifies that he is not saying Weigel considers John Paul II to be “post-Constantinian” in the same way as Yoder is “non-Constantinian”. Instead, by understanding Yoder’s epistemological assumptions that form various forms of Constantianism, John Paul II is closer to Yoder and Barth, rather than the theology formed by the intellectual habits of the Constantinian style (Weigel 1999, pp. 295–99; Hauerwas 2001, p. 226).
- 20 For example, consider the development of advanced technologies such as nuclear weapons and genetic editing and the contracts, laws, and ethical restrictions people have established to regulate the use of these technologies.
- 21 Veritatis Splendor, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html, accessed on 14 March 2024.
- 22 Dorothy Day was a devout Catholic, a pacifist, and dedicated to charity work. Together with Peter Maurin, she co-founded “The Catholic Worker”, initiating the “Houses of Hospitality” movement, which established communities for the poor. This is known as the “Catholic Worker Movement”. <https://catholicworker.org/house-of-hospitality/>, accessed on 14 March 2024.

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