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Contestant Theology: Toward a Play Theology of Religions

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CONTESTANT THEOLOGY:

TOWARD A PLAY THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

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By

Gregory D. Jones, Jr.

May 2023

CONTESTANT THEOLOGY:

TOWARD A PLAY THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

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ABSTRACT

CONTESTANT THEOLOGY:

TOWARD A PLAY THEOLOGY OF RELIGIONS

By

Gregory D. Jones, Jr.

March 2023

Dissertation supervised by Daniel Scheid

How can a Christian theology of religions navigate the interreligious dialogical problems of 1) the inability to fully articulate faith, 2) the lack of persuasive religious language, 3) the reality of violence among religions, and 4) the liquescent "truth" of modern times? This dissertation answers this question with a theology of religions considered through the lens of play theology. Contestant theology navigates these problems as 1) a space of cooperation and contest which 2) incorporates assertiveness (exclusivism), compassion (inclusivism), openness (pluralism) and free participation (Trinitarianism) to 3) hold together enriching and diminishing relationalities among diverse religious peoples with a view toward 4) affirming God's glory and humanity's goodness in traditional and surprising contexts.

The methodology of contestant theology is a mixture of biblio-theological, religious, and popular culture studies that is grounded in the five movements of Paul's speech to the Athenians

in Acts 17:28. The first movement ("in God") considers the "serious" theologies of religion, whose "dead" seriousness encounters dialogical problems. The second movement ("we live") grounds play theology's "revival" of the Christian thought-world, spirituality, relationality, and epistemology from the "dead" seriousness that hinders the Christian response to the interreligious encounter. The third movement ("and move") grounds the vision of "breathing with" other religions; the fourth movement ("and have our being") grounds the practices in which this "conspiring" occurs. The fifth movement ("For we too are his offspring") grounds the relationality of simultaneously pulling at and moving with other religions according to the wind of the Spirit, who "breathes where [God] will" (John 3:8). These movements of contestant theology prevent any religion from dominating the earthly sphere of faith, by situating the interreligious encounter in the game that one wants to play forever – discovering one's God-given self with the other, who is also discovering their God-given self.

DEDICATION

To my mother, Tina Jones, and to my brother from another mother, Mohammed Hosain;

who would've thought that Mom inviting Mo to ride with us in that cargo van during the

freshman move-in weekend at Virginia Tech would begin an everlasting friendship, and an

understanding of what it means to be grasped by God alongside of a different person?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

INTRODUCTION

I. Key Question and Thesis Statement

We do not grasp God, even with our reasonable minds, empirical senses, or meaningful languages. Our creeds, doctrines, canons, dogmas, pillars, jewels, tenets, *margas*, *yogas*, precepts, *koans*, offerings, rituals, and rational inquiries will all yield to the primal premise: God is infinite and beyond the grasp of one human mind or culture. Yes, we cognitively accept this premise in our lives of faith; Christians quote the apophatic insights which range from Augustine's "God is always greater, however much we have grown"[1] to Karl Barth's "God's hiddenness…meets us in Christ."[2] Yet, this cognitive acceptance feels like an admirable accomplishment of intellect and humility, until we forget the *primacy* of the premise. We end up knowing that we do not grasp God, but we act as if this fact has no grip upon us. Rather, our apophatic awareness launches our notions that we can still grasp and convey God in the social, emotional, and motivational dimensions of our lives of faith. This apophaticism directs a Kathyrn Hahn-esque "wink" to the primal premise, as if it were an open secret for those who believe that they hold the magic password, thought-pattern, or ritual for accessing God, Who is hidden otherwise – especially if it is the phrase *"We do not grasp God!"*

Separating this cognitive dimension of the primal premise from its social, emotional, and motivational dimensions is a human tendency that is hard to resist. We grasp for God, even though we cannot grasp God. This would be an absurd existence, except for the grace that is

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[1] Augustine, *Expositions on the Psalms* (Psalm 63), in *Nicene-Post Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8, ed. Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 262.
[2] Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 335.

found in distinguishing the difference between *grasping* God and *recognizing* God. Here, we learn that rendering God as something to be grasped is to mistake the "Grasper" for the "graspee." We do not grasp God; God grasps us. God grasps us through the ways that God makes Godself recognizable to us, without exhausting who God is. This describes the promise proclaimed in John 1:18, which illuminates the primal premise in the light of Christ: "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (all Scripture quotations are taken from the NRSVUE). This is awesome news – we are not doomed to the futile toil of grasping for an object that we cannot know! Instead, God gifts us God's Person, who grasps us in the unbounded aliveness of recognizing God, who is continually knowable, because God is infinite! This understanding of infinity follows the teaching of Fr. Richard Rohr, who explains, "Mystery is not something you *can't* know. Mystery is *endless knowability*."[3] In contradistinction to our human tendency to presume that the ungraspable can be grasped, this biblical presentation of Jesus Christ connects 1) the cognitive assent to the apophaticism through which God leads us away from relying upon our human capacity to grasp God with 2) the social, emotional, and motivational dimensions of our lives of faith, in which we are grasped with a biblical and Spirit-driven kataphaticism that emerges from God teaching God.

It is important to bring the primal premise into the space of the interreligious encounter because it legitimizes the space and the event of the encounter. If God is endless and beyond the grasp of one human mind and culture, then no one account of God is "the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."[4] Positively, there is always room for our recognition of God to be expanded by the presence of religious others. Yet, we must keep in mind what John Hick

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[3] Fr. Richard Rohr, "Mystery is Endless Knowability," *Center for Action and Contemplation Daily Meditations*, August 23, 2016, accessed March 15, 2021, https://tinyurl.com/46mdv5a2.
[4] John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, Ltd., 1993), 140.

explains in *God and the Universe of Faiths*: not all conceptions of God are "valid" or "equally valid."[5] Hick's warning clarifies how the primal premise places a spotlight on every conception of the Divine that "has been tested through a long tradition of worship and sustained human faith over centuries of time and in millions of lives."[6] Further, Hick maintains that different encounters with the Divine do not correspond with different "parts" of the Divine; "They are rather encounters from different historical and cultural standpoints with the same infinite divine reality and as such they lead to differently focused awarenesses of that reality."[7] Hick shows how the primal premise grounds the interreligious encounter. One fully understands the historical and cultural validity of one's faith when one shares space with a person of a differing faith or culture.

Hick's interreligious insistence is one set of footprints in a mass migration of Christian theologians advancing diverse avenues for being grasped by God alongside differing people. This dissertation joins the migration by making two moves to illustrate how one of those avenues (theologies of religions) play out when dialogical approaches are entrenched in postmodernism and popular culture. First, it considers how a theology of religions provides the language for articulating the interreligious encounter as the theological and relational event of being grasped by God while also being with differing people. Second, it explains how this grasping and being-with occurs when conceptual and cultural obstacles discourage dialogue and its ability to create a sense of human connection between differing people. These two key moves meet in the key question: how can a Christian theology of religions navigate the interreligious dialogical problems of 1) the inability to fully articulate faith, 2) non-persuasive religious language, 3) the reality of violence among religions, and 4) liquescent modern "truth?"

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[5] Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 141.
[6] Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 141.
[7] Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 141.

I answer this key question with a vantage point that is less about adopting the problems of dialogue, and more about *outplaying* these obstacles, by distancing myself from the single-minded theological rigidity that is stuck in the problems of dialogue. Instead, it is preferable to move toward agile play theology, which incorporates, but does not depend upon, seriousness. This team-up with non-seriousness describes the contribution of a new vantage point to the field of the theologies of religions – the lens of play. This new vantage point is this dissertation's "approach" – its characteristic way of answering the key question – which frames the thesis statement. If the key question is the "skeleton" that stabilizes the aforementioned two big moves, then the thesis statement provides the "muscles" which puts those moves into play. My first big move introduces my original term – *contestant theology* – as the launchpad for articulating the interreligious encounter. My second big move presents the four dimensions of contestant theology as a unified conceptual framework for articulating the playful relationality in which one is grasped by God while also being in contact with a person of another religion. These key moves conspire in my thesis: contestant theology describes a Christian play theology of religions that understands the interreligious encounter as 1) a space of cooperation and contest which 2) incorporates the ideals of the major theologies of religions which materialize in the single-minded emphases of exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and Trinitarianism to 3) hold together enriching and diminishing relationalities among diverse religious peoples with a view toward 4) affirming the glory of God and the good of humanity in traditional and surprising contexts. The key question and thesis statement are the skeletal and muscular descriptions of the two big moves that are at play throughout the body of this dissertation. Clear explanations of the usages of "play," "play theology," and "theologies of religion" will advance contestant theology.

II. Defining "Play"

A. The Mindset of Outmaneuverability

We begin to see play as a way of thinking, doing, and speaking that ever eludes definition. There is no clear and precise way to describe play as a new way of being a new identity in a new space and time with new rules. Yet, play's inherent outmaneuvering of all attempts at definition grants players an adaptably agile mindset – a playground for perspectives to move away from empirical, moral, or theological rigidity as they move toward continual knowability. This agile mindset orients players to be grasped by God, Who, like play, ever eludes definition, yet is ever-recognizable. Thus, it is crucial to understand play as a *mindset of outmaneuverability*. This mindset avoids reducing the primal premise to an impossible problem for serious-minded "experts" of God's ungraspability. Play's mindset allows the primal premise to also be envisioned as the playground for the game that non-serious "players" can play forever – learning and speaking about the ever-knowable God!

B. The Activity of Openness

Play is not just a mindset; it is also openness – the *activity of outmaneuverability*. "Playing" refers to the free, meaningful activity that is not beholden by necessities nor reducible to accidental occurrences. African-American theologian James H. Evans, Jr. characterizes playing as "the primary principle of the cosmos," in the sense that its "randomness" generates new patterns, new forms, and new rules, in its ability to "balance form and freedom."[8] In other words, play generates unpredictable newness in reliable recognizability; it is the way of continually recognizing something that is continually new. Drawing from Evans's terms and

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[8] James H. Evans, Jr. *Playing: Christian Explorations of Daily Living* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2010), 79.

insights, this dissertation describes playing as the conspiracy (breathing together) of randomness with reason that opens the finiteness of human thought and activity to the endless expression of God and the endless expanse of Paradise. This pairing of reason and randomness plays out in sacred and secular contexts, from the "lights and "perfections" of the Urim and Thummim cast by the Hebrew high priests of the ancient Near East, to the pair of dice thrown by gamblers in modern Las Vegas. Whether paradise or pair of dice, both expressions roll out the meaningful activity of paired randomness and reason. Countering the cruel casting of lots for Jesus's clothes (Matt. 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:34; John 19:24) and deceitful *kybeia* (Eph. 4:14), the paradise pair of dice describes recognizing God without knowing God – not grasping God, but being gripped by God's presence, which compels us to roll out our highest and deepest response.

This openness to divine-paradisical infinity is possible because playing holds together contrasts that are irreconcilable to the finite human mind, such as the unpredictable patterns of randomness and the stable structures of reason. This holding together of randomness and reason happens in every game on every playground – the pair of dice paradise! Players continually make new moves (randomness) to the extent that they fit within the rules of the game (reason). These established rules originated as inventions to preserve the meaningfulness of play's non-necessary activity from degenerating into chaos (matter without form or rules) or caprice (acts without intention or aim). Play's ability to hold together contrasts in both harmonic and expansive relationalities is a recurring theme in this dissertation.

C. The Language of Exclamation

Understanding play activity's capacity to hold together contrasts is crucial to understanding another key claim: play activity is participation in a world of existential possibility

that brings forth the most desirable, expressive, and persuasive forms of language from the deepest parts of a person. This is play's exclamation – the *language of outmaneuverability*. This exclamation that arises from play is comparable to what Paul Knitter describes as "the language of the heart" [9] – the most maneuverable human language to describe religious realities which elude description, such as the God-manity of Jesus Christ, or the Tri-unity of the Godhead.

Moving from the language of the heart to the language of play, play activities and playgrounds generate a similarly maneuverable human language that frames everything that theologians, philosophers, and other similar personalities desperately wish to express from the core of their being. This language of play outmaneuvers academic compromises and extremes. The language of play is not the "blunt honesty" which settles for emphasizing accuracy to the detriment of ethical and moral sensitivities. Further, play language is not the "right answer" that requires a mechanical obligation to doctrinal correctness at the expense of genuine emotion. Even more, play language is not concerned with keeping up appearances of "philosophical validity" that sounds like "a cold, desiccated fetishism of pure I.Q. divorced from humor, compassion, ethics, eroticism, and wisdom." [10] Put directly, the language of play does not always sound academic or reverent. Yet, this language convincingly conveys the powerful aliveness that intellectual and pious languages wish to express, in a manner comparable to Raimon Panikkar's and Milena Carrara Pavan's idea of Christian contemplation – an "elegance without restlessness of action, frenzy of activism, or paternalism of philanthropy." [11] This contemplative aliveness is play's mindset and activity pairing randomness and reason on the playground.

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[9] Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), 119.
[10] Camille Paglia, "Junk Bonds and Corporate Raiders: Academe in the Hour of the Wolf." *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 1, no. 2 (1991): 189, https://tinyurl.com/f94sevmv.
[11] Raimon Panikkar and Milena Carrara Pavan, *Cultures and Religions in Dialogue.* Opera Omnia. English edition. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2018), chap. 6, Location 2994 of 7170, Kindle.

Play's world of existential possibility brings forth exclamation. Exclamation is the outpouring of language that describes the interplay of the mind's most profound grappling and thinking about the experience of God, the body's response of actual-factual life in light of God, and the soul's enlivening participation in God. This outpouring is a "bubbling out" of saying what we are allowed to say and what we must say – like it or not, admirable or humiliating, right or wrong – about God. In exclamation, we bug our eyes out, grit our teeth, pound our clenched fists upon the table (which we may overturn), feel our guts squirm, curl our toes, and embrace the enflaming of our senses that makes us want to run through walls, as we say what we are desperately and continually reaching to say, above all else, about God, with our entire being.

The linguistic capabilities of exclamation incorporate the play activity of openness and the play mindset of outmaneuverability. Play is seen as the preferable and proper way to describe God, Who continually eludes description. This crucial point grounds another recurring theme. When theologians employ their best words to talk about God, and they are conscious of the fact that these words are meaningful without exhausting the meaning of God, they are actually playing without calling it such, and their claims are best understood through the lens of playing. This is true, because theologians continually adopt the play mindset of outmaneuverability, the play activity of openness, and the play language of exclamation.

First, consider how outmaneuverability is at play in theological discussions that emphasize the mystical (apophatic-union-kataphatic) epistemological patterns.[12] These patterns are the heartbeats of the world religions. Generally, these patterns begin when a person of faith realizes that God cannot be grasped or contained by human intellect. The base position of the life

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[12] These patterns are described by Evagrius of Ponticus in *The Praktikos*, Pseudo-Dionysius in *Mystical Theology,* Gregory of Nyssa in *Life of Moses*, Pseudo-Macarius in *Fifty Spiritual Homilies*, and Meister Eckhart's *Sermons*. This particular description of the mystical pattern heavily draws from the seminar presentation of Kevin Mongrain, "Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite: The Mystical Theology," Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA.

of faith is the continual realization of the failure of words to express what we actually believe. Nevertheless, the life of faith continues to draw us upward toward religious experiences, in which God is genuinely encountered on a "mountaintop." From this height, new words emerge to describe the genuine encounter. Yet, even these post-encounter words fail to exhaust the meaning of God, returning us to the base position. Such a pattern is maddening to one who seeks to grasp God as an empirical concept, because God cannot be grasped with our senses, and we do not fully define God. Meanwhile, those who play can recognize this not as a problem, but as living and life-giving terrain. When players trace this up-and-down pattern, as if jogging upon a range of hills, they can feel the "heartbeat" of the game that one wants to play forever! The heartbeat of the world religions is best conveyed and understood through the lens of play, because we are talking about the mindset of outmaneuverability that is the voluntary and enjoyable stance of thinking, learning, and speaking about God forever! Thus, it becomes clear that when we use the mystical descriptors of "apophatic ascent," "mountaintop union with God," and "kataphatic descent," we are actually talking about playing.

Second, consider how openness is at play during theological discussions about the paradoxical material-spiritual dialectics. These dialectics are the breathing patterns of the world religions. Drawing from Meister Eckhart's *Sermons*, this dialectic involves God drawing creatures toward God (inspiration/inhalation) so that creatures can put themselves into God (expiration/exhalation).[13] Prominent examples of this dialectic – such as the cosmotheandric kenosis of Panikkar and Pavan,[14] Jacques Dupuis's covenantal intervention,[15] and Richard

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[13] Johannes Eckhart and Claud Field, *Meister Eckhart's Sermons* (London: H.R. Allenson, Limited, 1932), 4-24.

[14] Panikkar and Pavan, *Cultures and Religions in Dialogue*, chap. 4, Location 2102 of 7170, Kindle.

[15] Jacques Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions : From Confrontation to Dialogue* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002). I use the phrase "covenantal intervention" to describe how Dupuis frames the relationship between the love of the triune God, Scripture, and universal salvation.

Rohr's panentheistic full-fillment[16] – each speak of holding together contrasts in ways which can be framed by the paired randomness and reason of play activity. Panikkar's and Pavan's language of kenosis envisions the material-spiritual dialectic in terms of holding together "an element of rupture as well as continuation."[17] Rupture is the new pattern-generating variant of randomness, while continuation is the stabilizing variant of reason. Similarly, Dupuis holds together God's being and God's will in order to frame God's divine activity in the material realm. God's being and will are united and recognized as singular in Jesus, multifaceted in application, and universal in scope. God's being (self-gift) is comparable to the unpredictable newness of randomness, while God's will (self-manifestation) corresponds to the reliable recognizability of reason. Likewise, Rohr describes the holding together of God and everything that is not God when he affirms that God continually becomes what God loves, while also transcending what God loves.[18] This panentheistic idea of God's continual incarnation describes how the love of the triune God is an infinity-loop of the Divine filling all materiality with God. For Rohr, God's act of continual Incarnation functions as the new-pattern generating randomness, while the result of "full-filled" materiality functions as reason.

Overall, Rohr joins Dupuis and Panikkar in providing a prominent material-spiritual dialectic that holds together contrasts. On one hand, it is easy to see how scholars who emphasize God's immanence could conflate these pairings of randomness and reason with chaos, thinking that they only describe matter without form or rules. Similarly, those who insist upon God's transcendence could easily conflate these pairings with a capriciousness that acts without

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[16] Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe* (New York, NY: Convergent Books, 2019). I use the phrase "panentheistic full-fillment" to describe how Rohr envisions the love of the triune God is an infinity-loop of the triune God filling everything with the triune God.
[17] Panikkar and Pavan, *Cultures and Religions in Dialogue*, chap. 8, Location 3451 of 7170, Kindle.
[18] Rohr, *The Universal Christ,* 5, 50-52, 91, 219-226.

intention or aim. On the other hand, those who play can celebrate the living and life-giving pattern as the breathing in the game that one wants to play forever! The breathing of the world religions is best conveyed as play, because we are talking about the activity of openness that holds together unpredictable patterns with stable structures in a relationality that is comparable to the patterns and structures at play in inspiration and exhalation. Thus, it becomes clear that when we discuss the paradoxical material-spiritual dialectic, we are actually talking about playing.

Third, consider how exclamation is at play in theological discussions that attempt to reconcile the reality of earthly finitude with the realization of paradisical infinity – the utterances of world religions. These utterances give voice to the living heartbeats of world religions via their life-giving breathing patterns which enable a spectrum of vocalizations, ranging from the laughter of the incredulous Sarah (Gen. 21:6), the ululation of the victorious Miriam (Exod. 15:1-19), the weeping of the inconsolable Rachel (Jer. 31:15), and the singing of the inspirited Mary (Luke 1:46-55). This "breathing heart language" of human faith experience is articulated – *inarticulately* – through "sighs too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26) and "words that no mortal is permitted to repeat" (2 Cor. 12:4). These biblical descriptions are helpful, because they convey the human faith experience in ways that include and move beyond the Judeo-Christian context. A major part of being a person of *any* faith involves "sounding out" faith experience in these ways. This sounding out – exclamation – happens when we utter the recognition of the Infinite (outmaneuverability) within the reality of the finite (the maneuverable). Again, this is giving voice to the heart through the breath. Alternatively, this is recognizing unpredictable randomness via stable structures of reason. Crucially, this is talking about the play on the playground. Regarding theological discussions about recognizing the Infinite within the finite – playing

without calling it play – several personalities come to mind, from the fields of postmodern biblical scholarship, Patristic exegesis, and Christian ecumenism.

In "Reading Scripture Faithfully in a Postmodern Age," William Stacy Johnson makes a distinction between the finite conceptions of God that we are desperate to protect and the Infinite God who is present in Scripture. Johnson insists that the pictures of the "reduced god" that is "under the demands of the contemporary situation" and the "Supreme being" that is "perfectly timeless, impassible, self-satisfied, but incapable of finitude, and surprise" are both outplayed by the presence of the biblical God, who announces "behold, I am doing a new thing" (Isa. 43:19).[19] Here, Johnson discerns infinity in the ever-new God, Who is not grasped by ancient philosophical relevancy nor modern ethical necessity. Rather, God is recognized in earthly life through the Bible, which is the narrative avenue through which God is for, with, and among us.[20]

Whereas Johnson articulates God's infinity as ever-new, Gregory of Nyssa characterizes God's infinity as "unlimited" and "unattainable" in *The Life of Moses*.[21] Gregory's understanding of finitude involves idolizing limits, while divinity involves limitlessness. Gregory insists that we must become unlimited as God is unlimited. Clearly, it is impossible to reach this perfection, being human beings. Yet, God still calls us to be "perfect."[22] Simply put, we must be perfect, despite the *impossibility*, being like God who overcomes all obstacles on Moses's journey, such as making bitter water sweet, making water gush from rocks, and raining bread from heaven. Gregory teaches that when we let God teach God, it un-limits our perceptions of God, because we are in God. This is the essence of Gregory's bold claim, "What is impassible by nature did

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[19] William Stacy Johnson, "Reading the Scripture Faithfully in a Postmodern Age" in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, eds. Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2003), 114.
[20] Johnson, "Reading the Scripture Faithfully in a Postmodern Age," 123-124.
[21] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 11, II.239.1.115.
[22] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, I.10.1.30.

not change into what is passible, but what is mutable and subject to passions was transformed into impassibility through its participation in the immutable."[23] In Gregory's play, we become un-bounded from finite impossibility by becoming in-bounded within God's infinite possibilities.

Gregory's understanding of God's biblical infinite presence is framed in terms of God's unlimitedness, which allows S. Mark Heim to anticipate "many mountains" – the manifold eschatological destinations of the world religions. In *The Depth of the Riches*, Heim advances both Johnson's conviction of God's newness and Gregory's insistence of God's unlimitedness. Heim describes God's "substance" in similarly infinite terms – a communion of triune Persons. This communion is God's free choice to extend the inner communion of God's Triune life to a human being through the Word. We recognize this unique divine act of God in Jesus Christ, both the finite person who has an "external" relation of communion with the Trinity and the infinite Person who has an "internal" relation of communion with the Word, who is also the infinite Person.[24] Heim further describes this communion between finite humanity and infinite divinity as "[God's] unconditional openness to all creatures," which means that every person has a relationship to God that is "established in creation and realized in history."[25] Thus, Jesus models an openness to those who believe and practice differently than his followers. This relation is framed by God's will to bring persons into full communion with God and all of God's creatures. A person enters into this full communion via a person's free relation with God.[26] Since this is a free relation, "salvation is not the same state for all who participate in it,"[27] because this free diversity of beliefs and practices produces unique religious ends. Heim uses the fictional

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[23] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, II.30.1.60.
[24] S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends.* Sacra Doctrina (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001), 133.
[25] Heim, *The Depth of the Riches*, 77.
[26] Heim, *The Depth of the Riches*, 77.
[27] Heim, *The Depth of the Riches*, 77.

eschatological model depicted in Dante's *Divine Comedy* to anticipate manifold religious ends, in which Christian salvation is only one of "many mountains."[28] Heim envisions how the event of infinity meeting finitude includes the ever-new God making Godself known to humanity, and humanity embracing the eschatological destinies which are un-limited by God. This results in the free communion with God, which overflows our finite capacities through a mutual in-dwelling with other persons and with their unique relations with God. Heim's theology of religious ends allows us to say that our finite possibilities are woven into infinity by God bringing us into communion with Godself, all of God's creatures, and all of God's space.

Overall, Johnson, Gregory, and Heim undertake diverse avenues for recognizing the Infinite in the finite. These utterances are best articulated through the lens of play, because they are examples of play's exclamation – the most maneuverable earthly finite language available to describe realities which elude description, such as paradisical infinity. Thus, when we discuss the recognition of the Infinite within the reality of the finite, we are actually talking about playing.

In summary, this dissertation describes play in terms of outmaneuverability, openness, and exclamation. This mindset, activity, and language of play is a framework that pairs the unpredictably new patterns of randomness and the reliably stable structures of reason. This paradise-pair of dice conveys how we continually recognize the ever-recognizable God. Likewise, this pair of dice-paradise plays out how we convincingly share that which we continually pray and desire to say, above all else, about God with our highest finite language and our deepest humanity. Through the lens of play, we see discussions of ubiquitous theological topics as sophisticated forms of playing, even though the participants do not and would not call it such, for reasons which will be considered and explored in Chapter 2. This move renders topics

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[28] Heim, *The Depth of the Riches*, 277-290.

such as apophatic-kataphatic mysticism, material-spiritual dialectics, and infinity-finitude interplays less in terms of inaccessible jargon that is detached from human experience and more in terms of an inviting call to join the game that is already in play, alongside of everyone, throughout many ages, over many spaces, forever. This game is the life pattern (heartbeat, breathing, utterance) of theology: being grasped by the ungraspable God Who generates the learning of the eternally recognizable God and the speaking of the infinitely describable God alongside of a fellow graspee, learner, and speaker in God! This lens clarifies theology as a way to play with God that is enabled by God being God (ever-recognizable), which is preferable to characterizing theology as a way to study God that is thwarted by God being God (ungraspable).

III. Defining "Play Theology"

Play theology adopts the lens and experience of play to continually recognize God, Who is ever-recognizable. This definition adopts the conclusion that David L. Miller reaches in *Gods and Games*. In his foundational consideration of play's relationship to theology, Miller makes a valuable distinction between a theology of play (God's nature defines play) and play theology (play grants language to bring inaccessible theological ideas into relatable and relational life).[29] This definition plays well with Karl Barth's "playful" understanding of the response of theology to other academic disciplines. In *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, Barth writes, "theology is an omen, a sign that all is not well, even in the *universitas literarum*. . .it is the question mark that must be added to the otherwise structurally perfect logic" and "the exclamation point on the farthest rim of scientific possibility – or rather, in contradistinction to the philosophical faculty,

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[29] David L. Miller, "Theology and Play Studies: An Overview." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39, no. 3 (September 1971): 350.

beyond the farthest rim."[30] Simply put, Barth applies the interrobang of theological discourse to the Big Bang of the empirical sciences and related disciplines.

Barth's approach of theology-as-interrobang is an apt playmate for the primal premise. The "question mark" matches the acknowledgment of God's ungraspability. The "exclamation point" corresponds to the continual recognizability of God. The combined insights of Miller and Barth contribute to a reliable starting point for the playfully theological recognition of God. In recognizing God's nature and activity through the accessible and adaptable lens of play, play theology engages any logical claim about God with the following question – "has it ever occurred to you that we do not grasp God?"[31] At the same time, play theology generates exclamation point-worthy articulations of God's ungraspability in terms of God's creative nature and generous purposes, which exceed philosophical categorization. Overall, play theology ends up saying that players can continually recognize God, because God is the original, ultimate, and everlasting Player Whose Play forever generates, validates, and sustains human play!

A. God's Outmaneuvering in Creation

Play theology affirms that God generates play; humans play because God plays first and best. Play theologians can say this for the same reason that they can sing "Yes, Jesus loves me" – the Bible tells us so! First, God's playfulness is grounded in the Genesis Creation narrative. Horace Bushnell notices this when he writes, "God has purposely set the beginning of the natural life in a mood that foreshadows the last and highest chapter of immortal character...As play is the forerunner of religion, so religion is to be the friend of play."[32] In my Master's thesis, I adapted

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[30] Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper and Row, 1928), 192.
[31] This question is a variation of a joke from a *Peanuts* comic strip, in which Snoopy is writing a theology book with the "perfect title" – "Has It Ever Occurred to You That You Might Be Wrong?"
[32] Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1861), 340-41.

Bushnell's insight to conclude that "play is a valid way to characterize the Creator's activity."[33] While it is possible to characterize God's Creation activity as "work," this descriptor obscures the biblical picture, in which God grants readers a reliable vantage point of God's activity and personality. In the biblical narrative, there is no higher power compelling God to create, nor is God beholden to any personal longing or moral obligation to create. Further, God does not fall into the "concept traps" that we resort to in our attempts to define divinity in reasonable and relatable terms. God escapes being described as a figure of unrivaled power that we prop up for the sake of defending philosophical conceptions divinity – an emotionally repressed, Charlton Hestonesque "action-hero deity" that eloquently "fire-and-brimstones" creation into being. At the same time, God escapes being characterized as an overly sensitive "wimp deity" that we devise to try to account for the suffering, vulnerability, and unanswered moral questions in life – a comically inept, Steve Urkelian artisan who "did-I-do-thats" creation into existence. Rather, God shows us the powerful freedom of God's creative nature and the reliable sufficiency of God's generous purposes in Creation. These characteristics are recognizable as God's "play" when they are considered through the play mindset of outmaneuverability, which pairs the corresponding new patterns of randomness and stable structures of reason. In this light, God's play is the Outmaneuvering that generates the outmaneuverability made possible in human play.

B. God's Opening in the Old Testament

Second, the way that the Bible teaches us that God's playing validates creaturely playing is by showing us God's Old Testament miracles. Play theologians would say that the term "miracle" is a technical term for God's play, which involves opening a way out of no way within

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[33] Gregory D. Jones, Jr., "*Homo Resumens*: Play Theology Unearths Openness to the Sabbath" (MA Thesis, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 2017), 2.

creaturely existence. In *Holy Play: The Joyful Adventure of Unleashing Your Divine Purpose*, African-American pastor and popular teacher K.B. Jones constructs a list of these miracles that he characterizes as play: "senior citizens become parents, a whale becomes a means of human transportation, humans survive in lions' dens and fiery furnaces, a heavenly hand sketches on a palace wall, and a flaming chariot soars in the sky."[34] Jones's list helps us to understand that God's play – the activity of opening a way out of no way – generally refers to God expanding the boundaries of possibility and multiplying the kinds of good which can be experienced. We can add more events to Jones's list, such as the theophanies which form the basis of early Christian thought and doctrine.[35] Additionally, notably odd and difficult-to-explain Old Testament events can be included under the umbrella of God's play, such as God "taking" Enoch, God appearing as the unexplaining and unexplainable whirlwind in Job, and Elisha's sunken axe head which miraculously "swims" to the surface of the Jordan River. All of these events coincide with Johann Huizinga's spotlight on the key aspects of play, which are the freedom and distinction from the stagnancy and anxiety of creaturely life which emerge in political and cultural situations.[36] In my Master's Thesis, I connect Huizinga's insight to the proclamation of the biblical prophets, who insist that God does not only expand boundaries of possibility, but also brings life into lifeless situations. In particular, the call to recognize the "new thing" that God is

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[34] Kirk Byron Jones, *Holy Play: The Joyful Adventure of Unleashing Your Divine Purpose* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 112.

[35] A special thanks goes out to Dr. Bogdan Bucur, who pointed out this key cluster of theophanies. This grouping features the Old Testament accounts of "angels" visiting Abraham at Mamre (Gen. 18), Jacob's dream of the "ladder" at Bethel (Gen. 28), Moses's perceiving of the burning bush (Exodus 3) and God's "back parts" (Exod. 33), Isaiah's witness of God in the Temple (Isa. 6), Ezekiel's view of God's anthropomorphic glory (Ezek. 1), the appearance of the heavenly figure in the fiery furnace (Dan. 3), Daniel's simultaneous perception of the Son of Man with the Ancient of Days (Dan. 7). This cluster also includes the New Testament visions of God, with Jesus Christ's Incarnation (John 1) and Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1–8, Mark 9:2–8, Luke 9:28–36), the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), Paul's arresting Damascus Road encounter (Acts 9) and vision of the "seventh heaven" (2 Cor. 12), and Peter's noonday vision of animals to "kill and eat" (Acts 10).

[36] Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1950), 13.

doing in Isaiah 43:19 is an expression of God's play that is tied to God's activity in both the Creation and the eschaton. Covering the entire span of time from the beginning to the end, God creates a time and a space for the creaturely echo of God's creative nature and generous purposes. In this light, God's play is the Opening which validates the openness in human play.

C. God's Exclaiming in the New Testament

Third, the Bible teaches that God sustains our playing by providing the language to describe Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. Play theologians recognize playmates in these descriptions of the Persons of the Trinity. In these descriptions, K.B. Jones recognizes God in Jesus – the "Ultimate Player" – Whose play not only generates new possibilities of life, but masters political and cultural boundaries, and calls others to experience God's own playing.[37] This is evident in how Jesus invitationally identifies himself in John 14:6-7: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." These verses are not the sole possession of exclusivism; the lens of play helps us to realize that the act of Jesus proclaiming what is otherwise unclaimable – His God-manity – grants us the language to recognize and exclaim His otherwise ungraspable and indescribable Father! When these verses are read in the comforting context of John 14, they sound less like a command to kick a bunch of people out of the club for not believing in "Christ alone," and sound more like a bewildering assurance, at the most bewildering time possible, that all those who read and hear this particular description of Jesus Christ are gifted with what is humanly impossible – the knowledge of God! This gift is open-ended; it does not stop at an elite conception of God.

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[37] K.B. Jones, *Holy Play*, 112-13.

Rather, the gift is being grasped by Jesus – the One whose Mind, Life, and Words enables us to recognize and articulate God in terms of everlasting reliability (the way), integrity (the truth), and vitality (the life) which cannot exhaust everything that God is. Jesus's self-disclosure of His powerful aliveness grasps his followers and pulls a response from the deepest parts of their being that stretches their finite language to its most expressive heights.

Simply put, Jesus's self-disclosure compels a Revelation-like response, where, like John, we are invited to stretch our words to describe realities grounded in Jesus living as the victorious Lion who is also the slain Lamb. While this powerful aliveness is usually considered "paradoxical," it is also valid to see the "paradisical" (harmonizing randomness and reason) aspect of Jesus's Revelation 5:5-6 Lion-Lambness, especially when we regard the expansive promise of His John 14:6-7 self-disclosure. Jesus identifying as "the way, the truth, and the life" is God's promise to be continually recognizable and learnable to those who seek God, despite the boundaries and finitude of earthly existence (slain Lamb), and regardless of the overwhelming uncertainty and ungraspability of divine existence (victorious Lion). God's promise of continual recognizability and learnability is paradisical, because these two facets represent the paired randomness and reason in play experiences which open players up to the divine.

K.B. Jones recognizes Jesus Christ as the Ultimate Player, while Evans perceives how the Holy Spirit – the One Who is present with His disciples in His earthly absence – is the Everlasting Player. In *Playing*, Evans locates the play of the Spirit in the church's identity (one, catholic, holy, apostolic), that is played out in directly corresponding "notes" (*kerygma*, *diakonia*, *koinonia*, and *didache*) which directly harmonize with the mythological functions of play (aesthetic/spiritual, poetic/natural, metamorphic/social, therapeutic/psychological).[38] The

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[38] Evans, Jr., *Playing*, 75-77.

admirable way that Evans weaves together the nature of the church and the mythological

functions of play allows us to consider how the Acts 2 narrative grants language to recognize and

describe God in the Holy Spirit as the One who sustains our play in four ways.

First, Acts 2:1-3 illustrates how the Holy Spirit creates the play aesthetic/spiritual sense

of awe and wonder, via the "proclamation" of a mighty rushing wind and divided tongues of fire

that fills one house and unites a diverse crowd as "one." Second, Acts 2:4-5 exhibits how the

Holy Spirit presents the play poetic/natural sense of better understanding the world, via the

"universal service" of speaking and being heard in one's own tongue as "catholic." Third, Acts

2:6-11 recounts how the Holy Spirit organizes the play metamorphic/social sense of a creative

framework for community, via the (bewildered) "fellowship" of those brought together by the

sound, amazed that they were heard and being heard as they each told "the mighty acts of God."

This is a model for the rest of society that could be considered "holy." Fourth, Acts 2:11-12 tells

how the Holy Spirit provides the play therapeutic/psychological sense for understanding the

human mind. This sense allows the mind to be a place where truth can be talked out, received

and passed on, via the "teaching" that emerges in light of the amazed community's shared

question, "what does this mean," in a way that could be called "apostolic." Thus, the Holy

Spirit's everlasting play complements Jesus's ultimate play. Both Persons grant us biblical

language to convey God's paradisical promises of continual recognizability and learnability,

which shine bright through the lens of play. All biblical descriptions of Jesus Christ and Holy

Spirit conveys God's play, which is the Exclaiming that sustains the exclamation of human play.

In summary, play theology orients our mentality, activity, and language toward offering

our truest and deepest response to God. It incorporates the mindset of outmaneuverability that

puts the interrobang to the Big Bang – posing the question of God's ungraspability to any

empirically logical claims about God, while simultaneously expanding the potential of those claims, by illuminating them in the surprising light of the creative nature and generous purposes seen in God's self-disclosure of Godself. Play theology is also the activity of openness that is grounded in the Old Testament narratives of God's miracles, which allows theological activity to be understood in terms of God creating time and space for the creaturely echo of God's creative nature and generous purposes in the face of lifelessness and impossibility. Finally, play theology is the language of exclamation that is granted by the biblical witness of God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. This witness allows theological activity to be understood in terms of God's promise to be continually recognizable and learnable to all who seek God, despite the boundaries of earthly finitude and the ungraspability of divine infinitude. Overall, play theology recognizes how God provides Godself as the playground, playmate, and play in order to do the theology that accords with who we truly are and what we most deeply believe.

IV. Defining "Theologies of Religions"

Having a playground, playmate, and play is the preferable and proper way to think about, live out, and speak about theologies of religions, which involve God grasping us alongside of a radically differing person, who is also being grasped by God. In order to understand how this dissertation applies the lens of play theology to the theologies of religions, we must start with a consideration of the multi-layered etymology of "religion" as a term used to convey one's response to the sacred and divinity. Historians point to Cicero's interpretation of the classical Latin root word that combines *re* (again) with *lego* (read) to form the *religio* that means "consider carefully or hesitantly."[39] Modern theologians point to Lactantius's *Divinae*

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[39] Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De Natura Deorum; Academica*, trans. Harris Rackham (New York: G.P Putnam's Sons, 1933), II.8.1.131.

Institutiones, which notably influenced Augustine to "read" the Latin root word that combines *re* (again) with *ligare* (bind or connect) to form the *religio* that means "bring together."[40] Huizinga points out that the medieval monks adapted the term to describe their "orders" as lives of special devotion to the spiritual life.[41] Each of these root layers of "religion" took on a life of their own.

Yet, when a theology of religions is considered through the lens of play theology, each layer can be unified in a common ground. The play mentality of outmaneuverability allows a theology of religions to undertake the careful consideration of one's own religion in contradistinction to the religion of another, as both grapple with the question of the ungraspable God. The play activity of openness permits a theology of religions to bring together radically different individuals and communities in their diverse considerations of the creative nature and generous purposes of the ever-recognizable God. The play language of exclamation grants both 1) the language to convey one's own life of special devotion to the spiritual life and 2) the ability to hear another's description of their own devotion. Thus, play theology clarifies and expands what interreligious dialogue scholar Jacques Dupuis puts forth as a definition for a theology of religions: studies of various traditions in the context of salvation history and their relationship to the Christic mystery and the Christian Church.[42] Play theology makes it surprisingly clear that Dupuis's Christian stance toward other religions is not necessarily foregrounded or exclusivized. Rather, the life of a theology of religions consists of putting the Christian life of faith into play with other faiths. Salvation history is understood as the playground in which God grasps *everyone* as the playmate of the Christic mystery and the play of the Church in the Holy Spirit.

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[40] Lactantius, *Divinae Institutiones*, trans. Sr. Mary Francis McDonald, O.P (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1964) IV.28.318-320.

[41] Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages: A Study of the Forms of Life, Thought, and Art in France and the Netherlands in the XIVth and XVth Centuries* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1924), 75.

[42] Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1997), 8-9.

Play theology also helps to convey my understanding of a theology of religions as an approach to different religions that is distinct from some closely-related, yet conceptually-different terms. First, the reason why I intentionally construct a theology of religions is because this is a way of looking at other religions from a Christian perspective. I value the other approaches which expand beyond a Christian-centered approach to the interreligious encounter. Yet, pursuing a theology of religions best matches my Christian background, my intellectual interests and ability, and best suits my primary audience, who are mainline Christians who are comfortable in sacred and secular contexts. Yet, I am not inclined to take the concept of "religious context" ultra-seriously while looking at other religions, as I observe that to be the tendency of comparative theology. Also, I do not try to take a disinterested, neutral stance, as I see in the approach of comparative religion. Further, I want to hear from other religions, but I also want other religions to hear from me, in a relationality that goes beyond the well-intentioned, yet somewhat-stifling structure of interreligious dialogue. I do not know how to write in any other way than as a Christian who believes and practices his faith, and wants to tell the Christian story, because I think it is "the best story ever told" and "worthy" of one's total commitment[43] in a way that's informed by, and hopes to inform, those who believe and practice differently. Here, I confess my limitations – I do not know how to pursue anything else but a theology of religions! Overall, play theology allows me to convey my honest understanding of a theology of religions that incorporates my preferences, intentions, and limits.

At this point, the key terms are comprehensively described. Play is the unpredictable newness paired with reliable recognizability that opens human thinking, doing, and speaking to continually recognizing and expressing that which is continually new. Play theology adapts the

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[43] Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 122. Here, I adapt and paraphrase Pinnock's claim about religious competitiveness.

mindset, activity, and language of play for the sake of recognizing and expressing God, via the biblical witness of God's play – outmaneuvering, openness, and exclamation. God's play promises God's continual recognizability and learnability through the question posed by the ungraspability of divine existence and the "exclamation point" of God's self-disclosure of God's creative nature and generous purposes, via Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Play theology clarifies a theology of religions as the continual recognition of God that is granted when one is grasped by God alongside of another person of faith, who is also being grasped by God. Overall, these descriptions of the key terms open the way to explain this dissertation's methodology.

V. Methodology

The first layer of my methodology addresses how this dissertation considers its key question: how can a Christian theology of religions navigate interreligious dialogical problems? This dissertation considers the ways that the different theologies of religions emphasize distance, support, coexistence, and participation in ways that correspond to the unified dimensions of *agon, mimesis, alea,* and *ilynx* in play experience, to describe how one religion enriches and diminishes another religion in the space that they share. This methodology refines the "methods" (the procedures used to generate a particular type of information), which are the biblio-theological, religious, and cultural studies used to consider the meaning of aspects of popular culture. These methods generate the information to construct *contestant theology*, which is my term for approaching the interreligious encounter using the insights of play theology.

Other dissertations which focus on dialogical theologies of religions tend to advance ways in which Christians can positively respond to the modern inevitability of religious pluralism while still retaining a distinct Christian identity. G.R. Sumner draws from Wolfhart

Pannenberg's theology of religions to detail a theology which "must be accompanied by robust practices of witness and contestation together with an open-minded affirmation of what is true and right in other traditions."[44] Narendra Singh advances the notion of "dialogical discernment" to explain how Christian theology is still relevant in a pluralistic world: "the church experiences God's revelation both in Jesus Christ and in other religions."[45] David John C. Zub insists that the theology of the cross, rather than pluralism, allows an open and positive Christian response to other religions. Zub's *theologia crucis* is "[resistant to] absorption into political and ideological agendas," and also "inherently self-critical in order to avoid religious superiority, triumphalism, and complicity with oppressive practices."[46] Barry Robert Taylor argues for an "entertainment theology"; he draws from insights in popular culture to describes the democratization of the religious impulse, including the Christian "diffusion of the message by the people, not contingent upon centralized authority, but on the wind of the true Spirit which still moves across the waters of these turbulent and chaotic times."[47] Finally, Teresa J. Reiger draws from Kevin Vanhoozer's linguistic theology and Amos Yong's pneumatological performative theology of religions. She asserts that "the category witness is broad enough to engage both the theory and practices required of an adequate Christian theology of religions that is canonically faithful and performatively fitting."[48] Each author contributes to the field of dialogical theologies of religions from diverse vantage points. They attempt to hold together the *reality* of the Christian foundation

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[44] George Robinson Sumner, "Pannenberg and the Religions: Conflictuality and the Demonstration of Power in a Christian Theology of the Religions." (PhD diss., Yale University, 1994), 384-385.

[45] Narendra Singh, "The Particularity of Christ and the Plurality of Religions: A Dialectical Paradigm for Developing a Christian Theology of Religions." (PhD diss., Asbury Theological Seminary, 1998), 217.

[46] David John Carl Zub, "Rediscovering a Critical Theology of Religion: Religious Pluralism and Theology of the Cross." (PhD diss., Emmanuel College of Victoria University (Canada), 2001), vii.

[47] Barry Robert Taylor, "A People's Religion: Democratization of Spirit, Entertainment Theology, the Contours of Religion in the Postsecular." (PhD diss., Fuller Theological Seminary), 294.

[48] Teresa J. Reiger, "Faithfully Performing Theology of Religions: A Proposal Utilizing the Trajectories in Kevin Vanhoozer's Canonical-Linguistic Theology and Amos Yong's Pneumatological Performative Theology of Religions" (PhD diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 2013), x-xi.

that stands apart from other religions with the *realization* of the Christian theological agility that breathes with the other religions. *Contestant Theology* follows these moves in a way not previously undertaken, by considering the theology of religions in terms of play theology.

The second layer of my methodology concerns how this dissertation answers its key question. This answer – contestant theology – contributes a new vantage point to the field of the theology of religions – the lens of play. The other dissertations and the monographs they consult share a commitment to seriousness, with little room for a playful approach. A reductive refrain echoes in these approaches – *just think and work harder at the theology of religions until it works!* This is not what these authors want to say. To be sure, this is not the sum of every author's claim (especially Taylor, who deserves credit for adopting an instructive playfulness). Rather, it is difficult to advance beyond this reductive refrain when playfulness is not presumed have an order of meaning that is comparable to seriousness. This presumption raises crucial limitations. Single-mindedly ("dead") serious approaches make interreligious dialogue more about adopting problems of dialogue, and less about adapting ways to outmaneuver, or *outplay,* those problems. This is where play theology proves not only innovative, but innovatively helpful, in the foundational role it plays in contestant theology.

Contestant theology does not place participants in religious dialogue at the starting point of showing that they already know God in a serious way. Rather, contestant theology brings religious people together in bewilderment, which is the common starting point of needing to learn God. Bewilderment grants a relational playground that allows these groups to cooperate with one another's efforts and contest each other's conclusions. Simply put, contestant theology aims to reframe a Christian's approach to people of other religious traditions in the space of the interreligious encounter. It is not about outworking those with different beliefs via

comprehensive doctrines, earnest morality, and rhetorical strategies under a well-intentioned, yet unconvincing posture of compassion or curiosity. The religious other is not a burdensome problem to solve or an elite concept to understand; s/he is our fellow human playmate in the game that we want to play forever. In this game, contestant theology features unrefined playing with those who believe differently, by placing one's own faith and practice at risk of being challenged and transformed by another's faith and practice.

This play mentality, activity, and language – which is less academic and more pop-cultural – incorporates an exploration of larger issues. This exploration begins by picking up where David Miller left off in *Gods and Games*, in which he envisions how a theology of play sees "theology" journey into *theograffiti*, which is its playful movement into "a theology of the everyday, seeing the Spirit of life in all life."[49] Miller's anticipated movement resonates with the biblical perspective evident in Paul's speech to the Athenians in Acts 17:28. This dissertation conveys the movements of Paul's theology in light of Miller's *theograffiti* over the course of five chapters, whose summaries bring this Introduction to a close.

VI. Chapter Summaries

Post-Introduction, the first movement of this dissertation follows the first movement of Paul's Acts 17:28 speech ("In God") by considering the "serious" theologies of religion, whose "dead" seriousness encounters dialogical problems. Chapter 1 summarizes the aims, claims, and criticisms of the exclusivist, inclusivist, pluralist, and Trinitarian theologies of religions. This survey shows how each approach responds to the interreligious encounter and its dialogical problems. Knitter's four models spotlight the key claim "spoken" by each of these approaches in

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[49] David L. Miller, *Gods and Games*: *Toward a Theology of Play* (New York: World Pub. Co, 1970), 176.

the interreligious encounter. This encounter is descriptively framed using a memorable depiction of interreligious relationality found in the video game *Xenogears*. This move brings a playful insight into a field dominated by "serious" approaches, by establishing the space of the interreligious encounter as a playground where religions enrich and diminish one another.

The second movement ("we live") is occupied by the biblio-theological consideration of play, which grounds the playful approach to the theologies of religions. Chapter 2 describes how play theology "revives" the Christian thought-world, spirituality, relationality, and epistemology from the "dead" seriousness that has hindered the ways that Christian theologies of religions respond to the dialogical problems of the interreligious encounter. To be sure, seriousness itself is not the problem; the problem is the overreliance on seriousness, to the detriment of incorporating non-serious/playful insights. This claim continues the movement toward the theology of play that Miller anticipates at the end of *Gods and Games*, as a play theology that is connected to biblical figures. Crucially, Paul's Acts 17:28 address to the Athenians establishes four key biblical dimensions for this playful relationality of contestant theology – 1) identification in God, in whom one is 2) living, 3) moving, and 4) existing – that adapts an expression of popular culture to express the contents of Christian faith and practice.

After reviving the idea of a Christian theology of religions from the "dead" seriousness, the third movement ("and move") turns to describing the playful "conspirational orthodoxy" of contestant theology. Chapter 3 draws from the insights of Courtney Goto, Juan Segundo, Roger Caillois, and other scholars. This section provides a description of a Christian play theology of religions that "holds lightly" the enriching and diminishing "breathing with" other religions via the four dimensions of play experience (*agon*, *mimesis*, *alea*, and *ilynx*) which are also shown to correspond to the four biblical dimensions of playful relationality in Acts 17:28. The description

of the distinctive belief system of *conspirational orthodoxy* leads into the fourth movement ("and have our being") – explaining *conspirational artistry*. These four practices are grounded in global and popular culture relational models of "breathing with" others.

Detailing the orthodoxy and artistry of contestant theology sets the stage for the fifth movement ("for we too are his offspring"), which begins by envisioning how Christianity enriches and diminishes differing others, and vice versa. Chapter 5 draws from the insights of Stephen Prothero and Peter Feldmeier. Both scholars provide religious studies textbooks that feature foundational comparisons between Christianity and other religions that address the criteria for the interreligious contest proposed by Hans Küng. This discussion leads into the Conclusion, which summarizes contestant theology as an approach with strengths and weaknesses which affords further discussion and correction, highlights the potential of this play theology of religions for bringing fresh insights into this otherwise serious field of study, and suggests a future trajectory for keeping the preferable game of the interreligious encounter going.

VII. Summary

Ultimately, this dissertation describes how the cognition of the primal premise – which is shared by religion and irreligion – undergoes a "re-cognition" when it is placed into the light of the primary principle of the cosmos. This dissertation explains how the life of theology is not about proving our inability to grasp God. Instead, theology is about continually recognizing God, by being grasped by God alongside of others, even if we are reluctant or ashamed to describe our theological mindsets, activities, and language as "play." Regardless, "contestant theology" frames the interrobang that this dissertation exclaims: did you know that we do not grasp God, Who is continually recognized, when God grasps us in the game that we want to play forever‽

CHAPTER 1
"IN GOD": THEOLOGIES OF RELIGIONS SPEAK INTO THE SERIOUS SPACE OF THE INTERRELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER

The play of contestant theology begins in the biblical Acts of the Apostles, where all theologies of religions are born – "in God." Peter, Paul, and other early church personalities speak into the space of the interreligious encounter with outmaneuverability, openness, and exclamation. This is the biblical foundation for theologies of religions to speak into the serious space of the interreligious encounter. Yet, when one realizes that seriousness does not exhaust the meaning of the interreligious encounter – just as Luke's intention of an "orderly account" does not fully characterize The Acts of the Apostles – one begins to appreciate the limits of serious theologies of religions. Noticing these limits allows one to envision the interreligious encounter as more than a serious space mired in dialogical problems. Acts 2 portrays the outmaneuvering of dialogical problems when the Holy Spirit gathers the bewildered in a playful recognition of God's presence and activity. This Holy Spirit-granted mindset inspires Peter's openness to Cornelius in Acts 10-11, which sets the stage for Paul's Areopagus exclamation in Acts 17. This play of the Apostles provides a biblical ground for noticing the "dead" seriousness that hinders the interreligiosity of the major theologies of religions and a launchpad for describing the play theology of religions that "revives" Christian engagements with the interreligious encounter. Contestant theology shares a biblical foundation with other theologies of religions, while avoiding their tendencies to adopt "grave" dialogical problems.

Saul of Tarsus and Peter are similarly prepared for the interreligious encounter. First, both men are faithful Jewish believers who are responding to the Person and message of Jesus

Christ in their own ways. Peter's zealous embrace of Christ contrasts Saul's zealous rejection of Christ, yet both men share the common experience of realizing that they did not grasp God until God grasped them in the way that they least expected. These God-granted experiences of *bewilderment* were the avenues in which God grasped Peter and Saul, enabling them to let God teach God via a divine vision and contact with their version of the religious other. Second, bewilderment displaced both men from self-defined "heights" of traditional religious piety. Peter departs the rooftop in Acts 10. Saul "falls down to the ground" in Acts 9, from a literal and spiritual high horse. Third, this *humiliation un-limits* both men from their ignorance of God and God's ways in the presence of God. Despite his Pharisaical expertise, Saul's vision of God brings forth the Acts 9:5 question, "Who are you, Lord?" which is followed by the Acts 9:5 answer, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Here, the primal premise and the primal promise transform Saul into Paul. In asking his question, Saul realizes that his zealous human faith does not grasp God. When Paul hears God's answer, God grasps him with the promise that God can be recognized, despite the unknowability of divine existence, the limits of human understanding, and even the persecution of the One in whom God makes Godself known. Fourth, both men experience a *re-creation* through their connection to their radical opposite, in an encounter that is not exhausted by Luke's serious intent to provide an orderly account.

Paul's Areopagus speech in Acts 17:27 is not only about the sharing of space (the *con*) but also involves the risks of challenging and being challenged by a radically different person of faith (the *test*). Paul is challenged by the presence of the Athenian altar to the unknown god, because it aesthetically contrasts his mystical recognition of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Paul also challenges the Athenian devotion and conception to the unknown god, by using particular details to describe what they specifically worship due to its unknowability. Yes, Athenian

religiosity and Christianity have existence "in him," but Paul's "him" is God, Self-disclosed in

Jesus Christ, Who challenges the concept of unknowable divinity that was depicted in the

Athenian-constructed altar. Paul declares that the Christian existence is distinct from Athenian

existence, even if both involve life, movement, and being. Paul does not merely adopt the

philosophical language, he *adapts* it to diminish the prominence of the unknown god in order to

enrich the awareness of God, who Paul recognizes in Jesus Christ. Paul does not merely "speak

Athenian" – he challenges the audience by claiming that their own "poets" accurately – albeit

unintentionally and deficiently – described *his* religious existence, not theirs! Thus, Paul puts

Epimenides and Aratus into play for Christianity, by establishing Christ as the key for

understanding the true meaning of their words, rather than affirming their words as the way to

grasp God. Overall, Paul proclaims the "unknown" object of Athenian worship by enriching their

awareness of the Person while diminishing their devotion to the altar. Paul's theological and

linguistic moves of challenging and being challenged by Athenian culture serve as a precedent,

rather than a prohibition, for contestant activity, showing it was always a part of Christian faith.

I. Paul Knitter's Models Spotlight Key Claims of the Theologies of Religions

The biblical narratives of Peter, Paul, and other early followers of Jesus illustrate how the

life of a theology of religions consists of putting the Christian life of faith into play with other

faiths. While every Christian response to the religions shares this biblical foundation, there is a

spectrum of emphases; different Christian individuals and communities have their own versions

of Peter's openness in the tanner's house and Paul's exclamation in the Areopagus. Some

Christians place the utmost importance on assertively necessitating Christian identity in the space

that they share with the religions. Movement away from this "Christian-centric" pole happens

when Christians see their presence in the shared space of the interreligious encounter as a means to bettering the religions. Movement toward the opposite end of the spectrum characterizes Christians who are open to sharing a transformative relationality with the religions. Christians who encourage the free life of all religions and a differing participation in salvation history settle into the "xenocentric" pole. These four spectrum points – Christianizing, bettering, sharing, and differing – are general labels for the versions of Paul's exclamation that each Christian approach speaks into the shared space of the interreligious encounter. Pluralist theologian Paul Knitter "models" these exclamations in *Introducing Theologies of Religions.* The next sections consider how these models uncover the ideals of each approach. Discerning these deep claims in light of Paul's exclamation clarifies their capacity for interreligious relationality. The lens of play will spotlight the "dead" seriousness that hinders these theologies of religions from effectively engaging the interreligious encounter. These moves legitimize the need for the play theology of religions to "revive" the biblically grounded Christian movement with other religions.

A. Replacement Model

Replacement "retells" Paul's Areopagus speech by saying that the Christian way of defining God is the basis of human living, moving, and being. It is tempting to say that this sounds identical to what Paul's "In God" conveys. Yet, placing Paul's emphasis on recognizing God in Jesus next to Replacement's emphasis on advancing Christian identity for the sake of knowing God allows the subtle differences to materialize. Yes, Paul recognizes God in the face of Jesus Christ. Yet, Paul's recognition is not the same as claiming that the Christian definition of God exhausts God's meaning and identity. Yes, Paul does call the religions to "repent" from their deficient attempts to grasp God in statues and buildings, in light of Christ, in Acts 17:30.

Yet, calling people to recognize God in the Person of Jesus Christ is a different message than requiring people to abandon their foundational religious context in order to take on an alien Christian identity. Yes, Acts 17:31 conveys Paul's eschatological expectation that all will be ultimately judged by Jesus. Yet, this eschatological vision is not necessarily a call that grants salvific affirmation only to Christians, in a way that is closed to everyone else. Marking these differences does not mean to disparage or endorse Replacement claims. Rather, these distinctions clarify the message that Replacers want to convey from the deepest parts of their being.

Knitter introduces Replacement as the life of following Jesus that must overtake one's previous practices.[1] Replacers step into their own version of the Areopagus, and deeply declare that salvation is only found in Jesus Christ, because all religions (Christianity included) cannot save anyone, despite their good intentions and efforts. In Replacement logic, this Christian insight into the salvific ineffectiveness of religions, even their own, is what legitimizes Christianity as "the one true religion," which delegitimizes any religion that does not understand itself as unable to save.[2] This logic develops Replacement *assertiveness*, which claims that the other religions must be replaced by Christianity, not because Christianity saves, but because only Christ saves, and Christians are the only ones who reliably understand and convey this reality.

Knitter's description of Replacement logic features the voices of prominent theologians whose well-reasoned insights make the Replacement exclamation a formidable claim, even if these theologians do not fully embrace Replacement. He particularly characterizes Karl Barth's insistence to "Let God be God in Jesus Christ" as the foundation for the Replacement Model.[3] Knitter points out that Barth's view is influential, not because he was a Fundamentalist (which he

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[1] Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), 19.
[2] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 29.
[3] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 22-24. Here, Knitter cites Karl Barth's well-known, 81-page "The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion" in *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, §17, 280-361.

was not), but because Barth manages to simultaneously say that all religions are the same and that Christianity is the one, true religion.[4] Knitter notices the appeal of the Replacement assertiveness that Barth advances, which not only links Christianity with every other religion that cannot save, but also reminds everyone of this reality, thus guaranteeing the necessity of the Christian identity, and rationalizing Christianity replacing the religions.

Knitter links this "one-and-only" language to Lesslie Newbigin's insistence that absolute truth indeed exists, as "one God-given truth" in contradistinction to just "one truth."[5] Newbigin defines "truth" as that which is particularly provided by God, and not as a particular claim to truth that is provided by any individual or group. Knitter quotes Newbigin's memorable conclusion: "the unique decisiveness of God's action in Jesus Christ is not arrogance; it is the enduring bulwark against the arrogance of every culture to be itself the criterion by which others are judged."[6] Newbigin clarifies how Replacers intend to establish Christianity not only as the one true religion, but also, as the one and only *honest* religion, in the sense that Christians find truth and salvation in the revelation (Christ), rather than the religion.

Knitter frames Replacement assertiveness in pessimistic and optimistic terms by including the respective Lutheran insights of Carl Braaten and Wolfhart Pannenberg. Braaten articulates Replacement assertiveness as the insistence that "no religion…is capable of generating the freedom to let God be God, which only faith can do…Thus the religions themselves fall under the wrath and judgment of God despite all the good and truth that they also undeniably have given to human experience and history."[7] For Braaten, Christians confess that

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[4] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 22-24.
[5] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 31.
[6] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 31. Here, Knitter cites Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989), 161, 162-169.
[7] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 39. Here, Knitter cites Carl Braaten, *No Other Gospel*! *Christianity Among the World's Religions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 76-78.

Christians and everyone else need Jesus, rather than religions which fail to grant salvific access to the Divine. On the other hand, Pannenberg renders this failure in more benevolent terms. He affirms that "God is always a God of the future," and further explains that "God never gives us the full picture, the full meaning of God's self."[8] Simply put, realizing the failure of human religions to save or define God is a natural part of the life of faith. Knitter characterizes Pannenberg's view in similar terms to Newbigin's approach – as a challenge to the "arrogance" of some communities who attempt to fully define God with their past images or present teachings about the Divine. In differing ways, both Pannenberg and Braaten frame Replacement assertiveness as an acknowledgment of the failure of religion, in order to rationalize the wholehearted embrace of Jesus, Who is proclaimed to grant salvific access to the Divine.

Knitter shows how Replacement is mostly – yet not fully – understood as an avenue to advance Christianity's superiority over the religions. Replacers are more concerned about the other religions' need for Christian identity. Christians are needed, because they are able to admit that even their own religion obstructs the Divine, and in doing so, avoid making themselves the source of the Divine. Thus, Replacement Model's ideal necessitates Christian identity less for the sake of replacing religions with Christianity, and more for the sake of replacing obstructive religious ideas of the Divine with Christ, Whose divinity does not obstruct one's access to God.

Knitter allows us to place the key Replacement ideal beside its key real-world limitation. Replacement features an aspirational theological foundation of what Christians most truly and deeply believe in the space of the interreligious encounter. Yet, this belief concretizes into exclusivist emphases on the distance between Christianity and the religions. In Knitter's words, Replacement valuably warns us to "beware of religion," as something that "seeks to make

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[8] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 40. Here, Knitter cites Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 107-113.

itself…more important than the revelation and experience it is meant to serve and pass on."[9] Knitter observes how, facing this constant temptation, Replacement logic rightly insists that "all religion [needs] daily reformation."[10] To this end, Knitter considers the ideal potential of Replacement's proclaiming of Jesus as the only Savior and viewing other religions as having to be replaced by Christianity in a friendly, yet competitive dialogue. Ideally, this competition could be a way in which Christians allow themselves to be tested with the people of other religions in order to ensure that no singular religion is made more important than their revelation. This ideal assesses every religion – Christianity included – in light of Christ. Yet, Replacement fails to translate this ideal into real life, because it too single-mindedly necessitates Christianity in the space of the interreligious encounter. Replacement takes the Christian identity so seriously that it crowds out any coexistence with another person of faith, unless s/he abandons their faith and adopts a Christian identity that is approved by Christian institutions. Knitter chronicles how Replacement reality does not make Christ (the revelation) more important than Christianity (the religion). Christian identity is necessitated to the detriment of interreligious relationality.

Thus, this single-mindedly serious Christian approach never realizes the ideal of the shared testing of the religions for the sake of their daily reformation. Instead, the serious approach of the Replacement Model conflates two things: 1) the assertiveness about the deeply held Christian belief that God grasps all people of faith through Christ and 2) exclusivist emphases upon the necessity of Christianity and the Christian distance from other religions which are deemed unnecessary. Noticing Replacement's limits is how contestant theology begins to unearth the ideal of the shared testing of religion that is buried in the grave necessitation of Christian identity and the pessimistic view of the distance that lies between different religions.

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[9] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 55.
[10] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 55.

B. Fulfillment Model

Fulfillment "retells" Paul's Areopagus speech by saying that the Christian way of defining God's salvific presence for all creatures is the basis of human living, moving, and being. This subtly deviates from Paul's message. Yes, Paul's "In God" affirms his Acts 17:24 recognition that God created the world and all things. Yet, the "distress" that Paul experiences from the Athenian statutes signals that his understanding of how God addresses all creatures is not the same thing as claiming that God is present in every creature's context of faith. Yes, Paul affirms that God made and united all the nations in one man in Acts 17:26. Yet, Paul stops short of saying that God does whatever is necessary to reach out and embrace all people with God's salvific presence. Yes, Paul not only affirms everyone's seeking of God, but also, that God is not far from anyone, in Acts 17:27. Yet, Paul does not say that everyone's seeking is a valid or effective way of salvation. Yes, Paul's Acts 17:31 eschatological vision insists that Jesus will be recognizable by everyone, via the Resurrection. Yet, this vision is not advanced as a directive for Christians to "help" differing others see that their religion was imperceptibly leading to Jesus – and thus, salvation – despite their intentions. Rather than disparaging or endorsing Fulfillment, these comparisons spotlight what is truly at play in its adaptation of Paul's exclamation.

Knitter's phrase "one fulfills the many" presents Fulfillment in terms of Christianity enabling the global religions to achieve what Christians supposedly have by default – access to God's salvific presence.[11] Fulfillment logic grants salvific validity to global religions by framing them as not-quite-Christian identities which can only reach full expression through dialogical connections to Christians. Fulfillers enter their own Areopagus and exclaim that God's love –

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[11] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 62-63.

which is definitively given through Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection – is so magnanimous that it overflows the bounds of Christianity to encompass other world religions as incomplete ways of salvation, even though their good intentions and efforts cannot save in the Christian sense of the term. Using his own play language, Knitter characterizes this stance as a "teeter-totter" that reliably grounds Christian identity in the "particular side" that preserves the unique finality of Jesus, yet also riskily stretches Christian identity toward the "universal side" that affirms God's will to save all people.[12] Knitter understands this balancing act as an effort to reconcile God's particular love for Christians with God's universal love for all people. This balance legitimizes non-Christian religions in a way that does not abandon the Christian identity. These moves develop Fulfillment "compassion," which understands that the other religions must be affirmed and validated by Christianity, because God loves all people – even people whose beliefs and practices do not save – uniquely and definitively through Jesus Christ.

The loudest contributor to Knitter's Fulfillment Model is his mentor, Karl Rahner. First, Knitter explains Rahner's insistence that everything in creation is grasped – or "graced" – by God.[13] This insight begins the Christian validation of other religions by implying that God graces the beliefs and practices of non-Christians. Emerging from this validation is Rahner's second conclusion: all religions are ways of salvation, because God graces religions. Knitter summarizes Rahner's conclusion by explaining that "grace must be embodied. God's presence has to take some kind of material shape… among the many "bodies" that God's presence can assume in human history, we can expect that one of the foremost and most effective will be the religions of the world."[14] Fulfillment ennobles the global religions as the shared dwelling place of God,

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[12] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 64.
[13] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 68-69.
[14] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 70-71. Here, Knitter cites Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1978), 178–203, 318.

unlike Replacement's suspicion that global religions are deficient avenues which obscure God. Rahner's idea of the religions comprising God's earthly home allows his third point: all religions connect to and lead to Christ, because the grace that God graces religions with is Christ's grace.[15] For Rahner, anyone who experiences the grace of God's love in their own religion is already connected with and oriented to Jesus, because Jesus is the final cause of God's grace and love. Such people are also oriented to the Church, which makes them Christian, but in a hidden sense.

To be sure, Knitter explains that Rahner's concept of "anonymous Christian" is proposed only for Christian consideration, both as a reminder that God is bigger than Christianity and as an alternative to pessimism toward other religions.[16] Further, "anonymous Christian" is not a label that Christians must force the people of other religions to place upon themselves. In Knitter's view, Rahner puts forth a vision of embodied Christian compassion, in which Christians "work *with* people, not just *for* them, in order to help them become more fully aware of, and thus more committed to, what they really are: children of God, called to live in their own lives the love and justice seen in Jesus."[17] Clearly, this vision of interreligious relationality makes a big, John 3:30 ask of other religions, by positioning them into the role John the Baptist, which requires them to become less so that Christ can become more. Yet, this ask can be considered compassionate, because Christians do not desire for other religions to lose their validity, but rather, to help other religions find and fulfill their ultimate meaning, albeit in Jesus.

Knitter provides church-centered articulations of Fulfillment logic by including the respective insights of the Second Vatican Council and Jacques Dupuis. The pronouncements of Vatican II affirm that the reign of God is taking place outside of the Church, yet the Church

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[15] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 70-71.
[16] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 81.
[17] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 74.

serves the Reign of God by giving it meaning, because the Church alone is the "ordinary" and "full" means of salvation.[18] Other religions are granted validity as "rays of truth" that not only require relational contact with Christianity, but also allow positive Christian attitudes and contact with other religions. This church-centered positive relationality allows Christians to be faithful to serving God and open to other religions in the Holy Spirit, Who "blows where [s/he] will" (John 3:8)."[19] The Vatican II pronouncements frame the Christian compassion to other religions in terms of the Church having a central role in the Reign of God that fulfills the religions.

However, Jacques Dupuis does not want to make the Church too important in a Christ-centered message of Fulfillment. Knitter notices Dupuis's insistence that necessitating all religious paths lead to Christ produces unhappy outcomes, because it places limits on what God is doing in other religions, makes the Church more important than God, and prevents fair dialogue.[20] Thus, Dupuis's Fulfillment does not require all people to find their Fulfillment in the Christian Church, but rather, enables Christians to recognize other paths as having a lasting role and specific meaning in what God hopes to achieve with humanity. Dupuis understands Jesus to stand among other religious leaders while also being a uniquely central avenue to God. Dupuis opens the possibility that the Spirit may be God's message to Christians that is spoken through other religions. This allows for the further development of Christians discovering that other religions may have recognized some aspects of the face of Jesus more clearly than Christians, which incentivizes Christian positivity toward and contact with other religions beyond a sense of a paternalistic duty to correct different beliefs. Toward this end, Dupuis describes "a mutual complementarity… one in which the intended final outcome is not for your side to convert to my

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[18] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 80-84.
[19] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 81. Here, Knitter cites John Paul II, *Redemptoris Hominis* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1979), sec. 11 and *Dominum et Vivificantem* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1986).
[20] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 88-91.

side but, rather, "a more profound conversion of each to God."[21] Dupuis's Christ-centered Fulfillment creates two-way compassion. In this view, the other religions are not left alone to answer the call to make oneself less so that Christ can be greater. Rather, Christians take the initiative of undertaking the "becoming less" of John the Baptist, in order to have a greater capacity to discern the Spirit at play in the other religions. The Holy Spirit helps Christians to recognize the deepest, truest aspects of the face of Christ which spill beyond the borders of the Church in ways that deepen their life of faith within the bounds of the Church.

A surface glance at Fulfillment sees the Church as the necessary guide for other religions to realize the salvific presence of God in their midst, in order to fully understand and express themselves in light of Christ. A deeper gaze into Fulfillment discerns a two-way exchange of compassion, in which the people of other religions voluntarily "become less" for the sake of being bettered and completed by Christ as He is known in Christianity, while Christians voluntarily "become less" for the sake of being bettered and completed by Christ as He is known in other religions. This ideal of Fulfillment is a compassionate diminishment. The Fulfillment ideal invites Christians and people of differing faiths to diminish their religious identities together as a way to affirm each other's life of faith, as expressions of both the particular (Christian faith in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus) and universal aspects (the Holy Spirit blowing where s/he will among the world religions) of God's salvific presence. Thus, the Fulfillment ideal of compassion goes beyond Christians bettering and completing another person of faith; Fulfillment calls for Christians to "be filled" with another person of faith's experience of being bettered and completed by God, by attending to the ways that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are known in contexts beyond the Church.

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[21] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 90. Here, Knitter cites Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997), 383.

Knitter allows us to place the key Fulfillment ideal beside its key real-world limitation. *Compassion* names Fulfillment's theological foundation for a mutual diminishment in the interreligious encounter. Yet, this ideal relationality tends to solidify into an inclusivism that is well-intentioned, but tends to patronizingly support other religions. In Knitter's words, Fulfillment valuably insists upon the "duty of dialogue" to "carry out the most fundamental law of Christianity—love your neighbor as yourself."[22] Following Knitter's claim, Christians are called to love their neighbors by "full-filling them" through a "self-emptying word of love…by respecting, embracing, and learning from them."[23] This is Fulfillment's ideal: Christians embodying a self-emptying lifestyle in order to fulfill not just religious "others," but religious neighbors, who in turn, self-empties to fulfill Christians, as a response to and reception of God's bettering and completing all things.

Ideally, Fulfillment envisions a diminishing relationality as a form of love that Christians and their religious neighbors can share in order to affirm that all religions are bettered and made whole by God's salvific presence. Yet, Fulfillment fails to translate the ideal into the real, because it is too single-minded in its focus upon the finality and uniqueness of Christ in the space of the interreligious encounter. It is not wrong to affirm the finality and uniqueness of Christ. Rather, this is an evaluation on the particular way that Fulfillers convey that finality and uniqueness as they stretch to the religious other. Fulfillment's singlemindedness makes the undertaking of compassion something that is less self-emptying, and more self-transferring. The reality of "full-fillment" becomes more about pouring out of the Christian cup to fill other religions with Christianity in order to save them, and less about the love of God overflowing the Christian cup it is poured into, ultimately breaking the cup, and carrying Christianity into God's

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[22] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 102.
[23] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 95.

loving fulfilment of everyone and everything. The ideal of being fulfilled together is overtaken by a patronizing impulse which claims that it is the Christian's burden to save people who are deemed as unable to know what their own religion was really about. This impulse requires so-called incomplete Christians to fulfill their beliefs and practices by accepting the Christian understandings of God's salvific presence in their religions.

This serious approach never realizes the ideal of the shared diminishment of the religions for the sake of their being bettered and completed by God, via the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ which benefits all religions and not just Christianity. Instead, Fulfillment seriousness conflates two things: 1) the compassion in the deeply held Christian belief that God calls us to love our neighbors as ourselves and 2) inclusivist emphases for Christians to support other religions by evaluating them by Christian criteria of salvation. This conflation deadens the notion of the interreligious life. Noticing Fulfillment's limits is how contestant theology begins to unearth the compassion in the mutual diminishment of religion that is buried in the grave focus on Christ's uniqueness and finality and a patronizing support for religious neighbors.

C. Mutuality Model

Mutuality "retells" Paul's Areopagus speech by saying that the relational witness and expression of God's presence is the basis of human living, moving, and being. Mutuality also subtly distinguishes itself from Paul's exclamation. Paul does not require all religions to be united, even though he does affirm that all nations come from "one ancestor" (Acts 17:26). Paul undertakes the act of dialogue, but Acts 17:26-27 says nothing about collecting the diverse people of the different times and boundaries established by God into a singular, temporal-spatial eschatological destiny known as "The Kingdom of God." Further, while Paul affirms that God

initiates every nations' searching and groping for God in Acts 17:27, nothing is said about the religions needing to do this together. Finally, Paul's Acts 17:27 insistence that God "is not far from each one of us" does embody a Christian optimism about non-Christian beliefs. Yet, this insistence does not require Christians to adopt the language of other beliefs, as if Christianity alone was insufficient for expressing the witness and reality of God's salvific presence in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit. These comparisons are not about endorsing or disparaging Mutuality, but rather, about spotlighting the heart of the Mutualist exclamation.

Knitter calls Mutuality "many true religions called to dialogue."[24] Mutualists presume that a religion is "true" to the extent that it engages another. Knitter explains this enabling of "authentic" interreligious dialogue as "leveling the playing field" to avoid guaranteeing the "win" for Christianity with single-minded exclusivist and inclusivist emphases upon the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ.[25] Mutualists roll into the Areopagus exclaiming that God's love for the world is so persistent that it overflows the Way of Christ to the point where the Spirit carries us into to other true ways of thinking, acting, and talking out the Reign of God.

Knitter's play language of the "level playing field" clarifies how Mutualists balance Christian identity with interreligious positivity. First, the capitalized "Way of Christ" conveys how Mutuality honors Jesus as "constitutive Savior,"[26] This is the traditional affirmation of Jesus "standing alone" among religious figures.[27] Yet, Mutualists insist that Jesus can stand alone, because His "powerful manifestation" of God's love is not necessarily its full expression.[28] Jesus's uniqueness is not superiority, but rather, a powerful recognizability. Jesus does stand

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[24] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 108.
[25] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 110.
[26] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 154.
[27] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 154.
[28] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 154.

distinct from Buddha, Krishna, or Muhammad, but in a way that Christians are opened to the possibility of them being "on par" with Jesus, as conveyors of God's love.[29] Second, Mutualists attach a "sacramental" view of Jesus to the idea of constitutive Savior. The "sacramental Jesus" stands *with* other religious figures, even as He stands alone. Knitter explains:

> [The sacramental Jesus] doesn't have to fix or rebuild the bridge between God and humanity by responding to God's demand for satisfaction for humanity's sinfulness… [Jesus shows] humanity that God's love is already there, ready to embrace and empower, no matter how often humans have lost their way in selfishness and narrow-mindedness.[30]

This Mutualist embrace of constitutive *and* sacramental Jesus sees God unifying all religions as recipients of God's persistent love. Jesus's multi-layered embodiment of God's love justifies the Christian openness to differing religions and the level playing field for interreligious dialogue.

Knitter's description of Mutuality logic incorporates some well-known theological voices who contribute three "bridges" to this level playing field for dialogue. First, the philosophical bridge features John Hick's conclusion that the limited human brain cannot fully grasp the infinity of God or solve the riddle of the radical differences among the religions. Yet, symbols, myths, and metaphors allow humanity to hold together faith experiences that are otherwise irreconcilable with reason, because these concepts create shared opportunities to "point to rather than define" the Divine.[31] This shared pointing resonates with the early Christian mindsets, activities, and languages which used the symbols, myths, and metaphors of the cultures that "nurtured" them to express who Jesus was according to their heart experience, rather than their empirical rationality.[32] Hick claims that Christians adapted the symbolically poetic Jewish and Greco-Roman languages to say what they really wanted to say about Jesus. Jewish tradition

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[29] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 154.
[30] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 153.
[31] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 116. Knitter cites John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 14, 235-236. Knitter's emphasis added.
[32] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 120.

described Jesus's special divinity with the titles "Son of God," "Savior," and "Good Shepherd," while the Greco-Roman thought world provided philosophical expressions of Jesus's extraordinariness as "Word of God enfleshed in a human being."[33] Hick insists that this early Christian language did not lead people away from what Jesus said about Himself. Instead, this language of the heart was the organic and cultural "[expression of] Jesus's significance as the one through whom men and women had transformingly encountered God."[34] These insights clarify how Christianity has long dialogued with nearby religious traditions and cultures, thanks to the poetic function of symbols, myths, and metaphors. This move grounds a Christian openness toward other expressions of God, which are understood to point to the Divine without exhausting or embodying divinity. As fellow pointers, Christians are open to incorporating the heart languages of other traditions into their recognition of God in Jesus Christ, while also allowing distinctively Christian language for the Divine to be considered and transformed in new ways. Thus, the philosophical bridge describes a level playing field of interreligious dialogue that holds together unpredictable randomness with reliable structures of reason.

The philosophical bridge emphasizes the discovery of the shared pointing to the divine when one looks out from one's own religious context. Meanwhile, the religious-mystical bridge to interreligious dialogue leads a person of faith to look into their own "religious well," to discover the shared river of the nourishing religious experiencing that exceeds anything a human can feel and express.[35] The religious-mystical basis of dialogue is less about describing how the separate religions combine their heart language to express the Divine, and more about describing the infinite religious element that animates and unifies all religions. Knitter closely associates

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[33] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 118-120.
[34] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 121.
[35] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 125-126.

this second bridge with Raimon Panikkar, who insists that "the fundamental religious fact" does not lie in any one religion's doctrine, but rather, in the core religious experience which is accessible within, and even beyond, all religions.[36] Panikkar understands this form of experiencing at the heart of all religions as an interrelationship between the creation (*kosmos*) the Divine (*theos*), and the human (*andros*), in which each participant senses their unity with each other in "[ever-deepening], life-giving ways."[37] Knitter characterizes this "cosmotheandric reality" as "the underground river that nourishes [all religions]."[38] Knitter understands Panikkar's vision of pluralism in terms of the "love language" that emerges in our deepest relationships, which experientially describes how a person's "one and only" grasps and expands their thought and living, in a way that only applies to them, but does not rule out the instances of another person's one and only. Knitter explains this in terms of a husband telling his wife that she is the most beautiful woman in the world and the only woman for him. This love language is true as an aspect of their intimate union, yet not affirmable in a courtroom context which requires scientific and legal language to prove how this particular wife's beauty surpasses those of all other wives.[39] This illustration characterizes the crucial aspect of cosmotheandrism's trustworthiness: validating the deepest expressions of religious experiencing, even though this language is not true in the manner that philosophical, legal, or scientific language is true.

While the religious-mystical bridge relies on the shared river of religious experiencing, the ethical-practical bridge unifies the religions with the shared responsibility to heal human suffering. This approach to dialogue envisions Earth's mightiest faith communities finding

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[36] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 128. Knitter cites Raimon Panikkar, "The Category of Growth in Comparative Religion: A Critical-Self-Examination," *Harvard Theological Review* 66 (1973): 115, 131 and Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist, 1978), 2–23.
[37] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 128. Here, Knitter draws from Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973), 74–75.
[38] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 126.
[39] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 133.

themselves united against common threats, to face the poverty, victimization, and violence that no single religion can withstand. This Avengerizing of the global religions creates a global ethic that identifies the threatened Earth as the common ground for all religions, which in turn, necessitates their dialogue with one another for the sake of saving our shared home. Whether it is protecting the vulnerable, healing the wounded, or rebuilding the broken, each approach to saving the world is a way that the Reign of God comes into earthly reality, via open cooperation among the global religions. The theologians associated with the ethical-practical bridge to dialogue emphasize Matthew 7:15-20 exhortations: "you will know them by their fruits." While this verse sounds a warning about false prophets, Mutualists adapt it to say that Christian "orthodoxy" is validated by its ethically good results. Tying orthodoxy to ethical action recognizes the historical harms Christianity has done in the name of doctrines which Samuel Ryan, Rosemary Radford Reuther, and others condemn as "manifest destiny," "imperialist missions," and "anti-Judaism."[40] These recognitions require Christians to intentionally abandon these destructively entrenched positions, and move closer to acting together with differing people to relieve worldly suffering. This requires a further move to make Christianity less Jesus-centered, and more Reign of God-centered, in the sense that it is less important to cling to doctrine, and more important to get involved with whoever and whatever is ensuring "the people actually be helped, fed, educated, and given medicine, that violence and war be avoided, and that the environment be saved and protected."[41] Thus, this is a call to not make the religion more important than the restoration and love that it is meant to pass on. For Knitter, Christians can

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[40] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 135. Knitter cites Samuel Rayan, "Religions, Salvation, Mission," in *Christian Mission and Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Paul Mojzes and Leonard Swidler (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 134; Rosemary Radford Ruether, *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 31.
[41] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 140.

choose a Kingdom focus over a Christ-centered view, because it is a way to adopt Jesus's own "liberation" viewpoint. He associates this insight with Edward Schillebeeckx, who insists that Jesus personally emphasized the transformation of people's hearts not by getting everyone to go to church, nor by promoting Himself, but by convincing people to follow Him in His *movement* toward bringing about a new, transformative society that frees humanity for "justice and peaceful relationships among individuals and peoples, in the disappearance of sickness, injustice, and oppression, in the restoration of life of all that was dead and dying."[42] Thus, following Jesus over the ethical-practical bridge means following him into a level playing field with other religious communities who are trying to bring this new way of life into being. This is no longer a matter of needing to replace inadequate religions with Christ or guiding ignorant religions to Christ in order to be fulfilled; Christianity collaborates with differing religions for the Reign of God.

It is tempting to confine the Mutuality Model to this notion of religious collaboration. Yet, when all three bridges to dialogue are seen together, collaboration unfolds into an expansive vision of openness to other lives of faith. If the Fulfillment ideal names the way of becoming less for the sake of religious betterment and completion, then the Mutuality ideal is the way of "becoming more" by opening one's religious identity to the bridges of interreligious dialogue. When a Christian brings who s/he is into the shared pointing to the divine, the shared river of religious experiencing, and the shared responsibility for healing the world, their one-dimensional religious identity expands into multi-dimensionality, by virtue of their relationships with God, fellow believers, and differing believers. Further, the Christian's presence also expands the dimensionality of their religious neighbor. This ideal of Mutuality is a transformative enrichment. The Mutuality ideal invites Christians and people of differing faiths to enrich their

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[42] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 144. Knitter quotes Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 111–112.

religious identities together as a way to dialogue with each other's life of faith, as expressions of both the particular (Christ embodying God's persistent love for all humanity in a powerfully recognizable way) and universal aspects (Spirit-granted love languages that convey each religion's true sense of their true "one and only") of God's salvific presence (the Reign of God that is co-built among the true religions). Thus, the Mutuality ideal of openness describes something more than the religions impersonally sharing office space. Mutuality calls for Christians to share another person of faith's life of thinking, acting, and talking out God, by becoming parts of the ways that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are known beyond Christian contexts.

Knitter enables us to place this key Mutuality ideal beside its key real-world limitation. *Openness* names the Mutuality Model's theological ideal of the transformative enrichment in the interreligious encounter. However, this ideal relationality concretizes into a pluralism that flattens the coexistence of religions. In Knitter's words, Mutuality contains the valuable invitation to share the life of faith as a "Word that can only be understood only in conversation with other Words of God."[43] Following Knitter's claim, Christians are called to share their lives with their religious neighbors. Primarily, Mutuality frames this life as the sharing of words. Yet, the model also encourages sharing the symbolic pointing to the divine, the spiritual love language for experiencing the "one and only," and the ethical responsibility to heal the world. Knitter notices how Mutuality frames the Way of Christ as the Way that is open to other Ways by including the testimony of contextuality theologian Douglas John Hall, who exclaims: "I can say without any doubt at all that I am far more open to Jews and Muslims and Sikhs and humanists and all kinds of other human beings, including self-declared atheists, *because* of Jesus

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[43] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 156.

than I should ever have been *apart* from him."[44] Hall's insight helps Knitter connect the Christian love of the neighbor to the practice of self-sharing love that is the ideal relationality at play in the transformative enrichment of Mutuality. This is the ideal of the Mutuality Model: Christians sharing the life of faith that transforms a suspicious "other" into a fellow witness of the Divine, who in turn, shares their life to similarly transform the Christian into one who is open to following the movements of Jesus Christ and Holy Spirit in contexts beyond the Church.

Ideally, Mutuality advances an enriching relationality as a form of love that Christians and fellow witnesses can share for the sake of responding to God and restoring the world. Yet, the Mutuality ideal does not fully translate into real world experience, because its concept of dialogue is too single-mindedly committed to necessitating an amicable and ethically-oriented religious common ground. This common ground is taken so seriously that it crowds out factors which threaten to prevent dialogue in the first place: the voicing of the real differences, disagreements, and diminishments that occur between religions. While this is an understandable move to make, Knitter clarifies how this denies the expression of any religions' exclusive and non-negotiable claims, particularly those of superiority and unsurpassability, which are legitimate "love language" expressions.[45] When these aspects of any religion are denied in interreligious dialogue, they are denied their true existence , and replaced with a bland, happy-faced counterfeit. Further, Mutuality tends to presume that one ethical system is standard for all people of faith. This presumption flattens the entire conversation for traditions such as Buddhism, whose concern for justice unfolds in a different manner than the Abrahamic faiths or

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[44] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 156. Knitter cites John B. Cobb Jr., "Beyond Pluralism," in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, ed. Gavin D'Costa (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 91; Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian? For Those on the Edge of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress/Augsburg, 1998), 34.
[45] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 156-157.

an African Indigenous Religious Tradition.[46] When the efforts to preserve dialogue cultivate this flattening of differences, it *appears* to be transformative and ethical, but it is no longer a sharing of the real beliefs of real people. This evaluation does not condemn Mutuality logic or deny its benefits. The key point concerns how Mutuality's single-mindedness undercuts interreligiosity.

This serious approach never realizes the positive potential of the shared enrichment of the religions, because this approach does not include the religions as they actually exist. Rather, this serious approach to dialogue necessitates substituting the untamed reality of any religion with its sanitized version that is deemed ethically sufficient and friendly enough for dialogue. The seriousness of Mutuality conflates two things: 1) the openness to radically diverse ways of thinking, living, and talking out the witness to the Divine and 2) pluralist emphases upon a peaceful coexistence that absolutizes harmonious discourse and uniform ethics, which deadens the sense of the interreligious life. Noticing Mutuality's limits is how contestant theology begins to unearth the transformative enrichment that is buried in the grave efforts to "referee" dialogue.

D. Acceptance Model

Acceptance "retells" Paul's Areopagus speech by saying that the radical freedom to experience God in diverse ways is the basis of human living, moving, and being. Acceptance distinguishes itself from Mutuality by insisting that there are as many different ways to live, move, and have being in God as there are people and communities of faith. This diversity of belief and practice necessitates a diversity of ultimate destinies, rather than a sharing of religious experiencing and ends. Acceptance also subtly distinguishes itself from Paul's exclamation. First, Paul's Acts 17:28 affirmation "We are his offspring" does not necessarily insist that God

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[46] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 161.

respects and affirms the human tendency toward religious diversity, as Acceptance presumes. Rather, this is Paul's call for humanity's diverse religious undertakings and ends to respect and affirm their origin in God. Second, Paul does not invoke God's "relational Tri-unity" to endorse the existence of multiple religious paths and many religious ends, because his Acts 17:31 eschatology is singularly and decisively Jesus Christ-centered. Neither endorsing nor disparaging Acceptance, this comparison exhibits the heart of the Acceptance exclamation.

Knitter describes Acceptance's handling of radical religious diversity as the Christian "amen" to freeing every person and community to fully express themselves on their own terms, beyond Christian control and approval, whether or not common ground is found.[47] In play terms, this is not the "Christians-only" playground of Replacement, the uneven playground of Fulfillment, or Mutuality's level playing field. Acceptance is a theme park, where one person rides all the roller coasters, another eats their way through the park, and others play in all the arcades. These are all diverse paths that lead to diverse ends, but they are all valid theme park experiences, because they take place in the space of free play. These play experiences focalize Acceptance's "manyness," which allows people to stop trying to conflate or control all religious destinies. Acceptance logic insists that God's response to diversity affirms that "all the different religions of the world are envisioning and attaining *salvations*, not salvation."[48] Accepters advance into the Areopagus to exclaim that God expands his "house" with "rooms" that both 1) generate radical religious diversity and 2) accommodate multiple religious destinies according to God's Triune relationality, thus allowing every person of faith to claim, "we are his offspring."

Knitter's explanation of Acceptance logic features S. Mark Heim's "relativistic" theology of religious ends, which stretches, but does not abandon, a Christian theology of religions. Heim

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[47] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 172.
[48] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 193.

follows Panikkar to describe the Trinity not just as "the unique property of Christianity," but rather, "a junction where authentic spiritual dimensions of all religions meet."[49] Heim sees the Trinity as a tri-revelatory ground where Christianity can meet all other religions. Seeing God as the Father is a prism into another religion's general revelation through creation; seeing God as the Holy Spirit is a prism into another religion's universal activity; seeing God as the Son is a prism into another religion's revelation that points to an eternal truth.[50] Knitter describes Heim's Trinitarianism in terms of interreligious communion: "God wants to relate to creation in really different ways, just as God relates to God's self in really different ways, and we can well expect that those different ways of relating are going to take concrete, living form in the religions of the world."[51] Thus, the Trinity is God's Life – the Living Communion of freely seeing and grasping the truth and difference of the Other, Whose human echo is the life of religious pluralism. For Heim, God's own nature creates, enables, and affirms free interreligious communion.

Heim's Trinitarian basis for free interreligious communion also advances the idea of plural ultimate destinies. Heim anticipates distinct religious ends for different religious traditions, rather than a convergence into one eschatological kingdom of God. Crucially, Heim turns to the sphere of popular literature to envision the scope of salvation in terms of the "many mountains" of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This move recalls Paul's use of the writings of Epimenides and Aratus to articulate religious beliefs in a pop-culture format.

The *Divine Comedy* grants Heim the poetic language to convincingly claim that every person of faith attains the destiny that they aim for. Heim begins to develop his notion of God's

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[49] Raimon Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), 42.

[50] S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends.* Sacra Doctrina (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001), 125-136.

[51] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 195.

multiplication of kinds of good by framing *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* as stops on the way toward one ultimate destiny, *Paradiso*. Each stop gives Heim Christian language to say that God accounts for the diversity of decisions that humans make in their free relations with God. Yet, this accounting for human freedom is done by a lovingly communal God, Who "chooses a good that consists of God and creatures, over the good which is God alone or the good of God and one sort of creature."[52] These stops set the stage for considering the "plentitude"[53] which is created by God's relational multiplications of good. These stops are offered as fulfillments of a person's free choices to commune or not commune with God and others. Someone finds "salvation" to the extent that one chooses the "communion of relation-in-difference with God and with others."[54] Heim explains, "God's saving will does not reach a limit or a point at which it changes to condemnation. God's relation to each person is one that seeks endlessly to attain good as fully as possible for the creature, within the terms set by the person's freedom."[55] Thus, Acceptance frames salvation as choosing Paradise to be with – rather than to escape – God and others.

When read in the light of the relationally triune God, *Inferno* serves as a sobering affirmation that God honors human freedom by attaining the fullest good that is possible to those who cling to what hell provides, over communing with God and with others. For Heim, *Purgatorio* is "physical therapy" that heals the soul maladies which incline one toward hell, in order to prepare them for the heavenly glory and joy that they are not yet ready to receive.[56] As Virgil guides Dante, *Purgatorio* not only serves to prepare him for paradise, but also shows God granting the fullest good possible amongst the various ways that people of differing faiths realize

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[52] Heim, *The Depths of the Riches*, 248.
[53] Heim, *The Depths of the Riches*, 248.
[54] Heim, *The Depths of the Riches*, 253.
[55] Heim, *The Depths of the Riches*, 254.
[56] Heim, *The Depths of the Riches*, 115.

their relations with God and others. *Paradiso* displays the reward of choosing of God's communal and continuing offer of divine good. Heim's definition of this heaven is not limited to a Christian understanding of Paradise; he also includes the realities of religious ends sought by the other traditions on their own terms. Heim explains this claim by teaching that Buddhists do not attain Christian salvation, but rather, a "compassionate selflessness that would be an appropriate preparation for relation with God."[57] Thus, Heim "updates" the Paradise that Dante experiences in Christian sensibilities.[58] Using the mountain imagery, Heim envisions a summit of communion-in-difference that preserves the integrity of every individual's religious identity. Heim makes this particular point because it goes against the aim of many religions – Christianity included – to establish a singular eschatological destiny in which religious diversity conforms into uniformity by virtue of one religion having been "right" the entire time. Instead, Heim insists that the seeking and recognition of the divine in one's own foundational context leads to a communion-in-difference in which Christ is relationally involved, but not exhaustive of, one's religious reality.[59] This insight unfolds through Beatrice, who guides Dante's vision of Paradise. She draws him closer to God, despite his ever-wavering faith. This vision exhibits how God grants the fullest good possible to those who freely choose to commune with God and others.

Crucially, Virgil and Beatrice guide Dante through his visions. Heim calls Virgil "the exemplar of the natural end,"[60] which links him to the boundaries of human reason. Virgil is a reliable guide who navigates the trap of hell and points toward Paradise. Yet, Virgil cannot advance beyond purgatory, because it is the highest height that human reason can reach. Virgil represents a partnering with the reliable structures of reason established by Socrates, Plato,

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[57] Heim, *The Depths of the Riches*, 32.
[58] Heim, *The Depths of the Riches*, 281.
[59] Heim, *The Depths of the Riches*, 281.
[60] Heim, *The Depths of the Riches*, 275.

Euclid and others who accept purgatory's limits. Meanwhile, Beatrice embodies a partnering

with the wonder of everlasting love. She draws Dante across the threshold of purgatory, into the

new patterns, forms, and rules of Paradise. This randomness is poetically conveyed as the

"celestial rose," that is, "an image…in which all the blessed are gathered like individual petals in

a vast, layered flower."[61] Unlike the whirlpool of hell that spirals into a self-isolation from

everything, the celestial rose unfurls the life-giving spiral of paradise – a whirlwind that draws

one's soul outward and toward communion with God, others, and creation. As an exemplar of

the divine end, Beatrice joins Virgil in the poetic pairing of reason and randomness that pushes

Dante through hell, prepares him in purgatory, and pulls him into paradise. This pairing grounds

Heim's conclusion: "loving attachment even to one person, if that love has the character not of

closed possession but of further openness *through* that person, can finally draw someone to the

very heart of the celestial rose."[62] For Heim, Acceptance is communally being drawn to paradise

via loving connections with different and differing others who are grasped by the triune God.

This communion-in-difference differs from Mutuality's transformative enrichment by

emphasizing theocentric freedom. Daniel Migliore helpfully clarifies this point. He partners well

with Heim's line of thought when he advances a "non-obstructed" theology of religions. Here,

the Trinity is the freedom of God and Christians to have a relationship with other religions and

belief systems in a way that neither locks salvation inside the walls of the church nor demands

that God save all people. In *Faith Seeking Understanding*, he writes:

> God is not a prisoner of any metaphysical scheme, including the scheme of eternal double
> decrees or the necessity of a universalist logic. While never arbitrary, God's grace is free;
> while freely given, God's grace is costly. Theology and the church have no authority
> either to declare that God must save all or that God can save only through the ministry

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[61] Heim, *The Depths of the Riches*, 110.
[62] Heim, *The Depths of the Riches*, 208.

and witness of the church. What the church is called to proclaim is the good news that there is no encumbrance on God's side to including all in the company of the redeemed.[63]

Migliore's non-obstructionism helpfully encapsulates the Trinitarian view that God's inherent relationality grants all religions the freedom to participate in revelation and salvation through Godself, and not any human doctrine. Theocentric freedom names how God's inherent Communion-In-Difference both 1) frees all religions from a singularly located ultimate destiny and 2) frees all religions to be their truest, fullest selves, in harmony and in difference. For Heim, this is a free relation that permits the existence of multiple religious ends. For Migliore, this is a freeing relationality that encounters no obstacles in being included in God's heavenly company. Both approaches articulate Acceptance as an unlimited, unobstructed "play-vista" of multiple religious terrains and ends that sounds much like the aforementioned theme park.

Knitter also notices how theocentric freedom allows each religion to tell its story as if it is the greatest story ever told, and hold up their particular destiny as the ultimate and universal end for all people. In this exchange of ultimate stories, Christians can and must speak of their Christ-centered destiny of *salvation*. This Christian ultimate story remarkably differs from the other ways that world religions speak of the ultimate destiny. In this differing, Christian salvation is shown to be one among many religious destinies that can and must be spoken about in the free space of the interreligious encounter. This freeing to tell one's religious story in the truest and fullest way applies to Hindu's hopefulness in *moksha* as the release from the cycles of rebirth and redeath, Judaism's journeying to *return* to YHWH, Islam's instruction to *submit* to Allah, Sikhism's solicitation to *unite* with Waheguru in the realm of truth, Buddhism's behest to achieve *nirvana* in the "blowing out" of suffering, the Indigenous Religious Traditions' (general)

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[63] Daniel Migliore, "The Finality of Jesus Christ and Religious Pluralism" in *Faith Seeking Understanding : An Introduction to Christian Theology*. Third edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2014), 344.

insistence upon the *interconnection* of all things material and spiritual, Confucianism's call to *social harmony*, Daoism's declaration of *flourishing*, Atheism's adjuration to *knowledge*, New Religious Movements' notions of *self-empowering spirituality*, and other claims of ultimate destiny. The diversity of this list shows that it is risky for Christians to tell their story of salvation as the greatest story ever told, not because the story is wrong or unethical, but because it is made vulnerable to the claims of everyone else is doing the same with their own diverse stories of ultimate destiny. It opens the possibility that another story of ultimate religious ends could be the greatest story ever told. Simultaneously, Christianity challenges other religions with the risk that the Christians had it right all along! Yet, the sheer diversity of these stories render the sharing open-ended. Acceptance ensures this inconclusive result, because the focus is not upon dominating the religious sphere (Replacement's explicit aim and Fulfillment's implicit result), but rather, freeing religious expression and existence. When religions and the religious are free to live in their full truth, the pressure for universality eases and the need for particularity intensifies.

Freedom names Acceptance's theological foundation for the communion-in-difference in the interreligious encounter. Acceptance memorably displays free religious expression and ends as "many mountains stretched across the heavenly terrain," where no mountain is higher than the other, "for each will be high enough for those who dwell on it to be fully satisfied on it."[64] Although the Christian mountain is not higher or lower than any other mountain, it can be the vantage point in which "one will be able to see and understand just how the diverse peaks of this heavenly skyline give expression to the diversity of divine life and to the diversity of God's relations with God's creatures."[65] Knitter's description of Acceptance allows us to say that Christians have a distinctive and relational role in the interreligious encounter. This role

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[64] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 202.
[65] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 202.

resonates with the "bilingual religiosity" of Thomas Merton, who insists that the more he learned his own Christian language, "the more he realized that there were things to say about the Divine that could only be said in other religious languages."[66] Merton shows how Acceptance advances a freeing relationality in which people of differing religions can adapt other heart languages for the Divine without surrendering their own. Thus, Christians are called to cultivate religious communion-in-difference as a way to be faithful to the inherent relationality of the triune God.

God's embodiment of religious diversity shows Christians how to let people of differing faiths be who they are without Christian imperial control, doctrinal definition, or ethical manipulation. This letting-be of non-control is a Christian gift to the world religions that shows what it is like to free religious existence and destiny in the shared space of the interreligious encounter, rather avoid the space for fear of being the dominated or the dominator. This life of non-control avoids forcing an agreement in order to recognize "the true otherness of God that is revealing itself to us in the "disagreeing" face of the religious other" and "in what is unclear and disagreeable [more clearly] than in what we can understand and affirm."[67] This is the Acceptance ideal: embodying the freeing faithfulness to the inherently relational – yet Different – Divine, to ensure that no one religion dominates everything in the worldly or heavenly sphere.

Knitter allows us to place the key Acceptance ideal besides its key real world limitation. Ideally, Acceptance brings forth this freeing relationality as a form of love that allows all people of faith to share a space and express their religious existence and destiny with the full conviction that it is the greatest story ever told. Yet, this Acceptance ideal fails to materialize into full reality, because its single-minded commitment to difference emphasizes the boundaries which

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[66] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 228. Knitter cites *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (New York: New Directions, 1975), 305-319; and Thomas Merton, *Thoughts on the East* (New York: New Directions, 1995).
[67] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 221.

preserve particular contexts over the bridges that create shared contexts. Knitter notices how this ideal relationality tends to materialize into "fenced-off" participations which sound less like a letting-be of differences and more like a letting-be of exclusivisms. It is not wrong to admit that diverse religions advance diverse unsurpassable truths and ultimate destinies. The concern is how Acceptance's serious expression of difference undermines its interreligious relationality.

Acceptance logic avoids the forced agreement of the religions, yet tends to cultivate a forced disagreement. Knitter illustrates this reality in terms of a neighborhood where the houses were built close together, yet each household decided to build a fence to claim their particular parcel of land. Knitter considers how these "good fences" embody how Acceptance logic ensures that "each religion has its own backyard," but to the detriment of the organic emergence of a "'commons' that all of them share."[68] Without this organic connection, the relational community flattens into a fenced-off participation, like a theme park that restricts visitors to riding only one roller coaster, to safeguard it from competing enjoyments. Acceptance admirably safeguards religious identities from being replaced or defined by another, yet takes the differing religious identity so seriously that it requires the fence to function not as a protector, but as a prison. Since the differing religious identity must be protected at all costs, inclusion is not enough – one's full religious existence is safeguarded by keeping differing others from *living with* each other.

The differing religious identity is necessitated over interreligious relationality. Difference becomes the prison that safeguards one's own beliefs through a distance from others, rather than a *prism* that safeguards one's own beliefs via a connection with others.[69] Thus, this single-mindedly serious Christian approach never realizes the theological ideal of the freeing faithfulness to the inherently relational God. Instead, the serious approach to Acceptance

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[68] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 183.
[69] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 224-228.

conflates two things: 1) God's inherent Communion-in-Difference which frees one to be their truest, fullest religious self in difference and in harmony with others and 2) the Trinitarian protection of communion-in-difference from replacement or definition by another religion. This conflation deadens interreligious life by emphasizing fenced-off views into differing religions to the detriment of opening up opportunities for religions to share vantage points, experiences, and destinies. Noticing Acceptance's limits is how contestant theology begins to unearth the freeing non-control of religion that is buried in the grave focus upon preserving religious otherness.

Overall, each model's ideal is buried by their grave emphases which deaden their interreligious relationality. Rather than focus upon these deadening realities which bury Christian interreligiosity in lifeless, grave-like reason, we now move to focus on the new patterns, forms, and rules which cultivate Christian interreligiosity from fertile, vista-like reason. This move ventures beyond the traditional schools of doctrine, ethics, and philosophy, and stretches toward the unorthodox studios of art, popular culture, and spirituality. Knitter signals the need for this move. He notices how Lindbeck tries to avoid the isolationism, relativism, and fideism of pluralism by insisting on "universal norms of reasonableness," or "something by which people in different religious communities can connect with each other and not be caught in their own prisons."[70] These "norms" make is thought or said accessible through what is *seen*.

The Apostle Paul began to recognize these norms when he adapted the writings and sculptures of Athenian culture for Christian purposes. Heim starts to discover something like these norms in the poetic vision of interreligiosity in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. This move calls for theologians to turn into artists. In Lindbeck's words, "efforts to bridge the religions are more a

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[70] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 226. Knitter quotes George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 130-131.

matter of "aesthetics" than logic, a job more for artists than theologians."[71] Knitter wonders how the differing artwork of differing cultures could possibly "create a means of communication that all can share in,"[72] but ends his consideration there. We continue beyond Knitter's consideration of Lindbeck's insight in a Heim-like way, by turning to a pop-culture vision of interreligiosity. The theologically and culturally significant PlayStation game *Xenogears* provides a video game vision of interreligiosity that holds together the ideals and realities of Replacement, Fulfillment, Mutuality, and Acceptance. These pairings are best seen through the lens of play, because play holds together radical contrasts. We will use the *Xenogears* vision of interreligiosity – the Nisan Angels Sculpture – to assess each model's capacity for interreligious relationality as a form of playing. This vision teaches that each model's interreligiosity lives to the extent that it outplays, rather than adopts, dialogical problems in the interreligious encounter. In 32-bit, pixelated light, this video game vision combines reasonable structures and artistic agility to contribute a launchpad for the play theology of religions that rises beyond grave dialogical problems.

II. *Xenogears* Spotlights Interreligious Relationality in Theologies of Religions

Following Apostle Paul's quotations of popular Athenian writings and Heim's turn to a popular Italian poem, we will consider a Japanese role-playing video game (RPG) for theological purposes. Originally released by Square in 1998 for the Sony PlayStation, Tetsuya Takahashi's *Xenogears* tells a complex story that features multilayered religious imagery and intricate interweavings of philosophical and theological themes. Without spoiling too much of the plot, the main characters learn that they are reincarnations of figures from previous ages. Also, some

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[71] George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age.* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 2009), *The Nature of Doctrine*, 130-131.
[72] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 226.

characters encounter Freudian aspects of the human personality, such as the "Id" that is powerfully destructively. These symbols and themes unfold throughout the general story, which concerns how Fei Fong Wong and others strive to free humanity from the control of corrupt organizations and a human-constructed predatory "god" called "Deus." The game is an immersive experience; over the span of 80+ hours, players explore a virtual world of diverse locations and terrains, and inhabit the storylines of many memorable characters, as if reading a long novel or watching a sprawling movie that lets one interact with the plot. We use the player-focused approach[73] to interpret *Xenogears* as an experiencing of interreligious relationality.

Beyond the immersive gameplay, *Xenogears* notably allows players to pilot gigantic fighting robots called "Gears," to fight battles, as they replace entire human armies. These Gears were discovered by the religious organization known as "The Ethos," which is an all-male monastic order who deeply influences the cultures and governments in *Xenogears*. These Gears contribute to the backdrop of the game's plot: the centuries' long border war which divides the Ignas continent into the Northern territory governed by the snowy industrial center of Kislev and Southern territories governed by the desert kingdom of Aveh. While The Ethos granted Kislev a decisive advantage by their donation of the Gears, Aveh would recover their losses with the help of "The Gebler," a special military force with advanced weaponry. Though this regional war divides people across religious and political lines, it serves to bring together the key protagonists of *Xenogears*, even though they each start their individual journeys within these different and differing contexts. Fei begins the game as an amnesiac painter/martial artist in the Aveh territory of Lahan Village, where he first befriends Citan, the mysterious, yet friendly doctor. Elly starts

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[73] Joshua A. Irizarry and Ita T. Irizarry, "The Lord is My Shepard: Confronting Religion in the Mass Effect Trilogy," *Religion in Digital Games: Multiperspective & Interdisciplinary Approaches* 5, (2014): 224-248. This player-focused approach helps explicate how video games "use the narrative as a mechanism to subtly engage players in conversations about ideology, faith, and free will, guiding and shaping their perspectives on religion."

out as a member of the Kislev army who invades Lahan Village. Bart is a desert pirate who is the crown heir to the Fatima throne that rules Aveh. Rico is a muscular, green-skinned and orange haired demi-human who is the champion of the Prison Battling Area in Kislev's imperial capital. Billy is a gun-toting priest who is dedicated to the Ethos religion and runs an orphanage. The events of the Kislev-Aveh War bring these protagonists together with others as they use the powerful Gears to end the cycles of battle and defeat the organizations who profit from conflict.

Fei and his friends gradually learn that the entire war is being staged by the Sacred Empire of Solaris, which is a hidden technopolis in the skies. Solaris manipulates both sides of the war through its religious arm (The Ethos) and its military arm (The Gebler), in order to control everything that happens on the planet's surface. Further, Solaris's hidden dominance of the surface derives from the true beginning of their world, which is an ancient secret. It turns out that all human life arrived on their planet because a spaceship carrying humans from another planet crashed onto its surface long ago. This crash was caused by something that those ancient humans constructed: "an interplanetary invasion system" that could destroy an entire planet. This "system" is an otherworldly hybrid of flesh and machine known as "Deus." The crash scattered Deus's body across the planet, where it began to undertake complicated efforts to reconstitute by mass-producing human beings, who would serve as the biological material for its new body. The ramifications of this plot point are theologically unsettling: it establishes that the Solarians are actively promoting a religion and a governance in which surface people are considered to be "Lambs" to be harvested, while "god" is a predatory entity who consumes human flesh and blood to rebuild itself. Fei and friends fight for freedom from this entity and all of the ways that it has entrapped humanity in its single-minded schemes of control. These friends also seek a home to belong to, amidst of world of imperial conflict and social divisions. Thus, *Xenogears*

"plays out" the search for the etymological promise of religion – the reconnection to the life of the Divine with others – amidst realities of religious manipulation and perversion.

Playing out the heart of *Xenogears* raises a crucial point: the game calls players to make their own decisions about the interplay of God, religion, relationality in human life. This call emerges through the game's two contrasting religious institutions: the aforementioned Ethos and the Nisan Orthodoxy, which is an all-female religious sect. The Ethos religion is symbolized as a cross with horns at the top, suggesting the hierarchical reality that the surface dwellers are "Lambs," and Solaris is their "Shepherd." The Ethos, created by Solaris, frames religion as the domination of the masses with both 1) humanly-constructed concepts of "god" that are tailor-made to prey upon the hopes of desperate people and 2) "sky people" facades of spiritual guidance, generosity and peace that actually hide predatory agendas to control surface dwellers. The Ethos turns surface dwellers into food for Deus and fuel for their selfish ambitions.

Meanwhile, the Nisan Orthodoxy offers an alternative framing of the interplay of God, religion, and relationality. This religious sect is a sisterhood dedicated to the teachings of the Holy Mother Sophia, a religious woman who embodied the hope and dignity that God's presence brought to the surface people. The Nisan religion is symbolized in the cross worn by Sophia, which is formed by separate, yet interconnected shards of light. The Nisan Cross conveys the belief that every individual is a "fragment" of God who is called to join with all humanity to constitute the whole of God. Being human means being flawed and weak, yet each individual also has unique talents and strengths. Unlike the predatory emphasis of the Ethos, Nisan's envisioning of God's "reunification" involves people coming together to use their individual strengths and talents to help each other while sharing common flaws and weaknesses. The Nisan

Orthodoxy frames religion as a relationality that leads to God by 1) devoting one's talents to another's weakness and 2) allowing one's flaws to be held by another's strength.

The divergent religions of *Xenogears* grant players two avenues to make decisions about the meaning of religion. The Ethos exhibits the decision to stick with the deadening realities of a single-minded religiosity. The Nisan Orthodoxy conveys the decision to embrace the enlivening ideal of interreligious relationality. While *Xenogears* does not contain a specific plot point in which players explicitly choose to affiliate with either organization, the game paints an inspiring picture of Nisan's serene sisterhood, as embodied by an iconic in-game painting of Sophia. This picture develops to the extent that deadening religiosity is associated with the inhumane villains, while interreligious relationality is embraced by Fei and his friends. Krelian, the leader of Solaris, dismisses interreligiosity when he concludes,

> Humans will never come to understand each other…All humans do is place themselves at a comfortable distance from each other and call that 'mutual understanding', 'spiritual unity', or 'true love'... but it is all lies! Man cannot associate with others without first deceiving themselves. That is the way that they were created."[74]

Krelian uses the reality of conflicting beliefs and practices to justify the Solarian control of the surface people. The antagonists see these differences as delusions and weaknesses of humanity.

Meanwhile, Fei and friends learn to see these differences as strengths, because they lead humans to lift each other up. After defeating opponents who teamed up against them, Elly (who is "reminiscent" of Sophia) validates the unifying power of weakness in her merciful appeal:

> Some things only the weak can feel... But weakness does not make them servile. It's because they are weak, that they can develop kindness…and never look down on people. That is where real human interaction comes from. Everyone has weaknesses…Your weakness drew you to each other…And made you grow strong. Never forget those feelings. When you all lived together side by side...[75]

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[74] Sheamon, "Xenogears – Game Script (Disc 2)," III. I. The Final Battle, GameFAQs, accessed March 4, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/5n7t9887.
[75] Sheamon, "Xenogears – Game Script (Disc 2)," III. C. The Anima Dungeons.

Elly's passionate speech describes a *living* together (rather than a serious agreeing or differing together) that is playful, because it holds together the radical contrasts of weakness and strength. Elly describes how weakness holds strength in the way that it does what strength alone cannot do – cultivate the kindness that renders others as a fellow person with common weaknesses, rather than a resource to be exploited. Yet, strength also holds weakness in the way that it does what weakness alone cannot do – cultivate connections with others as fellow human beings who have the capacity to deal with weaknesses via diverse talents and strengths. Crucially, Elly's speech articulates a relationality that can be used to frame a way of interreligiosity in which the enlivening ideals pull its deadening realities along the randomness of new patterns and new directions toward God, rather than letting the deadening realities bury the enlivening ideals in the grave of reason. In order to fully consider this insight, we must visit the Nisan Cathedral, where we will reflect upon the meaning of its video game vision of interreligious relationality.

This video game vision unfolds in the pixelated Cathedral in the country of the peaceful and religious country of Nisan with Fei, Citan, and Bart. The cavernous main hall is dimly lit by suspended candles and a ray of light that shines down from a stained-glass window adorned with Nisan's Cross. We hear the beautifully haunting hymn, "The Wounded Shall Advance Into the Light"[76] sung by eight nuns dressed in blue habits in front of an altar. As we look above the altar, we see a sculpture of two angels, with one wing each, reaching out to each other. A torch radiates the space between them. Marguerite Fatima, the young Holy Mother of Nisan, explains:

> Did you notice that the two great angels only have one wing each...? According to a legend handed down in Nisan...God could have created humans perfectly...But then, humans would not have helped each other...So that is what these great single-winged angels symbolizes...In order to fly, they are dependent on one another.[77]

[76] Asestir, "We The Wounded Shall Advance Into The Light - Xenogears Revival OST," YouTube video, 3:52, October 10, 2021, https://tinyurl.com/yc5eeytr. This is the vocal version of the original theme.
[77] Sheamon, "Xenogears – Game Script (Disc 1)," II. F. Nisan, GameFAQs, accessed March 4, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/444hfmhe.

As we take in this magnificent Nisan artistry, Dr. Citan Uzuki voices his intellectual insights:

> On further inspection, the left angel looks somewhat masculine...while the right one looks somewhat feminine. Now that is an unusual feature, is it not? Usually these depictions are not gender-specific. But these angels are clearly distinguishable as having opposing genders. And the space between them is the path from where god advents... Or could it be the path leading to god? Well... I do not know, it could be either, or even both.[78]

Citan's characteristically dense explication causes Margie to chuckle. Meanwhile, Bartholomew, the brash desert pirate, sees no need for the deep analysis. He favors a pragmatic approach, as he scoffs, "Hah! Forcing them to fly together...? It would be less bothersome if they could fly on their own, don't you think, Fei?"[79] Margie sighs, "Bart! You miss the deeper meaning and beauty of it. Someday I wish I could be of help to someone like that..."[80] Fei, the naïve martial artist, just shrugs and admits his confusion. Even in the video game realm of Nisan, the life of faith involves religious imagery that offers itself to ever-deepening recognition and bewilderment.

Citan, Margie, Bart, and Fei are different personalities whose responses to the Nisan Angels Sculpture frame the artwork as the aesthetic which creates a means of communication that all can share in. The Nisan Angels Sculpture functions as what Knitter and Lindbeck imagined to be a universal norm of reasonableness, and symbolizes the theological contribution of *Xenogears* as a whole: it is a video game vision that provides the mindset, habits, and language to make one's own decisions about the interplay of God, religion, and relationality in human life. Thus, *Xenogears* offers a playful lens to 1) discern Knitter's models as forms of play which hold together enlivening ideals with deadening realities and 2) evaluate their capacity to outplay dialogical problems of the interreligious encounter.

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[78] Sheamon, "Xenogears – Game Script (Disc 1)," II. F. Nisan.
[79] Sheamon, "Xenogears – Game Script (Disc 1)," II. F. Nisan.
[80] Sheamon, "Xenogears – Game Script (Disc 1)," II. F. Nisan.

A. Exclusivism as Assertive Distance

The Nisan Angels Sculpture envisions Replacement as a form of play that foregrounds its ideal of continual religious reformation over its emphasis upon the distance between Christianity and the religions. This foregrounding is conveyed by Citan's description of the space between the angels where God advents. Yet, the exclusivist "play" in the space of the interreligious encounter attempts to hold together the Replacement ideal and reality by prioritizing the Christian capacity to recognize the inadequacy of religion to the detriment of compassion and openness toward non-Christian religions. Carl Braaten embodies this approach with his genuine concern for other religions, yet primary intent to convey Jesus Christ as the sole source of salvation. Braaten admits "God reveals himself in many ways."[81] He also makes a striking point:

> [The Christian faith] makes a particular claim to truth: the all-fulfilling future of humankind and of the world's salvation has already arrived in Jesus of Nazareth, the Jew of Nazareth. Any church that either ceases to affirm the ultimacy of this event in the history of salvation or attempts to place alongside it other events of equal validity will fall into idolatry and apostasy. Just as the church in the third century could name and refute the heresy of Arianism, and just as the church in the twentieth century struggled against the apostasy of the Nazis' Aryan doctrine, so the church of the twenty-first century will be called upon to escape the deluge of neo-Gnosticism that places Jesus reverently into a pantheon of spiritual heroes.[82]

Braaten's "assertiveness" about the inadequacy of religion is an assertion of the Christian faith that is grounded in historical attempts to preserve the institutional Christian identity. This defense preserved Chalcedonian belief from the overemphasis of Jesus's humanity. It also preserved the kingdom of God from being conflated with a human empire. This distance from the homophonal "christianities" of Arianism and Aryanism prevented institutional Christianity from becoming a "supraconfessional philosophy of religion to which no believing community

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[81] Carl Braaten, "Hearing the Other: The Promise and the Problem of Pluralism," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 24 (October 1997): 395.
[82] Braaten, *No Other Gospel! Christianity Among the World's Religions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 13.

adheres."[83] Exclusivists preserve the scandal of the Gospel to avoid the theologically correct faith that all faith traditions can affirm, and the puppet faith which deifies human agendas.[84]

While exclusivism provides a history of clarifying Christian belief and activity against distortions and manipulations from within and without, it still does not overcome the conflation of Jesus Christ with *institutional* understandings and ideas about him.[85] We must remember that Jesus's identity and activity is not the church's sole possession. Rather, Jesus is the ground for the church's existence. He is present beyond church walls, in connection with all of humankind and creation. If Braaten and the exclusivists only notice the distance between the Nisan altar angels, then they miss the meaning of the hands that are reaching toward one another.

Exclusivism is a form of playing, but it does not outplay the dialogical problems of the interreligious encounter. Yes, exclusivism clarifies the Church's definition of Christianity. This is not a full articulation of faith, because it ignores the extra-ecclesial vantage points which are equally valid evaluations of Christianity's presence and activity throughout human history. Exclusivism preserves Christianity from being usurped by heretical and destructive belief systems claiming to be "Christian." Yet, this is not always convincing language, because Jesus ends up looking too much like a Church leader only sent to the Church, rather than the One given because "God so loved *the world*" (John 3:16, emphasis added). Exclusivism distances Christianity from movements that rationalize violence in the name of God. Yet, the only alternatives it offers to destroying other faiths are to isolate Christians from anything non-Christian or to convince non-Christians to replace their beliefs and practices with Christianity, as the only way to relate to them. Finally, exclusivism's move to keep the scandal of the Gospel

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[83] Braaten, *No Other Gospel!*, 10.
[84] Braaten, *No Other Gospel!*, 10.
[85] Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 320.

cuts the strings off of any attempt to make Christianity a puppet religion. Yet, this move tends to avoid the modern notions of "truth" which deplete the sense of connection between people. When viewed through the light of the Nisan Angels Sculpture, exclusivism is shown to be a form of play that holds together assertiveness and distance, yet fails to outmaneuver grave interreligious dialogical problems, due to its single-minded necessitation of Christian identity.

If Braaten and the exclusivists were to notice (as Citan does) that the space between the two angels is where God advents, then they would foreground the ideal that could navigate the inability to fully articulate faith – the continual reformation of religion, in light of who God shows Godself to be in the Person of Jesus Christ. Citan understands the distance between the Nisan Angels as an open space through which God relationally inclines one religion towards another. This open space between the two angels holds what each religion lacks on its own – a deepening recognition of God and a deepening connection to the other. The open space is the place of God's presence that inspires differing people of faith to share a way of continual reform. This way of reform involves moving away from (but not abandoning) the stable structures of one's religion and the moving toward new patterns and new forms which articulate the revelation. In this space of God's presence, revelation is foregrounded over religion. As one person of faith steps into this fuller understanding of God, they also stretch toward a fellow person of faith who is also reaching toward this space. This common stretching toward the space where God advents starts the movement toward a deeper connection with all religious others. Thus, the Nisan Angels Sculpture allows us to appreciate Replacement's limits when it foregrounds the ideal relationality of shared reform. Contestant theology puts these ever-new patterns of reforming religion into play to navigate the inability to fully convey faith.

B. Inclusivism as Compassionate Support

The Nisan Angels Sculpture envisions Fulfillment as a form of play that foregrounds its ideal of "becoming less" over its emphasis upon the need to support differing others as if they were incomplete Christians. This foregrounding is conveyed through Margie's explanation that the one-winged angels convey God's intention for imperfect, yet differently talented humans to help each other. Yet, the inclusivist "play" in the space of the interreligious encounter attempts to hold together Fulfillment's ideal and reality by prioritizing Christian evaluations of a religion's salvific validity to the detriment of openness toward and freedom for differing people, regarding them as incomplete Christians rather than their true and full non-Christian selves.

The inclusivist emphasis entails varying degrees. I use the term *chill-out inclusivism* to describe the stance of welcoming religious others by minimizing the threat that differing beliefs and practices pose to Christian identity. Braaten explains how Barth embodies chilling out:

> Barth thinks that Christians have taken human unbelief and godlessness too seriously… Christians have been too skeptical, pessimistic, and humorless. Barth says…"we are summoned to believe in Him, and in His victorious power, not in the invincibility of any non-Christian, anti-Christian, or pseudo-Christian worldliness which confronts Him. The more seriously and joyfully we believe in Him, the more we shall see such signs in the worldly sphere, and the more we shall be able to receive true words from it."[86]

Braaten hears the note of wisecracking humor in Barth's satirical "inclusion" of all religions as practices that are judged and overcome by God. Barth chills out with a parodic positivity toward other religions because God – not human belief systems – has taken care of salvation for everything and everyone in God's own way. Hence, his hope in God's will for all to be saved:

> There is no good reason why we should forbid…openness to the possibility that in the reality of God and man in Jesus Christ there is contained much more than we might expect and therefore the supremely unexpected withdrawal of that final threat, i.e., that in the truth of this reality there might be contained the super-abundant promise of the final deliverance of all men…an *apokatastasis* or universal reconciliation.[87]

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[86] Braaten, *No Other Gospel!*, 60. Braaten quotes Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1, §69.2, 122.
[87] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.1, §70.3, 477-478.

Barth's chill-out inclusivism frames compassion in terms of insisting that everyone is good enough to be saved, even if no one is automatically safe from being sent to hell.[88] Everyone, especially non-Christians, needs the support of God, which requires the diminishment of human religiosity, Romans 3:4-style: "Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true."

Chill-out inclusivism is witty, yet somewhat irresponsible; it does not adequately address the historical damages that Christians have dealt to traditions that they have not taken seriously enough. Thus, Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck moves to assess, rather than satirize, religion. Lindbeck intends to pay careful attention to every religion's self-description in order to "purify and enrich their heritages, to make them better speakers of the languages they have."[89] Meanwhile, I frame *Nostra Aetate* as *fired-up inclusivism* that pushes beyond just understanding other religions, explicating how Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam provide "a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men."[90] Vatican II instructs Christians to actively enter into "dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions" in their witness of Christ, "in whom men may find the fullness of religious life."[91] Karl Rahner extends this compassion further, insisting that Jesus Christ is freely at work in world religions. Thus, everyone can be included into the saved people of God, to the extent that they are faithful to the knowledge of God that is made known to them in their own traditions. Rahner walks past Barth's satirizing of religion, Lindbeck's intent to understand religious otherness, and Vatican II's exhortation for dialogue to affirm that Christ can bring the people of differing religions into a saving relationship with God.[92]

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[88] Braaten, *No Other Gospel!*, 61.

[89] George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age. 25th Anniversary Edition* (Louisville: Westminster Knox Press, 1984), 47-48.

[90] Paul VI, *Nostra Aetate,* accessed March 9, 2022, Vatican.va., 2.

[91] Paul VI, *Nostra Aetate,* accessed March 9, 2022, Vatican.va., 2.

[92] Karl Rahner, "On the Importance of the Non-Christian Religions for Salvation," in *Theological Investigations,* vol. 18 (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1969), 289-295.

Inclusivists open the way for a compassionate Christian response to the people of other religions, but do not overcome the lack of an explicit affirmation of their salvific value. They focus on the hands of the Nisan altar angels reaching toward each other, but grant meaning on a singular angel to the detriment of understanding the other angel. Inclusivism is a form of playing, but it does not outplay the dialogical problems of the interreligious encounter. Inclusivism conveys God's unified will to save all people through the particularity of Jesus Christ and the universality of the Holy Spirit. This is not a full articulation of faith, because it only describes the salvific value of Christianity, without speaking of other religious destinies. Inclusivism extends a welcoming hand to other religions. Yet, this gesture is more about an uncertain hope that God will figure it out for them, and less about a convincing affirmation of a different set of beliefs and practices. Inclusivism engages the problem of religious violence with a friendlier way to impose a foreign Christian identity on people whose beliefs and practices are viewed as incomplete without being "full-filled" by Christians and Christianity. Finally, inclusivism's compassion does cultivate connections, albeit in an indecisive approach that succumbs to liquescent truth, which sometimes takes religions too seriously or too lightly, and fails to sustain connections. When viewed through the light of the Nisan Angels Sculpture, inclusivism is shown to be a form of play that holds together compassion and support, yet fails to outmaneuver grave interreligious dialogical problems, due to its single-minded necessitation of Christian support.

If the inclusivists notice (as Margie does) that the Nisan Angels depend on each other in order to fly, then they would foreground the ideal that could navigate the lack of persuasive religious language – the mutual self-diminishment in which one's self-emptying word of love fills what another lacks in their life of faith, and vice versa, as a response to and reception of God's bettering and completing that which everyone lacks. Margie understands the reaching

hands of the Nisan Angels in terms of this self-emptying; it is the pouring out of one's strengths and talents into another's flaws and weaknesses, as a way of helping them "fly" by granting new ways to think, live, and talk out recognitions of God. The reaching hands also convey the reception of the other person's strengths and talents into one's own flaws and weaknesses. The reaching hands convey this shared experience of "becoming less" as a mode of expression that fills in for the lack of persuasive language in the life of faith. Thus, the Nisan Angels Sculpture allows us to appreciate Fulfillment's limits when it foregrounds the ideal relationality of becoming less. Contestant theology puts these ever-new patterns of mutual diminishment into play to navigate the lack of persuasive religious language.

C. Pluralism as Open Coexistence

The Nisan Angels Sculpture envisions Mutuality as a form of play that foregrounds its ideal of "becoming more" over its emphasis upon harmonic religiosity. This foregrounding emerges when Citan interprets the two angels helping each other progress toward God. Yet, the pluralist "play" in the space of the interreligious encounter attempts to hold together the Mutuality ideal and reality by prioritizing Christian ways to embrace the differences and salvific validity of other religions over ways of requiring or manipulating other religions to be more Christian. Hick does this with his theocentric, rather than Christocentric, "universe of faiths," in which Ultimate Reality is the "sun" that is shared and orbited by all religions.[93] Hick's pluralism explicates religious coexistence as a map in which one faith is located alongside of another. He anticipates that "such names as 'Christianity', 'Buddhism', 'Islam', 'Hinduism', will no longer describe…configurations of men's religious experience and belief," but instead, the future

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[93] John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, Ltd., 1993), 130-132.

convergence may "obsolete the sense of belonging to rival ideological communities."[94] Hick sees

coexistence as a harmonic human reality that is gradually overtaking religious distinctions.

Paul Tillich and Jürgen Moltmann also develop this constellation of religions. Both insist

that other religions improve, correct, and complete Christianity. Tillich insists that interreligious

dialogue protects world from a seductive "quasi-religion," such as Aryanism or Fascism.[95] He

calls out religious coexistence, chill-out inclusivity, and exclusivist "assertiveness":

> Does our analysis demand either a mixture of religions or the victory of one religion, or
> the end of the religions altogether? We answer: None of these alternatives! A mixture of
> religions destroys in each of them the concreteness which gives it its dynamic power. The
> victory of *one* religion would impose a particular religious answer on all other particular
> answers…For the question of the ultimate meaning of life cannot be silenced as long as
> men are men. Religion cannot come to an end, and a particular religion will be lasting to
> the degree in which it negates itself as a religion. Thus Christianity will be a bearer of the
> religious answer as long as it breaks through its own particularity.[96]

Tillich's pluralism emerges from his conviction that religiosity endures in human experience,

whether or not the religions coexist, compete, or collapse. Moltmann shares this optimism, but

describes a more expansive dialogue and reception of the other. He writes:

> The fellowship in dialogue of the religions would be misunderstood if it went under the
> slogan: religions of the world unite against growing irreligious secularism or anti-
> religious Communism! [Rather], inter-religious dialogue must be expanded by dialogue
> with the ideologies of the contemporary world. Together with them, it must ultimately be
> related to the people who are living, suffering and dying in the world today.[97]

Moltmann's conclusion puts openness into play to confront global suffering and injustice.

However, objectors note that this openness "leads to thin generalities that fail to represent well

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[94] Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 146.
[95] Paul Tillich, "A View of the Present Situation: Religions, Quasi-Religions, and Their Encounters" in *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963) 1-25.
[96] Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 96-97.
[97] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 161-162.

any particular religious tradition."[98] The pluralists value the two Nisan angels, yet struggle to find meaning in the fact that the one-winged angels are not identical.

Pluralism is a form of playing, but it does not outplay the dialogical problems of the interreligious encounter. Yes, pluralism describes a Christian vision of harmonious dialogue and global ethics. This is not a full articulation of faith, because these categories fail to include the particular Christian claims about the Kingdom of God which challenge other religious destinies and dominant global ethics. Pluralism grants an affirming and inclusive common ground for all religions. Yet, this is an abstract space which flattens religious identities into unconvincing facsimiles. Pluralism impressively counters the problem of religious violence with religious cooperation for the global good. Yet, this move does not acknowledge the differences which led to historical aggressions. Finally, pluralism's openness cultivates a shared religious mindset, lifestyle, and language. However, this move tends to side-step the connection-depleting sense of "truth" in modern times, by envisioning differences as obstacles to connection, rather than valid parts of a person's religious identity. The light of the Nisan Angels casts pluralism as a form of play that holds together openness and coexistence, yet fails to outmaneuver grave interreligious dialogical problems, due to its single-minded necessitation of religious harmony.

If the pluralists notice (as Citan does) that a path to God is found in the way that the two angels share space, similarities, *and* differences, then they would foreground the ideal that could navigate the problem of religious violence – the transformative enrichment of adding one's religious self into the shared pointing to the divine, religious experiencing, and responsibility for healing the world as a way to usher in the Reign of God with a different person of faith. Citan understands the presence of the two angels in terms of this self-sharing. One's presence in the

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[98] Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 328.

interreligious space expands the singular religious dimensionality of another, because one puts their different beliefs and practices into play. The resultant multidimensional perspective enables a person to recognize God in and beyond their home context. The shared presence of the one-winged angels depicts this embrace of similarities and differences without the quantum of violence. Thus, the Nisan Angels Sculpture allows us to appreciate Mutuality's limits when it foregrounds the ideal relationality of becoming more. Contestant theology puts these ever-new patterns of transformative enrichment into play to navigate the problem of religious violence.

D. Trinitarianism as Free Participation

The Nisan Angels Sculpture envisions Acceptance as a form of play that foregrounds its ideals of free religious existence and destiny over its dismissal of a common religious ground. *Xenogears* conveys this foregrounding through Bart's crass, yet meaningful comment about letting the angels fly on their own, rather than forcing them to fly together. It looks like Bart adopts exclusivism, but he is actually complaining against being *forced* to fly together. He implies that the two angels can freely decide to fly together, despite sharing space with differing body types and occupying different positions. Bart implies that freedom can be held together with difference. Yet, the Trinitarian "play" in the space of the interreligious encounter attempts to hold together Acceptance's ideal and reality by prioritizing religious participation-with-difference over religious communion-in-difference, to echo God's inherently relational nature.

Veli-Matti Kärkäinnen clarifies the centrality of the Trinity in this free religious diversity. He points out that modern theologians emphasize a multidimensional unity of "threeness" rather than one-dimensional "unity" when talking about the Trinity, as a "kind of dynamic ontology

[making] room for a unity that is not antagonistic to diversity within one Godhead."[99]

Trinitarians say that God's inherent diversity creates and affirms religious diversity in varying degrees, either emphasizing the role of God or the existence of diversity in describing theocentric freedom. For evangelical theologians Gerald McDermott and Harold Netland, religious differences are only valid to the extent that they reflect the Bible's witness of the triune God:

> We know from Scripture that God has purposely revealed himself to all human beings through nature and conscience. We can also know with certainty that God has revealed his work to save his people and form them into a family in fellowship with the triune society through Israel, Jesus Christ, and the church. But whenever we encounter beauty or goodness or truth in other religions, we must compare it to what we find in Jesus Christ in order to distinguish deeper differences from surface similarities and to bring out the richness of what God has revealed to us. We must also be humble when we speculate about how that truth or goodness came to be recognized and displayed … At the end of the day, as it were, there is no way apart from the tri-personal God's self-revelation to come to know the true God—or even a part of his truth, beauty, or goodness.[100]

Cautious Trinitarianism relies on the biblical account of God's inherent relationality to imagine possibilities of truth, beauty, and goodness in religions. Yet, these possibilities are tempered as somewhat-suspicious developments that must be evaluated by what Christians find in Christ.

The cautious Trinitarian notion of "God teaching God" differs from the *wild Trinitarianism* held by Heim and Migliore, who believe God reveals Godself beyond Christian contexts. In this view, it is less that the truth, beauty, and goodness of other religions must live up to the standard embodied by Christ, and more that the full experience of salvation is found in "a relationship in three dimensions: with God, with other humans, and with the rest of creation."[101] This framing of salvation is relational because the triune God is "unconditionally open" to all creatures, and wills to bring every person into full communion with God and all of

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[99] Veli-Matti Kärkäinnen, *Christian Theology in the Pluralistic World: A Global Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2019), location 1639, Kindle.
[100] Gerald R. McDermott and Harold A. Netland, *A Trinitarian Theology of Religions: An Evangelical Proposal* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 120-121.
[101] Heim, *The Depths of the Riches,* 75-76.

God's creatures, via a person's free relation with God.[102] Migliore understands the free relationality generated from God's will in terms of God removing every obstacle from God's side that would block anyone from a heavenly destiny.[103] Heim insists that God's relational will makes salvation different for every person, because the diverse choices undertaken in free relationality generate multiple religious ends.[104] Thus, wild Trinitarianism discerns the affirmation of religious differences in God's inherently relational nature. Yet, when it comes to the Nisan Angels Sculpture, both would notice the diversity of the angels' bodies, yet struggle to interpret the meaning of their close proximity to one another as a shared space.

Trinitarianism is a form of playing, but it does not outplay the dialogical problems of the interreligious encounter. Indeed, Trinitarianism grants the space for the true expression of one's own religious existence. However, similar to exclusivism, this is not a full articulation of faith, because its concept of "communion-in-difference" emphasizes difference to the detriment of speaking about communion with neighboring religious vantage points. Trinitarianism preserves one's distinct religious identity from being absorbed into a differing or dominant belief system. Yet, this move to keep one's faith safe from another fails to express one's convincing love language for one's own faith as the best story ever told that is worthy of full commitment. While the wild concept of the Trinity envisions inter-relationality and inter-penetration as the perichoretic dance shared by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the cautious reality of Trinitarianism tends to builds fences to reduce the threat of religious violence, which serves to keep religious communities away from one another for the sake of peace, but fails to bring them together to prevent future conflicts. Finally, Trinitarianism's freedom cultivates a wide variety of religious

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[102] Heim, *The Depths of the Riches,* 75-76.
[103] Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding*, 344.
[104] Heim, *The Depths of the Riches*, 76.

mindsets, lifestyles, and languages. Without a common ground, this diversity actually exacerbates the modern sense of liquescent truth that deadens one's sense of connection with others. When viewed through the light of the Nisan Angels Sculpture, Trinitarianism is shown to be a form of play that holds together freedom and participation, yet fails to outmaneuver grave interreligious dialogical problems, due to its single-minded necessitation of religious difference.

If the Trinitarians notice (as Bart does) that there is a way for the differing angels to share the same space without being forced to fly together, then they would foreground the ideal that could navigate the connection-depleting sense of modern "truth" – the freeing faithfulness to the relationally different God and the religious other. This freedom is a way of flying in the shared space that does not necessitate harmony or dissonance, but rather, one's voluntary presence. This presence is an oscillation of voluntary connection *and* difference, which Bart sees in the angels flying "on their own" by freely flying together and apart. Thus, the Nisan Angels Sculpture allows us to appreciate Acceptance's limits when it foregrounds the ideal relationality of unifying freedom. Contestant theology puts these ever-new patterns of communion-in-difference into play to navigate the connection-deadening liquescent truth of modern times.

The Nisan Angels Sculpture exhibit inclusivism, exclusivism, pluralism, and Trinitarianism as forms of play, in which it is possible to foreground their enlivening ideals over their deadening realities to illustrate their capacity for interreligious relationality. Yet, framing each model as a form of play also illustrates how their single-minded emphases undermine their capacity for interreligious relationality, making them too rigid to outmaneuver the dialogical problems of the interreligious encounter. Crucially, this sculpture of Nisan Angels who float apart yet fly together is the video game display of the agility that resonates with Paul's look at the Athenian idols, Dante's visions in the *Divine Comedy*, and Knitter's realization that

theologians of religions must become artists. Knitter's point is reinforced and reinvented in this chapter's conclusion, which considers the dialogical problems of the interreligious encounter as the "grave" that entraps serious approaches, but not the playfulness of contestant theology.

III. Statement of Dialogical Problems

Previously, we used Paul's exclamation to draw out the crucial message at play in each of Knitter's models of the theologies of religions, in order to assess their ability to outplay the dialogical problems of interreligious relationality in the playful light of *Xenogears*. These moves led us to realize that these theologies of religions cannot outmaneuver these problems, because the "dead" seriousness of their single-minded emphases only clarifies the grave problems of inarticulation, non-persuasiveness, violence, and fragmentation without offering a way beyond them. The major theologies of religions speak into the serious space of the interreligious encounter. However, this serious space is mired in dialogical problems which continually undermine the dialogue and connection between different people of faith. When theologies of religions are unable to navigate and outmaneuver these problems, their reliable structures of reason function as a grave that entraps their adherents in interreligious lifelessness. Knitter notices this deadening rigidity with a "moratorium" on theologies of religions in favor of a comparative "theology for dialogue."[105] We do not follow Knitter's move, but we do advance his logic to clarify "dead" seriousness as the single-mindedness of the major theologies of religions that cannot outmaneuver interreligious dialogical problems by reason alone.

The four dialogical problems express Dupuis's concern about every religious faith being unable to "express itself in, and be transposed to, another."[106] First, the inability to fully

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[105] Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 203-205.
[106] Dupuis, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 384.

articulate faith undermines the dialogical premise, because people cannot share what they cannot express. Second, the lack of religious language that changes hearts and inspires action calls dialogical adequacy into question. The non-persuasiveness of Jesus's human face in other religions and the non-persuasiveness of the religious other's face in Christian contexts reflects the increasing powerlessness of secular logic.[107] Third, this non-persuasiveness is not only noticed by theologians and ethicists, but also terrorists who exacerbate the increasingly tragic problem of violence in sacred spaces.[108] Fourth, these atrocities, and all dialogical problems, are caught up in the modern "de-absolutizing and "de-objectifying" of truth that makes it dependent on a subject's fragmented language, view of reality, and expression.[109] Each dialogical concern suggests that descriptions of Christ's presence in another religion means nothing to differing people. These concerns also suggest that descriptions of differing faiths mean nothing to Christians. These problems weaponize reliable structures of reason in order to deaden connections between religions and disqualify dialogue among diverse people.

Yet, such a verdict misses the reality that religious mindsets, lifestyles, and languages are still shared in ways that reason alone does not fully articulate or control. Thus, we ask two questions which can expand our view beyond these concerns. First, how can the shared space of the interreligious encounter be understood as something other than a serious space? Second, how can the stable structures of reason be anything other than a lifeless grave that buries interreligiosity? In other words, how do we revive theologies of religions from the "dead"

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[107] Daniel P. Scheid, "Introduction to Religion and Ecology" (class lecture, Theological Ethics, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA, March 28, 2019). Scheid explains how objective facts and reasoning about climate change often fail to persuade people to do something about it, "because there is no rationality that we can all agree on. Even objective data is under dispute. Yet, even secular people have religious tendencies and reverences, such as the ceremony of Presidential inaugurations, royal weddings, and the habits of Christmas shopping. These tendencies bring out the reality that we need more than facts."

[108] "Brenton Tarrant - The Great Replacement Manifesto (PDF)," The Great Replacement, University of Rochester, accessed March 29, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/mse9zvsj.

[109] Dupuis, *Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, 284-286.

seriousness mired in dialogical problems with the help of non-seriousness and the vision of the interreligious play-vista? This is the question mark of our theological interrobang whose exclamation point takes the form of the play theology of religions.

IV. Proposed Solution to Dialogical Problems

A play theology of religions can breathe fresh insight into outplaying the dialogical problems of the interreligious encounter by continually perpetuating the game-like lifestyle of being grasped by God alongside of another. This game meets the ever-confining seriousness of dialogical problems with the ever-expanding playfulness of interreligious relationality that is biblically evident in Peter's openness to Cornelius and Paul's exclamation in the Areopagus. Contestant theology uses the playfulness of biblical interreligiosity to unearth and weave together the buried ideals of the major theology of religions into a quadri-directional and quadri-dimensional Christian movement with differing people re-envisioned as religious playmates.

Upward, contestant theology adopts the *bewilderment* that oriented the early Christians toward their religious playmates. This is a mindset of continually reforming religion that answers the inability to fully articulate faith. Downward, contestant theology accepts the *humiliation* that Peter and Paul share with their religious playmates. This is the mutual diminishment that answers the connection-deadening absence of persuasive religious language. Leftward, contestant theology follows the *un-limiting* of intent that Peter and Paul share with their religious playmates. This is the transformative enrichment that reroutes the destructive quantum of violence towards the cultivation of relationality. Rightward, contestant theology seeks the *recreation* that Peter and Paul share with their religious playmates. This unifying freedom is generated by God's Communion-In-Difference, Whose relational holiness and wholeness

outmaneuver the de-absolutizing and de-objectifying sense of modern truth which fragments human connection, awareness, and expression. These moves present contestant theology as the play theology of religions that holds together the *reason* in the Christian foundation that stands apart from other religions with the *randomness* in the Christian theological agility that breathes and lives with the other religions. This point further reveals the *contestant* term to be a playful portmanteau of the "Protestant" and "Catholic" labels, to the extent that it holds together the Protestant impulse to encourage new formations of particular denominations with the Catholic impulse to encourage the universality of Christian faith. In etymological and theological ways, contestant theology conveys the artistically theological agility that was born in God, adopted by Peter and Paul, noticed by Heim, desired by Knitter, and played out in *Xenogears*.

In order for contestant theology to maintain the agility that outplays the dialogical problems of the interreligious encounter, it must incorporate the ideals of each serious theology of religions without adopting a single-minded theological rigidity. The overreliance on seriousness does not overcome these problems, because it ossifies the stable structures of reasoning into an ever-deadening grave that buries one's sense of connection with God and others. Instead, the reintroduction of non-seriousness into theology provides the new forms and patterns of randomness which vivify dead structures of reason into an ever-enlivening game that unearths one's sense of connection with God and the other. Overall, this chapter describes how interreligious relationality is born "in God" in ways that speak into the serious space of the interreligious encounter. Chapter 2 describes the interreligious encounter as more than a serious space, by illustrating how play theology carries the theologies of religions out of "dead" seriousness, in order to exclaim "We Live" on the play-vista of interreligious relationality.

CHAPTER 2
"WE LIVE": PLAY THEOLOGY REVIVES THEOLOGIES OF RELIGIONS FROM "DEAD" SERIOUSNESS

Peter's openness in the tanner's house, Paul's exclamation in the Areopagus, Dante's journey in the *Divine Comedy*, and gamers playing through *Xenogears's* Nisan Cathedral are biblical, literary, and virtual expressions of connecting the "In God" with the "We Live" of the interreligious space. Each example illustrates how play theology is able to revive theologies of religions from "dead" seriousness through its biblical design, spiritual/ethical application, and theological scope. Chapter 1 provided the biblical design for this revival, via the playful interpretation of Scripture, which recognized how God and biblical personalities hold together randomness and reason in their openness and exclamation toward the other. This biblical design of play theology names the outmaneuverability that envisions the space of the interreligious encounter as something more than its dialogical problems which deaden the sense of connection with God and others. Chapter 2 envisions the space of the interreligious encounter as a play-vista, by calling attention to the original union of seriousness and non-seriousness in the history of ideas, and assigning a higher order of meaning to non-seriousness. Foregrounding non-seriousness over seriousness enables the repurposing of spirituality and ethics in terms of play. The spiritual/ethical application of play theology functions to bring the powerful aliveness of Christian playfulness into the response toward a person of a different faith and into sharing the space of the interreligious encounter. The biblical design and spiritual/ethical application of play theology set the stage for its theological scope, in which a theology of religions can be articulated in play terms, as the contestant theology described in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

This chapter makes three moves to explain how play theology revives Christian thought, spirituality, relationality and epistemology out of the grave of "dead" seriousness. First, we will describe God grasping us with the powerful aliveness of play theology in five categories. This is the "We Live" that characterizes the character of many theological writings that is not named as play, because theologians do not presume that play's non-seriousness has an order of meaning that is comparable to seriousness. This move enlivens the theology of religions that is still buried in the grave of reason. Understanding the powerful aliveness of play theology leads into the second move, which follows David Miller's reintroduction of non-seriousness into theology in *Gods and Games*. Miller crucially explains why the overreliance on seriousness hinders theological thought and expression. Miller also envisions play as a new mythology for saying the theological things that we really want to say in the context of everyday life, in which theology becomes "theograffiti." Miller brings movement to the theology of religions buried in the grave of reason. The third move picks up where Miller leaves off, by connecting biblical theology to play theology. Paul's Acts 17:28 exclamation frames how we stretch beyond Miller's starting point, in ways which are clarified by the insights of philosophical, theological, pop-cultural, and contemplative figures. These are four biblically playful motions in which one plays with religious playmates via 1) the thought-world of identifying in God (*theograffiti*), 2) the spirituality of living with God (*theogility*), 3) the relationality of moving with God (*theoreography)*, and 4) the epistemology of having being in God (*theality*). These motions enliven and elasticize what is otherwise a rigid and lifeless Christian presence in the space of the interreligious encounter. Chapter 2 maps the journey through which the theology of religions bursts out of the grave of interreligious dialogical problems and unto the ever-unfolding play-vista of interreligious relationality, via the powerful aliveness and movement of play theology.

I. The Powerful Aliveness of Play Theology

Play theology puts the interrobang (the question of primal premise combined with the exclamation of the primal promise) to any attempt to empirically grasp God. The interrobang opens the way for play theology to say that God grasps us, by insisting that players can continually recognize God, because God is the original, ultimate, and everlasting Player Whose Play forever generates, validates, and sustains human play. When God's play is described as making a way out of no way, we claim that God's new and unpredictable patterns of randomness grasp stable structures of reason. In this grasping, God's randomness multidimensionalizes reason by expanding the boundaries of possibility and multiplying the kind of experienceable good. K.B. Jones notes these expanded boundaries in God enabling "senior citizens to become parents," a fish to carry Jonah through deep waters, and similar Old Testament miracles.[1] Likewise, Heim clarifies how God multiplies the kinds of experienceable good by pointing to God's triune nature. Heim does not only focus on how the Trinity multiplies relations with God, but also notices "The Trinity is striking in its stubborn refusal to subtract from these relations, its refusal to unify by reduction or absorption."[2] In the Trinity, Heim recognizes God's commitment to multiply, rather than restrict, the kinds of experienceable good for all people. Drawing from the Trinitarian insights of Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas, Heim advances his own claim:

> It is God's reality as Trinity that generates the multiplicity of dimensions that allow for that variety of relations. God's threefoldness means that salvation is necessarily a characteristic communion in diversity. It also permits human responses to God to limit themselves within the terms of one dimension. It makes possible, but not necessary, the realization of religious ends other than salvation.[3]

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[1] Kirk Byron Jones, *Holy Play: The Joyful Adventure of Unleashing Your Divine Purpose* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), 112.
[2] S. Mark Heim, *The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends.* Sacra Doctrina (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001), 217.
[3] Heim, *The Depth of the Riches*, 181.

Heim's notice of God's threefoldness grasping the singular dimension of human responses to God is his version of randomness pairing with reason, which is much like Jones's understanding of Old Testament miracles. Both scholars insist that God orients the finite toward the Infinite. God's grasp orients creatures toward communion with Godself, all of God's creatures, and all of God's space, even though creatures and creation are finite. God's grasping of creaturely life is the play that pairs randomness and reason, enabling life in the way that God makes out of no way. God's playfulness is not solely "survival" that preserves finite living through troubles, nor is it just "revival" that perpetuates finite life beyond its ending. This is *theovival* – the *powerful aliveness* experienced in God expanding the boundaries of possibility (survival) *and* multiplying the kinds of good (revival) for finite humans in human play.

Play theology can describe *theovival* – the God-given powerful aliveness – because its vantage point of play can hold together concepts which are not reconcilable to finite reason alone, in its recognition and expression of God. Martin Luther's notion of the "dual office" of God helps us to understand how theovival incorporates this radical reconciliation. Arguing against academic separations of the letter that kills and the Spirit that gives life, Luther insists that they are connected in the biblical testimony of God. Luther writes:

> These…are the two works of God, praised many times in Scripture; he kills and gives life, he wounds and heals, he destroys and helps, he condemns and saves, he humbles and elevates, he disgraces and honors, as is written in Deuteronomy 32 [:39], I Kings 2 [I Sam. 2:6-8], Psalm 112 [:7-8], and in many other places… The letter does not allow anyone to stand before his wrath. The Spirit does not allow anyone to perish before his grace. Oh, this is such an overwhelming affair that one could talk about it endlessly![4]

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[4] Martin Luther, "Concerning the Letter and the Spirit from Answer to the Hyperchristian, Hyperspiritual, and Hyperlearned Book by Goat Emser in Leipzig (1521)." In *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, Edited by Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 88.

While Luther is primarily discussing biblical interpretation, he crucially points out how God grasps creatures through a radical reconciliation of contrasts which are impossible according to a single-minded mode of finite human reason. God's dual office includes killing in a way that grants life, wounding in a way that heals, destroying in a way that helps, condemning in a way that saves, humbling in a way that elevates, and disgracing in a way that honors. In the bounds of finite human logic and potential, there is no way that these opposing activities can play together. Yet, God the original Player finds a way – out of no way – to pair these radical contrasts, in the Person who identifies himself as "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6-7). Jesus Christ – the ultimate Player – is the visible and relational embodiment of this radical reconciliation, being the Person who is killed yet alive, wounded yet healed, destroyed yet resurrected (helped), condemned yet saved, humbled yet elevated, and disgraced yet honored. Through this One in Whom divinity and humanity play together, the Holy Spirit – the everlasting Player – enables humanity to live in Jesus's way, truth, and life, as those who are dead yet alive, wounded yet healed, destroyed yet resurrected, condemned yet saved, humbled yet elevated, and disgraced yet honored. Overall, Luther's description of God's dual office grants biblio-theological language for describing the radical pairing of contrasts which characterize play theology's theovival. These pairings convey the powerful aliveness made possible in God that is rendered recognizable in play, despite reason's inability to grasp the premises for such an existence.

Theovival is the human sense of unhinderable "ever-being" recognized in the experience of being grasped by God, in which one is un-bounded from finite impossibilities by becoming in-bounded within God's ever-expanding boundaries of possibilities and ever-multiplying kinds of good. In simpler terms, it is the way that God enables humans to keep thinking, living, and talking out their life in God that is not thwarted by their finite thoughts, presence, and language.

To be sure, it is good to embrace our human limitations, because they ground and cultivate a healthy sense of powerful aliveness in recognizable ways, sacred and secular – in play and in worship. Placing our human limitations within God's creative nature and generous purposes enables a theological articulation of human desire, design, and destiny for the sake of God's glory and human good. This is dramatically different from other articulations of everlasting human existence, such as transhumanism, which envisions a destiny not in terms of God's benevolence nor human existence, but rather, as a technologically manufactured "posthuman" existence.[5] This comparison acknowledges that powerful aliveness can be experienced and described beyond the contexts of play and worship. However, the playground is where this aliveness is most freely and convincingly articulated in human terms. Likewise, the sacred place is where this aliveness receives its highest and deepest recognition in human terms. Pairing play with the sacred describes theovival – play theology's "In-God-We-Live"-ness.

The next sections consider play theologians' aesthetic, preparatory, political, therapeutic, and participatory perspectives to discern theovival in play and in worship. These perspectives correspond to play's newness, non-anxiety, non-practicality, venture, and vibrancy,[6] which locate the human openness to theovival in everyday life. This correspondence frames theovival as a relatable and reliable launchpad for contestant theology, the play theology of religions.

A. Newness: Play's Aesthetic Enlivening

Newness names the aspect of theovival in which God grasps us by expanding possibilities and multiplying kinds of good through the aesthetics of play. Newness is known when the start

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[5] Jacob Shatzer, *Transhumanism and the image of God: Today's Technology and the Future of Christian Discipleship* (Downers Grove, Illinois : IVP Academic, 2019), 39-45.

[6] Gregory D. Jones, Jr., "Homo Resumens: Play Theology Unearths Openness to the Sabbath" (MA Thesis, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 2017), 78-87.

of play "turns on" one's awareness of the new patterns, forms, and rules of randomness through the emergence of a playful vision or environment in the midst of ordinariness. Professional football players enjoy this visual thrill at the beginning of their games; they leave the confines of their locker room, walk through the narrow stadium tunnel, and run onto the field. The football field is a playground comprised of a wild myriad of lights, pyrotechnics, and jumbotrons that blurs into a colorful array of team jerseys, referee stripes, and cheerleader uniforms, a cacophony of cheers and jeers from thousands of fans, a labyrinth of sidelines, yard-markers, endzones and goalposts, and an ever-vigilant clock which controls the flow of game time. In a similar vein, gamers enjoy this thrill when video games begin. When the Sega or PlayStation logo appears on a screen, accompanied by their startup sounds, a gamer's attention is oriented toward newness. With our attention rightly focused, we can see the invitation to the intellectual playground unfold before us, in the form of the game's Start Screen asking us to "Press Start." These playful aesthetics enliven the sense of the new in the midst of the everyday, much like how candles, altars, stained glass, liturgical garments and music awaken the spiritual sensitivities as one enters a church, synagogue, mosque, temple, mandir, gurdwara, or other sacred place.

Separately, religion and play offer an ephemeral aesthetic for the randomness of the divine which only overtakes our routine sensitivities for a moment. Play's team up with religion in play theology involves an enduring newness, via an expansive aesthetic that conveys the unhinderable ever-being of theovival in intellectual terms. In *The Grace of Playing*, Courtney Goto frames this expansive aesthetic as "revelatory experiencing," in which a connection with one's true self, God, and others results from inhabiting places that are playfully made to look, sound, touch, taste and smell a certain way, in order to cultivate the sense and expression of an

extraordinary wholeness and holiness.[7] This is Goto's version of God grasping humanity. Goto insists that God seeks us, while we – like Adam and Eve – hide from God, our true selves, and others, because we are made to think that our vulnerable "nakedness" is the same as our sinfulness.[8] Goto's understanding of hiding is comparable to "dead" seriousness; both terms convey the deadening of relationality due to ossified and lifeless structures of reason. Yet, when the seeking God grasps hiding humans through expansive aesthetics, our nakedness is creatively affirmed as the ideal of our true selves, rather than condemned as the sinfulness of the flesh. God's grasp of "hiding humans" expands their lives into those "healed by the creativity and liveliness of Spirit [*sic*]" and multiplies their experience of good by enabling them to "participate in helping to bring forth abundant possibilities for all creation."[9] Revelatory experiencing is Goto's theological term for the intellectual enlivening of play's expansive aesthetics.

Goto reinforces her concept of revelatory experiencing with real-life examples of aesthetic play, which she calls "local practical theological aesthetics," or "LPTA." She defines LPTA as "the sensibilities that guide a Christian community's unique style of relating from a theological context" which enable the faithful to "reconstruct the past, understand the present, and envision the future" by building "renditions" of God's new creation "in light of their faith and communal stories."[10] LPTA is the aesthetic play in which Christians creatively grasp the world around them, in light of the intellectual enlivening experienced in God grasping them.

In one instance of LPTA, Goto's Japanese-American Methodist church invited congregants to decorate a "play" garden for over a month. By allowing open participation in this

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[7] Courtney T. Goto, *The Grace of Playing: Pedagogies for Leaning into God's New Creation* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 6-13.
[8] Goto, *The Grace of Playing*, 55.
[9] Goto, *The Grace of Playing*, 56.
[10] Goto, *The Grace of Playing*, 107-113.

art installation, the play garden drew from the congregation's shared culture to expand the boundaries of possibility and multiply the kinds of experienceable good. In this way, church conflict was acknowledged as a Japanese sense of hiding and woundedness, and ameliorated with Japanese expressions of forgiveness and healing. Goto explains how the "Garden Series" aesthetically drew people out of hiding by validating their true selves, on their own terms.[11] In another instance of LPTA, Goto illustrates that revelatory experiencing also happens in unlikely contexts, courtesy of artistically agile personalities. She chronicles how Malawian healing artist Masankho Banda visited the toughest block of a juvenile detention center, introducing himself as an artist who would not sing and dance for them, but *with* them. Banda learned the names and listened to the stories of these young men, and then improvised songs and dances based upon their life details. Banda introduced a new aesthetic to an environment of routine hostility, dehumanization, and lifelessness. Through his songs, dances, and friendly presence, Banda expanded the bounds of possibilities for the young men. Banda's playful aesthetic allowed the inmates to be human beings who are able to receive and give love, even as one confides to Banda that few people took the time to express love for them. Further, Banda's playful aesthetic multiplied their experienceable kinds of good. These young men may not have initially sought or appreciated Banda's play, but they still experienced an oddly creative and unexpectedly friendly presence in the context where creativity and friendship are buried in the hopelessness of imprisonment. Banda shared his key realization: "I know in that moment God was there…there was a sense in my core being and knowing that I was reaching these kids on a level at which no lecture [or] book would be able to."[12] Banda describes how play's newness creates a lasting intellectual enlivening that persists through environments which deaden the senses.

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[11] Goto, *The Grace of Playing*, 96.
[12] Goto, *The Grace of Playing*, 116.

B. Non-anxiety: Play's Preparatory Enlivening

Non-anxiety names the aspect of theovival in which God grasps us by expanding possibilities and multiplying kinds of good through the habits of play. Non-anxiety is known when the delight of play persists through the exertion of play. This persistent delight prepares one to embrace the new patterns, forms, and rules of randomness in everyday life. Runners enjoy this visceral thrill; they can tell you about the moments on the track or trail where they feel as if they could run forever, beyond any concerns and exhaustion. This runner's high is comparable to being in the "zone of proximal development,"[13] which is the awareness of "intermittent reinforcement to encourage players not to give up, despite growing challenges"[14] that is cultivated by habits of solving problems and adopting new strategies. These playful habits enliven the sense of the non-anxious in ordinary life, much like how a total involvement in a song, sermon, or prayer detaches people from daily patterns of concern and pressure.

Separately, religion and play offer an ephemeral preparation for the randomness of the divine which only overtakes our routine concerns for a moment. Play's team up with religion in play theology involves an enduring non-anxiety, via the expansive preparation which conveys the unhinderable ever-being of theovival in habitual terms. In *The Christian at Play*, Robert Johnston explains play's expansive preparation as a "natural experience of eternity," which describes God grasping humanity "not in the mystical or extraordinary but in a basic experience common to all."[15] Considering diverse definitions, Johnston defines play as the habitual "free

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[13] Romeo Vitelli, "Are There Benefits in Playing Video Games?" *Psychology Today*, February 10, 2014, https://tinyurl.com/mr3khuxh. Vittelli draws from Barbara Fredrickson, "The Broaden-and-Build Theory of Positive Emotions," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 359, 1449 (September 2004), 1367–1378.
[14] Romeo Vitelli, "Are There Benefits in Playing Video Games?"
[15] Robert K. Johnston, *The Christian at Play* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1983), 73.

activity" of accepting new time/space boundaries as both a "breathing spell" and "surprise"

which persistently inject "the consequences of play" into a world whose thoughts, life, and

language is dominated by work-mindedness.[16] As play habitually manifests joy and release,

personal fulfillment, the sense of shared humanity, an awareness of the sacred, the resolution of

risk, injury, or defeat, and a new spirit of thankfulness and celebration, it ultimately generates "[a

sense of life] enlarged beyond the boundaries of the work world."[17] Crucially, Johnston insists

that this habitually generated sense of life enables players to embrace "nonrational dimensions of

existence…the absurd, the inspiring, the uncanny, the awesome, the terrifying, the ecstatic –

[which do not] fit into a production- and efficiency-oriented society."[18] To the extent that we are

workers, we can only anxiously exclude nonrational dimensions from our lives, because they

threaten our stable structures of work-reasoning. Meanwhile, play cultivates non-anxiety in the

face of the nonrational. To the extent that we are players, we include nonrational dimensions in

our everyday lives, as the new patterns, forms, and rules of randomness which plays with –

rather than dismantles – the stable structures of reason. For Johnston, these natural experiences

of eternity cultivate the habitual enlivening of play's expansive preparation in theological terms.

Johnston illustrates non-anxiety in terms of God preparing humanity for eternity through

the enduring, real-life benefits of habitual play. The "continuing sense of joy and delight"[19] that

emerges in habitual play is verbalized by Bill Bradley's description of being "in the zone" on the

basketball court.[20] Bradley explains, "It is as if a lightning bolt strikes, bringing insight into an

uncharted area of human experience…It goes beyond the competition that brings goose pimples

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[16] Johnston, *The Christian at Play*, 34-36.
[17] Johnston, *The Christian at Play*, 34-36.
[18] Johnston, *The Christian at Play*, 28. Johnston quotes Harvey Cox, "Religion in the Age of Aquarius: A Conversation with Harvey Cox and T. George Harris," in Edward F. Heenan, *Mystery, Magic, and Miracle: Religion in a Post-Aquarian Age* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 18.
[19] Johnston, *The Christian at Play*, 44.
[20] Johnston, *The Christian at Play*, 44.

or the ecstasy of victory…I sense an immediate transporting enthusiasm and a feeling that

everything is in perfect balance."[21] Habitual play's "affirmation of one's united self"[22] is

confirmed by players who are totally involved in their play. Such is the case with George

Sheehan's account of running his Central Park race: "I don't know who won or where I finished

or what time I ran. My family wonders why [I endured] that cruel hour on those rolling hills. I

have no logical answer. I simply know that for that hour I was whole and true and living at the

top of my powers. That hour was life intensified."[23] Habitual play's "creation of common bonds

with one's world" draws a person out of a consuming concern for self and unto a profoundly

fulfilling bond with one's environment and the sacred.[24] Roger Bannister shares his pivotal

childhood experience of running along the beach, in which he "was startled and frightened, by

the tremendous excitement that so few steps could create…No longer conscious of my

movement, I discovered a new unity with nature. I had found a new source of power and beauty,

a source I never dreamt existed."[25] Habitual play's benefits culminate in the relativization of "our

over-seriousness toward life,"[26] which is Johnston's way of articulating how play involves God's

expanded boundaries of possibility. Johnston also connects play to God's multiplication of the

kinds of experienceable good, writing "if a person is not able to play, he is easily bewitched or

possessed by his own seriousness or the seriousness of another."[27] Offering an alternative to

work-mindedness, Johnston describe how play's non-anxiety creates a lasting habitual

enlivening that persists through an environment of deadening work systems.

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[21] Johnston, *The Christian at Play*, 44. Johnston quotes Bill Bradley, *Life on the Run* (New York: Quadrangle/New York Times Book Company, 1976), 221.
[22] Johnston, *The Christian at Play*, 44.
[23] Johnston, *The Christian at Play*, 45. Johnston quotes George Sheehan, "Play," *American Way*, July 1977.
[24] Johnston, *The Christian at Play*, 44.
[25] Johnston, *The Christian at Play*, 46. Johnston quotes Roger Bannister, *The Four Minute Mile* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1957), 11-12.
[26] Johnston, *The Christian at Play*, 48.
[27] Johnston, *The Christian at Play*, 48.

C. Non-practicality: Play's Political Enlivening

Non-practicality names the aspect of theovival in which God grasps us by expanding possibilities and multiplying kinds of good through the political dimension of play. Non-practicality is known when the joy of play persists through the guilt that compels people to legitimize their humanity by being useful in some way. The persistent joy of play affirms a human life as valuable according to the new patterns, forms, and rules of God. This joy lends a political dimension to play, because it offers a way for oppressors and oppressed alike to step outside of the agenda of dominant productivity- and consumption-oriented value systems. This teleological thrill is enjoyed by families hanging out together at the park, whether or not their joy upholds capitalism or smashes toxic patriarchy or matriarchy. In that same park, a group of friends play the totally unproductive game of Frisbee Golf with a joy that does not hinge upon ecological preservation or de-coupling from colonizers. Joggers running on trails have the joy that does not raise the GDP, affirm the marginalized, or make a nation great again. Creating artwork inspired by this park scene may not serve the liberal agenda and playing a video game version of this playground may not reinforce conservative family values, but the joy, meaning, and value of these play moments do not hinge upon practical results when *the play is the point*. Those entrenched in dominant value systems criticize play for these reasons, because the political function of play operates outside of their cultural agendas and understandings of human value. Yet, a playful teleology enlivens the sense of the non-practical in routine life. Play politics resonate with how people experience baptism and the Eucharist not as rewards for those who did the most or the best, but as gifts which God graces to those who both recognize their need for God and receive the value that God freely grants to humanity, despite our shortcomings.

Separately, religion and play offer ephemeral politics of the randomness of the divine which only overtakes our routine value-systems for a moment. Play's team up with religion in play theology involves an enduring non-practicality, via the expansive politics which convey the unhinderable ever-being of theovival in teleogical terms. In *Theology of Play*, Jürgen Moltmann frames these expansive politics as a "religion of freedom" that functions to remember and express "the joy…and the imaginative hope of [a person's] basic and final humanity before God."[28] Moltmann's language for non-practicality affirms that God affords human beings joy, meaning, and value, whether or not they accomplish the dictates of cultural agendas. Moltmann's non-practical religion of freedom does not endorse social or ethical irresponsibility. Instead, non-practicality playfully expands the bounds of possibility for responsibility, and the kinds of good that can be experienced in social and ethical responsibility. Play's non-practicality, as a religion of freedom, generates expansive politics which speak up for a person's value and happiness without the validation of an over-serious cultural agenda and the excesses of overproduction or overconsumption. In this non-practical religion of freedom, the church imitates Christ's liberation of humanity from productivity- and consumption-oriented value systems. Moltmann describes people of faith loving, suffering, rejoicing with, and advocating for others while being grounded in God's playful non-practicality, rather than an over-serious cultural commitment:

> Rejoicing in the free God and in its own liberty, faith must and will advance beyond the legal and completely capitalistic question: What is the use of God and for what is faith useful? We do not believe freely because it helps us spiritually. We do not pray freely if need has taught us to pray. We do not go to church because it may be to our advantage. We do not properly study theology because it may come in handy later on. We believe insofar we confront the believable. We pray because it is the privilege of the liberated to talk to God. We go to church because it is a joy to do so when the service is enjoyable. We study theology properly when we are curious and find pleasure in the subject.[29]

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[28] Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Play*. Translated by Reinhard Ulrich (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 57-58.
[29] Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, 65-66.

Moltmann shows how the non-practicality of play preserves the joy, meaning, and value of human life from a deadening dependence upon present-day value systems and agendas. James H. Evans, Jr. similarly explains: "the believer is unable to play while under the power of sin, guilt, and hopelessness."[30] That is, when a person cannot envision the joy, meaning, and value of their lives apart from being useful to a serious value system and agenda, their boundaries of possibility are constricted and the kinds of good they can experience are reduced, as if being locked in a box, or being buried alive. Yet, the non-practicality of play escapes this grave reasoning. Moltmann describes this escape when he writes, "the guilty [person] blackmails himself with image of what he is not…In faith, we accept ourselves for who we are and gain new confidence because we are trusted with more than what we deserve and ever thought possible."[31] Moltmann further illustrates non-practicality when he imagines the final fate of the nihilist and the believer, who see the same thing, but respond in radically different ways. In Moltmann's words (with key emphases), "'It's all *for nothing* anyway,' says the nihilist and falls into despair. 'It's really all *for nothing*,' says the believer, rejoicing in the grace which he can have for nothing and hoping for a new world in which all is available and may be had *for nothing*."[32] Depending on one's allegiance to modern agendas, this statement is either deeply hilarious or depressing. Moltmann acknowledges both responses, affirming that "the laughter of Easter and the sorrow of the cross is alive in liberated men."[33] Holding these contrasts together, Moltmann is playfully using the language of non-practicality to convey the believer as a "liberated person" – the one whose non-practicality creates a lasting teleological enlivening that persists through an environment that deadens one's sense of purpose.

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[30] James H. Evans, Jr. *Playing: Christian Explorations of Daily Living* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2010), 72.
[31] Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, 32.
[32] Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, 33.
[33] Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, 32.

D. Venture: Play's Therapeutic Enlivening

Venture names the aspect of theovival in which God grasps us by expanding possibilities and multiplying kinds of good through the therapeutic dimension of play. Venture is known when the hopeful risk of play persists through ominous uncertainties which threaten imminent loss and suffering. In sports language, this is choosing to "go for it" on fourth down, stealing a base, or going for the winning goal in overtime. In matters of faith and ethics, this looks like bringing the unfamiliar or unorthodox into one's community, serving in a ministry whose results are unpredictable, admitting one's deeply personal strengths and faults in the presence of others, and leaving one's familiar context to engage the uncertain world beyond. These instances describe a therapeutic playfulness which enlivens the sense of venture in routine life.

Separately, religion and play offer an ephemeral hopefulness in the randomness of the divine which only overtakes our routine concerns for a moment. Play's team up with religion in play theology involves an enduring venture, via the expansive hopefulness which conveys the unhinderable ever-being of theovival in therapeutic terms. This persistent hopefulness allows one to reasonably respond to the new patterns, forms, and rules of God, beyond routine tendencies to avoid or manipulate God. This hopefulness lends a therapeutic dimension to play, because it resolves the psychic conflict involving the human needs to discharge energy and design experience. This is the psychological language for describing how randomness (if the discharge of energy is understood in terms of unpredictably new patterns, forms, and rules, as experienced in unfamiliar revelation) plays with reason (if the design of experience is understood in terms of reliably stable structures, as experienced in familiar religion).

Robert Neale's *In Praise of Play* pairs randomness and reason in therapeutic play. He envisions psychic conflict as disharmonized human needs to discharge energy and design experience, while psychic harmony is harmonized discharge and design. For Neale, these human needs are conflicted in work, yet harmonized in play. Neale defines "the profane" as the work-ground of psychic conflict, while "the sacred" is the playground of psychic harmony.[34] Paradise is found in playing, because playing resolves psychic conflict by harmonizing random discharge and reasonable design. Thus, Neale explains that play is the proper "religious" response to the sacred, while "dead" serious religiosity is profane work stuck in psychic conflict that avoids God and Paradise: "The Christian…who feels overwhelmed by conflict within or without himself, or who feels weighted down by responsibility to God, his neighbor…or who has no awareness of a new being and a new world—this man is not religious. Either he has not met God, or he has met and is fleeing him, or he has met and is manipulating him."[35] Neale insists that non-playful Christians can be "secularists"[36] who *disbelieve* when their faith stops "working" for them, or "magicians"[37] who *believe* when their ethics and rituals "produce" the good family, fortune, and fame. Secularists suffer from discharge not corresponding to design, while magicians suffer from discharge attempting to dominate design. Neale also envisions those who celebrate being embraced by the sacred. Neale calls these playful Christians "adventurers," because their psychic conflict is healed in *make-believing*, via "the gift of a new self with a new time and a new space that is beyond belief and suffering."[38] For Neale, God expands the boundaries of possibility and multiplies the kinds of experienceable good in human play.

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[34] Robert E. Neale, *In Praise of Play: Toward a Psychology of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 97.
[35] Neale, *In Praise of Play*, 123.
[36] Neale, *In Praise of Play*, 142-143, 175.
[37] Neale, *In Praise of Play*, 142-143, 175.
[38] Neale, *In Praise of Play*, 142-143, 163.

Venture involves the therapeutic thrill that is enjoyed by adventurers of interior, material, and virtual landscapes. Neale's psychological insights resonate with Macarius of Egypt's theological description of prayer as questing for God in the playground of the heart:

> The heart itself is but a little vessel, and yet there are dragons, and there lions, and there venomous beasts, and all the treasures of wickedness; and there are rough uneven ways, there chasms; there likewise is God, there the angels, there life and the kingdom, there light and the apostles, there the heavenly cities, there the treasures, there are all things.[39]

In this dream-like succession of creatures, spirits, and realms which span heaven and earth, Macarius playfully teaches that the heart (the human soul), is the adventure itself – the fantastic journey predating fantasy books, movies, and video games. Human "being" is a continual tug-of-war of good and bad inclinations. Yet, the hopefulness in this oscillation is preserved by the guidance of the Spirit, who keeps the joy and the hope before the eyes – evoked in Macarius's upward-looking refrain, "I shall find deliverance and life."[40] For Macarius, the interior adventure depends upon the Spirit to buoy one's commitment to prayer with hope for wholeness in God.

Modern adventurers also experience expansive hope in the physical extremes they endure. Alex Honnold, of *Free Solo* fame, discovers the expanded boundaries of possibility and multiplied kinds of good in his rock-climbing ventures. Honnold explains, "My comfort zone is like a little bubble around me, and I've pushed it in different directions and made it bigger and bigger until these objectives that seemed totally crazy eventually fall within the realm of the possible."[41] Honnold describes a playground of the will, which coincides with Neale's playground of the mind and Macarius's playground of the heart. Each instance offers a conceptual space for undertaking the journey fraught with dangers, yet guided by hopefulness.

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[39] Pseudo-Macarius, Macarius, and Arthur James Mason, *Fifty Spiritual Homilies of St. Macarius the Egyptian* (London; New York: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; Macmillan, 1921), 43.7.272-73.
[40] Pseudo-Macarius, *Fifty Spiritual Homilies*, 26.11.190.
[41] Kidadl Team, "65+ Best Alex Honnold Quotes From The Infamous Free Solo Climber," last modified November 14, 2021, https://tinyurl.com/4bu9b8zm.

Video game players also recognize Neale's therapeutic notion of adventure, as an assurance of security despite in-game suffering. This might sound like an exaggeration, but gamers understand what it means to "suffer" along with in-game avatars who get punched with an opponent's fists, hit with an enemies' weapons or magic spells, and fall into pools of lava or bottomless pits. Video game ventures also offer rewards for taking in-game risks, especially in "retro" games, such as timing the jump *just* right to reach a difficult area in *Bionic Commando*, fighting the flying mechanical dragon in Dr. Wily's Castle in *Mega Man 2*, or even defeating *Final Fantasy VII*'s Ruby Weapon with dangerously low hit points (HP). Even though these retrogaming ventures make us sweat so much that we have trouble gripping the controller, they are experiences of expansive hopefulness, where we are propelled forward through risk and fear, because of our assurance that in-game death and failure are not ultimate verdicts. This virtual assurance cultivates our sense of being the adventurer – one whose venture creates a lasting therapeutic enlivening that persists through environments which deaden one's sense of hope.

E. Vibrancy: Play's Participatory Enlivening

Vibrancy names the aspect of theovival in which God grasps us by expanding possibilities and multiplying kinds of good through the participatory dimension of play. Vibrancy is known when the energy of play persistently enlivens perceptions, actions, and relationships in a spontaneous, yet skillful way. This persistent energizing is a participation in the new patterns, forms, and rules of randomness within everyday life. This energizing thrill is heard when musicians improvise complex melodies or freestyle rhymes on the spot, or when orators eloquently and convincingly speak without notes. This vibrancy is also seen across a spectrum of beautiful motions, which ranges from the absorbing choreography of Bollywood dance numbers

to the fascinating combat of Wing Chun. Religious communities are vibrant during spontaneous call-and-responses in sermons, in their vocal and instrumental contributions to sacred music, and even in the sharing of solemn silence. If newness is the "turning on" of theovival awareness at the start of play, then vibrancy is living out this powerful aliveness in play and beyond.

Separately, religion and play offer an ephemeral participation in the randomness of the divine which only overtakes our routine sensitivities for a moment. Play's team up with religion in play theology involves an enduring vibrancy, via the expansive participation that conveys the unhinderable ever-being of theovival in transformative terms. William Baker's *Playing With God* chronicles how the groups labelled as America's "outsiders" embraced this enduring vibrancy. Irish, Catholic, Jewish, Black, Mormon, and Muslim athletes sought and discovered this sense of wholeness and holiness in sports which were initially condemned, but ultimately embraced, by religious authorities. As these athletes enjoyed self-actualization, cultural inclusion, and relational transformation in everyday play, they were participating in God's expanded boundaries of possibility. Baker chronicles how boxing gave people such as Mohammed Ali the playground that transformed cultural outsiders into powerful personalities. Similar athletes discovered their versions of unhinderable ever-being in their diverse sensitivities of a whole and holy aliveness that persisted despite continual cultural prejudices, institutional obstacles, and personal losses. Baker clarifies this discovery with the words of a high school track coach: "I want to be here to tell the wounded fighter who suffered terrible personal loss and who treats every race like a test of courage that she will be OK [*sic*]…that trying hard is the way to live…that sharing your talents with others is valuable, even when it's not easy."[42] This living through the inevitable hurts and losses of life is the persisting vibrancy recognized by the athlete.

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[42] William J. Baker, *Playing With God* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 260. Here, Baker quotes Linda Head Flanagan, "What Does It Take to Coach Girls' Track?" *Newsweek, 8* May 2006, 14.

Complementing Baker's theological consideration of American sports, Craig Detweiler's *Halos and Avatars* collects memorable testimonies of video gaming vibrancy. If athletes are enlivened by a sense of ever-being through persistence, then video game players are enlivened through the sense of ever-being through interactivity. Detweiler explains this interactivity: "The more time and ingenuity invested by the creator of the game, the more pleasurable, complex, and empowering is the resulting game play. A benevolent creator challenges players to make the right decisions. Choice flows from generous design."[43] While Detweiler is talking about human creators of video games, he connects his claim with the consideration of God's nature and purposes. Detweiler's term "generous design" – when taken as a playful riff on "intelligent design" – contributes language for talking about God multiplying the kinds of good which can be experienced in a video game-like way. In light of the multiplied goods of generous design, "multiple selves and multiple lives are assumed in game construction."[44] A gamer's casual contact with resurrections, rebirths, reincarnations, and recreations energizes their sense of life, which enables them to powerfully risk and persist through losses and defeats. Further, the generous design cultivates a gamer's appreciation for multiple ways to complete a journey or a puzzle. Detweiler connects this insight to Jesus's playfully interactive approach to the unrepeatable personhood of every person that he met – from Zacchaeus to the Samaritan woman at the well – which avoided flattening their unique personhood into rigid doctrinal or ethical formulas.[45] Thus, the truth of Jesus's Gospel remains a singular invitation granted to all people, even if its acceptance requires and incorporates the diverse experiences of different people.

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[43] Craig Detweiler, "Conclusion: Born to Play" in *Halos and Avatars: Playing Video Games with God*, ed. Craig Detweiler (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), Kindle, 192.
[44] Detweiler, "Conclusion: Born to Play," 192.
[45] Detweiler, "Conclusion: Born to Play," 193-194.

Jesus living as the way, the truth, and the life "video games" the life of faith. This is both a singular way *and* a personalized way that takes the diverse shapes of different individuals, according to the freedom and self-determination they undertake in this one way. Just as two players do not complete the same video game the same way, Zacchaeus and the Samaritan woman enter the same "Way," yet differently, on their own terms. Through this video game-inspired vision of God's generous design, we begin to consider how our different "enterings" into the life of faith comprise our interactions with the living Way, Truth, and Life, Who is personalized for us. In this life, Jesus challenges us to commit to being the unrepeatable person that God has called us to be, by expanding our boundaries of possibility and multiplying the experienceable kinds of good. This observation corresponds with Rabbi Zusya's expertly crafted insight, uttered shortly before his death: "In the coming world, they will not ask me: 'Why were you not Moses?' Instead, I shall be asked, 'Why were you not Zusya?'"[46] Detweiler's video game description of interactive faith, coupled with Baker's sports-centered chronicle of persistent faith, describes the personalized vibrancy that creates a lasting participatory enlivening that persists through environments which deaden one's interaction with God and the world.

Overall, newness, non-anxiety, non-practicality, venture, and vibrancy describe the multiple dimensions in which humans are grasped by theovival – God's expanded boundaries of possibility and multiplied kinds of good – in everyday play. These enlivening categories of real-life play offer real-world avenues for Replacement's reform, Fulfillment's diminishment, Mutuality's enrichment, and Acceptance's freedom to live in everyday life, in ways that are not realized by "dead" serious approaches that are mired in dialogical problems. Newness persistently awakens human sensitivities of the divine life; this aesthetic enlivening "turns on"

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[46] Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Early Masters*, trans. Olga Marx (New York: Schocken Books, 1947), 251.

the Replacement ideal of continually reforming religion with the visually thrilling revelatory experiencing that pushes through the grave inability to articulate faith. Non-anxiety persistently prepares human sensitivities of the divine life; this habitual enlivening sustains the Fulfillment ideal of mutual diminishment with the viscerally thrilling natural experiences of eternity which persevere through the grave non-persuasiveness of religious language. Non-practicality persistently liberates human sensitivities of the divine life; this political enlivening empowers the Mutuality ideal of transformative enrichment with the teleologically thrilling religion of freedom that endures through the grave problem of religious violence. Venture persistently encourages human sensitivities of the divine life; this therapeutic enlivening advances the Acceptance ideal of a unifying freedom with its hopefully thrilling response to the sacred that continues through the grave problem of connection-deadening truths. Vibrancy persistently actualizes human sensitivities of the divine life. This participatory enlivening brings the aforementioned ideals into the contestant ideal to keep going toward the ever-knowable God and ever-unfolding paradise with the energetically thrilling game of thinking, living, and talking out God.

It is now clear how play theology illustrates the theovival of a theology of religions with the multidimensional enlivening of play experience. However, a theology of religions is still buried in the grave of reason and dialogical problems, so long as it has not yet overcome its over-reliance on seriousness. In order to escape "dead" seriousness, we must pair seriousness with play's non-seriousness, which will grant the conceptual movement necessary to navigate and outmaneuver the dialogical hindrances to interreligiosity. Thus, we turn to David Miller's philosophical and theological insights in *Gods and Games*, which allow us to join the powerful aliveness of theovival to the powerful movements of Christian playfulness.

II. Connecting Play Theology and Biblical Theology

A. Theograffitti: Identifying All Life "In God" via the Playful Christian Thought-World

In *Gods and Games*, Miller's explanation of the meaning of play provides the conceptual pathway in which a theology of religions rises out of the grave of reason. Miller's insights create this pathway because he understands and articulates a striking claim that serious philosophers and theologians are reluctant to recognize – all of our thinking, living, and language for our highest concepts which elude our control are actually forms of playing. There are three reasons why Miller envisions philosophy and theology as play. First, he avoids subordinating the idea of play to the idea of work. Miller does not grant the highest order of meaning to seriousness and usefulness, as if work has always been and always will be the primary principle of existence. Miller's refusal to see the ultimate meaning of life in terms of work grounds the second dimension of his logic: life – especially the life of faith – is not exhausted by seriousness. While serious theologies of religions are mired in dialogical problems, Miller's insight allows us to envision a play theology of religions that does not over-rely on seriousness, because seriousness does not necessarily have to be the primary principle of existence. Thus, the third dimension of Miller's logic insists that play holds a higher order of meaning than seriousness, because play can include seriousness, while seriousness can only exclude play. By prioritizing the idea of play over the idea of work, Miller is able to affirm the validity of philosophies and theologies according to the ways they enliven the human recognition and articulation of the divine. Miller sees how play concerns the revelation, rather than the serious mode of expressing the revelation.

Miller illustrates the value of non-seriousness and play in theology with a series of anecdotes, in which revelation is re-envisioned in non-serious terms. First, he recounts a tale from an American Academy of Religion convention, in which a waitress jokingly mistakes

theologians for cartoonists. The theologians joked back that, indeed, they were "cartoonists of divinities. Caricaturists of God!"[47] Miller shares this humorous exchange to spotlight the deficiencies of serious theological approaches. He insists, "Too much of [theology] has been a caricature. Too little of theology has been articulated in a mode appropriate to religious subject matter. It has therefore been idolatrous."[48] Miller holds that it is inappropriate to do theology in the way that is presumed to be academically and doctrinally proper, because doing so essentializes the *mode* of seriousness about God over that which theology is meant to cultivate understandings and articulations of: God's *revelation* of God. For Miller, the over-prioritization of seriousness produces the worship of seriousness. This worship idolizes serious academic and doctrinal portrayals of God, to the detriment of worshiping God as God presents Godself, Who, freely engaging human reason without being beholden to it, may or may not use the mode of seriousness in traditional and surprising contexts. Miller insists that over-relying upon the mode of seriousness deadens the mindset, activity, and language for conveying the content of theology. He continues, "[Theology's] message of grace and salvation has too seldom been manifest in its medium. Rather, the message of its befuddling medium has been, not gracefulness, but tedium."[49] "Tedious" (or "dead" serious) theologies produce academic, doctrinal, and ethical rigidity that is institutionally validated, yet woefully inadequate at conveying the deep things of faith. Here, Miller notices the need for non-seriousness and play in theology. Without play's maneuverable mindset, activity, and language to recognize religious realities which ever-elude description, theology becomes the absurd drudgery of trying to grasp God with caricatures of God which are considered serious and useful when they show that God is ungraspable.

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[47] David L. Miller, *Gods and Games*: *Toward a Theology of Play* (New York: World Pub. Co, 1970), 159.
[48] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 159.
[49] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 159.

Similar to Paul Knitter, Miller understands that theologians must become artists (not caricaturists) who cultivate the ability to continually recognize the ever-knowable God through God's expanded boundaries of possibility and multiplied kinds of good. Miller's version of these key components of theovival involves play theology "wittingly [incarnating] its content" by letting the "message" (content) frame the "medium" (mode of expression), rather than relying on the single-minded seriousness that obscures the message.[50] He explains:

> The message is freedom; theology's medium must be free. The message is grace; theology's medium must be graceful. The message is spirit; theology's medium must be spirited. Perhaps, this is why G.K. Chesterton is remembered as holding the opinion that the religion of the future will be based on a highly developed and subtle form of humor.[51]

Chesterton's hope for humor-grounded religiosity allows Miller to insist that the freedom, grace, and spirit inherent in the content of theology call for a mode of expression that incorporates non-seriousness. Miller discerns this expression in a post-dinner conversation enjoyed by the influential avant-garde composer John Cage, a famous Zen teacher, and notable global scholars:

> After dinner the talk turned to metaphysical problems…[the guests] were more or less equally divided between allegiance to Indian thought and to Japanese thought. About eleven o'clock we were out on the street walking along, and an American lady said, "How is it, Dr. Suzuki? We spend the evening asking you questions and nothing is decided." Dr. Suzuki smiled and said, "That's why I love philosophy; no one wins."[52]

Dr. Suzuki portrays Miller's non-serious mode of expression. Suzuki's smiling and joking insight combines the freedom that allows everyone to engage the metaphysical questions on their own terms, the grace that allows no single answer to conquer the dialogue, and the spirit of loving the open-ended thinking, living, and talking out the answers with differing friends. When this non-serious mode of expression eliminated the "purpose" of winning the discussion, the

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[50] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 159.
[51] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 159-160.
[52] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 174. Miller quotes John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1961), 40.

disruptiveness of dialogical problems gave way to an ever-unfolding conversation that lasted long into the evening. Likewise, the freedom, grace, and spirit of play theology generates the non-serious mode of expression that overshadows the compulsion to be useful with the desire to perpetually think, live, and talk out the continual recognition of the ever-knowable God.

Miller's insight allows us to say that a theology of religions can do more than be mired in dialogical problems, because it can do more than only be serious and useful. The play theology of religions navigates and outmaneuvers these problems by perceiving and articulating religious realities with a non-seriously free, graceful, and spirited mode of expression. Miller writes:

> Play theology will dethrone the theologies which have already dethroned our deities by burying them in hairsplitting logics and obfuscating logorrhea, profaning the joyful spirit of the religions that such theologies were so inappropriately attempting to explain…play theology has opened the possibility of a radically new mode of writing about religion; a mode which is somehow more in the spirit of the thing it is attempting to articulate.[53]

Miller insists that the thinking, activity, and language of play is the preferable and proper way to respond to the divine, because play theology is concerned with the actuality of the divine as God teaches God, rather than the doctrinally and academically approved ways of describing the divine which rely too much upon seriousness. Miller's conclusions about "inappropriate" attempts to explain God is his way to describe the logical end of "dead" seriousness, which characterizes theology as a way to inadequately and tediously describe God that is thwarted by God being God (ungraspable). Meanwhile, Miller's assurance that play theology is "more in the spirit of the thing it is attempting to articulate" characterizes theology as the way to continually recognize God that is enabled by God being God (ever-recognizable). Yet, if theology is best understood as a form of playing, then why are theologians so reluctant to call their deepest thoughts, activities, and language such, and why are they so eager to subordinate the idea of play to the idea of work?

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[53] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 89.

The answers to these questions legitimize Miller's prioritization of play and his reintroduction of non-seriousness into theology. Miller shows that most theologians resist the label of play because they presume that work is the primary principle of existence. He traces how this presumption resulted from a subtle, yet consequential philosophical development in the history of ideas.

Miller starts with the idea of primal play that is conveyed in the origin stories of multiple religions, which feature a unity of seriousness and non-seriousness. These religions say that in the beginning, seriousness and non-seriousness were one in play. Miller spotlights the *lila* of the Hindu creation hymns. This Sanskrit word intones that "the world as we know it is a result of God's play," because "the world is the Holy Power played out in many names and forms (*namarupa*)."[54] There is a serious "Holy Power" forming the world in reliable structures. Yet, there is also a non-seriousness in the "many names and form" in which God shapes the world with unpredictable patterns. Miller explains this unity when he writes, "The point of Hindu creation doctrines is to embody the religious ideal of playfulness. We are not to be deluded by what we take to be serious finite reality (*māyā*); it is actually and only the play of God (*lila*)."[55]

For Miller, the playful unity of seriousness and non-seriousness in the Vedantic description of God's creation activity resonates with the depiction of daughter Wisdom in Hebrew Wisdom Literature.[56] Proverbs 8:22-31 contains Wisdom's childlike testimony of God's serious creation activity. Seriousness's unity with non-seriousness is seen in daughter Wisdom frolicking "beside" God as "a master worker" who was "daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race" (Proverbs 8:30-31). Creation "work" is actually God playing the game that Wisdom does not want to end!

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[54] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 99.
[55] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 100.
[56] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 100-101.

Miller also notices how this Hebrew image of the Wisdom-girl connects with Christian

and Chinese religious articulations of seriousness's original unity with non-seriousness.[57]

Christianity grounds its notion of the ideal present and future destiny in terms of the Edenic

playground for the child at play, whether anticipating Zechariah 8:3-5's promise of a time where

"the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets," or looking ahead to

Matthew 18:3, where Jesus invites us to "change and become like children" in order to enter the

Kingdom of God. Miller connects the Kingdom-child to the Virtue-baby found in the *Dao De*

Ching, which applies a playful agility to the serious cultivation of virtue: "He who possesses

virtue in abundance / May be compared to an infant / Poisonous insects will not sting him /

Fierce beasts will not seize him / Birds of prey will not strike him / His bones are weak, his

sinews tender, but his grasp is firm." (55:1).[58] Overall, Miller shows us how ancient religions

East and West unify the serious rigor of protological, eschatological, and present virtue with the

non-seriousness playfulness of the divine child playing before, throughout, and beyond time.

The primal religious unity of seriousness and non-seriousness is echoed in Heraclitus's

sixth century Greek philosophy. Miller explains how Heraclitus playfully provides a

philosophical riddle for audiences to think, live, and talk out. He elucidates, "Time (*aiōn*),

[Heraclitus] is supposed to have said, "is a child playing (*pais paidzōn*), moving counters on a

game board. The kingdom (*basilēiē*) belongs to the child (*paidos*)."[59] Miller suggests that this

Heraclitan philosophy emerged from how ancient Greek religion united seriousness and non-

seriousness with its picture of Dionysius in play. Thus, the religious picture of primal play

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[57] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 102.
[58] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 102. Miller quotes The *Dao De Ching* 55:1. The verse as it appears here is from Wing-Tsit Chan's translation of The *Dao De Ching*, from "Tao Te Ching: Twenty-three Interactive Translations," Ch.55, Sentence 1, Chan, Mobilewords Limited, accessed April 18, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/48khjrhc.
[59] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 102.

grounded a philosophy which guided an influential Greek morality that was similar to wholistic lifestyles cultivated in Jewish, Chinese, Christian, and Indian religiosity: "All [people], like the gods, were once like children playing. It is to the life of play that we once again aspire, as mature adults. Our present life is virtuous…to the extent that we live playfully, adults living in the divine gracefulness of a child in the present moment."[60] The crucial point is this: originally in the history of ideas, the laboriousness of existence was joined with the playfulness of existence. The life of wholeness and holiness was the play-work, rather than simply the work, of religion, philosophy, and morality. In the beginning, seriousness and non-seriousness were *playmates*!

If this play-work approach to life appears to be an irrelevant or irreverent way of engaging real-world concerns in modern times, it is because modern sensibilities are shaped by what Miller calls "the philosophers' serious *faux pas* about seriousness."[61] The "philosopher's *faux pas*" describes the breakdown of the original unity of primal seriousness and primal non-seriousness. Miller traces the start of this breakdown to Plato and Aristotle, who brought unnecessary philosophical attention to the distinction between play and seriousness. Miller points out that Plato's philosophy was originally grounded in Heraclitus's play-work approach to life, on an etymological basis. The Greek word *spoudogeloios* was a recurring term for biographers, conveying the Heraclitan ideal that joined "the serious" (*spoude*) with "the mirth-provoking" (*geloios*) to frame the lives of the people they wrote about as honorable "grave-merry" people who could both "play serious" and "seriously play."[62] The non-distinction between play and work in *spoudogeloios* continued on in the English etymology of "play," which derives from the German *pflegan*, which conveys "play," "plight," and "pledge" all at once. For Miller, Plato

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[60] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 103.
[61] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 103.
[62] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 104.

endorsed this Greek ideal of the play-work approach, yet surrendered to his suspicion that life was ultimately about one's usefulness to civilization. Miller shows how Plato says "we ought to live…singing and dancing,"[63] while also teaching "we must be in earnest about [human affairs] – a sad necessity constrains us,"[64] explaining that "for Plato play served the higher end of the law and the republic, which were themselves deemed to be philosophically serious."[65] Plato begins the trend of understanding play as a training for seriousness, thus shifting the primal understanding of the grave-merry person toward the lifestyle of being merry for the grave.

If one doubts Plato's "merry-for-the-grave"-ness, Miller shows how Aristotle exacerbates Plato's distinction between play and seriousness. Miller quotes Aristotle's clearly-worded teaching: "Play that you may be serious,"[66] and his doubling-down on the matter: "serious things are intrinsically better than funny or amusing things, and that the activity of a man…is more serious in proportion as it possesses a higher excellence."[67] Further, Aristotle argues that play must function to make better workers, because his highest ideal is the laboriousness of building and preserving his civilization. Whereas play and seriousness once enjoyed an ages-long unity, Aristotle and Plato discard this unity to make the idea of play secondary to the idea of work. The driving factor behind play's narrow association with non-seriousness and a lower order of meaning and labor's over-association with seriousness and the highest order of meaning is this change that Plato and Aristotle brought to the history of ideas. This polarization of play and seriousness is a recent development and an unnecessary departure from their centuries-long unity in ancient religious, philosophical, and moral thought, life, and language.

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[63] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 106. Miller quotes Plato, *Laws*, VII. 803e.
[64] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 106. Miller quotes Plato, *Laws*, I.643c; VII.803b and *Republic* IV.424; VII.537a.
[65] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 106. Miller quotes Plato, *Laws*, VII. 803e.
[66] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 107. Miller quotes Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X.6.ii.
[67] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 107. Miller quotes Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, X.6.iv.

For Miller, the philosopher's *faux pas* goes beyond deviating from the primal unity of seriousness and non-seriousness; it narrows understandings and articulations of existence. Miller writes, "[the philosopher's *faux pas*] implies that one should feel guilty every time he plays, every time he spends an enjoyable moment of leisure. The *faux pas* marks a revolution in the history of ideas which has made man feel he should be constantly working, seriously doing something serious, something useful."[68] Again, this shows that holding serious laboriousness to be the primary principle is not an organic development in the history of ideas. The tendency to essentialize work and seriousness stems from the intentional, historical, and philosophical subversion of the idea of play to the idea of work for the sake of serving Plato and Aristotle's Greek civilization. This philosophical innovation for the Greek time and place ended up dominating the worldviews of other cultures in other places and times, because these cultures – particularly Christian ones – adopted Platonic-Aristotelian logic and language to convey their own concepts for the sake of academic and cultural legitimization. This move was valid and valuable during the eras when Christians were routinely dismissed and persecuted as irreverent and irrelevant members of various empires. Yet, the Christian adaption of philosophical language also entailed the adoption of the *faux pas*. This insight helps us to understand why the theologies undertaken in a serious mode of expression are valued, even when they are absurdly tedious and deficient at expressing the revelatory content of faith. Meanwhile, any theological insights that are contributed through playful modes of expressions are dismissed as irrelevant and irreverent things which are meant to prepare children for the supposedly relevant and reverent serious stuff. Simply put, Miller boldly claims that Christians have long accepted and perpetuated the essentializing of serious laboriousness because Plato and Aristotle said so!

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[68] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 108.

The philosopher's *faux pas* is both a departure from the original unity of seriousness and non-seriousness in the history of ideas, and an unnecessary narrowing of life as only meant for working. Miller insists that the philosopher's *faux pas* heavily influences Christian thought and practice. His claim cannot be dismissed as an overgeneralization, because he traces the ever-deepening Christian embrace of the *faux pas*. He includes quotes from Ambrose, Chrysostom, Augustine, Tollner, Aquinas, and other "representatives of orthodoxy in Christendom" who "interpreted Jesus' good news about the Kingdom to mean that a man had a serious obligation to imitate seriously the ideal essence laid before him by the grace of God."[69] These historical examples evidence the Christian trend of following the Platonic-Aristotelian elevation of the idea of work to the detriment of Christianity's natural and preferable playfulness.

Miller's claim is also effective because it is nuanced. Along with the philosophically-influenced Christian denunciations of play, Miller also notices surprising Christian appreciations of play which show "that not quite the whole of Western Christendom was taken in by the ideology and metaphysics of Plato and Aristotle."[70] Cornelius á Lapide, Gregory of Nazianzus, Maximus Confessor, The Venerable Bede and Bernhardt, Jerome, and even "the usually solemn, unfestive" Luther, envision the life of faith in terms of a "religious game."[71] Despite Miller's evidence of playful Christianity, "the quantity of evidence which can be marshaled on behalf of this minority view is pretty puny compared to the vast numbers of dry and dusty tomes which have encumbered the orthodoxast opposition to the spirit of play."[72] Christian playfulness lives, albeit buried in a philosophical grave of reason. This is why the historical Christian approach to play sounds like the Platonic-Aristotelian motto: play to be a better worker.

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[69] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 109.
[70] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 109.
[71] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 109-110.
[72] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 110.

Miller claims that for nineteen centuries, the church has continued this *faux pas* of Platonist and Aristotelian thought that makes people feel guilty for not being able to "mount the heavenly ladder to the ideal Idea," or do the "work" of conveying imago Dei through a super-serious thinking, living, and language.[73] Yet, Miller insists that when one becomes aware of this *faux pas* of utilizing play only for better work, one will spend the rest of their life trying to re-experience the primal play of their childhood, "wanting to play 'play,'" not games, and not some form of "productive play."[74] Miller's notion of primal play is the connection point to the original unity of seriousness and non-seriousness found in ancient religious, philosophical, and moral thought that remains evident in biblical accounts of God expanding the boundaries of possibility and multiplying the experienceable kinds of good. Miller asks Christians to stop over-relying on the serious laboriousness of Platonic-Aristotelian philosophy, so that they can recognize the primal playfulness in the biblical testimony and in their theological history.

In order to recover the remembrance of primal play, Miller does not merely resituate the idea of play alongside of the idea of serious laboriousness. Instead, drawing from Joseph Campbell's four categories of a vital meaning system,[75] Miller assigns the highest order of meaning to nonserious playfulness to recover the place of primal play in the life of faith, and to reverse the dominance of seriousness ushered in by Plato and Aristotle. Miller envisions play not as a servant to work, but rather, as a four-dimensional consciousness of an ever-expanding vista of thinking, living, and talking out religious experiences in everyday life. First, play's *aisthēsis*

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[73] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 112.
[74] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 125.
[75] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 138. Miller cites Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God*, vol. 3. *Occidental Mythology* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), 518-523 and Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God*: *Creative Mythology* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 608-624. He describes the four parts of Campbell's meaning system as a mythology that "(1) creates in man a sense of awe at those powers and circumstances that lie outside his control, (2) enables man better to understand the natural world-order, (3) gives man a framework in which society may be seen as coherent, and (4) gives man a way to understand the intricacies of his own psyche. A truly comprehensive meaning-system has a spiritual, a natural-cosmic, a social, and a psychological function."

(its spiritual function of wondering with the whole body) reorders non-seriousness as "the highest seriousness."[76] This reordered meaning reintroduces the "expansion of sense-consciousness for the turning on of all the senses" into theology, which involves "the disgust for the an-aesthetic, for anesthesia, for the ascetic."[77] Reversing Platonic seriousness, *aisthēsis* "learns the joy of the expansion of consciousness" in which one plays out the "Aha!" or "Oh I See" of revelation with the whole body.[78] Reversing Aristotelian usefulness, *aisthēsis* is the "big happiness of seeing with the imagination."[79] Recovering newness, *aisthēsis* intellectually brings non-seriousness back into theology as a playfully aesthetic mode of expression that *un-anaesthetizes* its free, graceful, and spirited content.

Second, play's *poiēsis* (its natural-cosmic function of creating shapes and forms) reorders fiction as "the highest truth."[80] This reordering brings metaphorical language and creative formations to "make-believe" existence back into theology, which involves "[calling] something by the wrong name intentionally," rather than mistaking literal language for the truth without being aware that it unintentionally "lies," "just like the scientist who calls [a] desk electrons."[81] Reversing Plato's grave seriousness, *poiēsis* provides "the meaning that quickens" when fictions serve a "truth function."[82] Reversing Aristotle's usefulness, *poiēsis* is "the healing fiction" that helps people "be truly at home in [*their*] external world."[83] Recovering non-anxiety, *poiēsis* habitually brings non-seriousness back into theology as "the lie which tells the truth"[84] – a playfully preparatory expression mode that *un-literalizes* its free, graceful, and spirited content.

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[76] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 139, 140.
[77] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 139.
[78] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 139-141.
[79] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 141.
[80] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 139, 143.
[81] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 144-145.
[82] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 144.
[83] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 144.
[84] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 145.

Third, play's *metamorphōsis* (its social-coherence function of transforming, disguising, and revealing oneself) reorders change as "the highest stability."[85] This reordering reintroduces the ever-changing "flow of life" into theology, which cultivates meaning in the dynamism of the "in-between," rather than consolidating meaning into static structures.[86] Miller explains *metamorphōsis* as things "playing out their own destinies," agreeing with Heraclitus ("everything changes") and the *I Ching* ("Change, that is the unchangeable").[87] Since "the social order is continual metamorphosis,"[88] Miller encourages speaking the truth "in riddles, in parables; ambiguities, temptations; that hearing they might hear and not understand."[89] These "non-straight" truths coincide with the non-linear character of change. Reversing Plato's consolidation of meaning in "heavy puritanical seriousness," *metamorphōsis* conceals meaning so that it may be found within "the iridescence, the interplay…in the puns or bridges, the correspondence," like a game of hide-and-seek.[90] Reversing Aristotle's nonchanging idea of usefulness, *metamorphōsis* is the "not-cohering understanding" that "the only thing that does not change is the appearance that all things seem to change."[91] Recovering non-practicality, *metamorphōsis* teleologically brings non-seriousness back into theology as the "iridescence in the void"[92] – a playfully political expression mode that *un-staticizes* its free, graceful, and spirited content.

Fourth, play's *therapeia* (its psychological function of "letting-be" unexpected meaning) reorders purposelessness as "the highest purpose."[93] This reordering reintroduces the sense of "ecstatically getting beyond one's own cares and anxieties" into theology, which weaves

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[85] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 147-148.
[86] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 147-148.
[87] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 148.
[88] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 148.
[89] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 147.
[90] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 147-148.
[91] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 148.
[92] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 147.
[93] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 150-151.

together "the wonder of all being (*aisthesis*), the imagination at work projecting an order onto reality (*poiesis*), and a life of creative action in a community of change (*metamorphōsis*)."[94] Miller concludes that this interior interplay of *aisthesis*, *poiesis,* and *metamorphōsis* renders a person as a "player [who] exists most openly to the world when [s/he] rejects all norms and when [s/he] is bound by boundlessness."[95] This is Miller's version of God grasping humanity, in which one becomes un-bounded from finite impossibility (norms) by becoming in-bounded within God's infinite possibilities (boundlessness). Reversing the Platonic restriction of purpose to seriousness, *therapeia* is the allowance of awe, creativity, and mystery.[96] Reversing the Aristotelian essentialization of usefulness, *therapeia* is the letting-be of creativity and change in things.[97] Recovering venture, *therapeia* hopefully brings non-seriousness back into theology as the "emergent *mythos* of play" – that is, a playfully therapeutic mode of expression that *un-limits* its free, graceful, and spirited content.

Miller's moves to prioritize the idea of play over the idea of work untangle the playfulness of the Christian thought-world from its historic over-reliance on "dead" seriousness. This movement un-anaesthetizes, un-literalizes, un-staticizes, and un-limits free, graceful, and spirited revelatory content with non-seriousness, allowing theology to be more than a tedious and inadequate mode of expression. Breathing non-seriousness back into theology is the *inspiration* that raises the Christian thought-world out of "dead" seriousness and unto its natural playfulness that brings its revelatory content into the mystery, non-linearity, and flux of everyday human life. Thus, theology "inhales" the powerful aliveness conveyed in its core biblical playfulness, as it weaves together the ideals of Knitter's models, the aspects of theovival, and Miller's

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[94] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 150.
[95] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 152.
[96] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 150-151
[97] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 150-151.

mythological functions of play. *Aisthēsis* breathes newness into theology, raising Christian playfulness out of grave inarticulation, and unto the continual recognition of God in everyday visuals, whose awe and wonder grants the expansion of consciousness that inspires the reform for religions. *Poiēsis* breathes non-anxiety into theology, raising Christian playfulness out of grave non-persuasiveness, and unto the continual recognition of God in everyday habits, Whose imaginatively constructive reality grants the poetic expression of self and world that inspires the mutual diminishment with another. *Metamorphōsis* breathes non-practicality into theology, raising Christian playfulness out of grave violence, and unto the continual recognition of God in everyday culture, whose ever-changing flow of life grants the creative action in a community of change which inspires the transformative enrichment with another. *Therapeia* breathes venture into theology, raising Christian playfulness out of grave fragmentation, and unto the continual recognition of God in everyday risks, whose adventure through cares and anxieties grants the letting-be of life and meaning that inspires the unifying freedom for religions.

Overall, this *inspirational* framework reframes theology in light of the primal playfulness originated in religious, philosophical, and moral thought, where seriousness and non-seriousness are one in the divine child who unifies the gravity and levity of God's activity. This playfulness reverses theology's long confinement to Platonic seriousness and Aristotelian usefulness. Miller's term "theograffiti" signals this reversal, in which primal playfulness distinguishes the Christian thought-world from philosophies which Christianity draw from, but do not require, to express its revelatory content. While Knitter asks theologians to become artists, theograffiti asks theology to become artistic, to express its revelatory content and live out Jesus's primally playful call to "receive the kingdom of God like a child" in Matthew 18:3. Miller explains:

> A theology of play might help. But it would not be theology. It might be more like *theopoesis*. Or even *theography*: writing about the gods, like geography, mapping where

the gods go, where the spirit is… Theography would prefer Mary to Martha, the former being one who sees the practicality of the impractical, the value of playing around. It would see with Jacob Boehme that Adam fell from paradise when his 'play became serious business.' It would understand Sri Ramakrishna's answer to the problem of theodicy. 'Why, God being good, is there evil in the world?' 'To thicken the plot.' Theography of play would likely think that bearing witness sounds burdensome and plodding, and would therefore hope to bare witness…it would all likely lead from theography to theograffiti: a theology of the everyday, seeing the spirit of life in all life.[98]

Miller's playful movement brings together the stable structures of "theology" with the unpredictable patterns of "graffiti." Theograffiti depicts Christian playfulness that moves beyond a reversal of over-seriousness, and into the continual "baring witness" of God, not only in rarified theological contexts, but also in public pop-culture illustrations made in public, with or without permission. In worship and in ordinary play, God grasps humanity, expanding their boundaries of possibility and multiplying their kinds of experienceable good. This theograffitic vision of the Spirit of life in all life is where Miller stops his description of theological aliveness and agility. Yet, he leaves the door open to keep this Spirit-led Christian playfulness going. We will continue this movement, by describing how theograffiti inspires *theogility*, which creates *theoreography*, to enter into *theality*. This movement overcomes the over-reliance upon "dead" seriousness, enabling a theology of religions to navigate and outmaneuver dialogical problems. No longer buried in grave reason, contestant theology powerfully lives and moves across the biblically cultivated play-vista of interreligious relationality, with sacred and secular insights.

B. Theogility: "Living" with God via Playful Christian Spirituality

Acts 17:28 brings together biblical and play theology in the interreligious space. Paul's exclamation provides a framework for embracing and extending Miller's play theology into four biblically playful motions for encountering a differing person, as if playing with a playmate. The

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[98] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 176.

"In God" phrase corresponds to the theograffitic vision of seeing the Spirit of life in all life, which involves sharing the thought-world of identifying all life in God with another. Paul creates his own theograffiti when he "translates" religious language into Athenian culture by using the words that they were familiar with – the writings of the Cretan philosopher Epimenides and the Cilician philosopher Aratus. This is possible because religion and culture both owe their existence to God, Who freely uses both to grasp humanity. Thus, Paul can use the language of popular culture to clarify the thought-world of religion. Catholic theologian Christopher West notices how pop-culture expressions can "illuminate truths in a way that academic theology can't."[99] West agrees with Pope John Paul II's insight, "even in situations where culture and the Church are far apart, art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience."[100] Thus, popular culture does not necessarily threaten or overtake religion; it lends language that orients us toward being grasped by God as we blindly grasp for God. This language is not always refined or reverent. Yet, it is a reliable mode of expression for describing our most profound thinking and grappling about God that accords with our actual bodily awareness of, accompaniment with, and enlivening in God's presence. Pop-culture language, as theograffiti, affords us aisthetic expansions of consciousness to convey that which is ever-expressible about God in recognizable terms. The theograffitic contributions of Epimenides and Aratus to Christian faith are biblical precedents of Christians using the playful language of popular culture to share the same space with a differing person, in challenging and being challenged by their differences.

Paul's theograffiti inspires theogility, which corresponds to Paul's "We Live" phrase that conveys differing religious individuals sharing the spirituality of living with God. In the literal

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[99] Christopher West, *Fill These Hearts: God, Sex, and the Universal Longing* (New York: Image, 2012), xiii-xiv.
[100] West, *Fill These Hearts*, xiv. West cites John Paul II, *Letter to Artists* [Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists 1999], sec. 10, accessed January 2, 2021, https://tinyurl.com/2ve4rhw2.

sense, Paul shares the physical space of the Areopagus with the Athenian audience. He is not stubbornly holed up in established sacred settings, whether church or synagogue. Paul energetically barges into the sphere of the secular. He does not let his distress of Athenian culture force him into a retreat to "safer" theological ground or thwart his expansive sense of the Gospel's inclusiveness. His exclamation starts with a "we" that acknowledges how both Christian spirituality and Athenian religiosity live, move, and have their being to the extent that they are "in God," even though Paul recognizes God in the face of Jesus Christ, while the Athenians look to the altar of the unknown god. Also, his exclamation adopts language from secular philosophers who are outside the purview of church and synagogue, rather than strictly bound to religious doctrine. Paul's physical, theological, and linguistic moves in the shared space of religion and popular culture are not modern innovations of those who are suspected of trying to make Christianity more secular; they are aspects of the original, core Christian identity.

The term *theogility* playfully pairs stable "theology" and unpredictable "agility" as the first move beyond Miller's theograffiti. Theogility is not only the vision, but the *movement* of the Spirit of life in all things, which include seriousness and non-seriousness. This movement with the Spirit portrays Christian spirituality, which is expressed with more compelling language through the lens of play, rather than from the lens of Platonic-Aristotelian laboriousness that cultivates "works" righteousness or "punish and reward" doctrines. Theogility incorporates the insights from Christian mystics who frame the Christian life as something other than attempting to think, do, or say things that "produce" God, accomplish a heavenly reward, or earn a reprieve from divine punishment. The mystics frame the movement of the Spirit of life in all life as God continually giving Godself to humanity, according to God's creativity and generosity. The generosity of God refers to God's ungraspable, yet enjoyable goodness that is at play in creation

(Neh. 9:6; 1 Tim. 6:17), salvation (John 3:16, 34), and friendship with Jesus (John 15:12-14). Beyond moral or ethical categories, generosity conveys God's love through a brand of goodness that inspires us to say, *I enjoy this giving so much that I want to keep giving!* Comparably, the creativity of God expresses God's untamable, yet enjoyable freedom that is at play in God's provision (Matt. 6:25-27), sustenance (2 Cor. 12:9-10), and renewal of creation (Rom. 8:19-23). Beyond a metaphysical necessity or an arbitrary act, creativity conveys God's love, through the brand of freedom that inspires us to say, *I enjoy being this way so much that I want to keep being like this!* Generosity and creativity are two ways to convey how God gifts Godself to creatures as a "playground" to develop their own existence and freely respond to God's love. This response does not overemphasize human agency through the accomplishments of works-righteousness or underemphasize human agency as a dependence upon grace. Rather, God's generosity and creativity grants the theogility for praying and playing into the Spirit's movement in all life.

When one moves with theogility, one agrees with Gregory of Nyssa's description of God gifting the finite with infinite movement. He writes *The Life of Moses* as the Cappadocian who "succeeded in maintaining their commitments to the Church, to Scripture, and to the Hellenistic tradition, without compromise and with intellectual and spiritual integrity."[101] Yet, Gregory stretched beyond these categories and into mysticism, with a playful interpretation of Scripture. When one reads *The Life of Moses* through the lens of play, one sees Gregory's game of theogility: stretching to the God-given, limitless identity, despite the obstacles which make this impossible, by being like God, who overcomes all boundaries. His term for theogility is "eternal progress" (*epektasis*), which is "both a standing still and a moving."[102] Gregory plays out this

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[101] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), xi.
[102] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, II.243.1.116.

"stretching" as an aliveness of knowing God as the One who generously and creatively gives you the truest identity. Since this self is from a limitless God, you playfully stand in it and gradually empty it, as you stretch toward being filled with the ever-pursuable, God-given identity.

Gregory details this stretching of identity with his allegorical interpretation of Moses's life as a way of always coming to birth, as a poietic "make-believing" of reality. He teaches, "We are in some manner our own parents, giving birth to ourselves by our own free choice in accordance with whatever we wish to be," as shown in the choices we make.[103] In Moses, Gregory sees the life of faith as a self-making according to the design of goodly parents (true, life-giving religion) or the tyrant (false, life-enslaving religion).[104] This agency is distinct from the seriously laborious compulsion of works-righteousness that seeks to outwork human sin, but becomes a law obsessed with the sinfulness of one's self and others. This obsession with sin freezes religious identities into rigid categories of "righteous" or "unrighteous." In contrast, Gregory's idea of eternal progress is the stretching past sin with the continual pursuit of the God-given identity, which incorporates (but does not stop with) orthodoxy. Gregory's theogility continually empties identity, so that it can be filled with the Beauty that God continually provides. This Beauty is the vision of "the sinless life of the saved and the blessed"[105] that God provides in earthly living, such as the palm trees, waters, and glory cloud that draws Moses up to the mountain of God. Gregory outplays sin's enslavement with the game of the Spirit's movement in all life, which draws all life to God via the vision of the Spirit in all life.

Gregory explicates how God draws the human soul with Beauty through three key statements. First, he explains, "What is impassible by nature did not change into what is passible,

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[103] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, II.243.1.116.
[104] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, II.14.1.57.
[105] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, 12. The editors quote Brooks Otis, "Cappadocian Thought as a Coherent System," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 12 (1958): 108, 115.

but what is mutable and subject to passions was transformed into impassibility through its participation in the immutable."[106] This is Gregory's allegorical interpretation of Moses's hand being healed from leprosy within his cloak (Exo. 4:6-7). The diseased hand represents Jesus being among us. The restored hand represents Jesus being brought back to God. Gregory says that it isn't the case that God's nature became "passible" but rather, the human nature was transformed into impassibility. This means that God brings creatures into Godself, and in doing so, enables them to share God's unlimitedness. Playing in the playground of God does not overtake our identity; God continually unfolds our ever-generating God-given identity.

The God-given identity does not mean that humans tame or become God. Hence, Gregory's second key statement: "the knowledge of God is a mountain steep indeed and difficult to climb – the majority of people scarcely reach its base."[107] Gregory makes it clear that one does not see, hear, think or accomplish one's way to God via a doctrine, ideology, or sense perception. For him, the knowledge of God, apart from God, is "profane education, which is always in labor but never gives birth."[108] In contrast, we always come to birth by following the way that God teaches, just as the Spirit drew Moses along with Beauty, and how theograffiti inspires theogility.

Inadequate senses are not the only obstacles to the mountain of God. Gregory realizes that most people stop at the base, because they do not let the Spirit lift their desire. Those who want to climb the mountain need purification, which involves the Spirit lifting their desire. Gregory sees this purification and desire in Moses's journey to the Promised Land. He writes:

> Whoever looks to Moses and the cloud, both of whom are guides to those who progress in virtue…who has been purified by crossing the water…who has tasted the waters of Marah… who has then delighted in the beauties of the palm trees and springs…who received the heavenly bread…and for whom the outstretched hands of the lawgiver

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[106] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, II.30.1.60.
[107] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, II.158.1.92.
[108] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, II.11.1.56.

became the cause of victory foreshadowing the mystery of the cross, he it is who then advances to the contemplation of the transcendent nature.[109]

This allegorical interpretation clarifies Gregory's game of theogility as the Sprit-led, mystic movement of continually letting go what was previously held as delightful, in order to stretch toward that which is ever-more fulfilling in God. Hence, Gregory's third key teaching: "the bold request which goes up the mountains of desire asks this: to enjoy the Beauty not in mirrors and reflections, but face to face."[110] This "bold request" is prayer language, in which God puts Beauty into play to draw the soul to the heavenly through the beauty which is seen in the earthly. Moses's desire for the hidden was kindled through what was constantly seen. As Moses was drawn to God through the path of Beauty, he let God lift his desire, continually letting go of what he saw for the sake of what lay ahead. Moses's lifelong journey of being unbounded from the finite impossibility of seeing God leads to Moses's encounter with God on the mountain, in which he is in-bounded within God's infinite possibilities. God grasping Moses grants what is beyond finite capability – the knowledge of God. Overall, Gregory's description of eternal progress memorably illustrates theogility. *The Life of Moses* exhibits the Spirit of life moving in all life, which draws one through earthly life with Beauty and enables one to outmaneuver the limits of finitude with a continual emptying of self to continually receive the God-given self. Moses's stretching cultivated the "well-designed" movement of his life journey toward God across diverse geographical and spiritual terrains. In theogility, identity creation is continually in play. This stance cultivates the creative and generous movement for interreligious relationships.

C. Theoreography: "Moving" with God via Playful Christian Relationality

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[109] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, II.153.1.91.
[110] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, II.232.1.113-114.

Acts 17 brings together theograffiti and theogility in the interreligious space, when Paul shares and challenges definitive recognitions of God making Godself known in everyday life with other people. Paul moves from the synagogue to the Areopagus, using the most maneuverable earthly language available to contest the claims of Jewish and Athenian religiosity with the elusive religious description of Jesus Christ. Act 17's testimony frames Paul's interreligious exclamation as a playful movement with a differing person that is distinct from a presuppositional dismissal or an unqualified acceptance of a religious claim. In the Thessalonian synagogue, "some were persuaded" (Acts 17:4) while others violently rejected Paul and the Christian message. At Beroea, some in the synagogue "welcomed the message very eagerly and examined the scriptures every day to see whether these things were so," (Acts 17:11). Yet, when Paul moves to the Areopagus, he is both the (Beroean) hero and (Thessalonian) villain in this interreligious space, because he serves both functions in his competitive truth-seeking. The Beroeans welcome Paul as the hero who "upholds" faith with language that allows any person of faith to recognize God within one's daily habits of examining their own faith traditions in Acts 17:11. Yet, the Jews of Thessalonica violently reject Paul as a villain who "disturbed" their religious life with language that challenges any person of faith to move away from trying to grasp God with their foundational beliefs and doctrines in Acts 17:9. These verses illustrate how Paul does not take his public reputation too seriously, whether the public considered him to be a dangerous "babbler" or "a proclaimer of foreign deities" (Acts 17:18). This metamorphic interplay of diminishing and enriching relationality is the biblical illustration of theoreography, which allows Paul to share space with other people of faith and simultaneously challenge them.

Paul's "We Move" corresponds to *theoreography*, which playfully pairs stable "theology" with unpredictable "choreography" to describe the well-designed movement of the

Spirit of life in all life that results from seeing this movement in all life (theograffiti) and moving with the movement (theogility). One does not only move with the Spirit of life in all things; one is enfolded into the Spirit's *skillful* movement with all things, which involves seriousness and non-seriousness. This "dance" with the Spirit and with things conveys Christian relationality that is more about being a playmate with others than it is about being one who regards non-Christian, anti-Christian, or pseudo-Christian worldliness too seriously or not seriously enough.

The serious outlook of the religious other is coupled with the fear of the religious other. Sometimes, this fear is rooted in the suspicion of being replaced by the other, as evidenced in the white supremacist manifesto, "The Great Replacement." Other times, this fear arises in the suspicion of being dominated by the other, as evidenced in Boko Haram's outright rejection of Western teachings. When religious violence is viewed through the lens of an enriching and diminishing relationship, the problem can be broadly framed as one religious group demonizing the other as a "diminisher" that needs to be conquered, while idolizing themselves as "enrichers" that are justified in conquering all who carry different beliefs. Rather than offering a comprehensive approach to the complex issue of religious violence, we will consider a new vantage point that joins, rather than replaces, the serious consideration of the religious other. As Paul's contestant activity illustrates, this well-designed movement of the Spirit in all life leads one into and through the space shared with a differing person of faith, in the sense that one shares life with another (the *con*) while challenging and being challenged by them (the *test*). This abstract relationality does not find its best expression in purely academic or theological language.

What is needed here is a remembrance of Paul Knitter's request: "religious artwork" that can exhibit popular "universal norms of reasonableness," which could bring the people of different religions together in addressing "the very real problems of violence, starvation, and

environmental degradation that face all peoples of the entire earth."[111] Knitter's request

anticipates seeing God through everyday visuals, living in God through ordinary beauty, and

moving with God through expressions of popular culture. Whether he intends to or not, Knitter

appeals to the capacity of popular culture to bring people together in a recognition of the divine

for virtuous purposes, as he orients pop-culture to the sphere of interreligious relationality. We

will follow Knitter's request once again, to convey the metamorphic function of theoreography

through the pop-culture icon Goku, the hero of the world-renown anime series, *Dragon Ball.*

Dragon Ball is an anime that is deeply influenced by *Journey to the West*, one of the Four

Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature that unifies seriousness and non-seriousness with its

own playful illustration of the well-designed movement of the Spirit of life in all life. The novel

is based on a historical religious quest and rooted in the profound insights of Chinese and Indian

religiosity. Yet, its satiric presentation of the Confucianist, Daoist, and Buddhist pantheons as a

heavenly bureaucracy makes the religions accessible to diverse audiences across space and time.

Much of the *Journey to the West* concerns how this heavenly bureaucracy, led by the Jade

Emperor, responds to the chaos of Sun Wukong, the legendary Monkey King. While the Jade

Emperor embodies the serious laboriousness and reason of religious life, Sun Wukong

continually disturbs and challenges the heavenly bureaucracy, as the embodiment of the non-

seriousness that cannot be tamed by religion or reason. The entirety of the Monkey King's life

illustrates this untamable unpredictability. He is born out of a stone without a logical

explanation. The stone monkey finds Paradise, but grows bored, and undertakes Daoism to

achieve the life and powers of an immortal. Sun Wukong then uses these powers to rebel against

the order of heaven, which leads to many conflicts and attempts to destroy him by The Jade

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[111] Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2002), 226.

Emperor and the Confucian sage Lao-Tzu. Eventually, the Buddha bests Sun Wukong with a clever challenge, and imprisons him under a giant mountain. The Monkey King is then placed under the service of the novel's true hero – "Longevity Monk" Tang Sanzang – on his quest to find Buddhist sutras from "the West" (India) on a journey that puts Sun Wukong's proclivity for non-serious conflict to good use. The personalities of Overly Sarcastic Productions contribute a valuable interpretation of this plot point at the end of their *Journey to the West* summary video:

> The person who wrote the story favored Buddhism over the other major Chinese belief systems – namely Confucianism and Taoism. Which is why the Confucian bureaucracy is completely inadequate at controlling Monkey, who at this point represents the uncontrolled human mind (hence his overwhelming power but complete lack of forethought), and why the Taoist sage Lao-Tzu was unable to destroy him.[112]

The crucial takeaway from this insight is not the novel's implicit endorsement of Buddhism, but rather, its depiction of the agile personality that can playfully navigate the interreligious contest. Overly Sarcastic Productions notices how Sun Wukong embraces belief systems while also finding ways to avoid the "trappings" of religions (except for the Buddha). Surprisingly, Sun Wukong shares similarities with Paul, as both contest the people of faith with whom they share space, in protagonistic and antagonistic ways. Their function as "playful rivals" provides a helpful prism for understanding how Goku's popular, yet non-traditional personality clarifies what theoreography means for interreligious relationality.

Akira Toriyama's *Dragon Ball* manga and anime[113] – similar to *Journey to the West* – feature a quest for objects with religious import. While they are not Buddhist sutras, the "Dragon Balls" are seven orange spheres of magic and power that are dispersed around the world. Each Dragon Ball is numbered according to the amount of red five-point stars engraved on its surface.

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[112] Overly Sarcastic Productions, "Legends Summarized: The Monkey King (Journey To The West Part 1)," YouTube video, 11:50, October 1, 2015, https://tinyurl.com/mr352m49.
[113] Manga are Japanese comics or graphic novels, usually read from right to left. Anime is Japanese animation.

Each Ball is powerless until someone manages to bring all seven together, which summons the Eternal Dragon, who rewards that person by granting any wish. Such wishes included immortality, resurrection, eternal youth, wealth, and even the most delicious ice cream in the world. Initially, it sounds odd to assign religiosity to the Dragon Balls of *Dragon Ball*, until one remembers the etymological meanings of *religion* that incorporate "careful effort" "bringing together," and "special devotion." Thus, *Dragon Ball*'s valid "religious" dimension involves the careful adventure for the seven Dragon Balls, undertaking a special devotion to find them in order to bring them together to summon the entity whose wish-granting illustrates divine creativity and generosity. *Dragon Ball* also features other "call outs" to other religious ideas, such as its *Journey to the West*-like bureaucratic realms of heaven and hell, the spiritual guidance of "kami" and angelic figures, and even the presence of the divine child(ren) – Grand Zeno – who oversees the pantheon of divine figures and rules the multiverse as a set of twin playmates. In many ways, the *Dragon Ball* series itself is a pop-culture illustration of theoreography!

Sun Wukong is the direct inspiration for *Dragon Ball*'s main character, Son Goku. Goku's life unfolds across the different iterations of the series, which begins with his growth from child to young adult (*Dragon Ball*), goes through his family life and discovery of his heritage (*Dragon Ball Z*), branches unto a "grand tour" of his universe and legacy (*Dragon Ball GT*) and leads into the current *Dragon Ball Super*, the prequel to *Dragon Ball GT* that explores the diversity of the *Dragon Ball* world through time travel and its multiverse. Though the series name changes, Goku's personality stays consistent – he is a mostly good person with a signature love for challenging strong opponents. Goku's heroism is always in tension with his origin. Goku was born on the Planet Sadala as "Kakarrot." He belongs to the super-strong extraterrestrial race known as "Saiyans," who possess an innate enjoyment of battle, a keen fighting sense, and

arrogance. The naturally aggressive baby Kakarrot was originally sent to Earth to destroy it. However, upon his arrival, he falls and hits his head, losing the memories of his brutal Saiyan nature. He is adopted by the master martial artist Son Gohan, who renames him "Son Goku." Thanks to Grandpa Gohan's kind influence, Goku's bloodthirsty Saiyan nature is redirected into his energetic, pure-hearted, and generous character traits. Yes, Goku loves to fight, but it comes from a good place, even though it often causes trouble for him and his friends. Goku embodies both Sun Wukong's untamable energy and Tang Sanzang's pure-hearted adventurousness, in his continual seeking of strong opponents and his continual training to improve himself.

Though the original *Dragon Ball* series initially features Goku's pursuit of the Dragon Balls, the series expands to focus more upon the intense fights between Goku and his opponents. The Dragon Balls become a background concern as Goku becomes strong enough to defend the Earth with his own impressive powers. Crucially, most of Goku's opponents gradually become his friends, as a direct result of their shared contests. Further, Goku's fights with his opponents also change their character; not only do enemies become friends, but villains become more heroic. In *Dragon Ball*, Goku first encounters the desert bandit Yamcha as a villain, but their fight inspires Yamcha to abandon his thieving ways to join Goku's adventures and training. Similarly, Krillin's initial rivalry with Goku paves the way to their lifelong friendship, as fellow trainees of Master Roshi. Tien Shinhan's battle with Goku during the World Martial Arts Tournament inspired him to abandon the path of the cold-hearted assassin, in order to become an honorable fighter who could surpass Goku and defend those whom he deeply cares for. At the end of *Dragon Ball*, Piccolo, the reincarnation of the Great Demon King, threatens the well-being of the world by attempting to rule all life and kill Goku. After losing to Goku in a brutal battle, Piccolo becomes a better fighter, and his inherently destructive nature increasingly

changes into a stern generosity. As *Dragon Ball Z* begins, Piccolo and Goku are able to team up to defend the Earth from Radditz, Goku's Saiyan brother who arrives to recruit him into conquering planets. Overall, the continual combination of Goku's untamable seeking of opponents and pure-hearted improvement cultivates a powerful aliveness that wins over many of his opponents, as they realize that they want to be a part of this way of ever-being, as if playing a game that they do not want to end. Goku's use of force neither dominates nor moralizes, but rather, redirects the quantum of violence into a relationally skillful movement with the differing other. Simply put, Goku fights the fear of the other into friendship with the other.

Dragon Ball's pattern of fighting enemies into friendships reaches its deepest expression in *Dragon Ball Z,* which sees Goku fighting his most personal challenger into his most valuable rival. The series begins with Goku and Piccolo teaming up against Radditz. This battle is only the precursor to the bigger fight with Nappa and Vegeta – two radically stronger Saiyans who seek to use the Earth's Dragon Balls to achieve immortality and conquer the galaxy. After Radditz is defeated, the Saiyans are scheduled to arrive on Earth in one year. This time of preparation brings together everyone who was Goku's enemy in *Dragon Ball* into a friendly alliance to defend their world. Goku even entrusts his son's training to Piccolo. The battle between the Z-Fighters and the Saiyans finally occurs, which results in Goku and Vegeta being the last combatants standing. Following the *Dragon Ball* pattern, the two Saiyans have an intense battle. Yet, there is a new twist – the bitter enemies push each other unto new levels of power, beyond reasonable limits. Vegeta initially gains the upper hand, which forces Goku to use his Kaio-ken technique beyond the safe levels he was taught to maintain. Goku's powered-up Kaio-ken technique grants him radical strength and speed, allowing him to seriously injure Vegeta. This causes Vegeta to lose his temper, push beyond his reasonable limit, and fire his Galick Gun

energy wave technique in an attempt to destroy Goku's world. In one of the series' most memorable scenes, Goku counters with his signature Kamehameha wave, as his upward flow of energy evenly matches Vegeta's downward flow of power. When Vegeta's Galick Gun seems to be gaining ground, Goku once again pushes past his limits, multiplying the power of his Kaio-ken technique times four to energize the Kamehameha energy wave. This move finally overpowers Vegeta's assault, and sends him flying into the sky. Though the battle would continue until the world is saved, a crucial point emerges: the Goku-Vegeta rivalry continually pushes each combatant past their established limits. Yes, fighting with Goku sends even Vegeta into a long-unfolding redemption arc of his own, where he becomes less of a villain and more of a friendly rival. Yet, the value of Vegeta's relationship with Goku is not only found in the ways that Goku enriches him. Goku's diminishment of Vegeta through the damage of battle causes him to continually push beyond his own limits. Likewise, Vegeta's diminishment of Goku through the damage of battle inspires Goku to continually improve and reach beyond previous limits. Overall, the Goku-Vegeta rivalry is a pop-culture illustration of the theoreographic moves of playful rivals, who both enrich and diminish each other, for the sake of pushing their playmate beyond their limits, to be more than they imagine themselves to be on their own.

Also, the Goku-Vegeta rivalry theoreographically illustrates how one's own areas of strength and potential for growth are exposed and complemented through a connection with a radically different person. In *Dragon Ball Super,* Goku and Vegeta enjoy an intensely playful rivalry, because they realize that their personal strength challenges the other person to improve in their area for growth. Some fans of the series notice that Goku's strength is defense; he masterfully dodges attacks, which allows him to find the vulnerable spots in overpowering

enemies.[114] However, his area for growth is offense; he must gradually wear down opponents, which causes him to weaken as fights drag on.[115] Likewise, Vegeta complements Goku's attributes when he fights *alongside of* him as a friendly rival. Unlike Goku, Vegeta's strength is offense; he masterfully attacks and grows stronger as the battle continues, allowing him to quickly defeat opponents.[116] However, his area for growth is defense; he is always wide open to attacks, making him vulnerable to attacks that gradually wear him down.[117] Goku mastered the defense that Vegeta strives to learn, while Vegeta mastered the offense that Goku strives to learn. The diminishing aspect of their relationship (their battles against each other) exposed the areas in which they need to grow. The enriching dimension (their choice to fight against opponents together) cultivates their continual growth. Crucially, the Goku-Vegeta rivalry embodies the contest, in which two differing entities move together (the *con*) while challenging each other (the *test*) not to dominate, but to perpetuate each other's life and growth indefinitely.

The *Dragon Ball* series chronicles Goku's continual growth in power and skill. Yet, his contact with opponents continually reminds him that he has much to learn and much room for improvement. This function of the friendly rival to inspire growth powerfully resonates with the concept of theoreography, because it is a way to frame the presence of the differing other in the life of faith as the playmate who challenges us to continually live out our faith and grow in the areas in which we need improvement. This framing involves theograffiti, when we see the Spirit of life's movement not just in everyday things, but in everyday people. This framing also involves theogility, when we let the everyday person be part of our "eternal progression" to our

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[114] GalacticRevolutionaryMJ, Twitter / @GalacticMJ: One thing I've Grown to appreciate about Goku & Vegeta… May 2022, 3:48 p.m., https://tinyurl.com/yb6arc96.
[115] GalacticRevolutionaryMJ, Twitter.
[116] GalacticRevolutionaryMJ, Twitter.
[117] GalacticRevolutionaryMJ, Twitter.

God-given, un-limited identity. Goku needs Vegeta to understand his own strength and own avenues for progress, and vice versa. Similarly, theoreography is the well-designed movement of the Spirit of life with all life, because it is God teaching one how to recognize personal strengths and areas for growth through one's shared movement with radically differing people.

To be sure, Goku does not fight all of his opponents into friendship. Some of his enemies cling to their evil ways, which leads to their eventual destruction. Further, Goku's fighting is not entirely about achieving justice and redeeming villains; he is driven by his Saiyan enjoyment of battle. Beyond being a hero, Goku's true intent is to keep the game going that he does not want to end. This impulse comes to a memorable head in *Dragon Ball Super*, where Goku accidentally initiates the Tournament of Power. This tournament was originally the idea of the Grand Zenos, who thought it would be fun to see warriors from different universes fighting against each other. The Zenos forgot this idea until Goku – ever seeking stronger opponents to fight – naively reminds them about the idea. Due to Goku's reminder, the Zenos require most of the universes to send teams of their strongest warriors to compete in the tournament, and stipulates that the losing teams will have their universe erased from existence. This is the Zenos's playfully grave way of reducing the number of universes they have to monitor, which eliminates those who do not grow, while rewarding those who manage to improve beyond limits. Of course, the people of the different universes blamed Goku for threatening their very existence. Combining seriousness and non-seriousness, Goku is the protagonist who also functions as the antagonist, by putting all the universes at risk, even though he will eventually play a key role in saving the universes. Goku describes his villainous heroism while recruiting the warriors of his universe for this tournament:

> No, see, I don't think like I'm saving the world. The fact is, I go into every conflict for the battle, what's on my mind is beating down the strongest to get stronger. That's how this tournament happened, too. That seems to be a recurring mistake on my part. Maybe that's the Saiyan in me, too stubborn to stand down in the face of that prospect. But I can't bear

the thought of the blood of everyone back home being on my hands because I couldn't resist this. This is for them, now. Would you help me?[118]

Goku confesses that he is both the "good guy" and the "bad guy" in this situation. He is responsible for saving his universe from the threat created by his inherent inclinations. His love for fighting is both the cause of the problem and the means to solving it for everyone involved. Goku embodies the playful relationality that is both diminishing and enriching, as a pop-cultural echo to Martin Luther's theological dual office, in which God "condemns and saves."[119]

Goku's occupation of both roles gives the people of different religious traditions – especially Christians – the space to consider how we too, are the "good guys" and the "bad guys" all at the same time. Every religious identity is "good" to the extent that it exists as its fullest, truest self and "bad" to the extent that it exists as the challenger in the interreligious encounter. When understood as theoreography, this is a good thing, because it frees us from the compulsion to take ourselves or others too seriously as the antagonist or the protagonist, while freeing us to playfully move with a differing person. This playfulness contributes to moving the interreligious encounter away from demonizing the other as the "diminisher" and idolizing the self as the "enricher." Theoreography, as modeled by Goku, conveys the playfulness that enjoys movement with the other, but also acknowledges that our presence with one another is mutually enriching and diminishing. Our religious identities are contesting and contested, simply by existing.

Like Goku, each religion's aspirational "heroism" of bringing people together to "bare witness" to the Divine is in tension with its playful impulse to challenge something, whether it is the conventional wisdom of the age or another religious vantage point. Hinduism's origin story

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[118] *Dragon Ball Super*, The Tournament of Power Saga (2017-2019), episode 87, "Hunt the Poaching Ring! Goku and Android 17's Joint Struggle!" Directed by Akio Yamaguchi, aired November 10, 2018 on Cartoon Network.
[119] Martin Luther, "Concerning the Letter and the Spirit," 88.

sees Brahma and Vishnu contest each other's claim of supremacy.[120] The Buddha's key teaching of *anatta* (no-self) contests Hinduism's key teaching that the self (Atman) is Brahman.[121] Confucianism originated as a contestation of strict Buddhist codes and Daoist social reclusiveness.[122] Lao-Tzu's contest of the Zhou Dynasty's confining bureaucracy led him to quit his librarian job and relocate to the mountains, where he would learn and spread Yin Xi's teachings about the Dao.[123] Israelite religion emerged out of the contest between Pharoah and the God of Moses. Christianity emerged from Jesus's disciples contesting Jewish tradition and Greco-Roman culture. The early Medinan community of Islam was founded by former Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians who contested their surrounding polytheistic culture.[124] Sikhism began when Guru Nanak contested the cultural "purity and pollution codes" of the dominant cultures of his context, which caused him to memorably conclude "There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim. So whose path shall I follow? I shall follow God's path."[125] Many Indigenous Religious Traditions generally involve a contest between the material and the spiritual that are interpreted by shamanic specialists.[126] New Age and New Religious movements emerge from the contestation of the way that modern society and mainstream religion frames life's meaning.[127] Atheism and agnosticism are "part of a skeptical tradition that pursues human flourishing in a godless universe by [contesting] religion as false and harmful."[128] Each exchange involves a shared space, in which one is enriched when a religious identity bares its full self and witness,

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[120] Stephen Prothero, "Lingam of Light" in *Religion Matters: An Introduction to the World's Religions* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020), 32.
[121] Peter Feldmeier, "The Self and Anatta" in *Encounters in Faith: Christianity in Interreligious Dialogue* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2011), 156.
[122] Prothero, "The Life of Confucius," in *Religion Matters*, 358.
[123] Prothero, "One, Two, Three, Ten Thousand," in *Religion Matters*, 396-397.
[124] Prothero, "Muhammad and Proto-Islam," in *Religion Matters*, 307-311.
[125] Prothero, "Guru Nanak's Vision," in *Religion Matters*, 134-135.
[126] Feldmeier, "The Shaman," in *Encounters in Faith*, 228-230.
[127] Feldmeier, "What is New Age?" in *Encounters in Faith*, 239-243.
[128] Prothero, "Atheism at a Glance," in *Religion Matters*, 502.

yet diminished when another religious identity contests one's own viewpoint. When this exchange is seen in the light of Goku's playfulness, enrichment is the encouragement to continually live out faith in the identity that God creatively and generously provides to complement what is missing in another's life, much like how Goku and Vegeta complement each other in their corresponding strengths and areas for growth. Likewise, diminishment is the push to continually improve beyond our self-limiting religious identity and toward the ever-pursuable God-given identity, much like how Goku and Vegeta push each other past their limitations.

Thus, theoreography describes the well-designed movement of the Spirit of life in the activity of the differing people of faith teaching and challenging each other to continually live out and live beyond their religion's limits. This theoreographic lens reveals the little bit of Sun Wukong and Tang Sanzang (monkey and monk) playing together in all religious and irreligious identities. Just as *Journey to the West* pairs the monkey's untamable antics with the monk's pure-hearted adventure, Goku's personality brings together the fighter and the hero, and Paul upholds and disturbs faith, theoreography is the well-designed movement with differing playmates. These new patterns of randomness playing with reason's stable structures in everyday life echo the primal play of non-seriousness and seriousness.

D. Theality: "Having Being" in God via Playful Christian Epistemology

Acts 17:28 weaves together the seeing, living, and moving with the Spirit of life in all life in the "Have our Being" portion of Paul's exclamation. For Clark Pinnock, Paul models the Christian who "is prepared to enter into contest with rival claims," as one who undertakes "the risk, vulnerability, and intellectual adventure of not knowing where the conversation may

116

lead."[129] After explaining how Paul is not a fideist or relativist, Pinnock claims that Paul was a "cognitivist," who "shared with people what he took to be knowledge of reality."[130] Further, since Paul took the truth seriously, and believed that differences needed to be evaluated, Pinnock does not call him a relativist, because he claims that relativism does not permit truth to matter.[131] Pinnock's conclusion is valid and valuable. Yet, there is room to explore how Paul reconciles differences in religion in a way that diverges from Pinnock's suspicion that certain pluralists (Hick) have gone "full-fledged Kantian" with their "God cannot be known" language and Pinnock's warning about secularism "[taking] over the study of religion."[132] One can value Pinnock's insights and still posit that Paul was actually a *recognizer* who shared definitive experiences of God making Godself known in reality with other people. The act of recognition acknowledges that we do not grasp God, and avoids embracing the Kantian position that God is unknowable. Instead, recognition acknowledges human finitude and a dependence upon God's self-disclosure, in which God teaches God in a way that grasps humans, who cannot learn God otherwise. In this way, God is ever-recognizable; humans can learn and say valid things about God, but none of these thoughts and expressions will exhaust the meaning and nature of God.

This pairing of the question of God's ungraspability by humanity with the promise of God's recognizability for humanity is the reality that Paul exclaims in the interreligious encounter with the Athenians who worshipped the "unknown god." Paul shares these experiences of recognizing God, but at the same time, he also challenges the articulations of these experiences that differ from his own. Thus, acknowledging Paul's recognizer tendencies is

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[129] Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 138.
[130] Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 133.
[131] Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 136.
[132] Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 135-136.

a steppingstone for understanding him as a *contestant*, given the etymological roots of this term. The *con-* prefix applies to Paul's activity of sharing, while the *test* root word conveys his activity of challenging different beliefs. This distinction from fideism and relativism emerges due to the decisive way that God grasps Paul alongside of a radically different religious other, in the way that Luther frames the dual office in which God "wounds and heals."[133]

Paul's Acts 9 experience of being grasped by God exposes his blindness and recreates his vision. This sets the stage for his exclamation in the Areopagus, in which he contests the Athenian expression of God's "unknowability" with his own recognition. In this progression from Acts 9 to Acts 17, Paul's vision of the Spirit of life in the everyday (theograffiti) enables him to live (theogility), move (theoreography), and ultimately, conform to this vantage point of the Spirit of life moving in all life (theality). *Theality* pairs stable "theology" with unpredictable "reality" to describe existence as it is experienced and understood in the power of the Spirit, Who includes everyone and everything, including the serious and non-serious dimensions of existence, according to God's creative nature and generous purposes that are revealed and recognized in the loving Person of Jesus Christ. Emerging from theoreography, the thealistic viewpoint sheds light on a person's capacity to both "bare witness" of the divine and to stretch to the ever-pursuable God-given identity with others, because one understands themselves, other people, and the world around them in light of the ungraspable, yet ever-recognizable God. Entering theality is to be grasped by God as Paul was in Acts 9, as the persecutor who is both wounded and healed by the recognition of the Divine in the face of Jesus, Who is the persecuted religious Other. In this grasping, one realizes that one enriches and diminishes others just as much as they are enriched and diminished by others.

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[133] Martin Luther, "Concerning the Letter and the Spirit," 88.

Paul's "healing wound" characterizes the theality that incorporates, but is not limited to, a Christian context: one's ability to recognize the Divine is not contingent upon one's cultural status as either the guilty "bad guy" or innocent "good guy." Rather, theality involves God's continually recognizable and learnable presence 1) exposing the "false innocence" of zealously clinging to a self-created reality, and 2) letting-go of the "wound-avoiding control" that uses religion, politics, and social norms to render oneself and one's group guiltless while making everyone else guilty. Theality conveys how God's grasping of humanity "wounds" this "dead" serious commitment to one's own ordering of reality, while also "resurrecting" this epistemology as the Spirit-led inclusion of all things in God's creativity and generosity. Theality is conforming to the Spirit of life's way of seeing, living, moving, and having being with everyone and everything, as an identity generated in the wounding and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Franciscan priest Richard Rohr eloquently frames theality in terms of the encounter between "doubting" Thomas and the Risen Jesus; it is "believing that someone could *be wounded and also resurrected at the same time*!"[134] Rohr explains how Thomas represents all of us in this encounter, especially when the Risen Jesus invites him to touch his wound in John 20:27. Rohr teaches that Thomas's touching of Jesus's wound illustrates the path along the "divine map" for reality, in which "we are given permission to become intimate with our own experiences, learn from them, and allow ourselves to descend to the depth of things, even our mistakes, before we try to transcend it all in the name of some idealized purity or superiority."[135] Theality maps this therapeic "letting-be" of this ever-being with God and with a differing other that exists, even though we are wounded people who are wounders of God and others. Rohr calls

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[134] Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe* (New York: Convergent, 2019), 111.
[135] Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, 110-111.

this a "*tangible* kind of religion that makes touching human pain and suffering the way into both compassion and understanding,"[136] rather than resorting to attempts to avoid woundedness with self-ordered realities which allow us to pretend that we are innocent of wounding others and safe from being wounded by another viewpoint. Overall, theality involves the playful living *through*, rather than around, the loss of innocence and control that results in the encounter with a differing other, as the re-created self who emerges out of the encounter with the differing other and conforms with the Spirit of life moving with all life. Rohr helpfully clarifies this "pattern of spiritual transformation" when he insists "to grow toward love, union, salvation, or enlightenment…we must be moved from *Order* to *Disorder* and then ultimately to *Reorder*."[137] Rohr's explanation of this pattern is complemented by his interpretation of Thomas's encounter with the Risen Jesus, which illustrates theality's map for connecting oneself to everyone and everything, via the One who holds together grave woundedness and playful resurrection.

Initially, Thomas does not give himself this permission to believe in the Jesus who is wounded *and* Risen. This refusal illustrates Rohr's description of the tendency to cling to *Order*. Rohr explains, "At this first stage…we feel innocent and safe. Everything is basically good, it all means something, and we feel a part of what looks normal and deserved…Those who try to stay in this first satisfying explanation of how things are and should be will tend to refuse and avoid any confusion, conflict, inconsistencies, suffering, or darkness."[138] Thomas's famous John 20:25 refusal – "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe" – is his way of clinging to the pre-crucifixion Jesus with the innocence of a faithful disciple and an understanding of Jesus's identity according to his

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[136] Rohr, *The Universal Christ,* 113.
[137] Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, 244.
[138] Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, 244.

safe structures of reason. Yet, Thomas's self-ordered view of Jesus does not match what Jesus

shows Himself to be – alive, both before and *through* crucifixion and burial – according to wild

and unpredictable patterns of randomness. The wounded-Risen Jesus cracks open Thomas's

"safe" epistemology. Speaking from experience, Rohr insists that this wounding is necessary to

move us out of permanent residence in this stage, which "[creates] either willingly naïve people

or control freaks, and very often a combination of both."[139] Thus, the second stage – *Disorder* –

"wounds" our ideally ordered universe in order to share the growth toward the greater wholeness

that is given by God – and not our self-ordered realities – with a differing person.

When the *Disorder* of the wounded-Risen Jesus wounds Thomas's self-ordered ideal

reality, he connects Thomas to the other disciples, to other people, and to everything else, by

making him a vulnerable person who is in touch with the confusion, inconsistencies, and

suffering that exists outside of himself. Rohr explains this *Disorder* when he writes:

> Your 'private salvation project,' as Thomas Merton called it – must and will disappoint
> you, *if you are honest*. As Leonard Cohen puts it, 'There is a crack in everything, that's
> how the light gets in.' Your wife dies, your father loses his job, you were rejected on the
> playground as a child, you find out you are needy and sexual, you fail an exam for a
> coveted certification…you finally realize that many people are excluded from your own
> well-deserved 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.'[140]

When the wounded-Risen Jesus allows Thomas to touch his wounds in John 20:27, he joins

Thomas to every person of faith whose belief has been wounded in human life. For Thomas, the

wounded-Risen Jesus is the wounded religious Other, whose existence cracks his self-ordered

reality of innocence and control. When Thomas sees the nail marks of Jesus's hand, he lets go of

the false innocence of having nothing to do with woundedness to embrace the sympathy and

empathy with the wounded. When Thomas sees the hole in Jesus's side, he abandons the

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[139] Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, 244.
[140] Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, 245.

understanding of the wounded religious Other as under his own control, to embrace the ever-unfolding identity of the wounded religious Other, as presented by God. Thomas's interaction with the wounds is his participation in Jesus's wounding, even though he thinks he is innocent. Yet, Rohr also warns us to not permanently dwell in this stage, because doing so only serves to make a disguised self-ordered reality based on universal skepticism and cynicism.[141] Thus, *Reorder* "resurrects" our wounded epistemology in order to share the experience of being taken to happiness by God – and not serious laboriousness – with a differing person.

When the *Reorder* of the wounded-Risen Jesus transforms Thomas's epistemology, he opens Thomas's self-ordered reality of innocence and control unto the ever-unfolding, "universal pattern of growth and change."[142] John 20:19 illustrates this by showing how the wounded-Risen Jesus was able to outmaneuver the locked door to enter the disciples' room, stand with them, and playfully say to them, "Peace be with you." The disciples are hiding out in this locked room in the wake of Jesus's crucifixion and burial, which has wounded their faith and understanding of reality. Their belief and devotion to Jesus seems to be a complete failure, and this locked room functions as a grave for their faith. They are willing to believe, but they need God to help their unbelief. God does so in a playful way, by outmaneuvering the room's locked door without any logical explanation, and by changing the vibe of the room from mourning into bewildered joy and enlivenment. If the locked room embodies the reliable structures of reason, and the wounded-Risen Jesus embodies the unpredictable patterns of randomness, then John 20:19-22 portray *Reorder* as a playful movement which pairs reason and randomness in opening the disciples' wounded understanding of reality to God's ever-aliveness – "the life on the other side of death, the victory on the other side of failure, the joy on the other side of the pains of

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[141] Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, 244.
[142] Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, 219, 247-248.

122

childbirth."[143] When Thomas's self-ordered reality is cracked open to this aliveness, he recognizes God in the face of the wounded-Risen Jesus in Paul-like fashion, realizing that he always needed to learn God from God. The wounded-Risen Jesus responds, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (John 20:29). This response not only opens Thomas to God's reality, but the divine reality that is shared with others, as the fellow wounded and wounders. Jesus's response confirms that His theovival lives through human confusion, conflict, failure, suffering, death, and darkness.

Theality is the epistemology of this ever-aliveness that occurs when one conforms to the Spirit of life's way of seeing, living, moving, and existing with everyone and everything. Rohr explains that living in the presence of the wounded-Risen Jesus teaches us that we are not innocent; we learn that our ways diminish and wound. We also find our own woundedness and diminishment in the wounded-Risen Jesus. At the same time, life in the Risen Jesus teaches us that we have our being despite woundedness and beyond wounding; we learn that our ways enrich and restore. We discover our own resurrection and enrichment in the wounded-Risen Jesus. This way of understanding reality from the vantage point of the One who is both gravely wounded and playfully resurrected allows Rohr to make the appeal to let go of the influential post-modern narratives that promise innocence or wound-avoiding control to their adherents.

Theality involves the choice to interpret reality according to the Spirit of life and the wounded-Risen One moving with all life, rather than self-ordered ideologies which venerate the self to justify avoiding and demonizing others. Rohr notices this tendency in political extremes, insisting that "both liberals and conservatives are seeking separateness and superiority, just in different ways…they both must somehow be 'wounded' before they give up these foundational

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[143] Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, 245.

123

illusions."[144] Rohr's description of the "wound" operates beyond either groups' labels of help or harm, because it cracks their *Order* for the sake of *Reordering* their epistemology in a way that looks harmful, but actually helps usher in a greater wholeness. For Rohr, *Disorder* wounds self-ordered ideologies, and their illusions of innocence and control, so that we can let go of our belief in their offers of security and salvation, to embrace the powerful ever-aliveness that does not have to avoid woundedness or cling to a political ordering of reality. The wound frees all people to exit their self-ordered realities to enter God's universal pattern of growth and change that is embodied in Jesus and granted through the Spirit of life moving with all life. Theality is the "letting-be" that keeps the awareness of the wounded-Risen Jesus's ever-being going. Jesus's way of holding together these contrasts grounds the playful Christian epistemology in which the woundedness that prevents one culture from dominating God's sphere of religion is paired with the resurrection that keeps the life of every religion going through pain, failure, and death.

Describing a way of knowing that holds together woundedness and resurrection, Rohr articulates how Theality remembers Christianity's playfulness as a way of being with others without relying on a meaning system that requires maintaining a false innocence or avoidance of woundedness. This playful way of being enables Christians to be people who can playfully breathe with another, whether post-modern narratives frame the Christian identity positively or negatively. Rather than being subject to narratives of heroism and villainy, contestant theology grounds Christians in the identity of Christ, where all people learn that we are simultaneously enrichers and diminishers, because we are all simultaneously wounded and resurrected. Overall, the wounded-Risen Jesus is the ultimate Player of the wounded-Risen epistemology, Who enables the human play of the wounded-Risen theology of religion called contestant theology.

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[144] Rohr, *The Universal Christ*, 246-247.

III. Chapter Summary

Christians continually exclaim "We Live" with God and others when the play theology of religions rises out of "dead" seriousness. The "We Live" of contestant theology affirms three things: 1) God grasps humanity by expanding the boundaries of possibility and multiplying the kinds of experienceable good in everyday living, 2) theology expresses its free, graceful, and spirited content by *baring* witness to the divine child's primal play that unites non-seriousness with seriousness, rather than *bearing* witness to the Platonic-Aristotelianism that essentializes productivity and usefulness, and 3) differing people of faith are religious playmates when one sees, lives, moves, and conforms to the Spirit of life tangibly moving with everyone and everything. Randomly emerging from ossified structures, contestant theology resembles the Monkey King, who like Goku, continually challenges differing others with its untamable energy. Unpredictably outmaneuvering locked doors of reason, contestant theology also resembles the Longevity Monk, who, like Jesus, continually brings differing others into its ever-reliable aliveness. Thus, contestant theology is the "Monkey Monk" that plays out the space of the interreligious encounter, not as a serious laboriousness for dominating the sphere of religion, but instead, as the game of keeping every religion's thoughts, life, and talk going, through the enriching and diminishing directions of human life. This Monkey Monk theology answers the grave dialogical problems of the interreligious encounter with untamable and ever-reliable *motion*. This is the quadri-directional Christian movement with a differing person, in which the Spirit of life's "blowing where s/he will" crosses over with the intertwining lines of the Magen David, the spinning spokes of the Dharmachakra, or the ever-spiraling Enso. This crossover holds differing others and interreligious ideals within real life play movements.

Contestant theology's upward play pushes the Replacement ideal out of "dead" serious exclusivism as theograffiti. This aisthetic revival of the Christian thought-world inspires the continual religious reform with religious playmates that engages religious inarticulation with the shared bewilderment that never runs out of things to say about God. Contestant theology's downward play pushes the Fulfillment ideal out of "dead" serious inclusivism as theogility. This poietic revival of Christian spirituality inspires the continual mutual diminishment with religious playmates that engages religious non-persuasiveness with the shared humiliation that empties one's human faith into the lack of another. Contestant theology's leftward play pushes the Mutuality ideal out of "dead" serious pluralism as theoreography. This metamorphic revival of Christian relationality inspires the continual transformative enrichment with religious playmates that engages religious violence with the shared un-limiting that adds one's human faith to another's recognition of God. Contestant theology's rightward play pushes the Acceptance ideal out of "dead" serious Trinitarianism as theality. This therapeic revival of Christian epistemology inspires the continual unifying freedom with religious playmates, which engages religious fragmentation with the shared recreation of thinking, living, and talking into the ever-living creativity and ever-unfolding generous purposes of the ever-knowable God in ever-livable Paradise. Overall, this chapter describes interreligious relationality as the "We Live"-ness that stretches beyond the serious space of the interreligious encounter, via the playfulness of powerful aliveness and non-serious movement. Chapter 3 explains the interreligious space's "And Move"-ness, by describing contestant theology's three-dimensional "conspiration" with other religions.

CHAPTER 3
"AND MOVE": HOLDING OTHER RELIGIONS LIGHTLY AS "CONSPIRATORS"

Play theology describes the powerful aliveness and movement that raises Replacement, Fulfillment, Mutuality, and Acceptance ideals out of "dead" seriousness. The remembrance of the unity of seriousness and non-seriousness in the primal play that is core to the major religions "breathes" life into these ideals, inspiring them into playful movements of theograffiti, theogility, theoreography, and theality in everyday life. This "inspirational" stance adopts the untamable and ever-reliable "motion" of religions as the proper and preferable mode of religious expression that navigates and outmaneuvers the dialogical problems of inarticulation, non-persuasiveness, violence, and fragmentation. In this stance, the "In God We Live"-ness of the previous chapters connects with the "And Move" of the interreligious space, through contestant theology's biblical design (playful interpretation of Scripture) spiritual/ethical application (the life of faith resituated with play having a higher order of meaning) and theological scope (a theology of religions whose orthodoxy and orthopraxy is articulated in terms of playful motion with differing faiths). Chapter 1 situated contestant theology's biblical design in Paul's "In God." Chapter 2 framed the spiritual/ethical application as Paul's "We Live." These chapters "inspire" Chapter 3 to align the theological scope of contestant theology to Paul's "And Move," by envisioning a playful Christian belief framework of "breathing with" other religions as the "conspirator." Chapter 3's "conspirational orthodoxy" animates Chapter 4's orthopraxy of breathing with other religions as the "con artist" and Chapter 5's description of the Holy Spirit's path of navigating the spiraling motion of moving-with and pulling-at other religions, via the "controller."

This chapter makes four moves to explain how contestant theology holds other religions lightly as "conspirators." First, we will frame Paul's "And Move" as the Christian way of "breathing with" the belief systems of other religions, which involves defining "conspiracy" as a playful relationality of mutual enrichment and diminishment, and re-purposing it from its modern associations with conspiracy theories. The second move begins this repurposing, as Courtney Goto and Lakisha Lockhart contribute a playful relationality of "holding lightly" that opens a way for religions to breathe together without consuming each other. The third move looks to Juan Segundo, who contributes language for articulating the enriching and diminishing dimensions of this religious conspiracy. The fourth move draws from Roger Caillois's four dimensions of play experience to connect the previous conspirational insights with Paul's biblically playful interreligious relationality. Overall, Chapter 3 maps the belief system of following the Holy Spirit "breathing where [s/he] will" across the ever-unfolding play-vista of interreligious relationality, via the conspirational orthodoxy of contestant theology.

I. The Conspirational Orthodoxy of Contestant Theology

The term *conspiration* pairs the prefix meaning "with" or "thoroughly" (*con-*) to the root word that means "the action of breathing as a creative or life-giving function of the Deity" (*spiration*)[1] to convey the activity of "breathing with" or "breathing thoroughly." John C. Murray and other pluralists see this etymological ideal of breathing with others.[2] Their ideal gets overshadowed by its negative concretization – the *conspiracy* of like-minded people secretly coming together to deceive and destroy. Yet, conspiration does not necessarily have to always

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[1] *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2022), s.v. "spiration," accessed May 31, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/mwdemzkr.
[2] John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960), 22-24.

concretize into conspiracy. If there can be a secret "breathing together" for harm, then there can be an overt conspiring for life. This life-giving conspiracy is depicted throughout the New Testament, in which fishermen, tax collectors, theologians, zealots, doubters, betrayers, and persecutors are unified by the Spirit to breathe together in a public life of following Jesus Christ. Interestingly, the New Testament authors do not describe the disciples' togetherness as a conspiracy. That term is given to the secret conspiring that unified rival groups – chief priests and Pharisees – to kill Jesus (Matt. 26:3-5; John 11:45-57). Yet, both instances involve a conspiring of differing people and viewpoints. When the life-giving conspiring of the disciples is understood in contradistinction to the harmful conspiracy of the religious leaders, one sees the biblical illustration of conspiration's etymological potential. For the disciples, the etymology meets theology when Jesus "breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (John 20:22). The Bible shows that God, in the Person of Jesus Christ, "inspired" conspiration through the Holy Spirit, Who guides his disciples' breathing with each other and others in a way that is distinct from the conspiracies of the world. Christians move with others by following the unpredictable, yet reliable path travelled by the breath of the Holy Spirit.

This biblio-theological illustration of conspiration grounds contestant theology's conspirational orthodoxy. Contestant theology advances this belief system of playful relationality by 1) cultivating an expansive sense of "withness" for differing personalities, 2) holding together the radical contrasts of enrichment and diminishment, and 3) integrating multiple layers of perception. In simpler terms, the conspirational orthodoxy is a Christian belief system of playfully relating to other belief systems. One breathes with the differing religious other, who is held *as if* s/he is a deeply relatable playmate. This *as if* navigates through *what is* (finite human relationality that prevents anyone from dominating the religious sphere) until it outmaneuvers

unto *what could be* (perpetually thinking, living, and talking out the ever-recognizable God and ever-unfolding Paradise). This interplay of the *as if*, *what is*, and *what could be* provides the belief framework that allows the conspirational orthodoxy to adapt a conspiracy's capacity to assemble differing people together, without an intent to deceive and destroy others. Instead, conspirational orthodoxy functions as a "theory of conspiracy" that guides the Christian sense of testing and stretching with other religions, with the same attractive power of conspiracy theories which threaten to overtake the role of religion in the modern life of faith.

Conspirational orthodoxy valuably offers Christians a belief system of breathing with others that is on par with the increasingly contagious conspiracy theories that are emerging as the influence of institutional religion declines. Current developments prove how conspiracy theories go beyond "explaining an event or set of circumstances as the result of a secret plot by usually powerful conspirators"[3] – they serve a religion-like function for people who are brought together under its belief system that cultivates the careful effort and special devotion for exposing the secret plot and resisting its conspirators. These beliefs motivate people to act and form groups to respond to differing others *as if* they are powerful villains who rig *what is* (status quo society) against anyone who does not comply with their villainous *what could be* (the secret plot)*.* This conflation of *what* is with the villainous *what could be* allows conspiracy theorists to envision themselves as the heroes attempting to save the world from being controlled by the villains, with conveniently unfalsifiable narratives and inescapable accusations.

Unfalsifiability and inescapabilty are traits which make conspiracy theories infectious rivals to the religions. Conspiracy theories do not need empirical evidence to validate their narratives – they only require the willingness to believe and perpetuate them. Also, conspiracy

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[3] *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2022), s.v. "conspiracy theory," accessed June 7, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/mvw29yvp.

theory narratives are bolstered by denials and criticisms. Any denial of the narrative's villainous

secret plot becomes the evidence that the villains' secret plot exists, while any criticism of the

narrative's rationalization of its pessimism towards the other becomes the evidence that the

villains are trying to keep the secret plot going. To be sure, unfalsifiability is not necessarily bad,

nor limited to conspiracy theories. Many institutional religions advance claims which are true

beyond empirical observation. Regardless, conspiracy theories dramatically differ from

institutional religions. Religion generally concerns an object of worship that is a conception of

God that has been shown worthy of one's ultimate devotion, particularly after it "has been tested

through a long tradition of worship, and sustained human faith over centuries of time and in

millions of lives."[4] A religion *as ifs* a differing other's truth by including *what is*, framing current

reality as a movement through the good and evil of existence toward the ultimate destiny, or

what could be. Meanwhile, conspiracy theories orient one's ultimate devotion to narratives

which defy long traditions and communities of sustained faith. Conspiracy theories *as ifs* a

differing other's truth by replacing *what is* with the villainous *what could be*. Conspiracy

theories frame current reality as the product of a villainous secret plot that heroes must expose

and rectify, even if this goal is necessarily ever out of reach, to preserve the conspiracy theory's

relevance. Thus, a religion is seen to be a way of *moving through* reality, when compared to

conspiracy theories which promise to *move reality around*. The conspiracy theory's promise of

being able to declare what is good and evil on one's own terms becomes more enticing when

modern developments discourage trust in institutional religions' capacity to navigate reality and

provide meaning. Two major conspiracy theories cultivated on the extremes of modern

American politics share similar narrative structures and promises to move reality around.

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[4] John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, Ltd., 1993), 141.

The right wing "great replacement" narrative (GRN) insists that non-white people must be held *as if* they are "invaders" who are conquering European culture. GRN "invaderizes" the non-white person because it renders *what is* in terms of non-Europeans' "higher fertility rates, higher social trust and strong, robust traditions"[5] and conflates it with its fear of *what could be* – the undefeatable invaders "[occupying white] peoples [*sic*] lands and [ethnically replacing white] people."[6] Some may be reluctant to call GRN a conspiracy theory. Yet, GRN does not require actual statistics to validate its claims, nor does it use statistics to justify invaderizing non-white people. Rather, the gunmen who shot and killed worshippers in the 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue attacks, 2019 Christchurch mosque attacks, and 2022 Buffalo shootings shared the following conviction: "[m]onotonous repetition of immigration facts and statistics will simply bore the masses, and drive the people away from the stale and uninspired speakers that propagate them. Be creative, be expressive, be emotional and above all be passionate. These are the things that speak to people, connect people, drive people."[7] In GRN, the threat of being replaced by the other – which exists with or without evidence – justifies unqualified violence against the other. Those who appeal to the evidence that would disprove GRN or discredit the actions of its adherents are called "traitors" who "support a corrupt and broken state."[8]

This narrative is made further unfalsifiable with its dictation that becoming "infamous" is the way to spread the message and achieve victory, even in death. One GRN manifesto insists, "the media will paint you as villains, the state will name you as traitors, the globalist forces will name you as criminals and the traitors amongst your people will name you as enemies. You will

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[5] "Brenton Tarrant - The Great Replacement Manifesto (PDF)," The Great Replacement, University of Rochester, accessed March 29, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/mse9zvsj.
[6] "Brenton Tarrant - The Great Replacement Manifesto (PDF)," 14, 17, 20, 63.
[7] "Brenton Tarrant - The Great Replacement Manifesto (PDF)," 57.
[8] "Brenton Tarrant - The Great Replacement Manifesto (PDF)," 83.

become infamous until victory is achieved. Take it with a smile."[9] GRN confers an unfalsifiable heroism upon those who will be labeled as societal villains for acting out their presuppositional fear of the differing other with unqualified violence. This religion-like belief system is a *meligion* that tempts people away from the movement with others with its unfalsifiable narrative that promises its adherents the ability to define good in terms of their singular identity, as a response to what they define as evil – the imagined threat of the non-white other.

GRN meligion finds its left-wing counterpart in the "systemic racism" narrative (SRN). SRN insists that everyone who does not affirm its message must be held *as if* they are "oppressors" who victimize ethnic minorities. SRN "oppressorizes" non-adherents because it renders *what is* in terms of the effects of historically racist policies and practices which are attributable to real individuals and institutions, and correctable by anyone who is willing to do so. Yet, this *what is* gets conflated with *what could be* – the notion of an un-eradicable racism that is traceable to no one, the fault of everyone, and impossible for anyone to correct. Critical discourse author Robin DiAngelo quotes African-American film director Omowale Akintunde's articulation of systemic racism as "a societal, institutional, omnipresent, and epistemologically embedded phenomenon that pervades every vestige of our reality."[10] Valuably, Akintunde intends to set the stage for continually addressing racism. Yet, this intent is undermined by presuming racism less as the problem to be perpetually addressed by anyone, and more as everyone's perpetually unsolvable problem. If racism is omnipresent and epistemologically embedded, then SRN's racism is everywhere, including efforts to eradicate racism.

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[9] "Brenton Tarrant - The Great Replacement Manifesto (PDF)," 66.
[10] Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 72. DiAngelo quotes Omowale Akintunde, "White Racism, White Supremacy, White Privilege, & the Social Construction of Race: Moving from Modernist to Postmodernist Multiculturalism." *Multicultural Education* 7, no. 2 (Winter, 1999): 2, https://tinyurl.com/3kb3nn6d.

Some may find it striking to describe SRN as a conspiracy theory. Yet, this is a valid label, to the extent that SRN draws people together with a tempting ability to denote right and wrong that does not require evidence, while also thriving on criticism and denials – traits which are shared with GRN. Politics lecturer Matthew Franck distinguishes *systematic* racism (actual patterns of racist behavior committed by actual people and institutions) from systemic racism. He makes this distinction to explain how SRN eliminates the ability to not be racist, insisting "'who's to blame' is never answered with any particularity that will fix responsibility on known persons, for the answer is "why, everyone!"[11] For Franck, SRN's presumption of everyone's complicity in the racist "system" creates an "indefensible construct"[12] that relieves adherents from the burden of validating it with evidence. The only requirement is a willingness to believe that everyone is infected by a racist bias. Further, any attempts to counter SRN with contrary evidence is taken to be "a sure sign of the inquirer's naïveté" and support for the undefeatable racist system.[13] SRN denies possibilities for any relationships between different ethnicities that are not tinged with racism. Instead, there is an emphasis upon collective guilt. This emphasis gradually dissolves the ties between different groups of people, because every interaction is suspected to involve racism. This insight captures Franck's core concern about SRN:

> If everyone in general but no one in particular is to blame, the few remaining actual racists among us are let off the hook. They're no worse than the rest of us… unlike all of us who are invited to affirm our collective guilt for the "system," the truly guilty won't *feel* guilty… any of us non-racists who deny our guilt are mistaken for them—and the circular reasoning of "system racism" keeps turning the wheels of its juggernaut.[14]

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[11] Matthew J. Franck, "Racism is Real. But is 'Systemic Racism'? *That Time I Was Published by* Newsweek – *For Two Hours*," *Public Discourse: The Journal of the Witherspoon Institute*, September 14, 2020, https://tinyurl.com/53s86e77.
[12] Franck, "Racism is Real. But is 'Systemic Racism'?"
[13] Franck, "Racism is Real. But is 'Systemic Racism'?"
[14] Franck, "Racism is Real. But is 'Systemic Racism'?"

Franck's insight clarifies how SRN confers an inescapable villainy upon everyone who disagrees with its notions of collective guilt for undefeatable racism. This religion-like belief system is a *deligion* that tempts people away from movement with others with its inescapable narrative that promises its adherents the ability to define good in terms of deconstructing social ties as the response to what is defined as evil – the imagined (rather than the actual) racist threat.

These brief considerations of GRN and SRN intend to show how each religion-like belief system erodes one's sense of connection with the differing other. Clearly, both approaches are not reliable modes of expression for interreligious relationality. Yet, the "And Move" – the Christian intention to breathe with others – faces a modern world filled with these and other villainizations of others. Christians must figure out how the "And Move" sustains "withness" for the other in a way that not only matches the enticement of GRN and SRN, but also builds better relational alternatives to their unfalsifiable vindication and inescapable guilting.

Christians do not have to become conspiracy theorists. Rather, they can repurpose the identity of the *conspirator*, by re-envisioning it as a person who finds ways for differing people to breathe together, as the subversively attractive contrast to the ways that modern conspiracy theories keep people apart. Christian conspirators adopt a *theory of conspiracy*. This belief system, called conspirational orthodoxy, encourages breathing with the differing other as a mode of expression that enables them to move with people whose beliefs increasingly resemble the conspiracy theories which erode relational ties. This conspirational orthodoxy is the attractive alternative to the over-serious villainizing of conspiracy theories, because it *playmates* the differing other through the motions of its playful thought-world (theograffiti), spirituality (theogility), relationality (theoreography), and epistemology (theality). Conspirational orthodoxy holds the differing religious other *as if* they are a fellow human being, and not as a "threat" that

is only discerned by the meligious elite, nor as deligion's "unsolvable problem." This religious playmating includes *what is* (the enriching and diminishing ways that differing others exist as they truly and fully are), without conflating *what* is with the imagined threat of the differing other. In this key distinction, conspirational orthodoxy envisions a generously unlimited *what could be* as the hope of sharing the perpetual thinking, living, and talking out of the ever-recognizable God and ever-unfolding Paradise with differing people. The conspirational *what could be* does not replace *what is*, because conspiration is not exhausted by exposing the potential threat of the other as something to continually outwork (akin to conspiracy theories) or by anticipating the potential hope of the other as something to continually work to realize. Instead, conspirational orthodoxy's "playmating" of the differing religious other conveys the inclusion of *what is* in one's playful movement toward the generously unlimited *what could be*.

Conspirational orthodoxy unfolds in three dimensions. First, holding differing people *as if* they are deeply relatable playmates cultivates the convincing sense of "withness" for differing personalities. Second, religious playmates navigate *what is* because they can hold together the radical contrasts of enrichment and diminishment operative in finite human relationality, in the mode of play. Third, this play of the religious playmates moves with *what is* while being drawn to the generously infinite *what could be* – the ever-enjoyable game of differing people playing out their God-given selves together. The next three sections frame conspirational orthodoxy as the playful *weligion* with a conspiracy theory's attractiveness and better relational approaches than the self-glorifying meligion or the all-shaming deligion.

A. *As If-ing* Others via Courtney Goto's and Lakisha Lockhart's "Holding Lightly"

As if-ing starts conspirational orthodoxy by recognizing that certain conditions are needed to view a differing religious other as a deeply relatable religious playmate. This realization follows how Womanist play theologians Courtney Goto and Lakisha Lockhart adopt D.W. Winnicott's function of *as if-ing* to create the "container" that makes young people feel safe enough to play.[15] Goto's and Lockhart's phrase for *as if-ing* is "holding lightly," which is the relational spiritual practice of considering who one is playing with, how one plays, and where one plays.[16] Holding lightly in youth ministry offers key takeaways to guide conspirational orthodoxy's playful cultivation of the convincing sense of interreligious "withness."

Goto and Lockhart present holding lightly as embracing younger people with the playfulness that "engages the 'other' – be it a person, feeling, or idea – with openness to what is emerging in the moment…with attentiveness to creating freely with care and respect for the other."[17] Goto insists that the habit of holding lightly only emerges from a sense of being grasped by God in our tumultuous growing times. She emphasizes the gentle allowance that lets youth be who they are, rather than serious pressure to be the adults they are not:

> In practicing gentle openness, we commit to resisting the temptation to quash, predetermine, or misuse the other…remember a time when you were in pain or turmoil, and needed someone to hold you lightly in that moment, someone not to predetermine or misuse you, but rather, help you grow. If you did experience being held lightly, you might have experienced it as a moment of something God-given…as a particular mode of playing, which itself is a way of being with and for others, that it can invoke a wider range of experiences than joy, or fun, or delight…to play is to experience losing and finding oneself in engaging reality and one another "as if" exploring freely a world of possibilities bounded by structure that facilitates relationship. For young people who feel like they have no options, being able to be playful would help them realize there is more going on than what they are experiencing in a given moment.[18]

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[15] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Dr. Courtney Goto & Lakisha Lockhart: Holding Lightly," YouTube video, 51:09 (35:55-36:36), February 28, 2017, https://tinyurl.com/2ebnfhr9.
[16] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Courtney Goto: Challenges," YouTube video, 3:52 (0:53-1:09), February 24, 2017, https://tinyurl.com/yc88t9tz.
[17] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Holding Lightly," 12:15-13:11.
[18] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Holding Lightly," 13:40-15:26.

Goto's description of holding lightly in youth ministry opens three points for reflection. First, the generously open commitment to the other is a compelling alternative to the villainizing tendencies of conspiracy theories. This commitment connects people through the deeply relatable remembrances of the youth experiences which Lockhart describes as the "wiggling and struggling" of molting lobsters who are defenseless and blind in their soft skin, until their new shells harden and their eyes refocus.[19] Molting youth are "walking around tender, trying to figure out who [one is] in a world of "-isms" that bombard them with conflicting messages, telling them who to be and what to believe."[20] In our molting seasons, we seek the hand that situates us into a "holding" environment of presence, attentiveness, and respect. Holding lightly cultivates these conditions for young people, enabling them to play with life's uncertainties in a gentle relational openness, rather than resorting to self-ordered graspings at security and salvation.

Modelling gentle relational openness grants the second point: holding lightly offers joy, fun, and delight as embodied ways to enliven and expand the capacities of youth and adults to engage reality relationally. Such is the case with Lockhart's *cajita* box project, in which church members paired with the youth to create "sacred boxes" which conveyed the essence of their church. Lockhart describes how these relational containers made youth feel safe enough to play:

> Not only were the *cajitas*, just, beautiful…but also I was so moved at the relationships that were formed because of this playfulness that they had experienced. Because of the playfulness they created and imagined together in this new space, they learned how their vision and mission were and were not quite being lived out. Some learned that their youth did not feel safe enough to be themselves at church. Some learned that their youth didn't feel valued or cared for as real people with real problems. Some learned that their youth are struggling with issues of bullying, body image, sexuality, and did not feel that their church was a place that they could go to for help or advice. Some found their youth at a loss for words, because they never before felt seen or heard.[21]

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[19] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Holding Lightly," 2:10-2:50.
[20] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Holding Lightly," 5:28-5:48.
[21] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Holding Lightly," 22:39-23:50.

Lockhart's *cajitas* are real-life examples of holding lightly's playfulness granting youth and adults the safety to express different perspectives and the openness to receive them. Lockhart sees this playfulness as a spiritual practice that expands young people's capacities for "coping with everyday challenges and reflecting deeply on questions of purpose, identity and life, and for building relationships with themselves, God and others."[22] When adults hold youth *as if* they were deeply relatable playmates, this playful personhood "allows youth to see themselves in a light of possibilities," and to "engage in risk and exploration, without all the familial and societal pressures…to know exactly what they should be and do in this world."[23] Lockhart connects these instances of youth cultivating their faith on their own terms to Womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant's "sense of somebodiness," which is "the realization that you are fully a human being that deserves dignity, respect, and care," in contrast to adult tendencies to dismiss the youth concerns and experiences.[24] Held-lightly youth also enjoy "the space to freely be and live out that being without judgment – to live into all the possibilities they imagine when they play."[25] Lockhart recognizes this as the "ludic learning space," that safely "allows room for what we in churches don't often make space for…doubt, wrestling, risking, and questioning."[26] She insists that these experiences – when held lightly in the joy, fun, and delight of playfulness – create ludic spaces in which youth feel "free and safe enough" to invite adults into their space to move with them as they engage the risks of discovering themselves.[27] Holding lightly enlivens one's identity and agency, due to the inclusion of the other in one's stretching toward God.

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[22] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Holding Lightly," 24:20-24:35.
[23] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Holding Lightly," 28:33-29:09.
[24] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Holding Lightly," 31:23-32:45. Lockhart quotes Jacquelyn Grant, "A Theological Framework," in *Working With Black Youth: Opportunities for Christian Ministry*, eds. Charles R. Foster and Grant S. Shockley (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 69.
[25] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Holding Lightly," 32:48-33:05. Lockhart refers to M. Shawn Copeland's concept of "ontological space."
[26] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Holding Lightly," 33:15-33:30.
[27] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Holding Lightly," 25:17-26:06.

The growth of youth identity and agency that comes from the inclusion of the other leads into the third point: holding lightly actualizes the hope of something more, through the playful connection with the other. Goto insists that this playful connection enables a person to see the possibilities which lay beyond their singular vantage point, by "[feeling] the power of the space one is in with someone who is there with and for us."[28] This spatial experiencing is where *as if-ing* holds together the sense that "we are here, grounded in reality, meaning others also experience what we're experiencing as real and true" and the intention of "treating ideas, situations, and experiences as provisional, open-ended, and unfinished…[luxuriating] in the excitement of constantly changing conditions to experiment with what is possible…trying to imagine and enact something more beautiful, lovely, good, and right."[29] In the context of youth ministry, she situates something-moring in 1 Corinthian 13:13's triad of faith, hope and love:

> First, being playful with young people is an act of love… To hold them lightly in this delicate time is a deliberate, loving act in which adults set aside their egos, agendas, and assumptions to try to be with and for young people… Experiencing the constancy of loving companions in this time of transformation, youth can dare to hope, which is the second of Paul's triad. Sometimes, they need to borrow our sense that this is not the end, there is more. In being playful, we practice the hope of more. Finally, experiencing love and hope and being playful together, we deepen one another's faith, which completes the triad. Adults enact faith in young people, so that they come to know that they will not only survive their molting – they will become bigger and stronger for it.[30]

Goto theologically characterizes holding lightly as the biblically playful container of faith, hope, and love that holds the youth *as if* they are something more. By making more space for the young person's journey of faith within the church, the youth are enabled to playfully engage all that represents "the other" with the faith, hope, and love of the adults who held them lightly.

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[28] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Holding Lightly," 16:47-17:20.
[29] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Holding Lightly," 17:36-19:08.
[30] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Holding Lightly," 19:09-20:45.

As youth learn to hold others *as if* they are something more, they join "the movement of the Spirit"[31] that grows youth identity and agency in the formation of their faith through relationship with another. This movement occurs in ludic learning spaces which "decenter the serious adult and recenters the imaginative child, with a sense of awe, wonder, and curiosity."[32] Goto explains how the ludic space makes room for the youth journey of faith through the relational structuring of four open-ended playful "forms," in which doubt, wrestling, risking, and questioning are held lightly and held in light of the hope of something more. First, doubt is held lightly in the playful form of "deep listening." This form commits to lovingly attending to youth "without judgment or commentary,"…allowing young people to "think aloud [without needing] to defend, argue, or explain…" so that they hold ideas that are not their own, rather than being held by those ideas.[33] Second, wrestling is held lightly in the playful form of "awakening the inner child(ren)." This form commits to "[remembering] what it is like to be a child" and being amazed by – rather than expertly grasping – biblical stories.[34] Third, risking is held lightly in playful "artistic forms." These are improvised music and movements which allow a young person to "hold lightly all that she may be holding," with support from others who affirm her vulnerability and playfulness.[35] Fourth, questioning is held lightly in the playful form of "witnessing." This form answers the questions which threaten the youth's sense of hope with the testimony from a different and more imaginative vantage point that does not tell them what to do, but rather, helps them know "that what they see is seen," while expanding their view and "opening up the world."[36] Through these forms, adults grant youth the "permission and support

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[31] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Holding Lightly," 33:48-34:22.
[32] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Holding Lightly," 26:07-26:15.
[33] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Holding Lightly," 40:22-41:04.
[34] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Holding Lightly," 42:42-43:36.
[35] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Holding Lightly," 45:32-46:34.
[36] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Holding Lightly," 47:22-48:29.

to be themselves, and not anyone else, to discover and pursue their hopes and dreams, and to know that we, God, and others will be there to support them in their pursuit."[37] When *as if-ing* holds youth lightly, it generously provides the conditions which encourage them to pursue who they are, without trapping them in a quashed, predetermined, or misused identity.

Conspirational orthodoxy *as ifs* the other as the religious playmate by adapting three key elements of holding lightly in youth ministry to cultivate the convincing sense of withness in the space of the interreligious encounter. First, the ways in which Goto and Lockhart discern how God playfully grasps youth contribute starting points for conspirational orthodoxy's theograffiti, which sees the Spirit of Life's presence in the religious other. This thought-world involves the big happiness of intentionally seeing the other with the imagination and with the whole body as the "something more" that awakens and expands sense-consciousness. Goto and Lockhart introduce this sense-expansion as the youth's relational "molting" into their fuller selves that results from being held lightly through the presence, attentiveness, and respect of adults. Conspirational orthodoxy advances this molting as the relational growth from the Christian context toward another that is possible due to God grasping all humanity. In youth ministry, adults create the holding environment which allows the youth to relationally doubt, wrestle, risk, and question their way into their deeper selves. Similarly, conspirational orthodoxy engages the pressures and limitations of a singular religious context, by envisioning the holding environment which incorporates doubt, wrestling, risking, and questioning as *bewilderment* which brings every person of faith to realize their need to continually learn God/Paradise[38] with another. We can continually learn God because God grasps us. We continually learn God by continually

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[37] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Holding Lightly," 49:55-50:57.
[38] This recurring "God/Paradise" phrasing acknowledges how some recognize the existence of an anthropomorphic or non-anthropomorphic being called God while others recognize the concept of an Ultimate Reality.

molting in the space of the interreligious encounter. We molt as we follow the Spirit breathing where s/he will into our contact with the differing religious other, which inspires the continual reforming of beliefs that cultivates focus on the revelation more than the religion. When Christians see themselves within the grasp of God as continual molters who are continually learning about God, they embrace a thought-world that affirms their recognition and witness of God in the Person of Jesus Christ, without presuming that any religion totally exhausts the meaning of God. This Christian molting opens the way to hold people of differing faiths lightly. Christians can hold people of differing faiths *as if* they too are continual learners of God/Paradise, who can give full devotion to their faith as the best story ever told, without presuming that any religion totally exhausts the meaning of God/Paradise. Thus, *as if-ing* accepts that all people are molting; it is the Christian way of saying that we are all in a movement toward the ever-recognizable God in which we all can be our truest, deepest religious selves in the way that is informed by – rather than threatened or replaced by – a differing person. This movement that *as if-ing* invokes is deeply relational, because the shared molting identity allows differences to be held together in a shared space. Here, Christians and differing others move each other to consider their beliefs in new ways without abandoning those beliefs, thus cultivating the daily reformation needed to ensure that the religion does not overtake the revelation. Instead of being a presuppositional dismissal or unqualified acceptance of a differing religious person, *as if-ing* makes room for Christians to playfully move with them as fellow human beings who share the need to continually learn and reform their recognitions of God.

The second element of holding lightly adapted by *as if-ing* concerns how the sense-expansion of the ever-molting identity enlarges theograffiti from baring witness to *baring withness* to God. Whereas Goto and Lockhart teach how adults and youth find ways to be

143

together to engage reality, the mindset of baring withness applies their insights toward

envisioning ways for Christians and differing religious playmates to be together to recognize

God, in ways which enliven and expand both groups' beliefs. Since all people of faith are

molting toward God, *as if-ing* insists that the Christian's continual stretching toward God

includes the religious playmate's stretching toward God, and *vice versa*. As one molts, one sheds

his or her singular recognitions of God which stand apart from others, due to differences. Yet,

this shedding is not a replacement of one's own recognition of God with that of another. Rather,

it is a "baring" of one's connections to differing recognitions. Thus, baring withness exhibits

one's singular recognition of God that connects with others, despite differences. This is the

Christian commitment to granting "somebodiness" to the religious playmate, as a way of

allowing the differing person of faith to establish their own sense of identity and agency. Also,

this is the Christian reception of the "somebodiness" from the religious playmate, who allows

Christians to develop their own sense of identity and agency. This *cajita*-boxing of interreligious

relationality creates the conditions to advance ideas and concepts which frame the Christian's

connection with the religious playmate as the ludic learning space where both groups feel free

and safe enough to invite the other into their space to move with them as they engage the risks of

exploring being themselves. The phrase "free and safe enough" describes the enlivening

freedom, grace, and spirit of *as if-ing*'s non-seriousness, which makes room for a differing

other's somebodiness without taking them too seriously or not seriously enough.

The third element of holding lightly adapted by *as if-ing* concerns how the molter's

spatial experiencing of withness enables theograffitic activity to generously include the religious

playmate within the hopefulness of something more. Whereas Goto and Lockhart value the

importance of adults affirming that young people will become bigger and stronger in their

molting process, conspirational orthodoxy positions Christians to tell all people of faith to keep

moving, because their religion is not the end! This is an invitation and a challenge, delivered

with the smile of a reliable friend, and the smirk of a pesky rival. Provocatively, *as if-ing*

positions Christianity as the Goku of the religions – the Monkey Monk who upholds and disturbs

faith, by challenging us to continually live out our faith and grow in our areas for improvement.

This playfulness keeps the game of thinking, living, and talking out God going for everyone.

Notably, Goto does not associate the spiritual practice of holding lightly with games. She

insists, "forms, unlike games, are more open-ended, and non-competitive; there are no winners

and losers...[this is] more important and appropriate for church."[39] Goto's choice of forms over

games is a well-researched, well-reasoned, and safe approach, especially for youth ministry. We

will frame the interreligious encounter as a game, even though our approach risks of being less

safe, wise, and reasonable, because we do not want to give up the fun and expansive experience

of competition. Instead, we use the conceptual structure of games to redirect the competitiveness

between the religions toward the hope of something more. This move follows Clark Pinnock's

optimistic assessment of religious competition. When a religion is "noble, uplifting, and

sound,"[40] Pinnock trusts that "God would accept people whose beliefs fall short of the complete

truth."[41] However, Pinnock warns that religions are still "part of fallen human culture," and can

be "deficient" in knowing God and doing the right thing.[42] Thus, he maintains the Person of

Christ as a norm, to test the spirits of religion. Similar to the molting identity, Pinnock sees

religions as changing entities, which Christians can impact via truth-seeking. In his view, if a

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[39] Yale Youth Ministry Institute, "Holding Lightly," 38:49-39:12.
[40] Clark Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy: The Finality of Jesus Christ in a World of Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 92.
[41] Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 101.
[42] Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 107.

religion is not competitively telling its story as the best story ever told that is worthy of full commitment, it is dying.[43] He hopes that all people of faith tell their story with full devotion, because he sees the religious competition as inevitable and needing to be channeled for good. This unavoidable religious competition serves relational good when it is situated in games – particularly contests – whose playful structures something-mores its contestants as those who keep the game going, beyond the labels of winners or losers.

Combining the playfulness of Goto and Lockhart with Pinnock's sense of competition, *as if-ing* sees religions as molting entities, which Christians can hold lightly in contests whose relational structures are faith, hope, and love. Christian playfulness with differing religions is an act of love, in which Christians decide to move with religious playmates by setting aside manipulative agendas to grant them the freedom to molt and express their lives of faith on their own terms. This loving act is the contest of deep listening that holds the varying dynamism of each religion's story lightly, by affirming their liveliness while encouraging growth beyond their lifelessness. Christian playfulness with the religions is also an act of hope, which grants religious playmates the grace that ensures no single viewpoint will conquer the interreligious dialogue, in the anticipation of recognizing something more. This hopeful act is the contest of awakening the inner child that holds the varying wonder of each religious story lightly, by affirming their awe-inspiring epiphanies while encouraging growth beyond uninspiring dogmas. Christian playfulness with the religions is an act of faith, where sharing the differing faith stories of full devotion assures all people of faith that they will become bigger and stronger for including others in their molting process. This faithful act brings the contests of aesthetics and witnessing

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[43] Pinnock, *A Wideness in God's Mercy*, 122.

into holding the expansiveness of each religious story lightly, by affirming their capacity to uplift, while encouraging growth beyond their tendencies to entrench.

Overall, conspirational orthodoxy *as ifs* the religious other by adapting the withness of holding lightly in youth ministry to frame how the people of differing religions can move and breathe together in ways that enliven everyone involved. By itself, holding lightly is an expansive ideal that presumes the generously unlimited *what could be* of people being together, despite differences. Yet, conspirational orthodoxy attaches this ideal to the realities of finite human relationality. To show how the conspirational *as if* includes *what is*, we must turn to Juan Segundo's consideration of the limits of human nature and morality. This move ensures that conspirational orthodoxy maintains itself as a theory of conspiracy that is distinct from conspiracy theories which *as if* others according to its conflation of *what is* and *what could be*.

B. *What Is-ing* Others via Juan Segundo's Finite Relationality

Uruguayan theologian Juan Segundo emphasizes the need to theologically engage the actual conditions of human life, and not just superimpose a vision of reality over *what is*, or conflate it with *what could be*. While Segundo advances liberation theology, his insights map the path in which the *as if-ing* that makes room for relationship connects to *what is*. Segundo's term for this connection is "commitment,"[44] which involves theology embracing humanity not as a faceless and spaceless concept, but as actual people who exist in the material properties of time and space, and in the historical circumstances which produce and condition a system of limited options and goals.[45] Segundo allows for *as-if-ing's* aspiration to make room for the withness that transcends differences. Yet, his commitment situates holding lightly within finite human

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[44] Juan Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Oregon: Orbis Books, 1976), 13; 80-82.
[45] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 102.

relationality that cannot avoid social and material limits. Commitment is not about *what is-ing*'s limitations replacing *as-if-ing*'s aspirations. Rather, Segundo frames *what is* as the material obstacle course of enrichment and diminishment that *as-if-ing* navigates through, in order to be a truly human and humanizing theory of conspiracy. Segundo's commitment to lovingly contribute to the life of the oppressed in a way that actually liberates real people guides conspirational orthodoxy's intent to cultivate the truly human sense of breathing with differing religious others.

Segundo explains the social limitations of *what is* as the commitment to humanity that "[lets faith] be fleshed out in human, provisional ideologies."[46] This limitation resonates with how conspirational orthodoxy is structured to convey withness to people whose belief patterns are increasingly influenced by modern conspiracy theories. While different than a conspiracy theory, Segundo assigns a similar, religion-like function to the ideology, as a "system of goods and means" which looks to historical reality to provide the meaning "for any human option or line of action," such as capitalism or Marxism.[47] Ideologies hold a system, rather than a narrative, as the object of one's devotion. Ideological devotion is distinct from faith, which finds meaning for human existence in God/Paradise. Segundo distinguishes ideology and faith to say that ideology is the unavoidable entry point to belief that gradually opens to faith in the humanly recognizable and pursuable God. He sees ideologies as "human options" for learning and understanding. Such human options enable people to understand and express their faith within their material and historical circumstances. Ideology is not faith, and it does not convey all that there is to faith, because it is a limited human expression. Segundo suggests that these limitations lead people to prefer ideologies over faith, because they are human options to address human situations with material and historical approaches, rather than with immaterial and atemporal

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[46] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 129.
[47] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 102.

claims. Yet, instead of pitting ideology against faith, Segundo pairs them in a "liberative process" of faith allowing ideological solutions to human problems to "always be provisional and incomplete," and ideology "freeing" faith to engage history and human experience.[48]

Segundo discerns this interplay of faith and ideology in biblical revelation, especially in the Exodus narrative, in which the spiritual claim of the liberating God concretizes in Israel's ongoing historical saga. Yet, when it comes to the New Testament, he claims that the results of the gospel message are "disastrously" divorced from its claims, due to its focus on another plane of reality, to the detriment of the physical one and its real world problems.[49] He explains that this is why Christians are asked to translate the gospel message into modern culture, even though it is difficult and "disheartening" when it is properly preached.[50] To engage these difficulties, Segundo looks to how Jesus comes to fulfill God's historical liberation as a particular person in a particular place who is adapting a particular ideology – the historical saga of the Israelites – rather than innovating an immaterial and atemporal liberation claim. He frames Jesus's activity as the ideology that provides the human option for recognizing the liberating God's presence within the realities of real world experiences and problems.[51] Following Segundo's logic, God embraces human social limitations through the Person of Jesus Christ, which includes being influenced by ideologies, as the way to be fully human without ceasing to be fully God.

Beyond the social limitations of *what is*, Segundo also describes its material limitations, in terms of humans only having a limited and singular store of relational energy to distribute material love. Drawing from the empirical principles of psychology, biology, and physics, Segundo teaches that the material human condition "has only a certain quantity of available

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[48] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 107-110.
[49] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 111.
[50] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 111.
[51] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 114.

energy. We can fashion infinite combinations with it…but we cannot increase the supply in any absolute way."[52] He also insists that there is only one form of energy available for human relationality. He denies that a person draws from one "well" of love energy to relationally enrich others, while drawing from another "well" of egotism energy to relationally diminish others; he situates both human love and egotism in the same "economy of energy."[53] Segundo reads Jesus's words about love according to this economy of energy. He suggests that faith navigates ideology in Jesus's teachings, because they illustrate "a way to attain the most love possible in a given concrete situation which, as such, will never be repeated in exactly the same terms."[54] Thus, in the materiality of human loving, when a person uses relational energy to love one group of people, they have less available energy for loving other groups. In Segundo's words, "if we truly love a specific number of persons, we cannot incorporate other people into our love by distributing our available energy differently without taking energy away from certain areas of our love for the first group."[55] This is how Segundo makes sense of the Gospel command to love one's enemy, which for him, can only materialize as "an *extension* of our love for our neighbor – not as an alternative to the latter."[56] Segundo *as ifs* the enemy in terms of being the neighbor – the one whom we have the energy and proximity to love. Yet, the enemy is also *what is-ed*, as one who receives our relationality to the depletion of our love for our actual neighbors.

Here, Segundo illustrates how material relationality in material existence is an interplay of enrichment and diminishment. It is tempting to call this a zero-sum game. Yet, Segundo

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[52] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 157.
[53] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 157.
[54] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 155.
[55] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 157
[56] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 158.

actually advocates for a "prudent distribution"[57] of relational energy within the material laws of

energy. He writes:

> Thus the economy of energy in the process of love implies that there is some mechanism whereby we can keep a whole host of people at arm's length so that we can effectively love a certain group of people. Some such mechanism is necessary until we hit upon another combination of energy that will enable us to broaden the circle of our love and bring new "neighbors" into it.[58]

Here, Segundo teaches that real and material love is a matter of someone committing more of

their relational energy for the particular person or group who they can actually be with, socially

and spatially. He interprets the parable of the Good Samaritan in this light, insisting that "Jesus

does not end up his parable saying that every human being is our neighbor. His point is that we

can make any given human being our neighbor if we take advantage of the countless

opportunities offered us in life."[59] Segundo suggests prioritizing the limited way of loving actual

people who are actually in our path (unlike the priest and the Levite) over envisioning an

immaterial and atemporal moral command that only loves the faceless and spaceless concept of

humanity. He continues, "Consider the Good Samaritan himself…If he found himself there on

the road by the wounded man with money to pay for his lodging and a burro to carry him, he did

so because previously he had bypassed many other human misfortunes. Otherwise he would not

have had money, a burro, and a trip."[60] Here, Segundo sees the Good Samaritan as a real human

being, which entails material limitations, and thus, an inability to carry *every* wounded person

safely to the inn. The Good Samaritan must make a relational energy commitment to the

wounded traveler in his path, which materially entails diminishing others who must be left out of

that commitment. Hence, Segundo's key conclusion, "We are able to love our neighbors to the

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[57] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 161.
[58] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 159.
[59] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 159.
[60] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 159.

extent that we keep other human beings from showing up as neighbors on our horizon."[61] The

reality of bypassing others is part of the effective and wise distribution of love that is materially

possible. This commitment does not makes the Good Samaritan a bad person, but rather, a real

person who exists in *what is*. In conspirational orthodoxy, *as if-ing* commits to making room for

the religious playmate and the social limitations of *what is*, by expressing itself as a provisional

and incomplete human option for relationality that something-mores (enriches) others while

calling attention to their historical and material limitations (diminishes).

Socially and materially real relationality involves the commitment to enrich another in

their humanness. This commitment also involves the relational "violence"[62] that is inflicted on

the identity of those who must be held at arms' length. Segundo defines this violence as the

identity diminishment of those who we do not have the proximity and energy to bring into our

circle of love. Crucially, Segundo insists that this violence is not intentionally malicious or

primarily destructive, explaining that "[w]e have time and energy to love our family…thanks to

the mechanism whereby we take no interest in the countless people who cross our path each

day."[63] The identity diminishment of some enables our commitment to those for whom we are

materially capable of treating as our neighbor. Segundo admits these are "painful options" which

appear to be egotism, yet are actually the "prudent" and wise distribution of energy that makes

love effective.[64] Since love and egotism use the same energy, Segundo is able to say that

"violence is *part and parcel of both of these opposed tendencies*, a sort of no man's land between

them. Egotism is no more violent than love; love is no more violent than egotism."[65] Seeing that

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[61] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 159.
[62] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 156-157.
[63] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 160.
[64] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 161.
[65] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 157.

violence is not confined to egotism's tendencies to harm and reduce relationality, Segundo endorses the violence which is "not opposed to love," but rather "is an essential and intrinsic dimension of any and all effective love within the human condition" which "tends in the direction of reducing the quantum of violence required for efficacy to the lowest possible level."[66] Briefly put, Segundo describes channeling the force of violence's pain and diminishment into a humanly relational option to love. This is not necessarily a destructive force, but rather, a real force that enriches and diminishes in the act of humanly existing in *what is*.

Segundo helps us to understand *what is* as the human existence that is socially bounded to ideological influence and expression while also being materially bounded to finite relational energy and violence. Segundo situates Jesus's humanity within these bounds, to legitimize how liberation theology actively combats the heresy of denying Jesus Christ's humanity in well-intentioned phrases and theological moves as to preserve his divinity and blamelessness. Regarding contestant theology, Segundo's interpretation of Jesus's humanity helps us to understand how the conspirational *as if* navigates these social and material boundaries.

Segundo sees Jesus's devotion to John the Baptist as Jesus taking on the human social limitations to ideology. Jesus is a big fan of John the Baptist's message and admires him as "the greatest prophet of Israel" (Matt. 11:9; Luke 1:76). Segundo also suggests that Jesus takes on the material limitations of finite relational energy when he does not save John the Baptist from his grisly fate, calling it "a painful choice for Jesus to make."[67] Segundo insists that Jesus is not synonymous with inhuman innocence. He sees this in Jesus's encounter with the Phoenician woman, in which he responds to her request to cure her daughter with the surprising challenge: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs"

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[66] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 162.
[67] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 162.

(Mark 7:27). Those who are eager to "protect" Jesus's sinlessness try to frame this verse as Jesus's way of "confirming" a pagan believer's faith that He divinely foreknows. Meanwhile, Segundo suggests that Jesus is reflecting a nationalistic bias here, which is further seen in how he instructs the disciples to only go to Israel, and stay out of pagan country.[68] Segundo prefers to allow Jesus to prioritize his humanly concrete and effective love for his own people. He explains, "[Jesus] had to put some people at arm's length in order to let other people get close to him as real human beings. [This] meant accepting the common prejudices against aliens in order to maintain them in that status. How could Jesus have wept over Jerusalem if there had been no trace of nationalistic prejudice in him?"[69] Here, Segundo makes a formidable claim: affirming Jesus's true humanity and true divinity means accepting His sinlessness in human terms (that is, the sinlessness that is attributable only to God, yet still entails the social and material limitations of being human) and not as inhuman blamelessness.

Segundo embraces Jesus's human sinlessness, due to his awareness of the violence not opposed to love that makes Jesus's divine relationality authentically human. He writes, "[w]ithout such violence…love dies, human beings are left at the mercy of an even worse violence."[70] By "worse violence," Segundo means "[becoming] totally incapable of systematically and effectively loving any concrete human being."[71] Segundo points out that as a fully human being, Jesus embraced the human relationality which entailed identity violence. Segundo insists that when theology and ethics forget the violence in humanity, they render themselves unable to realistically engage the human problems of exploitation, segregation, and egotism, and thus, perpetuate it. This acknowledgment of violence is key to understanding how

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[68] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 163. Segundo cites Matthew 10:5-6.
[69] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 164.
[70] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 164.
[71] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 159.

Segundo deals with the commandment not to kill. He claims that Jesus teaches us to use the least amount of violence compatible with truly effective love, and asserts that violence and nonviolence are ideologies themselves, which are the human options to take in the gap between the intentions of faith (*as if-ing*) and historical realities (*what is-ing*).[72] For Segundo, Jesus embodies *as if-ing's* expansive withness in the finite *what is*.

Conspirational orthodoxy *what is-es* the religious playmate by adapting three elements of liberation theology's commitment to humanness, in order to cultivate the human sense of withness in the space of the interreligious encounter. First, Segundo illustrates God grasping humanity by pointing to the ways that Jesus's humanness involves being socially limited to ideological influence and expression. This explanation contributes starting points for conspirational orthodoxy's theogility, which is the movement of the Spirit of Life with the religious other. This spirituality generates the quickening of humanness that is granted by intentionally moving with the other in a provisional and open-ended way that helps them be truly at home in their external world. For Segundo, ideologies serve a playfully poietic function, because they bring the abstract ideas of faith to life as human options which do not exhaust the content of faith, yet effectively address historical circumstances.

Conspirational orthodoxy advances these human options as the Christian capacity to humanize another that is possible due to God grasping all humanity. Segundo's liberation theology allows faith to be fleshed out in ideologies which acknowledge the realities of human weaknesses and problems. Similarly, conspirational orthodoxy embraces the social limits of a singular religious context, by envisioning the commitment which incorporates human weaknesses and problems into the *humiliation* which brings every person to realize their need to

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[72] Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, 169-170.

continually admit their human shortcomings in recognizing God/Paradise with another. We are able to recognize God, only because God grasps us. We continually realize our shortcomings in recognizing God through our socially limited commitments to other people in the shared space of the interreligious encounter. When we commit to others by following the Spirit breathing into the socially limited movement with the religious other, we are inspired to continually share mutual diminishment. Here, we exchange self-emptying words of love with them, to fill in what we each lack in faith, as a reception of God completing that which is lacking in all lives of faith.

When Christians envision themselves as grasped by God, yet embarrassingly limited in their understanding of God, they embrace the spirituality that is less about inhumanely correcting other beliefs, and more about providing generous human connections which grant the grace to fall short of total truth. Thus, this element of *what is-ing* is the Christian way to humanize all religion, by admitting that every religion is humanly finite, and falls embarrassingly short of getting God completely right. This admission is deeply relational, because it allows the people of differing religions to hold their different social limitations together in a shared space. Here, Christians and differing religions move each other to concretize their immaterial and atemporal claims within the historical and material limits of human existence, thus cultivating the mutual diminishment for bettering and completing that which both groups lack. Instead of being a presuppositional dismissal or unqualified acceptance of a differing religious person, *what is-ing* makes room for Christians to playfully move with them as finite humans who can share the need to continually admit their shortcomings in recognizing God.

The second element of Segundo's commitment adapted by *what is-ing* concerns how Segundo illustrates God grasping humanity by spotlighting the ways that Jesus's humanness involves the material limitations to a humanly finite economy of relational energy. This

illustration contributes starting points for conspirational orthodoxy's theoreography, which is the Spirit of Life's well-designed movement with the religious other. This relationality generates the flow of life that emerges in skillfully moving with the other in an ever-changing way that helps them to play out their own destinies. For Segundo, the finite economy of energy requires us to skillfully use our relational energy to love in real and effective ways. Conspirational orthodoxy advances this distribution of energy as the Christian's capacity to add to the differing person's humanness that is possible because God grasps all humanity. Segundo's liberation theology insists upon this finite distribution of this singular relational energy to enrich those who one can actually be with socially and spatially. Similarly, conspirational orthodoxy embraces the material limits of a singular religious context, by envisioning this distribution of relational energy into the *un-limiting* that brings every person to realize their need to contribute to another person's human recognition of God. Since God grasps all humanity, Christians can become parts of the ways that people of other faiths know God/Paradise, beyond their personal contexts. Likewise, the people of other faiths can become parts of the ways that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are known beyond Christian contexts. We continually realize our contributions to recognizing God through our materially limited commitments to other people in the shared space of the interreligious encounter. We commit to others when we follow the Spirit breathing into the materially limited movement with the religious other. This movement inspires transformative enrichment, in which one person of faith is made to be more than who they are within the boundaries of their religious context by the contribution that a differing person of faith makes to their recognition of God.

When Christians place themselves within the grasp of God as human beings whose understanding of God enriches people outside of their religious context, they embrace the relationality that cultivates generous human connections which welcome every true religion to

pool its finite understandings into the shared recognition of God. This element of *what is-ing* is an admission that every religion has humanly valuable content to bring to the space of the interreligious encounter, which assuages the realization that all religions are embarrassingly finite. This admission is also deeply relational, because it allows differing people to hold their finite contributions together in a shared space. Instead of being a presuppositional dismissal or unqualified acceptance of a differing religious person, *what is-ing* makes room for Christians to playfully move with them as finite humans who can share finite recognitions of God.

The third element of Segundo's commitment adapted by *what is-ing* concerns his expansive view of the pain and diminishment done to the identities of those who must be held at arms' length. He considers this as the violence that is not opposed to love, insisting that the quantum of its pain and diminishment can be reduced and reoriented toward relational good. Segundo insists that the aggressive force of violence powers all human relational commitments, whether it is for love and compassion or for harm and destruction. The violence is problematic when its aggressive force causes destruction. Yet, the violence is also the key to building truly human love and compassion, albeit with an aggressive force that can be easily mistaken as harm and destruction. Conspirational orthodoxy applies Segundo's explanation of violence to its playful way of reducing the aggressiveness involved with encountering religious differences while reorienting that force toward relational good. Conspiration reduces the quantum of violence by bringing differing people together in mutual diminishment, which involves the pain of admitting the embarrassing shortcomings of human faith, for the sake of God bettering and completing faith through another person. This *humiliation* allows the limitations of one's faith to be seen and touched, as a way to convince another person that they are free and safe to do the same with their faith. Conspiration attaches this mutual diminishment to transformative

enrichment, which reorients the quantum of violence into the energy for contributing to another person's recognition of God. This *un-limiting* allows one to channel their aggressiveness into valuing their own religious stance (even with its shortcomings) and expanding another person's religious vantage point, rather than into harming or replacing different conceptions of faith and the Divine. This reduction of the force of violence without sacrificing its relational potency is the way in which *as if-ing's* something more navigates the social and material limitations of *what is*. *As if-ing* through *what is* describes keeping the game of thinking, living, and talking about God/Paradise going with another, even with finite human relationality. Segundo contributes the language for situating the mode of contest – whose playful structures hold religious differences together – into the historical and material circumstances of human beings. In Segundo's contest, holding lightly holds one's truly human commitment to another's humanness *tightly*, through enrichment and diminishment. This insight allows us to understand the key elements of *what is-ing* in an interrelated way, as illustrated in Jesus's Mark 7 contest with the Phoenician woman.

Is Jesus's encounter with the Phoenician woman about him overcoming the violence of human relationships or being entrapped in them? When we situate this encounter within the playful structures of a contest, we can allow ourselves to answer, *yes*. As embarrassing as it sounds, Jesus's challenge to the Phoenician woman in desperate need reflects Segundo's suggestions of Jesus choosing to be humanly limited, both socially (influenced by a nationalistic ideology) and materially (needing to hold some people at arm's length). In Segundo's logic, Jesus denies the Gentiles as "dogs," so that he can feasibly and effectively love the Jews as "children." Yet, this account does not end with this display of Jesus's limited humanity or the defeat of the Phoenician woman's quest to save her daughter. The woman provides an amazing reply that subverts the violence of the Jewish national ideology to expand its capacity to relate to

non-Jewish people. When she says "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Mark 7:28), one hears a harmony of self-deprecation, sarcasm, and wisdom. The woman accepts the humiliating terms of the harsh words without internalizing them. Rather, she resituates those words for her own purposes, by situating the dogs "under the table" and allowing the children to have "crumbs." These innovations are her desperate gambits to defy the accepted terms of the Jewish-Gentile relationship, by using an ordinary household scene to show that they are already connected in a deeper way that the dominant ideologies of their time suggest. The Phoenician woman hopes that there is still a way to receive the relational blessing, even though Jewish relationality with Gentiles can only stretch so far. As the passage concludes, we see that her desperate gambit unfolds into Jesus un-limiting His relational blessings from the Jewish context. He speaks the surprisingly generous words, "For saying that, you may go – the demon has left your daughter" (Mark 7:29). Jesus, impressed by the woman, matches the way that her faith outmaneuvers social and material limits by liberating her daughter from evil powers, within the bounds of her historical and material circumstances, even though He is not actually with her socially and spatially. Jesus can do this because He is truly human, while also being God, Who is present when, where, and how God pleases to be present, even within the bounds of human existence. Jesus and the Phoenician woman interact in a truly human way, by contesting each other's ideological understanding of their relationship. This contest expands their relationship, because the violence of that aggression was not opposed to love. This expansive liberation and relationality emerges from Jesus and the Phoenician woman "one-upping" each other's claim in a shared contest of diminishment and enrichment that leads to relational blessing!

Jesus challenges the woman with a statement that diminishes her identity as someone who does not receive the blessings which are reserved for the people of God. We do not fully

know what Jesus was doing here. Was he, as Segundo suggests, wholeheartedly subscribing to the Jewish ideology of his time? Or, was he, as Christian apologists suggest, detachedly acting out the ideology of the day, hoping that the woman's faith would provide the opportunity for overturning it? A serious vantage point can only answer this question by choosing one option or the other. Yet, the playful vantage point – which can hold together these different dimensions of the encounter – allows us to answer this question by saying *yes,* realizing that something more is at play than our notions of human "bias" and doctrinal purity. When this encounter is viewed as a contest, we can see that the Phoenician woman and Jesus are bantering with each other as a way to navigate the situation at hand. Yes, the woman is in a desperately grave situation, and Jesus sees this. In the Mark 7 context, Jesus's statement sounds ideological, yet flexible. The Bible shows us that Jesus loved His people and fulfilled Jewish law. The Bible also shows us that Jesus's love and obedience was multidimensional, offering "many rooms" for both His people and others, in traditional *and* surprising ways, in seriousness *and* non-seriousness.

Remember, this is the same Jesus who played out His first miracle amidst playful bantering with his mother, who He calls "woman," while questioning how the Cana wedding's lack of wine was their concern, and while dramatically insisting "My hour has not yet come" (John 2:4). It is both profound and hilarious that Jesus listens to his mom like a good son should, despite his divine declaration. The unwritten "C'mon Mom" is heard as Jesus creatively pushes the divine calendar ahead of schedule, just to make more wine for people at a wedding! Yet, Jesus's bantering hints at His willingness to go beyond offering a singular good for people, but also, to multiply the kinds of good they can experience when they engage Jesus in faith. In Jesus's bantering contests, he issues statements in open-ended ways which invite human interaction with His claims. Through banter, Jesus generously and creatively grants his audiences

human options which make room for people to put their skepticism and their faith into play with His own, in a way that is oriented for their good and for God's glory. Jesus makes room for Mary to playfully push Him into transforming the water into wine, because it leads to the good of human delight and it "manifested his glory" (John 2:11), even though it defies the serious dictates of religious doctrine and piety. Similarly, Jesus makes room for the Phoenician woman's desperate "one-upping" of His ideological statement, because it leads to her daughter's healing, illustrating the "un-limited" blessing of God, beyond the Jewish context. These examples show that Jesus's socially and materially limited humanness is not the embarrassingly obligatory reduction of God into human existence, but rather, the humiliatingly generous expansion of who humanity can be in God, without sacrificing humanness or divinity. Even though Jesus is present with the Phoenician woman in an embarrassingly limited capacity that involves identity violence, He is also present for her in a way that holds her as she continually asks, seeks, and knocks Him in faith, for the sake of her daughter. In this blessed messiness of being human, Jesus and the Phoenician woman keep their contest of thinking, living, and talking out God going, playing through the humiliation of diminishment and un-limiting of enrichment, and playing into the powerful aliveness of expanded boundaries of possibility and multiplied kinds of good. Simply put, Jesus and the Phoenician woman played their way into the daughter's blessing. To insist that Jesus "honored" the woman, or to insist that the Phoenician woman "corrected" Jesus is to miss the expansive conspirational blessing of their shared contest. This breathing together in enriching and diminishing ways makes room for *as if*'s persistent withness and *what could be's* perpetual hope in *what is*. Jesus and the Phoenician woman illustrate how playfulness enables differing religious people to be together in the actual conditions of human life.

Overall, conspirational orthodoxy *what is-es* the religious other by adapting liberation theology's reduction and reorientation of relational violence to frame how the people of differing religions can move and breathe together within finite human relationality. If holding lightly envisions the ideal space for interreligious withness, then Segundo's commitment humanizes that space by populating it with social and material limitations. By itself, this commitment is the palpable pressure to compassionately embrace humanness, without persuasively explaining *why* finitely relational people should try to connect with each other. For this reason, conspirational orthodoxy attaches its ideal and pressure to the hope of the generously unlimited *what could be* of people being together, despite differences. This hope draws *as if-ing's* ideal withness into the palpable commitment to the differing religious other, thus including *what is* in the movement toward *what could be*. This movement with the religious other is human, because it is tied to the politics, ideologies, historical realities, and laws of energy which govern physical life on Earth and in the universe. This movement is also playful, because it pairs *as if-ing*'s unpredictable newness with the reliable structures of *what is*. Yet, Goto, Lockhart, and Segundo tend to offer a cramped room for this movement with the religious other, where one's presence not only takes up space, but takes away space from another person. This room seems cramped because their approaches put too much of a singular focus on one linear dimension, whether it is the space for including youth or embracing humanness. Crucially, *what could be-ing* multidimensionalizes this playroom into an ever-unfolding play vista, whose generously unlimited movement not only includes youthfulness and humanness, but also (to borrow a popular movie title) *everything, everywhere, all at once*. To show how the conspirational *what could be* includes the *as if* and *what is*, we turn to Roger Caillois, whose framework of play allows us to hold religious others lightly as fellow human beings who we multidimensionally commit to as religious playmates.

C. *What Could Be-ing* Others via Roger Caillois's Multidimensional Play

French intellectual Roger Caillois describes play as making room for the ideal and the real in a multidimensional space that unifies diverse layers of perception. His sociological insights grant the language to describe *what could be* as a stable structure in *what is* that houses *as if's* ever-expanding vista. Simply put, conspirational orthodoxy's *what could be* is a place that contains ever-growing space, as exhibited by savvy *Minecraft* players, who build "non-Euclidean" houses which are small on the outside, yet keep expanding on the inside.[73] Likewise, Jesus's John 14:2 promise ("In my Father's house there are many dwelling places") expands the architectural, spiritual, and relational meaning of the *bet av* (house of the father) by generously making room for people of faith to dwell in heavenly paradise. These Minecraftian and Christian illustrations provide helpful vantage points to ground how Paul makes room for Christians to move with religious others in the space of the interreligious encounter. Conspirational orthodoxy adapts Caillois's four dimensions of play experience (*agon, mimicry, alea,* and *ilynx*) to unify the four diverse layers of Paul's interreligious perception (identification, living, moving, and existing in God) to distinguish itself as a breathing with the religious other that follows the breath of the Holy Spirit. This theory of conspiracy is a belief system of moving with differing others by playfully something-moring (*as if-ing*) and humanizing (*what is-ing*) them as fellow religious playmates in the generously unlimited game of thinking, living, and talking out the ever-recognizable God and ever-unfolding Paradise (*what could be-ing*).

What could be's upward play dimension is *agon* – the consuming nature of major sports events and low-stakes games that sets someone at home in its immersive competitiveness. *Agon*

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[73] csx42, "Minecraft NON EUCLIDEAN House!" YouTube video, 4:57-5:21, March 14, 2021, https://tinyurl.com/33r2t3vy.

"presupposes sustained attention, appropriate training, assiduous application, and the desire to win…It leaves the champion to his own devices, to evoke the best possible game of which he is capable, and it obliges him to play the game within the fixed limits, and according to the rules applied equally to all, so that in return the victor's superiority will be beyond dispute."[74] Paul's "In God" phrase is *agonian*. He frames God as a spatially spiritual presence Whose grasp affords the entirety of human existence in an all-consuming manner. Being "In God" enables *all* living, moving, and being, whether it follows or rebels against God, and whether one's life of faith is deemed superior or inferior to another. Paul's recognition of being "In God" is an immersion in the consuming wonder of all things, while also competing against human compulsions to find meaning in something else other than God. *What could be-ing* adapts this *agonian* phrase to make space for all people to share the realization that God is the playground for all religious life, because God affords differing – even competing – conceptions of the Divine. These competing conceptions are properly and preferably held in contests whose relational structures are faith, hope, and love. Instead of winning through one religion's doctrinal, moral, or cultural superiority, this contest challenges all religions to be the one that can keep all people of faith thinking, living, and talking out God's superiority (faith), by competitively wondering about God (hope) to share the *bewilderment* of continually learning God as God teaches God (love). *What could be's* generous multidimensionality frames conspirational orthodoxy as a weligion that brings people together in the upward play toward the ever-describable God/Paradise.

What could be's downward play dimension is *mimicry* – the captivating acting out of a play identity and a play world, which habitizes provisionally shedding one personality in order to identify with something other than oneself. Caillois characterizes the actions of children playing

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[74] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games,* trans. by Meyer Barash (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 15.

as dinosaurs and performers portraying historical and fictional personalities as the "incessant invention" that convinces the spectator to "lend [oneself] to the illusion…which for a given time [one] is asked to believe in as more real than reality itself."[75] Paul's "We Live" phrase is *mimetic*. He frames the life of faith as playing out the identity and activity that is granted by God, Who grounds and enables the diverse lives of faith. Alongside the *agonian* "In Him," "We Live" is the *mimetic* identification with God that is comparable to how spectators closely identify with cultural heroes, hometown sports teams, and celebrities who accomplish the feats which they cannot achieve. People "live and die" by these vicarious victories, which may offer the only taste of triumph in a world where victory is only available to a lucky or favored few.[76] *What could be-ing* adapts this *mimetic* phrase to make room for all people to share their shortcomings, which are realized as they identify with diverse conceptions of God. These shared identifications are properly and preferably held in contests whose relational structures are faith, hope, and love. Instead of winning by exploiting another religion's shortcomings, this contest challenges all religions to be the one which can incessantly invent ways for all people of faith to play out their God-given identity (faith) by competitively opening the lack in human faith to be completed by God (hope) to share the *humiliating* inability to get God/Paradise completely right (love). *What could be's* generous multidimensionality allows conspirational orthodoxy to be a weligion that brings people together in the downward play toward the ever-learnable God/Paradise.

What could be's leftward play dimension is *alea* – the engrossing risk of play that occurs in gambling, which reconciles players to "[playing] the hands that blind luck has assigned to them as best they can."[77] Caillois sees *alea* as a meeting between the desire to win and fate's

[75] Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 23.
[76] Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 120.
[77] Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 18.

unpredictable verdicts. He explains, "*[a]gon* and *alea* imply opposite and somewhat complementary attitudes, but they both obey the same law—the creation for the players of conditions of pure equality denied them in real life."[78] *Alea* gives all players an equal opportunity to compete by putting them all at risk, despite their strengths and weaknesses, with "an outcome over which [the player] has no control."[79] Paul's "And Move" is *alean*. He frames the shared movement of faith as the risk granted by God, beyond any person's qualifications or control. "And Move" is an immersion into the risky creative action in a community of change, where people and things are playing out their God-given destinies. *What could be-ing* adapts this *alean* phrase to make room for all people to share the risk of contributing to a differing person's life of faith without dictating their destiny. These shared contributions are properly and preferably held in contests whose relational structures are faith, hope, and love. Instead of winning through better training, experience, and qualifications, this contest challenges all religions to be the one which can continually create the conditions for all people of faith to equally risk playing out their own destinies (faith) by competitively adding one's faith to the shared pointing to God/Paradise (hope), to share the *un-limiting* of recognitions of God from singular contexts (love). *What could be's* generous multidimensionality allows conspirational orthodoxy to be a weligion that brings people together in the leftward play toward the ever-recognizable God/Paradise.

What could be's rightward play dimension is *ilynx* – the fascinating dizziness in the new time and space of the play world that envelops players in the vertigo-like direction of an ever-expansive power. This is felt when rapidly spinning children are caught in the spiral, tightrope walkers and acrobats are gripped by the thrill of making death-defying moves at awesome heights, and racers are engulfed in the excitement of record-breaking speeds on the track.

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[78] Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 19.
[79] Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 17.

Caillois insists that this vertigo appeals to our deep desire to stretch beyond our grounded sense of reality, via "[trust] in a guiding fantasy or a supreme inspiration, neither of which is subject to regulation."[80] *Ilynx* is the dazzling of the senses which attaches the awareness of an ever-expanding reality to one's grounded sense of reality. Paul's "And Have Our Being" is *ilynxian*. He situates the faith existence in the grasp of God, the ever-expansive Power Who is generously and creatively unregulated. Since everything has its being in God, God not only affords, but includes everything, everywhere, all at once in Godself. Thus, Paul conveys how God grasping us grants room for everything to have its own stable, yet ever-expanding existence. *What could be-ing* adapts this *ilynxian* phrase to make room for all people to share the dizzying awareness of an ever-expanding life of faith. This shared awareness is properly and preferably held in contests whose relational structures are faith, hope, and love. Instead of winning by only preserving one's own religion, this contest challenges all religions to be the one which enables every person to stretch their faith beyond the regulations of ordinary life (faith), by competitively freeing religious expressions and aspirations from a singular destiny (hope), to share *recreated* recognitions of God which emerge from continually learning God with another (love). *What could be's* generous multidimensionality allows conspirational orthodoxy to be a weligion that brings people together in the rightward play toward the ever-expansive God/Paradise.

Overall, Caillois's multidimensional play helps us to see the diverse layers of Paul's exclamation as an expression of *what could be* – the relational experience of being grasped by God's ever-expanding interreligious reality within a finite place, with another person. The conspirational *what could be* attaches these play dimensions to the ordinary perceptions of finite life, so that a religious other is embraced as a fellow human being living in material and

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[80] Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 75.

historical circumstances *and* as a playmate in the expansively competitive, inventive, risky, and dizzying Acts 17:28 game of identifying, living, moving, and existing in God. In Caillois's contest, holding lightly holds one's truly human commitment to another's humanness *brightly*, through multidimensionality. Following Paul's expansive Christian approach to the Athenians in the Areopagus, conspirational orthodoxy does not forbid the ideal approach to the other (*as if-ing*), nor does it replace the reality of the other (*what is*) with its own presumptions and fears (conspiracy theories). Rather, this theory of conspiracy's *what could be* includes the ideal and reality of the differing other in the experience of being grasped by God. *What could be* justifies *as if-ing* as conspirational orthodoxy's ideal starting point and *what is-ing's* commitment to reality, because one can only breathe with the differing other by being grasped by God's hopeful vision of the other as ideally something more and realistically relatable.

To be sure, this faith experience of being grasped by God does not reduce a person to passivity. David Miller helps us to associate *what could be* with the active epistemology operative in theality. He does this by framing faith in the experience of a terrified young girl, who screamed at the sight of a "monster" in her room at night. Yet, when her father turned on the lamp, the "monster" was revealed to be the creation of the outdoor street light producing a scary shadow on the wall of her room.[81] Miller says that faith is like this, but in the positive sense – "being gripped by a story, a vision, or a ritual," as if playing a captivating game.[82] He further describes this experience of being grasped as "being seized by a pattern of meaning that becomes a paradigm for how one sees the world."[83] Miller helps us to see that faith is not just belief, but "make-believe," in the sense that it is the belief system cultivated due to being turned on by an

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[81] David L. Miller, *Gods and Games: Toward a Theology of Play* (New York: World Pub. Co, 1970), 167-168.
[82] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 168.
[83] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 168.

"incredible vision," rather than by intellect or ritual.[84] In Miller's *what could be,* "belief and disbelief are transcended in authentic faith…this is the faith that Jesus spoke of: 'Unless you have faith like that of this little child….' It is the faith we may hold in the midst of doubt. Or rather, it is the faith that holds us in the midst of our doubt. It is the faith which says, 'I believe, help my unbelief!'"[85] This is also the character of the faith that Paul carries into the Areopagus. He builds a belief system of being with differing religious others due to being grasped by the incredible vision of Jesus as the religious Other. Miller's insights clarify how Caillois's gripping play dimensions contribute starting points for conspirational orthodoxy's theality, which is conforming to the vantage point of the Spirit of Life moving with the religious other. This epistemology is a willingness to be grasped by God's multidimensional pattern of meaning with the same intensity as the child seized by the terror of the shadow monster and as Paul seized by Jesus the Other. This pattern of meaning unfolds as Paul weaves together the *agonian* "In God," *mimetic* "We Live," *alean* "And Move," and *ilynxian* "And Have Our Being" to convey *what could be* – the generously unlimited paradigm for being with a differing person.

Simply put, *what could be* unifies the playful structures of conspirational orthodoxy which make it a weligion that envisions being with differing others as the ever-unfolding game of identifying, living, moving and existing in God with another person of faith. *As if-ing* envisions the ideal container that cultivates this withness, which is Goto and Lockhart's intention to play the game of being with the other in a hopeful way. *What is-ing* humanizes this container as a room of finite relationality, which is Segundo's map for navigating the obstacles and boundaries of this shared game with finitely distributable relational energy, whose function is comparable to the limited hit points (HP) and magic/mana points (MP) operative in role-playing

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[84] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 168.
[85] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 168. Miller quotes Matthew 18:3 and Mark 9:24.

video games (RPGs). *What could be-ing* multidimensionalizes this room as a play vista unfolding in all directions, which is Caillois's allowance of being grasped by this shared game that one wants to play forever, with another person. This weligion matches the lure of meligion or deligion, offering the playfully hopeful commitment to others as a better relational option.

II. Chapter Summary

Paul's "And Move" makes room for Christians to hold other religions lightly. The "And Move" of contestant theology sees Christians re-purposing the conspirator term to convey the belief system of following the path of the Holy Spirit into breathing with other religions. This theory of conspiracy finds ways to breathe with others as a weligion that engages people influenced by conspiracy theories. Conspirational orthodoxy navigates the dialogical problems of the interreligious encounter with playful movements of *as if-ing, what is-ing,* and *what could be-ing*, which see the differing person of faith as our deeply relatable religious playmate (Fig. 1).

As if-ing fills the silence of religious inarticulation with theograffiti that continually finds things to say about God/Paradise in the ordinariness that Christians can share with others. The playful Christian thought-world enables us to hold people in our everyday lives lightly in the hope of something more. "Something-moring" the religious other is the aisthetic expansion of consciousness that makes room to articulate the *bewilderment* of continually molting in the life of faith, filling our *agonian* wonder of God/Paradise with words of doubt, wrestling, risking, and questioning, to continually reform our faiths with other people in upward play.

What is-ing fills the absence of convincing religious language with theogility that continually finds things to say about God/Paradise in social circumstances which Christians can share with others. The playful Christian spirituality enables us to humanly commit to others

through ideologies. This poietic humanizing of abstract ideas makes room to articulate the *humiliation* of continually falling short of total truth, filling our *mimetic* identifications with God/Paradise with words of admission, embarrassment, and shortcoming, to continually "become less" with other people in downward play. *What is-ing* also fills in the obstruction of dialogue caused by the problem of historical religious violence with theoreography that continually finds things to say about God/Paradise in material circumstances which Christians can share with others. The playful Christian relationality enables us to humanly commit to others with an aggressive relational energy that is not opposed to love. This metamorphic reduction and redirection of the quantum of violence makes room to articulate the *un-limiting* of continually expanding our *alean* recognitions of God/Paradise with words of challenge, change, and ambiguity, to continually "become more" with other people in leftward play.

What could be-ing fills the connection-deadening void of post-modern religious fragmentation with theality that continually finds things to say about God/Paradise in the thrills which Christians can share with others. The playful Christian epistemology enables us to include others through multidimensionality. This therapeic letting-be of life makes room to articulate the *recreation* of being grasped by God, which fills our *ilynxian* thinking, living, and talking out the ever-knowable God and ever-livable Paradise, filling our *ilynxian* envelopment in God/Paradise with words of creativity, dizziness, and intensity, to continually create new patterns of communion-in-difference with other people in rightward play. Overall, this chapter describes the "And Move"-ness of contestant theology as the belief system of "conspirators" who follow the path of the Holy Spirit's breath. Chapter 4 interprets "And Have Our Being" within the interreligious space, by describing how "con artists" breathe with other religions in four conspirational practices of contestant theology.

CHAPTER 4
"AND HAVE OUR BEING": BREATHING WITH OTHER RELIGIONS AS "CON ARTISTS"

Conspirational orthodoxy emerges from being grasped by God (original Player), Who inspires the generously unlimited paradigm of being with a differing person of faith through the Persons of Jesus Christ (ultimate Player), and the Holy Spirit (everlasting Player). When seen as play, Paul's Acts 17:28 exclamation describes this paradigm as the game of identifying, living, moving, and existing in God with a differing person. Conspirators adapt Paul's Christian stance to playfully, hopefully, and multidimensionally make room for movement with the other, by attaching it to their key religious claims, in the spirit of Gregory of Nyssa's insistence that the life of faith is "both a standing still and a moving."[1] The Christian Cross visualizes Gregory's insight as both 1) the stationary religious symbol that grounds Christian faith in the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, and 2) a stretching in all directions, which launches Christian faith unto the upward, downward, leftward, and rightward blowing of the Holy Spirit breathing where s/he will, among the world religions. The Cross's stationary moving conveys the faithfully playful Christian "crossover" with another religious identity, as the Christian multidimensional aesthetic for making room for everything, everywhere, all once, in God.

This reference to the critically-acclaimed 2022 film is intentional. A key plot point from *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (hereafter *EEAAO*) illustrates how the multidimensionalizing belief system considered in Chapter 3 materializes into this chapter's

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[1] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), II.243.1.116.

multidimensionalizing practices. This film features Evelyn Quan Wang, who is frustrated with her daughter's (Joy) life choices, her doormat husband's (Waymond) divorce request, and her failing laundromat business. In these struggles, Evelyn learns that she lives in one of an unfolding number of parallel universes which house every possible path that one takes in life. Using special technology created by her genius self in the "Alphaverse," Evelyn adopts the memories and abilities of her radically diverse selves from parallel universes, such as celebrity Evelyn, kung-fu master Evelyn, hot-dog-fingers Evelyn, cartoon Evelyn, hibachi-chef Evelyn, nun Evelyn and even the Evelyn who is a small rock. Yet, she learns Alpha Evelyn used this technology to push Alpha Joy to connect with too many universes. Alpha Joy's mind overloads, and she becomes Jobu Tupaki, who simultaneously exists in all universes, accesses any universe at will, and creates anything she chooses. Being in touch with everything, everywhere, all at once, Jobu despairingly concludes that nothing truly matters. She creates her "everything bagel," which is an Enso-like spiraling mass of dark energy that threatens to suck everything into its blank nothingness. Evelyn decides that she can only reach Jobu by also connecting to every universe. Evelyn's mind also overloads, and she gains the same abilities of her daughter as she connects with her. Evelyn also embraces nihilism and almost jumps into the everything bagel with Jobu. Crucially, she stops when she remembers Waymond's pleas to be kind and have hope.

Evelyn remembers how Waymond always put googly eyes on mundane objects – such as their laundry machines – as a humorous way to inject kindness and hope into their all-too-serious lives. Evelyn despised Waymond's silliness, because she was preoccupied with disappointment over the outcomes of her life choices. Despite Evelyn's disapproval, Waymond maintained his love for her and his playful way of finding happiness, even when the meaning of life eluded him. He is consistently kind and hopeful across the multiverse. Facing the everything bagel's void,

174

Evelyn remembers how movie-star Waymond impressively explained, "when I choose to see the good side of things…it is strategic and necessary. It's how I learned how to survive through everything. I know you see yourself as a fighter. Well, I see myself as one too. This is how I fight."[2] Simultaneously, Evelyn stands between a mob of Jobu's followers and opponents. Here, doormat Waymond desperately cries, "I know you're all fighting because you're scared and confused! I'm confused too…The only thing I do know is that we have to be kind. Please, be kind, especially when we don't know what's going on!"[3] Waymond's words gradually inspire Evelyn to see kindness and optimism as a playful way of fighting against the surrender to nihilism. Evelyn embraces Waymond's philosophy by placing a googly-eye onto her forehead. The googly eye frames enlightenment as a silliness and non-seriousness which opens one's vision to a kind and hopeful connection to people over multiple dimensions of existence, even when the meaning of existence proves elusive. As googly eyes randomly roll in all directions, they imbue its wearers with the levity of kindness, humor, and fun that withstands the gravity of nihilistic despair. Googly-eyeism resonates with the *as if-ing*, *what is-ing,* and *what could be-ing* in conspirational orthodoxy's ways of seeing religious others.

The googly eye imbues Evelyn with a new way of fighting, which is the transformative practice of connecting with others. As she attempts to prevent Jobu from jumping into the bagel's void, Jobu's devotees block her path. Evelyn moves through each radically diverse person in the mob by using her googly eye multidimensional fighting style to do three things: 1) see the particular hurt that drove each person to embrace nihilism, 2) embrace their hurt with intensely tangible empathy, and 3) give the happiness that reverses their hurtfulness into

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[2] *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, directed by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert (A24, 2022), 1:45:17-1:46:35, https://tinyurl.com/cdbww6fs.
[3] *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, 1:45:17-1:46:35.

hopefulness. As a cowboy with a katana and a dog mom with a broken coffee mug charge toward her, Evelyn parries their attacks, grasps their arms, and brings their bodies together in a kissing embrace, which transforms them from destructively lonely people into a happily married couple. Her next opponent is a hand grenade-wielding infantryman, yet Evelyn comically turns the weapon into a bottle of perfume that sprays into the soldier's face. The scent blissfully disarms him with the happy memory of his deeply missed wife. Evelyn inflicts a two-handed karate chop on the neck of the attacking SWAT officer, which turns out to be a chiropractic adjustment that relieves him of chronic pain. By engaging the other attackers in similarly silly ways, Evelyn illustrates the artistic playfulness of being grasped by the loving violence of a generously unlimited paradigm for being with a differing person. This paradigm allows Evelyn to grasp her daughter in a battle of hope and nihilism, in front of the bagel's void, across every universe.

Evelyn fights Jobu not to hurt her, but rather, to find the way to be with her daughter, even when reason fails to maintain their connection. As they fight, Evelyn learns that Jobu crafted the everything bagel in the hopes that she could find peace by erasing herself from existence. She also learns that Jobu yearned for an Evelyn who would embrace her, even if she fought against being grasped. The fight ultimately leads Evelyn to confess, "Yes, you're right. Maybe it's like you said – maybe there is something out there, some new discovery that'll make us feel like even smaller pieces of [crap]. Something that explains why you still went looking for me through all of this noise. And why, no matter what…I still want to be here with you. I will always, *always*…want to be here with you."[4] That is, Evelyn and Joy commit to being with each other as imperfect and differing people. Joy is not fully the daughter Evelyn thinks she should be, nor is Evelyn entirely the mother who Joy was hoping for, but they still seek each other.

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[4] *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, 2:05:59-2:06:49.

EEAAO's key takeaway is found in that "something" that compels Evelyn to make a way to be with her daughter and others, despite frustrating shortcomings and differences. This "something" is the realization that the meaning of one's existence is not confined to any abstract philosophy or particular place; it is continually cultivated by making room to expansively be with others in a shared existence. *EEAAO* creatively illustrates how this shared existence is not only explained within the serious stability of reason; it also involves the unpredictably unserious patterns of randomness. As such, shared existence in the interreligious space looks less like an academic articulation, and more like an artist's playful practices of breathing with differing people of faith. This is the "And Have Our Being"-ness of contestant theology, which plays out the biblical design of Paul's "In God," the spiritual/ethical application of "We Live," and the theological scope of "And Move," through practices which provide ways for differing people of faith to be together. Evelyn's googly eye fighting style shows how contestant theologians breathe with the people of other faiths as "con artists," as imperfect people who find ways for differing people to be together, without taking themselves or others too seriously.

This chapter makes three moves to explain how contestant theology breathes with others as "con artists." The first move situates Paul's "And Have Our Being" in creative Christian practices of conspiring with differing people of faith. This conspirational artistry starts by envisioning the "con artist" as the personality who finds ways to bring people together (the "con") by creatively playing out conspirational orthodoxy's generously unlimited paradigm for seeing and expressing the world (the "artist"), thus re-purposing it from its associations with the modern confidence artist. The second move continues to re-purpose the con artist with relational insights from African (*Ubuntu*) and Korean (*jeong*) contexts, where interreligiosity has long been a way of life. These foundational global relational models are supplemented with accessible pop-

cultural tales which depict the necessity ("The Animals in the Pit"), inevitability (*The Killing Joke*), and coolness (*Ocean's Thirteen*) of being the con artist who finds ways to conspire with radically differing others. The third move describes how re-purposed con artists outplay the dialogical problems of the interreligious encounter via four practices – bewilderment, humiliation, un-limiting, and re-creation. Overall, Chapter 4 maps how the conspirational artistry of contestant theology finds ways to breathe with differing others, thanks to the Holy Spirit "breathing where [s/he] will" over the ever-unfolding play-vista of interreligious relationality.

I. The Conspirational Artistry of Contestant Theology

We see a con artist when we watch *EEAAO*'s Evelyn fight differing people into a new way of being together. This *conspirational* artist dramatically differs from the audience's experiences with *confidence* artists who "[deceive] other people by making them believe something false or making them give money away."[5] *EEAAO*'s audience sees these confidence artists weaponizing conspiracy theories at the highest levels of politics, culture, and religion to scam people with their capriciously fake paradigm for seeing and engaging the world.

Christians often respond to the religious scams of confidence artists by explaining that these personalities and their claims do not represent "real" Christianity. These confidence artists are accused of capriciously tricking people into believing in fake promises and a false vision of God, Whom they have not seen and do not understand. Yet, these accusations raise four crucial questions and biblical considerations. First, who *has* actually seen God? Christians share Exodus 33's bewildered gaze into the glory cloud. Likewise, there are a multitude of Bible verses which reinforce God's Exodus 33:20 declaration, "you cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and

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[5] *Cambridge English Dictionary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022)*, s.v. "con artist," accessed August 4, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/yfcu7tbb.

live."[6] Second, who has actually *understood* God? Christians point to Job 40's humiliating appointment with the whirlwind. Likewise, the Bible makes everyone's inability to grasp God hilariously clear, with tons of verses which affirm Job 42:3's confession, "You asked, 'Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?' Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know."[7] Third, who can actually *explain* God's ways? Christians share Act 9's un-limiting epiphany in the blinding face of the Risen Jesus. Likewise, a plenitude of Bible verses continually ask us Romans 11:34's question, "For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?"[8] Fourth, who can actually *describe* God's nature? Christians rehearse Revelation 1:12-18's vision of the apocalyptic Living One Who continually re-creates the way we envision God. Likewise, the Bible continually invites us to keep thinking, living, and talking out God, following Matthew 7:7's call, "Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you."[9] Overall, there is a solid biblical foundation for saying that Christians believe in God, Whom we have not seen, do not understand, cannot explain, and will not fully describe. For these reasons, we depend on God continually making Godself recognizable in the Persons of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Admitting that we do not see or understand God by ourselves, the Christian response to the religious confidence artist is less about calling out a "fake" Christianity, and more about affirming that every life of faith does not grasp God. This primal premise makes it clear that Christians share the religious confidence artist's inability to see, understand, explain, and describe God. The primal premise also clarifies how Christians similarly try to seize people with

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[6] Exod. 3:6; Exod. 33:23; Deut. 4:12, 15; Job 35:14; Isa. 38:11; Isa. 64:4; John 1:18; John 5:37; John 6:46; Acts 7:32; 1 Tim. 6:16; 1 John 3:6; 1 John 4:12; 1 John 4:20.
[7] Deut. 29:29; Job 5:9; Job 11:7; Job 36:22-23, 26; Ps. 139:1-6; Prov. 25:2; Eccles. 3:11; Isa. 40:28; Isa. 55:8-9; Rom. 11:33-34; 1 Cor. 2:11, 16.
[8] Job 21:22; Job 36:22, 23; Ps. 82; Isa. 40:13; Isa. 41:28; Isa. 45:9; Ps. 113; Luke 10:22; 1 Cor. 2:16.
[9] 1 Chron. 16:10-11; 2 Chron. 7:14; Ps. 9:10; Ps. 10:4; Ps. 14:2; Ps. 27:8; Ps. 34:4, 10; Ps. 63:1; Ps. 105:4; Ps. 119:2, 45; Prov. 8:17; Prov. 15:14; Prov. 28:5; Isa. 55:6; Lam. 3:25; Amos 5:4; Luke 11:10; Heb. 11:6.

their own narratives which resort to rendering God – Who they have never seen or measured – as an object that can be grasped in empirical categories. In order to accept the primacy of the primal premise, Christians admit that no one has seen God unaided, yet we tend to try to "sell" our "story" as the way to grasp the God that is beyond seeing or measuring. We do this when we cling to our favorite theological terms, the rigid doctrines of our preferred Christian churches, and the cold, desiccated philosophical language of overseriousness that's taken to be true because our institutions – Western and beyond – have acquiesced to the Platonic-Aristotelian-like essentialization of needing to be productive and useful to a particular culture, civilization, agenda, or ideology. To be sure, these terms, doctrines, and languages are not automatically problematic; they are beneficial, to the extent that they do not contribute toward substituting the religion for the revelation. Further, this tendency is not limited to the Christian context; many people of faith are inclined to believe that their religious story is the best and worthy of one's full devotion. Yet, one can only distinguish between the religion and revelation when one accepts that the religion's story falls laughingly short of the complete Truth of the revelation. Even when our thoughts reach the deepest depths, even when our love attains the purest virtue, and even when our language achieves its highest eloquence, we do not grasp God, and we need God to teach God. God is so *God* and so *Good*, that our highest truths look like lies and our brightest virtues look like scams in comparison. Human truth and virtue are not inherently deceptive. Rather, God is God, even in the embarrassingly deficient human epistemological and ethical efforts to see, understand, explain, and describe God. The excerpt of Paul's Romans 3:4 exclamation summarizes this insight with potent brevity: "Although every human is a liar, let God be proved true." Paul speaks this in the context of reconciling the early Christian doctrine of God's righteousness with his audience's Jewish faith. Yet, his words are able to resonate with all

modern people of faith who are beset by con artists offering false promises and false realities. Romans 3:4 opens a way for Christians to play out a personality who does not maliciously deceive, but rather, embraces imperfections to *poietically* "let" one's religious story be unable to exhaust the meaning of God, for the *therapeian* "letting-be" of God continually showing Godself to be true, beyond one's context or control. Thus, Romans 3:4 biblically renders everyone as a con artist, in a playful sense! The name of the game – us letting God be true as liars – is deciding whether to be conspirational artists for the good of others and God's glory, or confidence artists who obscure God and sacrifice others in the devotions to ourselves and our concepts of God.

To be sure, the idea of Christians letting themselves be "liars" in any sense sounds striking and offensive, even if the Apostle Paul calls for it. This idea sounds like it frames Christian statements as lies, or that it permits Christians to lie, but this is not the intent. Rather, this idea intends to be faithful to Romans 3:4, by enabling Christians to envision the ways in which they are not only the heroes of their story, but also, how they are the villains. This is a crucial vantage point to cultivate as modern confidence artists weaponize conspiracy theories to enthrall people with the fake promises of unfalsifiable heroism or inescapable shaming. Confidence artists exploit people's tendencies to view themselves as heroes, to the point where they deny the destructive aspects of their identity, especially when it serves the con's agenda. This helps to explain why some modern Christians embrace leaders and policies which are radically contrary to the nature and activity of Christ or the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Many American Christians of the early twenty-first century are known more as the people who support wealthy criminals, parrot the dehumanizing talking points of cable pundits, and openly associate and empathize with hateful domestic terrorists, and less as the people who live out Jesus's Beatitudes. We are quick to confess ourselves as the "sinners" of Romans 3:23, yet will see no

problem with endorsing deceivers, adulterers, racists, rapists, abusers, bigots, and murderers, so long as these figures adhere to our version of the Christian story that affirms our heroism, even if it buries Jesus under ideological ideals. We can begin to see the problem with our actions when we are given space to envision our conduct as villainous – hence the striking and offensive term, "liar." Romans 3:4 makes this room to consider how we can be the villains in our story, and also heroes who can let themselves be liars, to let God be true.

Romans 3:4 gives Christians room to embrace the embarrassment of our imperfections and the shortcomings of our story. Unlike conspiracy theories which force adherents to be right at all costs, Romans 3:4 is the Christian way of making relational space for being wrong for the glory of God and the good of others. This way of being wrong is not about being sorry for being a Christian, renouncing Christian faith, or sacrificing important Christian convictions or doctrines. Rather, the Romans 3:4 personality knows that our heroic intentions to be faithful to Christ and tell the Christian story are bound up with our embarrassing inabilities to fully grasp and exhaust the meaning of God, as well as our historical wrongness of oppressing the marginalized people whom Jesus loves, siding with people whom Jesus resisted, and persecuting the others with whom Jesus identifies. Many people see us as villains for this reason. Christians also suffer cruel and unjust persecution for illegitimate reasons. These are also tragic injustices, not "whataboutisms" which excuse us from owning our wrongness. This wrongness does not totally define Christianity, nor could it invalidate all of the historical good that Christians and the Church have brought to the world. Christians also faithfully follow Jesus in liberating the oppressed, opposing the corrupt, and loving the unloved. Crucially, Christians live in the modern post-Christendom culture, in which the cultural awareness of Christianity's harm outpaces the recognition of Christianity's help. Christians are not villains, but we are increasingly being seen

and labeled as such by people in religious and secular spheres, due to legitimate historical reasons. Thus, Christians need to figure out how to convey the goodness and the awesomeness of our story not just according to our heroic self-images, but also, as bad guys of modern culture. This figuring out unfolds as conspirational artistry that plays out the imperfections and shortcomings of one's own religious life while relationally connecting with differing others.

This granting of space to be wrong is playful, because it does not adhere to the labels of protagonist or antagonist too seriously. The conspirational artist lets God be true, whether they are validated as the hero or demonized as the villain. This playfulness makes the granting of space to be wrong a relational act, because it is a way of offering oneself and one's space to a differing other, regardless of how one is labelled or how one's offer is interpreted. Conspirational artistry enables Christians to have their being with differing others without letting their badguy-ness block the interreligious dialogue and space by repurposing the villainous dimension of the Christian identity for relational good and dialogical expansion.

Conspirationally artistic Christians breathe with their religious playmates and say (in many ways): *We mean well when we tell the story that we see as the best ever told that is worthy of full devotion, but we are wrong when we try to tell it in ways that are manipulative, power-hungry, destructive to your identities and cultures, and hubristic enough to presume it explains everything about God. You help us to see the value of our story and the ways in which we are wrong by believing and practicing differently than we do, and we need that. We also help you see the value of your story and the ways in which you are wrong, and you need us. Yes, we have our villainous moments, but now, we are not trying to share a space with you to hurt or conquer you. We are saying it because we – as our truest and deepest selves – love you – as your truest and deepest selves, and we want to be good and bad guys together, here with you, who can let God*

be true. This dialogical conspiration defies cultural labels to bring Christians together with differing people. This breathing together illustrates the Christian story less as comprehensive, and more as competitive, in the sense that it is "in play" with other stories which are "contestants" in the field of being the best at finding ways of letting God be true. Thus, in the mode of interreligious play, the winner does not defeat or conquer the other religions. Rather, the winner keeps the games of faith, hope, and love going for the other religions, through the play of continually thinking, living, and talking out God together. When Christians play out Paul's "Have Our Being," they undertake the conspirational artistry that provides ways to be with others by continually letting God be true, in the face of us continually being unable to grasp God, and thus, continually needing God to teach God. The next section develops this point by drawing from global and pop-culture models to depict how storytelling, friending, sparring, and partnering-in-crime enables diverse people to breathe together in the interreligious space.

II. Global and Pop-Culture Relational Models for "Breathing With" Others

The conspirational artist of contestant theology looks and operates like the confidence artist, not to scam differing people, but to bring them together with a hopeful sense of powerful aliveness that enables their faith to endure through human confusion, conflict, failure, suffering, death, and darkness. This con-artistry-for-good provocatively resonates with Pope Francis's recurring recognitions of "social" movements comprised of people conspiring together as "poetic" personalities who artistically "create hope where there appears to be only waste and exclusion."[10] Conspirational artists are contestant theology's playful, label-defying version of Pope Francis's "social poets" – those who hold the continually unsolvable human hurts which

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[10] Francis, *Video Message of the Holy Father Francis on the Occasion of the Fourth World Meeting of Popular Movements,* accessed August 17, 2022, Vatican.va., 1.

destroy social ties with the continually unfolding path of shared aliveness. This is the playful

way to hold together the Romans 3:4 "liar" persona with the way that Psalm 62:9 renders all of

humanity in respiratory terms, singing "Those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate

are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath." Pope Francis

explains: "Along this path, popular movements play an essential role, not only by making

demands and lodging protests, but even more basically by being creative. You are social poets:

creators of work, builders of housing, producers of food, above all for people left behind by the

world market."[11] Notably, Pope Francis's social poetry is a hopeful commitment to justly making

room for being with others that offers comparisons to the *as if-ing*, *what is-ing*, and *what could

be-ing* of conspirational orthodoxy. Yet, Pope Francis goes further, hinting at the subversive

nature of the social poet, and subtly calls out the oppressively influential agents of the modern

world: "The future of humanity does not lie solely in the hands of great leaders, the great powers,

and the elites. It is fundamentally in the hands of the peoples and their ability to organize. It is in

their hands, which can guide with humility and conviction this process of change. I am with

you."[12] Pope Francis identifies with creative personalities who challenge any individual or

group's attempt to have the final say about human destiny, especially if they are the scam artists

at the highest levels of culture who are weaponizing conspiracy theories to enslave minds and

resources. Directly put, it takes a con(spirational artist) to beat a con(fidence artist)!

The future is not one confidence artist's story that turns deplorable people into

unfalsifiable heroes, nor is it another confidence artist's story that entraps everyone into

inescapable shaming. The future is the story of how messy, ordinary people figured out how to

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[11] Francis, *Participation at the Second World Meeting of Popular Movements: Address of the Holy Father*, accessed August 17, 2022, Vatican.va., 3.1.
[12] Francis, *Participation at the Second World Meeting,* 4.

creatively come together as the good and bad guys who fought and conspired each other into friendship, love, and ever-aliveness. Pope Francis's social poetry characterizes the future direction of the world religions, whose theologians will become the conspirational artists anticipated by Paul Knitter, and played out in contestant theology. Brian McLaren notices how this conspirational artistry looks and feels like a magnetic relational force, particularly "a radical migration from 'organized religion' to 'organizing religion.'"[13] McLaren provides the language for describing how the conspirational artistry of contestant theology aspires to attract all people into the game of continually thinking, living, and talking out God, for the good of every life, and for the glory of God. The following global and pop-culture models envision the radically relational ways in which conspirational artists make room to breathe with differing others.

A. African *Ubuntu*: Breathing Together as the Storyteller

African scholars speak out from their geographically and culturally diverse continent to provide awesome contributions to the global restorative justice paradigm. Rwandan scholar Abe Oyeniyi describes how many pre-colonial African Restorative Traditions collectively provided a paradigm for understanding and "[resolving] conflicts in cordial and harmonious ways, devoid of any formal process."[14] This paradigm of solving conflict with the sense of African togetherness continues to guide modern African restorative justice practices such as Kinship Joking, Palaver Traditions, and Gacaca Courts. Each of these practices breathes with the other through the concept of *Ubuntu*. Don John Omale defines *Ubuntu* as "the natural connectedness of the

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[13] Brian D. McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to be Christian* (New York; Convergent, 2016), 173.
[14] Abe Oyeniyi, "Conflict Resolution in the Extractives: A Consideration of Traditional Conflict Resolution Paradigm Post-Colonial Africa," *Willamette Journal of International Law and Dispute Resolution* 25, no. 1 (2017): 61, https://tinyurl.com/2rxy53cy.

humanity of persons,"[15] drawing from the indigenous phrase "*umuntu ngumuntu ngbantu* (a person is a person through persons)"[16] and academic slogans such as "I am because you are," or "my humanity is tied up with your humanity."[17] Although *Ubuntu* offers a harmonious relationality, Nyasha Mboti explains that it is more than resorting to a moral obligation to flatten differences to achieve a common African identity. *Ubuntu* enables Mboti to "imagine instances where broken relationships are as authentically human and humanizing as much as harmonious relationships, broken relationships [are] as ethically desirable as harmonious ones, and harmonious relations [are] as potentially oppressive and false as a disharmonious ones [*sic*]."[18] For Mboti, *Ubuntu* expands beyond a rigid necessitation of African harmony to be African multidimensionality that makes room for the differing of others. Mboti describes this *Ubuntian* way of breathing together as relational "collisions" in an "isotropy of space – where all directions are equal."[19] Thus, Mboti frames *Ubuntu* not just as a relational philosophy, but as the relational *space* that orients the differing directions of differing people to collide (or crossover) with each other in potentially enriching and diminishing ways.

Mboti's *Ubuntian* "African ethics of collision"[20] models how conspirational artistry makes room for differing people to be together despite cultural labels. Mboti explains:

> Goodwill is not like sound, which travels rectilinearly. Rather, normal human relations cause ethics to bend, reflect, diffract, refract, scatter, and travel in several directions, sometimes all at once. These directions are not always pleasant, nor always desired. In fact, daily life is lived in the knowledge that collision and dispersal are more or less the only constants. "Harmony," in such contexts, is treated with as much suspicion as endless

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[15] Don John O. Omale, "Justice in History: An Examination of African Restorative Traditions and the Emerging Restorative Justice Paradigm," *African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies* 2, no. 2 (November 2006): 55-56.

[16] Omale, "Justice in History," 55.

[17] Omale, "Justice in History," 55. Omale cites Daniel Van Ness and Karen Heetderks Strong, *Restoring Justice*, 2nd ed. (Cincinnati, Ohio: Anderson, 2002).

[18] Nyasha Mboti, "May the Real *Ubuntu* Please Stand Up?" *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 30, no. 2 (April 2015): 141, https://tinyurl.com/ms9npkds.

[19] Mboti, "May the Real *Ubuntu* Please Stand Up?" 132-133.

[20] Mboti, "May the Real *Ubuntu* Please Stand Up?" 134.

strife. In the end, life never really settles into total harmony or total discord, complete goodwill or complete ill-will. Rather, it is nearly always … between the two, in an im/perfect balance. African ethics is therefore best regarded as a *tertium quid*.[21]

Mboti's explanation of *Ubuntu* (the multidimensionalizing African relationality of collisions and dispersals) grants language to describe the "third something" that holds together Paul's Christianity with the Areopagians' Greek culture and Evelyn's googly-eyeism with Jobu Tupaki's nihilism. Contestant theologians know this third something as play. Thus, Mboti's *tertium quid* ethics is African *play* ethics, because *Ubuntu* holds together radical contrasts, in a mode and space that are "indefinite [things] related in some way to two known or definite things, but distinct from both"[22] which they hold. Mboti's *Ubuntu* is having our being in the "third something" (play) of the isotropic space of operation (playground) that envelops operatives (players) in enriching and diminishing collisions and dispersions (crossovers). Mboti's "real" *Ubuntu* conveys African relationality as making room for human identities to relationally play out themselves and their differing directions, through harmony and discord, regardless of being seen as cultural heroes or villains. Weaving together Mboti's nuanced description of *Ubuntu* with other definitions, we can voice the conspirational artist's *Ubuntian* play through an axiom (*I am a result of you being in the process of being*), an aphorism (*I can tell my story because you can tell your story*), or an adage (*my story is a story through our stories*).

Ubuntu unfolds through forms of storytelling which convey the African connectedness that creates a relational space for strengthening social ties, navigating differences, and opening the most realistic options for restoration possible in broken relationships. Simply put, *Ubuntu* is making room to tell the story of shared Africanness in real life harmony and discord. Kinship

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[21] Mboti, "May the Real *Ubuntu* Please Stand Up?" 133.
[22] *Dictionary.com Unabridged 2012 Digital Edition* (New York: Random House, Inc. 2023), s.v. "tertium quid," February 2023, https://tinyurl.com/rucr276m.

Joking is a way of managing conflict with social flexibility in which differing parties allow and receive each other's teasing criticism, in the name of a common African identity, and to lessen conflict. These relations avoid constraining the players to act out their identity as either victims and offenders, so that through the free flow of "joking," the offender/oppressor sets aside the need to dominate and victim/oppressed sets aside the need for resistance, so that they both can share the greatest sense of shared Africanness possible amidst rigid hierarchies or conflicts.[23] Mark Davidheiser describes how traditional Gambian conflict management is connected to *dangkuto*, in which joking bonds are built on particular events in a story of shared Africanness. An informant's story taught Davidheiser the origin of one form of *dangkuto*:

> The joking relations between the patronymics Fofanna and Jaiteh [began] when their ancestors were traveling on a long journey without food. [Fofanna] went into the bush, cut some meat from his leg, and roasted it so that his teacher…could eat. Jaiteh ate it without being aware of its source. They continued traveling, until Fofanna became weak from loss of blood. When Jaiteh realized his student was injured he healed the wound by laying his hands on it and praying. They then made an oath that their descendants must always support each other and never quarrel or suffer great misfortune.[24]

Davidheiser notes how this story opens ways to navigate modern conflicts, such as a nobleman allowing his friend of a lower social class to intervene in a marital dispute "only because of the *dangkuto* between them."[25] Davidheiser endorses these story-driven joking relationships, because they are adaptable for many situations. Ferdinand de Jong agrees, noting the comeback of these non-codified traditions, as political restoration practices fail to achieve reconciliation.[26]

The *Ubuntian* Palaver Traditions are also story-driven. Anna Floerke Scheid defines the palaver as "a physical, social, and psychological space" for open communication and

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[23] Cécile Canut and Etienne Smith, "Pactes, alliances et plaisanteries: Pratiques locales, discours global," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 184, no. 4, (2006): 692-697, https://tinyurl.com/6j8m7tpd.

[24] Mark Davidheiser, "Joking for Peace. Social Organization, Tradition, and Change in Gambian Conflict Management," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 184, (2006): 839, https://tinyurl.com/22u68ahe.

[25] Davidheiser, "Joking for Peace," 847.

[26] Ferdinand de Jong, "A Joking Nation: Conflict Resolution in Senegal," *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne Des Études Africaines* 39, no. 2 (2005): 393, https://tinyurl.com/mf2zfvex.

remembering (*anamnesis*) to promote the community life.[27] Tapiwa N. Mucherera agrees with this, framing the palaver as a relational process of "revillaging" (bringing people together in a renewed sense of the village) and "reauthoring" (a healing rewriting of the communal village narrative).[28] These story-processes help to ground an understanding of the roles of the offender, victims, and communities as storytellers of shame and hope. In these palaver spaces, the offender must tell the story about their offending and listen to how the victim has been affected. In turn, the victim must "speak the unspeakable"[29] by telling the story about how they have been affected by the offender's harm. Both the offender and victim share the responsibility of shedding light on what happened in the past. The palaver tasks the community with hearing both stories and asking both stakeholders what they need, to truthfully uncover the story of the past and hopefully stretch toward the story of a communal future.

Similarly, the Gacaca Courts which emerged after the Rwandan genocide feature a storytelling process that does not just emphasize a general Africanness, but Africanness that is communally healing and responsible. This community elects local officials to ensure that offenders take responsibility for the crime by telling the detailed story of their involvement in it, which grounds the way in which the harm is repaired. The community also asks victims to tell their story about the harm of the crime, which prompts offenders to confess and apologize. If Kinship Joking's *Ubuntu* binds the offender's Africanness in the victim's Africanness, and the Palaver's *Ubuntu* binds the offender's story in the victim's story, then the Gacaca Courts' *Ubuntu* binds the offender's telling of their story in the victim's telling of their story.

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[27] Anna Floerke Scheid, "Under the Palaver Tree: Community Ethics for Truth-Telling and Reconciliation," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 31, no. 1 (2011): 17, 23, https://tinyurl.com/4xd7dm2v.

[28] Tapiwa N. Mucherera, "Signposts of Hope" in *Meet Me at the Palaver: Narrative Pastoral Counseling in Postcolonial Contexts* (Oregon: Lutterworth Press, 2010), 76-98.

[29] Tapiwa N. Mucherera, *Meet Me at the Palaver: Narrative Pastoral Counseling in Postcolonial Contexts* (Oregon: Lutterworth Press, 2010), 125-133.

Overall, *Ubuntu* guides the way in which conspirational artists use the mode of storytelling to create relational spaces in which the differing people of faith can breathe together. Storytelling allows people to shape their own faith in a way that does not require full understanding of the content of a divine revelation, yet allows that understanding to continually disperse in traditional and unpredictable directions. Faith conveyed as religion grounds revelation in reliable traditions; faith told as story stretches revelation in random directions. Thus, even if a person grounds their faith in a particular religion, one's truest and deepest articulation this faith – greatest story ever told that is worthy of full devotion – is one's isotropic movement of stretching in all directions. In this all-directional storytelling movement, one will eventually crossover with the other people of faith telling their stories. Following Mboti's *Ubuntu* principle, these faith crossovers create isotropic zones of collision and dispersion, whose human relationality causes faith "to bend, reflect, diffract, refract, scatter, and travel in several directions, sometimes all at once,"[30] in harmonious and discordant ways. The conspirational artist – as the storyteller – continually makes room for the awareness of and optimism for this constant "pinballing" of interreligiosity. This pinballing is the playground where the people of differing faiths bump into each in the trajectory of their multidirectionalizing storytelling, which also orients them into new encounters with new people in new playgrounds.

Following the ways that *Ubuntu* makes room for the conflicting stories of shame and hope with the accommodating and accountable Africanness that lives beyond the labels of offender and victim, the conspirational artist makes room for the differing "greatest stories ever told about God" with the enriching and diminishing playfulness that lives beyond the labels of hero and villain. To be sure, breathing with others through *Ubuntian* storytelling is not the

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[30] Mboti, "May the Real *Ubuntu* Please Stand Up?" 133.

avoidance of discussing the historical heroism and villainy of any religious group for the sake of preserving a sense of interreligious community. Rather, conspirational artistry is about making sure that every religious group is not entrapped – nor entraps other groups – solely in the story of being either a hero or a villain, because neither label fully exhausts who they are. Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie contributes crucial insight to this point, by describing the entrapment of the "single story" – "show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become."[31] Adichie usually gets credit for describing a laborious trap. Yet, she also envisages a playful opportunity, teaching, "when we realize that there is never a single story about any place, we regain a kind of paradise."[32] At the end of "The Danger of the Single Story," Adichie leaves room to pick up where she left off, allowing *The Play of Our Many Stories*, particularly, our greatest stories ever told about God. Following Adichie's cue, conspirational artists play the role of *Ubuntian* storyteller to pair the finiteness of human understandings of faith with the infinite directions of God and the infinite expanse of Paradise.

B. Korean *jeong*: Breathing Together as the Friend

If *Ubuntian* storytellers create relational spaces for people of differing faiths to breathe together, then the Korean concept of *jeong* describes how conspirational artists are also friends who maintain connections in these spaces. W. Anne Joh explains her Korean envisioning of Jesus on the cross as Jesus's connectedness with humanity that stretches through relational obstacles – particularly the pain caused by contact with others (*han/*abjection) and the "cutting

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[31] TED, "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The Danger of a Single Story | TED," YouTube video, 19:16 (9:26-9:36), October 7, 2009, https://tinyurl.com/mttmabht.
[32] TED, "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: The Danger of a Single Story," 18:18-18:31.

off" from others to avoid receiving or inflicting pain (*dan*).[33] Joh insists that Jesus models the radical connectedness of *jeong*, which "[allows] one to move beyond the edges of the Self into the Other and vice versa."[34] This movement begins as *jeong* "contests relationships and realities that uphold dichotomous views."[35] Put another way, *jeong* does not prioritize the Self or the Other, but rather, emphasizes the life of "connected hearts"[36] that holds together relational pain and pleasure. This pairing of pain and pleasure is crucial for understanding why Joh defines *jeong* as "the power of eros that forges its presence in the interval between the Self and the Other."[37] Joh envisions *jeong* as Eros – God's primal relational energy – whose wholeness and holiness counters the selfish and consuming eros. Joh explains that *jeong* "works as a lubricant and as a relentless faith that *han* does not have the final word."[38] *Jeong* describes the connectedness that persists through the boundaries of *han's* pain and abjection and *dan's* self-denial which keep up the wall between the Self and the Other.

To clarify how *jeong* is both a connectedness between Self and Other and an elusiveness of the boundaries between Self and Other, she borrows Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenological imagery of the hand in the honey jar. This hand illustrates *jeong's* connectedness as a "stickiness," because it is both the allowance to touch something while still remaining oneself, and the entrapment within a clinginess that "risks diluting [oneself] into viscosity."[39] Joh characterizes this sticky connectedness of the hand in the honey jar as "an experience that is

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[33] W. Anne Joh, "The Transgressive Power of Jeong: A Postcolonial Hybridization of Christology," in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire,* eds. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, Mayra Rivera (Danvers, MA: Chalice Press, 2004), 151-152.
[34] Joh, "The Transgressive Power of Jeong," 153.
[35] Joh, "The Transgressive Power of Jeong," 152.
[36] Joh, "The Transgressive Power of Jeong," 152.
[37] Joh, "The Transgressive Power of Jeong," 152-153.
[38] Joh, "The Transgressive Power of Jeong," 153.
[39] Joh, "The Transgressive Power of Jeong," 153-154. Joh cites Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: H. E. Barnes, 1956), 606–607.

appealing, repelling, and compelling,"[40] which complements the *Ubuntian* zone of collisions and dispersions. To paraphrase *The Lion King*'s famous line, *jeong* connects people in relational spaces in "sticky" (diminishing) yet "satisfying" (enriching) ways. Jeong's stickiness models how conspirational artists connect with differing people despite cultural labels. Joh explains:

> [Trespassing] given parameters, boundaries, and norms…jeong is present within the gaps and fissures and in the uncomfortable and often painful interstitial spaces. Because jeong moves freely and is embodied across diverse borders and boundaries, life becomes much more complex. The power of jeong lies in its ability to wedge itself into the smallest gaps between the oppressed and the oppressor.[41]

Jeong's sticky relationality in the smallest spaces complements *Ubuntu*'s multidimensionality in isotropic space. Conspirational artists combine *Ubuntu* and *jeong* to not only make room, but to also create the sticky connectedness of enriching and diminishing human relationality. Joh writes, "jeong could be construed to perpetuate either oppression or liberation…yet life in the fullness of jeong brings healing and a break in the cycle of han."[42] Joh admits that human connectedness risks imperfect relationships which exacerbate *han's* relationship-shriveling pain and *dan*'s self-denial. For her, *jeong*'s imperfection is less a risk, and more "vulnerability [which] challenges us to identify ourselves with those whom we perceive to be the Other," in which "we are challenged to go beyond ourselves."[43] For Joh, embracing one's vulnerabilities is living in the fullness of *jeong,* because it cultivates the ability to connect to differing people that grows out of "[accepting] the often negativized and shadowed parts of ourselves."[44] Thus, *jeong* allows us to accept the embarrassing parts of ourselves, so that we can accept other people, even if we may be embarrassed to accept them for who they really are, and vice versa.

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[40] Joh, "The Transgressive Power of Jeong," 154.
[41] Joh, "The Transgressive Power of Jeong," 154.
[42] Joh, "The Transgressive Power of Jeong," 154.
[43] Joh, "The Transgressive Power of Jeong," 155.
[44] Joh, "The Transgressive Power of Jeong," 155.

Further, Joh frames *jeong* as the vulnerability that is tied with the "clarity" that is not rigid "categorization and neat, straightforward answers," but rather, "recognizing complexity and ambiguity."[45] Thus, *jeong's* way of opening us to see the Self in the Other involves seeing ourselves in the shortcomings of others, and others seeing themselves in our shortcomings. This is the gradual experience implied in the metaphorical imagery of the hand in the honey jar, in which the stickiness of the honey represents human relationality – being connected to other people's existences. The sweet-tasting honey is also an inconveniently sticky mess that is embarrassingly difficult to untangle. Yet, as the hand remains in the honey jar, it takes on the honey's clingy viscosity. Joh describes the hand's sticky-sweetness as a dissolving of boundaries which exhibits how *jeong* softens the hardened heart of *han* for relationality. Joh explains:

> It is only when one's heart becomes a heart of flesh that jeong arises within connectedness…Jeong challenges the ways in which the boundaries of the Self and the Other have often been made insoluble. Thus, the metaphor of heart of stone concedes the cycle of han that continues to conflict more han, whereas the metaphor of the heart of flesh confesses the inherent vulnerability and the porousness that is part of relationality. The power of jeong is what dissolves the hardened heart of han.[46]

Joh frames *jeong* as the relational power of voluntary porousness and vulnerability. The stable structures of reason do not fully explain this willingness to stick the hand in the honey jar. Yet, when reason is paired with the non-seriously random dimensions of human relationality, we can cherish and follow the heart of stone's willing transformation into the heart of flesh as the powerful play of connected hearts. Joh hears this voluntary porousness and vulnerability in the popular phrase, "You die—I die; you live—I live,"[47] in which *jeong* echoes *Ubuntu.*

For Joh, Jesus is God with us, somewhere in between the oppressed and the oppressors, as the Friend who sticks his hand in the honey jar that is messy humanity. Joh's understanding of

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[45] Joh, "The Transgressive Power of Jeong," 155.
[46] Joh, "The Transgressive Power of Jeong," 155.
[47] Joh, "The Transgressive Power of Jeong," 155.

jeong allows her to highlight the voluntary nature of Jesus's connection with those who "were han-ridden [and] also to those who caused han."[48] Joh explains, "Jesus recognized the complexities present in relationships. Unlike other revolutionaries who arise out of such colonized contexts, Jesus chose not to practice dan but to opt instead for transformation through the power of jeong in connectedness."[49] For Joh, the cross is Jesus's *jeong* – his interstitiality by which he undoes all the barriers to connecting everyone and everything to God. Crucially, Joh frames Jesus's cross as the interstitially interreligious "Third Space"[50] where a self-emptying crossover between Jesus's Passion and Buddhism's No Self makes room for Christians to follow Jesus in embracing differing religious others. Joh explains:

> Jesus is awakened to No-Self through jeong. In his journey into the wilderness before beginning his ministry, he chooses No-Self in the face of temptations of the Self. His awakening to No-Self through jeong allows him the capacity to have jeong for the Other, even to the point of risking the cross. In the passion narrative he again withdraws, not into the wilderness this time, but into the garden, to once again search deep into his heart to reach into the depths of jeong for the Other so that he might continue to practice self-emptying even when faced with death…The practice of No-Self, or self-emptying, will certainly have negative repercussions for those who have been rendered as No-Self through dominant and oppressive forces… However, the practice of self-emptying from a Buddhist perspective is the process toward self-fullness…When jeong is present in connectedness, we are able to clearly see the complexity of life so that while we practice self-emptying, we simultaneously discover ourselves and others.[51]

Overall, Joh's insights allow us to describe *jeong* as shared pouring out of oneself into another as friends, both in the intercultural and interreligious sense. Jesus models the friend's way of vulnerability and porousness in which Christians "become less" for another person of faith, not by sacrificing the Christian identity and story, but rather, by identifying with the oft-repressed embarrassing messiness of being Christian, which in turn, compassionately orients the Christian

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[48] Joh, "The Transgressive Power of Jeong," 157.
[49] Joh, "The Transgressive Power of Jeong," 157.
[50] Joh, "The Transgressive Power of Jeong," 157.
[51] Joh, "The Transgressive Power of Jeong," 158.

heart towards the messiness of another person's identity and story. Following Joh's Christological description of *jeong*, conspirational artists play the role of friends who find ways for differing people of faith to breathe together with a radical connectedness that shows compassion through the suffering of the oppressed and the harm of the oppressor, rather than choosing to break relationship with anyone to avoid that messiness or pain.

Reflecting their intercultural geographical contexts, *Ubuntu* and *jeong* are global models of making room for the Evelyn Quan-like multidimensional and interstitial human relationality in spatial terms. Both models powerfully ground the ways in which conspirational storytelling and friendship enable the people of differing faiths to breathe together. Yet, as important as the spatiality of interreligiosity is, the interreligious encounter presses toward something beyond spatial awareness, because the relationality at play in interreligiosity is not simply grounded in holding someone *as if* they are a religious playmate, nor is it exhausted in *what is* — our commitment to messy humanness. Rather, the promise of the shared religious life continually stretches unto the not-yet-experienced and ever-unfolding *what could be*. Thus, conspirational artistry's play into the interreligious encounter reveals that the academic definition of space contains, but does not confine, the faith that isotropically stretches out through storytelling and kenotically pours out through friendships. The practices of conspirational artistry stretch the idea of the interreligious space unto the tangible *place* of differing people of faith being together. To understand this shade of difference, we turn to Jacob Shatzer's distinction of these terms, as he considers how technology flattens notions of spatiality. Shatzer explains, "[*space* is] one-dimensional, a location on a map, while *places* are multidimensional and layered with various associations and other aspects of context. Place is 'charged with human meaning,' while space is

something 'from which the meaning has departed, something empty and inert.'"[52] Adapting

Shatzer's insights to a play theology of religions reveals that the interreligious encounter is not

fully contained in a one-dimensional, "dead" serious space, nor is its expansiveness fully

contained in the human meaning of "place." Thus, I introduce a new term. *Playce* conveys how

the play of conspirational artists continually stretches and unfolds the stable space of the

interreligious encounter with the new patterns of randomness granted by the *Ubuntian*

storytelling that pinballs the deepest and truest expressions of one's faith into the devotional

expressions of other faiths, and the *jeongian* friendship that agglutinates the messiness of one's

faith to the messiness of other faiths. *Ubuntu* and *jeong* are the real world models for creating the

conditions to tangibly experience multidimensionality and interstitiality in the *playce* of the

interreligious encounter, which incorporates, but does not necessitate, the dictates of spatial

awareness, in its non-Euclidean manner of ever-unfolding within contained locations which are

charged with human meaning. The abstract promise of these relational models is illustrated in

several accessible pop-cultural tales which establish the necessity, inevitability, and coolness of

having the *playce* to play out the storytelling and friendships of interreligious relationality.

C. "The Animals in the Pit" / *The Killing Joke*: Breathing Together as the Sparring Partner

Alexander Nikolayevich Afanasyev's Russian folktale "The Animals in the Pit" concerns

Pig, Wolf, Fox, Rabbit, and Squirrel, who join together on their way to St. Petersburg to "pray to

God."[53] Their spiritual migration continues happily and predictably until "they came across a

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[52] Jacob Shatzer, *Transhumanism and the Image of God: Today's Technology and the Future of Christian Discipleship* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019) 128-129. Shatzer quotes Wilfred M. McClay, "Why Place Matters," in *Why Place Matters: Geography, Identity, and Civic Life in Modern America*, ed. Wilfred M. McClay and Ted V. McAllister (New York: Encounter, 2014), 4.
[53] Alexander Nikolayevich Afanasyev, "The Animals in the Pit," in *Russian Folk-Tales (Translated from the Russian),*" trans. Leonard Arthur Magnus, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1916), 119-120.

broad, deep pit."[54] The animals fall into this pit with no escape, which is now their shared space. As time passes, Pig, Wolf, Rabbit, and Squirrel grow hungry, but there was nothing to eat, except another animal in the Pit. In this hopeless space, Fox devises her civil, yet savage solution – a singing contest that allows them to gradually eat each other, with the hopes that this will give enough time for the survivors to find the way out of the Pit. The contest's first round stipulates that everyone gets to eat the animals with the thinnest voices, which leads to Squirrel and Rabbit – the most vulnerable animals – being eaten. The contest's second round targets the animal with the fattest voice, which allows Fox and Pig to eat Wolf – arguably the most threatening animal. Yet, Fox somehow hides the leftovers of Wolf from Pig for three days. When Pig asks Fox about what she is eating, she replies, "Oh, Pig, I am eating my own flesh. You tear your belly up and munch it yourself."[55] Pig – true to being the hungriest animal – is tricked into becoming food for Fox, who is shown to be the craftiest animal. Yet, for all her survival schemes, Fox is left alone in the Pit. Likewise, we are left to wonder about her fate, as the tale cryptically ends with a faintly discernible smirk, "Did she climb up, or is she there still? I don't know, really!"[56] While unsettling, this story conveys the need to expand the interreligious encounter beyond the cannibalizing Pit, as the *playce* for the people of differing faith journeys to breathe together.

The nightmare of "The Animals in the Pit" is all too real in the interreligious sense. The diversity of the global beliefs and practices seeking ultimate destinies is discernible in the personalities of Pig, Wolf, Fox, Rabbit, and Squirrel as they journey to pray to God. In the space of the interreligious encounter, our best intentions of sharing a life of faith continually stares into the Pit of the worst human impulses, which involve taking advantage of another's weaknesses,

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[54] Afanasyev, "The Animals in the Pit," 119.
[55] Afanasyev, "The Animals in the Pit," 120.
[56] Afanasyev, "The Animals in the Pit," 120.

neutralizing their perceived threat, and commodifying people to feed our selfish agendas. Yet, the dream of conspirational artistry always contests the nightmare of confidence artistry. It is tempting to read Afanasyev's tale and conclude that no one escapes the nightmare space of confidence artistry, not even the confidence artist. As such, the tale depicts the necessity of framing the interreligious encounter with greater spatial and relational expansiveness.

Reading the tale through the lens of conspirational artistry, one discovers a playful challenge in the interrobang ending of Afanasyev's tale. The playful question and exclamation of not really knowing Fox's fate grant the space to wonder about her, which keeps the audience involved with the story past its conclusion. Creating the conditions for wondering about what happened to Fox, the reader is given room to imagine how she managed to climb out of the Pit, and continued the journey to pray to God. This imagining is a bit of a stretch, but it is the key to unraveling the conditions which establish shared space (the Pit) as an unsolvable problem, both in the story and in modern life. The playfully ambiguous ending allows us to envision Fox climbing out of the Pit, which makes room for hearing a different version of events that took place within that impossible-to-escape space. We can allow for the possibility that the animals did not cannibalize each other, but rather, helped each other to survive, which makes room for seeing a different story altogether. If the animals conspired to survive the Pit, then that space is no longer the "dead" serious nightmare space, but the living *playce* for breathing together with differing others, which makes room for telling the other story. When we tell the other story of "The Animals in the Playce," we become the new story, as the Fox who conspired with her friends to keep going in their shared life of faith, past the Pit, and ever toward God. Thus, Afanasyev's tale – through its playfully ambiguous ending – contests its own inescapably cannibalizing space. This un-limiting guides how conspirational artists embody the new story of

stepping out of one's own space to breathe with a person in a differing space. This new story of breathing with another is not about abandoning one's own context or denying spatial awareness. Rather, conspirational artistry contests the enclosure of space (locations with isolating boundaries) with the unfolding of *playce* (multidimensionally meaningful contexts which cross over with each other). This mode of contest stretches the understanding of what it means to be situated in a singular religious context, as one is primed to see the ways in which their context not only grounds people inside traditions, but also, continually unfolds to include differing others and their differing spaces. The *playce* allows Christians to pose Afanasyev's interrobang to themselves and to others as a positive and humanizing response to differing religions. The playful question (did she climb up, or is she still there?)[57] allows Christians to think about un-limiting themselves from nightmarishly enclosed and cannibalizing spaces. The playful exclamation (I don't know, really!)[58] allows Christians to enact generously unfolding *playces* of conspiring with religious playmates to keep the life of faith going toward God and Paradise.

"The Animals in the Pit" is featured prominently in Tom King's *Batman* (Vol. 3) #74, which reveals that Bruce Wayne loved hearing his father read the story to him as a young child. Batman confesses, "the reason I liked the book…it's because of the horror. Because no one escapes. But every time you read it, I childishly, idiotically thought…it might change…I was waiting for someone to come out of the pit. I knew it was impossible…but still. I couldn't give up the hope."[59] Batman's hope is the pop-cultural insistence upon the necessity of stretching space beyond an enclosing and relational horror that no one escapes. This hope expands the interreligious encounter beyond the Pit which spatially confines differing people to survive each

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[57] Afanasyev, "The Animals in the Pit," 120.
[58] Afanasyev, "The Animals in the Pit," 120.
[59] Tom King, *Batman* (Volume 3) #74 (Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2019), 15.

other's presence in horrible ways. Conspirational artists play out this unfolding room of expanded boundaries of possibility and multiplied kinds of good that comes out of the pit. Christians recognize this powerfully alive *playce* in the Person of Jesus Christ, the One who not only entered the nightmare Pit through the Cross, but also emerged out of its horror, to ground believers in God as "the way and the truth and the life" (John 14:6) while also stretching them toward the "many dwelling places" He has prepared for them in God (John 14:1-4). Christians follow Jesus when they embody His new story of theovival that unravels the entrapping stories of rigid spatial and relational contexts. Conspirational artists extend this unravelling into the interreligious encounter, by practicing the storytelling and friendships with the people of differing faiths that keeps their thinking, living, and talking about God going through the inevitable realities of confusion, conflict, failure, suffering, death, and darkness. This Christian move to keep faith going is neither a patronizing endorsement nor an unqualified acceptance of differing faiths; it is the offer of play that results from being seized by God's generously unlimited paradigm for being with a differing person.

When Christians are playful toward differing people of faith, they adopt the conspirational artist identity that is somewhat heroic and somewhat villainous, without entirely fitting into either of these cultural labels. In addition to being storytellers and friends, conspirational artists act as sparring partners who playfully push people out the "dead" seriousness of their context, for the sake of perpetuating interreligious relationality. Another Batman story – Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke* – illustrates this point, and clarifies the inevitability of needing to find ways to push beyond the rigidity of one's context. This 1988 DC Comics graphic novel presents Batman's quintessential battle with his arch-nemesis. The story concerns how the Joker was once an engineer who worked at a chemical plant to support his

pregnant wife. However, he decides to leave his job to do stand-up comedy, and fails miserably. In need of cash to support his family, he agrees to help a group of criminals get through the chemical plant in order to rob a playing card company next to it. While he is planning the caper, police inform him that his wife was killed in a freak household accident. The engineer tries to back out, but the criminals force him to proceed with the plan. During the robbery, the criminals are killed by police, while the engineer runs into Batman. He tries to flee, and jumps into a vat of chemicals to escape. He is swept outside through a pipe, and discovers that the chemicals have permanently made his skin chalk-white and his hair green. This mutilation and the loss of his family drive him insane, leading him to become the Joker, the sadistic villain who looks more like a harmless clown. The bad day that creates the Joker is comparable to Bruce Wayne's, who as a helpless child, sees his parents being murdered by a mugger, and undertakes the path of becoming the Batman, whose vampiric appearance and brutal methods sets him far apart from the conventional hero. As personalities shaped by the bad day, Batman and the Joker illustrate how conspirational artists do not fit into the cultural labels of hero and villain.

Throughout *The Killing Joke*, the Joker dubiously reflects upon his past as he attempts to ruin the life of Gotham City's conventional hero, Commissioner Gordon. Batman is unable to find the Joker, until he is sent an invitation to an abandoned amusement park where he has taken the kidnapped commissioner. Gordon is caged and ridiculed as "the average man" for whom insanity is inevitable "in today's harsh and irrational world."[60] The ridicule that the Joker inflicts upon Gordon is a projection of how he sees himself. Batman arrives and frees the commissioner, and the Joker flees into the funhouse. Gordon is traumatized by the Joker's machinations, but insists that Batman capture Joker "by the book" to "show him that our way works."[61] The Joker

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[60] Alan Moore, Brian Bolland, and John Higgins, *Batman: The Killing Joke* (New York, NY: DC Comics, 1988), 33.
[61] Alan Moore, *Batman: The Killing Joke*, 37.

taunts Batman as he avoids traps, insisting "all it takes is one bad day to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy."[62] He even suggests that he and Batman are similar, because they are both the victims of one bad day. The Joker gradually reveals his *clown-nihilism* when he pleads to Batman, "It's all a joke! Everything anybody ever valued or struggled for…it's all a monstrous, demented gag! So why can't you see the funny side? Why aren't you laughing?"[63] Batman counters that Gordon is still sane, replying, "maybe ordinary people don't always crack. Maybe there isn't a need to crawl under a rock with all the other slimey [*sic*] things when trouble hits…maybe it was just you, all the time."[64] Batman and the Joker represent dueling impulses of conspirational artistry. Batman's grave duty to justice and reason balances the Joker's merry weaponization of randomness. As Batman matches wits and fists with the Joker in the funhouse, their sparring partnership generates a modern illustration of the Heraclitan ideal of grave-merriness that evinces the conspirational way to play serious and seriously play.

After their gruesome brawl, Batman corners the Joker outside of the funhouse. The Joker pulls out a gun and fires, but the comical "Bang" flag comes out. He tells Batman to get it over with, beat him up, and "get a standing ovation."[65] Here, the Joker continues to mock the cultural categories of hero and villain, acknowledging that he and Batman live outside of them, even if Batman tries to operate by Commissioner Gordon's heroic "book." Surprisingly, Batman appeals to the book and to the Joker, offering to help him. He explains that they are on a course toward killing each other one day, and that he doesn't want that. Acting against his brutal reputation, he begs the Joker to take his offer for help. The Joker also acts against his usual character, and somberly admits that it's too late for him, yet tells the "killing joke" as his explanation:

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62 Alan Moore, *Batman: The Killing Joke*, 38.
63 Alan Moore, *Batman: The Killing Joke*, 39.
64 Alan Moore, *Batman: The Killing Joke*, 41.
65 Alan Moore, *Batman: The Killing Joke*, 43.

See, there were these two guys in a lunatic asylum...one night they decide they don't like living in an asylum [anymore]. They decide they're going to escape! So…they get up onto the roof and there, just across this narrow gap, they see the rooftops of the town, stretching away in the moonlight...stretching away to freedom. Now, the first guy, he jumps right across with no problem. But his friend, his friend daren't make the leap. Y'see...he's afraid of falling. So then, the first guy has an idea...He says 'Hey! I have my flashlight with me! I'll shine it across the gap between the buildings. You can walk along the beam and join me!' B-but the second guy just shakes his head. He suh-says... 'What do you think I am? Crazy? You'd turn it off when I was half way across!'[66]

The Joker wildly laughs at his own joke, as expected. But surprisingly, Batman joins him! The two foes laugh and clutch each together as the police arrive. This ending left some readers thinking that Batman killed the Joker off-panel,[67] while others believe that the joke "killed" Batman and Joker's chances of finding peace with each other.[68] While these are valid conclusions, these approaches tend to overemphasize the "killing" to the detriment of noticing how its seriousness is paired with the meaning of the "joke's" non-seriousness. The mode of joking allows seriousness to be expressed non-seriously, and thus, connects to the mode of play, which brings together the stable structures of reason with the new patterns of randomness. This pairing also corresponds to the combat in which the deadly serious Batman is entangled with the unpredictably non-serious Joker. Though they risk death, the radical sparring partnership of Batman and the Joker illustrates how conspirational artistry expands identity and relationships beyond the confinement of heroic and villainous labels. This expansion occurs in the interreligious *playce* that allows enrichment and diminishment in breathing with differing others.

When audiences "get" the killing joke, they see its serious message given in a non-serious way – the inevitability of becoming conspirational artists who play past the labels of

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[66] Alan Moore, *Batman: The Killing Joke*, 45.
[67] Kevin Melrose, "Batman Kills The Joker…That's Why it's Called 'The Killing Joke,'" *CBR*, August 16, 2013, https://tinyurl.com/sab9jzuy.
[68] Scott Johnson, "The Killing Joke Script Proves Batman Didn't Kill The Joker," *Comicbook.com*, September 6, 2017, https://tinyurl.com/m458mudt.

heroism and villainy. The joke is about two men who each had one bad day – Batman's parents were killed by a mugger, and the Joker lost his family and sanity while being forced to commit a crime. The bad day is the harsh, irrational tragedy that obscures the vision of life as benevolent and meaningful for the average person, such as Commissioner Gordon. The one bad day entraps the two men in a space that confines them in this tragically irrational understanding of existence – the lunatic asylum. The Joker frames himself and Batman as trying to escape this hopeless, tragedy-defined space, albeit in hilariously different ways. One man becomes a bat in his dedication to protect the innocent, while the other man becomes a clown in his devotion to prove that no one's existence is innocent, but rather, an awful gag. The asylum tries to be the stable structure that holds these men, but they stand on the roof, defying the reasonable cultural categories of hero and villain. One man easily jumps from the asylum roof to another building, but the other man is afraid to take the leap. The cultural expectation is that when one gets out of the asylum, that person is "sane" – that is, a reasonable person that is categorizable as either hero or villain. Yet, the joke mocks society's labels as unstable and inadequate; the successful jumper trying to make a path for the scared man by shining a flashlight over the gap means that he is irrational by cultural standards, even though he is outside of the asylum. Humorously, the man who is left behind is also irrational, but apparently not "crazy" enough to follow a "crazy" path to freedom. Funnier still, the scared man's problem is not the impossibility of walking on a beam of light, but the possibility of the other man pulling the cruel prank of shutting the flashlight off when he is halfway across, thus betraying his hope, and causing him to plummet to his death – hence, a *killing* joke. This killing joke characterizes the nature of the "offer" that Batman and the Joker make to each other in their sparring partnership, which causes both of them to laugh together. The Joker laughs as the man left behind, because he realizes that Batman's offer is too

crazy even for him, a man who plunges himself and others into madness. Batman laughs as the man who offers a beam of light to walk across, because he realizes the Joker's fear is more reasonable than his hope to save the victims of the harshly irrational world. This killing joke and its unsettling laughter captures how the sparring partnership of Batman and the Joker brings these violently opposed personalities together through a movement beyond cultural labels. Batman's brand of justice must move beyond the cultural label of heroism – the social sanction and moral order that Commissioner Gordon represents – because that is what it takes to engage someone like the Joker, who discards the culture labels of villainy and embraces madness, in order to deal with the harshly irrational world. Overall, *The Killing Joke* captures the inevitability of becoming something beyond a cultural hero or villain, as a way of needing to learn how to engage the irrational aspects of existence without losing one's stability in reason. Not fully heroes or villains, conspirational artists are the sparring partners who push against the rigid reasonableness of another person's context to make room to include the irrational aspects of interreligious relationality. Overall, sparring partners challenge each other to become more than what their context dictates, as illustrated in "The Animals in the Pit" and *The Killing Joke*. This layer of conspirational artistry allows the *jeongian* connectedness of the friend and the *Ubuntian* collisions of the storyteller to escape the dictates of rigid spatiality and cultural labels, in finding ways for differing others to breathe together in enriching and diminishing relationalities.

D. *Ocean's Thirteen*: Breathing Together as the Partner in Crime

When Mboti frames *Ubuntu* as *tertium quid*, Joh describes *jeong's* Third Space, Afanasyev wonders about surviving the Pit, and Moore banters about *The Killing Joke*'s beam of light, each author is talking about play, with their own versions of players and their own concepts

of playgrounds. This play stretches and unfolds the enclosure of a space unto the *playce* that makes room to have one's being with differing others. The conspirational artist situates the life of faith in this breathing with a differing other, and plays out the meaning of this shared existence through storytelling, friendships, and sparring partnerships. As a playful identity, the conspirational artist escapes "dead" serious enclosures and categories of hero or villain. As such, conspirational artists can act as good guys, even when culturally defined as the bad guys. Further, they can identify as bad guys (the liars, unrighteous, and sinners of Romans 3) who act as good guys. This spatial and cultural agility describes how conspirational artists beat confidence artists at their own game, by becoming playful "con men" who let their story be unable to exhaust the meaning of God, so that God can continually show Godself to be true, for the good of others and for God's glory. The notion that it takes a con(spirational artist) to beat a con(fidence artist) encourages Christians when the villainous aspects of Christian history attract more attention than the heroic Christian contributions to the world. By being the con artists who share God's expansion of possibilities and multiplied kinds of good with differing others, Christian conspirational artists unravel the spaces of confidence artistry which gather people together only to consume them as fuel for self-serving agendas or to conscript them into defending fake narratives of unfalsifiable heroism or inescapable shaming. As "partners in crime," conspirational artists acknowledge a societal label of villain, but do not let this label fully define them or prevent them from finding ways to be with a differing person of faith, even in the midst of their frustrating differences. This abstract notion is clearly depicted in the camaraderie of the con men in *Ocean's Thirteen*, whose casino heist – traditionally assumed to be a villainous process – surprisingly produces good results in convincingly cool ways.

Ocean's Thirteen features Danny Ocean and his diverse crew of con men as they embark on a heist-like scheme to avenge their friend and colleague, Reuben Tishkoff, who was conned by the wealthy investor, Willy Banks. The film's opening scene shows Reuben investing in a new hotel-casino with Banks. However, Reuben gradually learns that Banks double-crossed him. He protests, "There's a code amongst guys who shook [Frank] Sinatra's hand" only for Banks to scoff, "*screw* Sinatra's hand!"[69] A distraught Reuben is strong-armed into signing over his ownership rights by Banks's thugs. This causes Reuben to have a heart attack, which leaves him bedridden, in the care of the Ocean crew. Ocean diplomatically confronts Banks out of respect for the fact that he shook Sinatra's hand, and tries to convince him to make things right, only to be refused. This drives the Ocean crew to plan the heist that will ruin Banks.

The importance attached to shaking Sinatra's hand depicts partnership in crime as a positive form of honor among thieves. This is a code of conduct in which people who are labelled as criminal and corrupt share their own form of morality and ethics so that they do not harm one another. *ScreenFish* writer Mark Sommer, noting the nod to Sinatra's starring role in the original *Ocean's Eleven* (1960), frames the concept of shaking Sinatra's hand as a voluntary, humanizing loyalty. Sommer explains, "Sinatra was known as a celebrity who did not look down on people and genuinely cared about them. He wasn't like…Willie Bank, merely using people to get ahead."[70] Sommer's framing of Bank's disregard for people resonates with the practices of confidence artists. Further, Sommers describes a Christological dimension in this gesture, despite its implicit criminality. He writes, "Sinatra was jaded toward organized religion, but he seems to have a good grasp on how Jesus taught us to treat our fellow human beings. The rumors about

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[69] Steven Soderbergh et al., *Ocean's Thirteen* (United States: Warner Bros. Pictures, 2007).
[70] Mark Sommer, "Ocean's Thirteen: Shaking Sinatra's Hand," *ScreenFish*, June 7, 2018. https://tinyurl.com/46kd4e8j.

his relationship with organized crime persist, [but] I have the impression if he was your friend, he would be the most loyal friend you could have."[71] Sommer holds a charitable view of Sinatra to be sure, but he opens a way for considering how Ocean's crew embodies the partner in crime. This partnership is a loyalty to the humanity of another human being in lived experience, regardless of ever-shifting social narratives which label some as heroes and others as villains.

The loyalty of the Ocean crew to Reuben and to each other forms the heart of the movie. The crew is an impressive assemblage of people from different ethnicities, countries, ages, specialties, professions, and religious backgrounds. Much of the film's charm comes from watching this crew construct surprising relationships, build impressive schemes, and accomplish amazing feats together, despite their real and often-humorous differences. Each member enables the others to accomplish their particular parts of the scheme to avenge Reuben. This relationality provides everyone with a sense of belonging and real purpose on their own terms, according to who they are as (con) men, and not according to an imposed cultural label.

Everyone involved in Ocean's two-part heist keeps each other going with continual creativity and label-defying generosity, as they use their con artistry for a good cause. Danny Ocean brilliantly lays out the plan and keeps everyone together. Rusty Ryan, Danny's right-hand man, makes sure everyone understands and plays out the plan successfully. The Mormon brothers Virgil and Turk Malloy sneak into a dice-making factory in Mexico to sabotage the die used in Banks' casino-hotel, which leads to the factory workers successfully revolting against their exploitative bosses. The anxiety-ridden tech expert Livingston Dell finds encouragement and assistance from the crew in figuring out how to rig Banks' card shuffling machines. The British munitions expert Basher Tarr procures a gigantic underground drill to simulate the

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[71] Sommer, "Ocean's Thirteen: Shaking Sinatra's Hand."

210

earthquake that will briefly disable the security system in Banks' casino-hotel, thanks to funding

from their one-time enemy and ruthless casino owner, Terry Benedict. The oldest member of the

crew – master impersonator Saul Bloom – pretends to be a hotel reviewer who distracts Bank,

allowing the crew to make life miserable for the real reviewer, who gives the casino-hotel a

horrible rating. Saul's charade is instructive for the crew's youngest member, Linus Caldwell.

Linus teams up with the Chinese acrobat Yen to impersonate an interpreter and his rich boss, to

distract Bank's assistant during the heist. The experienced card dealer Frank Catton hosts the

games during the opening night in Bank's casino-hotel, in order to ensure that the games are

rigged so that the people win constantly, which amounts to a winnings payout of $500 million.

Each partner in crime plays a crucial part in the heist that forces Bank to give up his control of

the casino-hotel, which reverses the con he inflicted on Reuben. More importantly, Ocean's crew

uses their portion of the winnings to buy property for Reuben to build his own casino. Further,

the crew managed to trick their enemy, Benedict, into donating his $72 million take of the heist

to charity. Even more generous, Rusty recompenses the suffering of the real hotel reviewer, by

rigging the airport slot machine he plays at the movie's end to reward him with $11 million.

Ocean's Thirteen is obviously a fictional heist movie. Yet, its assemblage of unique personalities

allows audiences to consider the coolness of the conspirational artistry that not only lets

Christians do heroic things when surrounding cultures consider them to be the "villains," but also

enables Christians and differing people of faith to "have their being" together, resulting in the

building of ideas and accomplishing of feats, for the common good and for the glory of God.

  When conspirational artists are known as partners in crime, they are operating as agents

of what Brian McLaren calls "alternative orthodoxy."[72] McLaren sees this as a "siding" with the

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[72] McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, 29, 33.

"mystical/poetic wings of Christian tradition," which "may put [one] in tension with sectors of the scholastic and priestly wings" who "presume to be the sole proprietors of orthodoxy and pronounce those who differ as heretics."[73] Yet, McLaren sees this move as the way to follow Jesus. Referring to Jesus's Temple protest in John 2, McLaren insists, "if Jesus dared to side with the [mystical/prophetic] tradition and suffer the wrath of the scholastic/priestly establishment, shouldn't his followers do the same when necessary?"[74] McLaren anticipates the villain label not only from outside the church, but also from within. Thus, he turns to Franciscan priest and spirituality writer Richard Rohr, who describes alternative orthodoxy as a label-defying "practice of paying attention to different things (nature, the poor, humility, itinerancy, the outsider, mendicancy, and mission instead of shoring up home base and 'churchiness')."[75] As conspirational artistry, this is the continual playing out of the religious identity that pays attention to and breathes with the differing religious other, beyond how one is known the church, as the way to expand the church identity without discarding it. Conspirational artistry is the way that Christians keep going in the life of faith, even when they are in tension with their scholarly and priestly traditions. This way to keep going is not confined to Christianity. Having learned from Jesus's contest with the priestly/scholarly traditions of Judaism, conspirational artists can invite and challenge the people of all faiths to keep going, even when the priests and scholars of their faiths try to stop them with the threat of "villain" labels.

Conspirational artistry does not denounce the priestly/scholarly tradition. Rather, it re-affirms that we do not grasp God, because God is ever-recognizable, and thus, God grasps us in the continual learning of God, as God teaches God, beyond confinement to tradition. Thus, all

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[73] McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, 29.
[74] McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration,* 29. McLaren cites Matthew 23.
[75] McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration,* 29. McLaren cites Richard Rohr, *Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi* (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2014), 52–53, 81, 86–87.

people of faith are invited and challenged to keep going toward God, through the stable structures of religion, and unto the unpredictably new patterns of revelation. This stretching toward God is grounded in priestly/scholarly tradition, yet continually expands outwards through the continual building of ideas and practices inspired by the presence of the ever-learnable God, which carry the differing people of faith out of their home contexts, and unto contact with one another. McLaren hints at this idea of continual building by quoting futurist architect Buckminster Fuller, who says "You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."[76] Fuller's insight resonates with the nature of the Ocean crew, which is a conspiracy of con men that re-purposed the nature of the conspiracy and con artistry not to scam others, but to achieve good, in cool ways. This continual building of new relationalities and concepts unravels the dehumanizing conspiracy theories and capricious confidence artists that tear things down. As storytellers who prevent one story from exhausting the entirety of faith, friends who embrace vulnerability and messiness, and sparring partners who push against the confinement of space, these partners in crime devote themselves to keep creating thoughts, words, and relationships for all people of faith to continually express the ever-learnable God, as a shared living out of God's ungraspability, despite cultural and religious labels. In this continual "re-creation," people of faith learn that they are grasped by God, in the game that keeps each faith going forever!

III. The Four Conspirational Practices of Contestant Theology

The global and cultural models which illustrate conspirational artistry as storytelling, friendship, sparring partnership, and partnership in crime also frame the discussion of how

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[76] McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, 29.

bewilderment, humiliation, un-limiting, and re-creation outmaneuver the dialogical problems of the interreligious encounter. These grave dialogical problems are *die-logic*; religious inarticulation, non-persuasiveness, violence, and social fragmentation wither the life and possibilities of interreligious relationality in all-too-reasonable ways. The major theologies of religions offer interreligious ideals of reformation, mutual diminishment, transformative enrichment, and unifying freedom which are buried in the "dead" seriousness of *die-logic.* Yet, play theology unearths these ideals in the *theovival* of theograffiti, theogility, theoreography, and theality – the powerful aliveness of play in everyday living. This aliveness frames the conspirational orthodoxy of *as if-ing*, *what is-ing*, and *what could be-ing* to playfully multidimensionalize the dialogically problematic real world. Conspirational artists create *playces* to breathe together for differing people of faith. Hence, conspirational artistry is *playtonic*, advancing a mode of a ludic (*play*) healing (*tonic*) that is evident in the Ocean crew's care for Reuben, Pope Francis's social poetry, and Evelyn Quan's disarming of nihilist opponents. These instances are examples of *playing to* the powerful aliveness in God's creatively expanded boundaries of possibilities and generously multiplied kinds of good. *Playtonism* unravels the laborious *die-logic* of conspiracy theories and confidence artistry which enslave the Aristotelian-Platonic impulse to be useful to their self-serving agendas. The next section describes four ways in which conspirational artists *playtonically* weave together playful movements with interreligious ideals. *Playtonism* pulls together the people of differing faiths as contestants – those grasped in the game granted by God's generously unlimited paradigm to think, live, and speak out God's ever-learnability and ever-unfolding paradise. When pulled by God's grasp, the dialogic is not the *die-logic* of "dead" seriousness, but the logic of the *die* (pair of dice), and even *Paradise,* the harmony of randomness and reason, in the game we want to play forever.

A. Bewilderment

Ubuntian storytelling frames the practice of bewilderment, which is when the people of differing faiths share the recognition of God's ungraspability, as those who are grasped by God. Bewilderment is playing in the upward pull of the ever-stupefying God, Who rises in the heavenly heights. Rather than beginning the interreligious encounter with statements which attempt to exhaustively define God, bewilderment puts a question into play: *how does God teach us that we do not grasp God, through God's own ungraspability?* This bewildering question allows people of faith to not have the full understanding of the divine revelation that holds their deep devotion. This allowance makes room for differing people to talk with each other about our shared recognitions that we have dedicated our highest possible thoughts and practices to God, *even though we have not seen, do not understand, cannot explain, and will not fully describe God!* Sure, there will always be those who say that they have "seen" God in some special way. The "specialness" of their vision is valid and valuable, even when learning that God is beyond that vision. Bewilderment affirms that the highest beliefs and deepest devotions do not produce the existence of God – only God does this, whether one affirms or denies God's existence. Thus, bewilderment's allowance of this shared inability to grasp God offers a dialogical connection point between communities of faith and those who do not believe in God.

Bewilderment does not confine God's ungraspability to a gravely negative concept; it also allows the different ways of finding out that God always has something new to teach about Godself. Dialogically, bewilderment draws from God's ungraspability that is experienced in every faith, to contribute thoughts, experiences, and words that differing people of faith can use to talk with each other. This dialogical content is crucial, especially as the grounding in a

singular tradition threatens to confine a person to beliefs and practices which lead away from dialogical relationality with differing others. These bewildering words make room to render the inability to grasp God as something more, by holding lightly the inability to grasp God as the starting point for continually articulating faith. In *playces* of bewildering words – the *bewilderness* – God continually teaches new ways to recognize God to those who have been grasped with the realization that they cannot grasp God with their singular traditions. The bewilderness offers common ground for the differing thoughts, experiences, and language for God, in which differing people find themselves relating to each other in realizing that one's deepest and highest expressions for God does not fully exhaust God. Further, conveying this inability to exhaust God is a continual unfolding of new and unpredictable expressions within the stable structures of theology and religion. Hence, bewilderment is theological and religious play. These playful and unpredictable expressions – *stories* – contribute everyday relational language for expressing the revelatory thought-world that is grounded in religion, yet overflows institutional structures. In stories, bewilderment outplays inarticulation as theograffiti that generates the thoughts, occasions, and language which enables differing people to express God's ungraspability together. Bewilderment moves the interreligious encounter out of the "dead" seriousness of trying to fully explain God to a differing person of faith, by playing out the non-serious aisthesis of not being able to say enough about the revelatory content of one's life of faith. In this game of expressing the inexpressible – God's ungraspability – these stories of faith totally turn on the senses. Theograffiti's aisthesis inspires the continual reform of one's faith, by pulling the stable structures of religion upward, toward the new patterns of paradisical revelation that are recognized in earthly expressions. *Playtonically*, bewilderment playfully heals people of faith from the compulsion to dominate one another as religious experts, offering instead the

opportunity to be a deeply relatable fellow beginner in continually articulating God's revelation. Conspirational artists practice bewilderment when their stories bring the people of differing faiths together to appreciate, celebrate, and articulate the *agonian* experience of God teaching us that we do not grasp God. Bewilderment's consuming nature sets people of faith at home in the bewilderness – the pinballing zone of collisions and crossovers where the differing people of faith both cooperate with and contest each other's different concepts of God, because no singular story is held to exhaust the meaning and nature of God.

It is fitting that this play of the religious stories begins in the bewilderness, considering that many religions originated in the different forms of wilderness. Hinduism emerged in the Indus Valley. Buddhism began beyond the walls of Gautama's palace. Judaism developed in the unfamiliar *yeshimon*. Islam was born in the seclusion of Mount Hira. Sikhism surfaced in the Kali Bein (Black River). It is particularly fitting for Christians to begin their interreligious encounter in this bewilderness, because it positions them to be grasped in the surprising ways that God grasped the early followers of Christ, beyond their religiously and culturally intrenched conceptions of God. Following the bewilderment that Peter and Paul share with their religious others, Christians tell their stories of being grasped by God's ungraspability, which opens the playground for having their being with differing religious playmates who also do not grasp God.

B. Humiliation

If bewilderment is the pairing of non-seriousness and seriousness that draws people together in the *playce* of continually thinking, living, and talking out the inability to grasp God, then humiliation is the pairing of non-seriousness and seriousness that bonds people together in this *playce* with a "sticky" inadequacy. Humiliation is playing in the downward pull of the ever-

217

intimate God, Who plunges into the depths of a person. *Jeongian* friendships frame this practice of humiliation, which is when the people of differing faiths share the embarrassment of failing to fully understand and explain God. Instead of trying to sustain the interreligious encounter by striving to describe one's faith in the way that will finally persuade differing others of its infallible rightness, humiliation puts a question into play: *how does God teach us that we do not grasp God, through the presence of the differing other?* Dialogically, when persuasive religious language is lacking in the interreligious encounter, the thoughts, experiences, and words about our religious and theological shortcomings are able to fill in the absence of dialogue and make room to learn God's ungraspability in a human connectedness of voluntary vulnerability and porousness with differing others. This vulnerable and porous connectedness expresses how being grasped by the God we cannot grasp takes something from us, through the presence of others in the interreligious encounter. God's grasp causes us to lose our grip upon the dialogue-deadening and relationship-withering confidence in personal and singular conceptions of God and the religious other. Just as *jeong* softens the heart of stone into the heart of flesh, humiliation opens the clenched fist of those in the interreligious encounter, by placing all hands in the honey jar, to share the mutual diminishment of vulnerability and lack in the ungraspable God's sticky grasp.

The practice of humiliation renders everyone in the interreligious encounter as vulnerable and lacking something in their life of faith. This practice embraces embarrassment without endorsing capriciously shaming another person of faith for having differing beliefs and practices. Rather, humiliation expresses the vulnerability and lack in others and ourselves to grant language that allows differing others to talk with each other as fellow human beings, and not as subjects to conquer or problems to solve with the perfectly persuasive argument. It is tempting to think that *humility* is better suited for interreligiosity. Yet, humility contributes to non-persuasiveness, by

allowing people to excuse themselves from interreligious dialogue by considering themselves as unqualified for engaging a differing person. Such excuses conveniently mask a disinterest or dismissal of interreligiosity with a façade of modesty. Meanwhile, humiliation is having one's being with the differing religious other as one really is and as they really are. This connectedness gets at how McLaren describes messy contact with messy people as "the way of annoyance, frustration, disappointment, unkindness, need, conflict, humiliation, opposition, and exhaustion"[77] in human life. Simply put, humiliation says, *your life of faith is messy, my life of faith is messy, so let's share our messy stories – as friends!*

Humiliation is emptying one's religious identity in the interreligious encounter, for the sake of multidimensionalizing one's own view of another's humanity and one's own recognition of the presence of God. This self-emptying offers a common ground for the differing thoughts, experiences, and language for God, in which one person of faith finds that they are just as embarrassingly vulnerable in the grip of God's ungraspability as differing others. Conveying this vulnerability involves a continual unfolding of new and unpredictable connections within the stable structures of theology and religion. Thus, humiliation is theological and religious play. These playfully unpredictable connections – *friendships* – contribute everyday, relational language for expressing the revelatory spirituality that is grounded in religion, yet overflows institutional structures. In friendships, humiliation outplays non-persuasiveness as theogility that generates the thoughts, occasions, and language which enables differing people to experience God's ungraspability together. Humiliation moves the interreligious encounter out of the "dead" seriousness of trying to persuade another person of faith to accept one's own version of God, by playing out the non-serious poiesis of playfully emptying one's human faith into the lack of

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[77] McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, 185.

another's human faith. In this game of humanizing God's ungraspability, these friendships of faith quicken the sense of meaning through the playful shedding of a singular personality to identify with something other than oneself. Theogility's poiesis inspires continual "becoming less" with another, by pulling the stable structures of religion downward, toward the new patterns of paradisical revelation that are recognized in the connections with religious others. *Playtonically*, humiliation playfully heals people of faith from the compulsion to win people over to a singular conception of God, offering instead the allowance and empathy of being vulnerable and lacking in one's life of faith. Conspirational artists practice humiliation when their friendships bring people together to appreciate, celebrate, and articulate the *mimetic* experiences of God teaching us that we do not grasp God, through the presence of the differing person. Humiliation's vicarious nature is less about a dialogue that grants the power of correction to those with the most persuasive arguments, and more about movements which creatively cultivate generous human connections. This connectedness follows how Rohr discerns the message of the cross as a generously interstitial salvation: "all our warts [are] included and forgiven by an Infinite Love…We are all saved in spite of our mistakes and in spite of ourselves."[78] Embracing this humiliation that knocked Peter off of his rooftop and Paul off of his horse, Christians form friendships as those who share the experience of being grasped by God's ungraspability, adhering them to religious playmates in the playground of not grasping God.

C. Un-limiting

Bewilderment and humiliation pair the non-seriousness and seriousness of not grasping God to generate expressions from the playful Christian thought-world and connections from

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[78] Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe* (New York: Convergent, 2019), 166.

playful Christian spirituality. These playful expressions and connections continually keep the interreligious encounter going with the language of stories and friendships, when inarticulation and non-persuasiveness deaden dialogue. The upward play of bewilderment and the downward play of humiliation form two poles of vertical play. Play's "y-axis" stretches interreligiosity out of the "dead" seriousness of expressing the inexpressible, and unto the powerful aliveness of telling pinballing stories of faith and embracing others with self-transcending friendships. Meanwhile, un-limiting and re-creation pair the non-seriousness and seriousness of continually learning God to generate collisions from playful Christian relationality and constructions from playful Christian epistemology. These playful collisions and constructions keep the interreligious encounter going with the language of sparring and partnerships in crime, when violence and fragmentation deaden dialogue. The leftward play of un-limiting and the rightward play of re-creation form two poles of horizontal play. Play's "x-axis" stretches interreligiosity out of the "dead" seriousness of solving the unsolvable, and unto the powerful aliveness of pushing out of contextual confinement and continually building new models of faith and practice.

Sparring partnerships frame the practice of un-limiting, which is when the people of differing faiths share the learning of God's ungraspability. Un-limiting is playing in the leftward pull of the ever-directional God, Who extends into the other's context. Rather than confining the meaning of the interreligious encounter to a singular context that dominates all others, un-limiting puts a question into play: *what does being grasped by the ungraspable God compel us to add into the lives of differing others?* Dialogically, un-limiting redirects the interreligious language that attempts to minimize or rationalize the destructive quantum of violence in the interreligious encounter into thoughts, occasions, and words which emphasize the primal energy of relationality. The language of sparring and rivalry turns enemies into friendly rivals; it holds

lightly the quantum of force for relationality, rather than grasping force for subjugation, or abandoning force due to fear of competition. This constructive quantum of force makes room to express how being grasped by the ungraspable God makes us more than our contextual selves, through the presence of differing others in the interreligious encounter. God's grasp compels us to commit our human presence to the life of another to make them more than they are in their singular context. This commitment involves force, because human selflessness is limited to the single "energy economy" of relationality that enables both love and harm.[79] Thus, adding ourselves to another's life involves one's deepest and truest self, as it pushes against the other's deepest and truest self. The intent is not to harm, but rather, to pull differing others out of their confinement to their singular context that is resistant to the interreligious movement of learning of God's ungraspability. In "something-moring" one's religious playmate, un-limiting shares the transformative enrichment of rivalry and difference within the ungraspable God's grasp.

Complementing humiliation's shared self-emptying, un-limiting fills the interreligious encounter with one's deepest and truest religious self, in order to multidimensionalize how one is viewed by the other and how the other recognizes God. This filling-with-the-self is less about transferring the self into the life of another person, and more about "full-filling" a religious playmate with the love of God that extends beyond the Christian context, as well as being "full-filled" with the love of God that extends beyond the contexts of different religions. This full-filling offers common ground for the differing thoughts, experiences, and languages for God, in which differing people share experiences of "something-moreness" in the grip of God's ungraspability. Conveying this "something-moreness" involves a continual unfolding of new and unpredictable collisions within the stable structures of theology and religion. Thus, un-limiting is

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[79] Juan Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology* (Oregon: Orbis Books, 1976), 157.

theological and religious play. These playfully unpredictable collisions – *sparring* – contribute everyday, relational language for expressing the revelatory relationality that is grounded in religion, yet overflows institutional structures. In sparring, un-limiting outplays violence as theoreography that generates the thoughts, occasions, and language which enable differing people to continually learn God together. Un-limiting pushes the interreligious encounter out of the "dead" seriousness of burying or rationalizing a history of religious harm, by playing out the non-serious metamorphōsis of playfully adding one's religious self into a differing person's life of faith. In this game of extending God's ungraspability, these collisions of faith discover the meaning of revelation in the dynamism of the "in-between" shared by differing people of faith, more than in the consolidated meaning of separate and static concepts. Theoreography's metamorphōsis inspires the continual moves of "becoming more" with another, by pushing the stable structures of religion leftward, toward the new patterns of paradisical revelation that are recognized in the collisions with religious others. *Playtonically*, un-limiting playfully heals people of faith from the impulse to repel the differing other by destructive force, offering instead one's human presence in rivalry to re-direct of the quantum of force into the primal, constructive energy of relationality. Conspirational artists un-limit when their sparring partnerships bring people together to appreciate, celebrate, and articulate the *alean* experiences of continually learning God, by adding one's faith to the shared pointing to God and creating the conditions for all people of faith to equally risk playing out their religious destinies. Un-limiting happens as Peter and Cornelius push each other out of their traditional contexts and when the Risen Christ pushes Saul out of zealous Pharisaism. Christians follow this path by sparring with those who continually learn God, moving with religious playmates in the playground of not grasping God.

D. Re-creation

Ocean Thirteen's partnerships in crime frame re-creation, which conveys how differing people build the life of being gripped by God's ungraspability together. Re-creation is playing in the rightward pull of the ever-knowable God, Who continually makes room for Godself to be continually known in continual creativity and label-defying generosity. Instead of settling for the differing religions coexisting as a collection of fenced-off zones which safeguard their individual religious identities, re-creation puts a question into play: *how does being grasped by the ungraspable God keep faith going for all people?* Dialogically, when social fragmentation deadens the language of interreligious connection, the thoughts, experiences, and words about sharing religious destinies sustains the dialogue. This dialogical content makes room to share the learning of God's ungraspability in the letting-go of one's control of all of the manifold religious destinies, and the letting-be of differing people freely and fully aspiring to their own religious ends with others doing the same. This letting-be is less about letting people do their own thing, and more about constructing a shared, continually unfolding religious destiny with the ideas, opportunities, and languages that keep every person going through confusion, conflict, failure, suffering, death, and darkness. Similar to the Ocean crew, re-creation assembles interreligious personalities with the surprisingly relational building of ideas and label-defying shared feats, in the conspiracy to keep each other going.

Re-creation does not interpret the singular "Kingdom," multifaceted "City," and manifold "Mountains" as settled eschatological destinations. Rather, re-creation understands all religious destinies as the *everness* which involve play's randomness of continually (*re-*) building (*creation*) new patterns, new forms, and new rules with religious playmates in the human way of continually recognizing the ever-living God and ever-livable Paradise. As a playful take on

recreation, re-creation extends the religious "end" into religious continuing – not the game over, but the new game. Re-creation is a "keeping-going" into and through paradise in a way of helping and being helped by religious playmate to ever-build, ever-move, and ever-talk toward God, even with human limitations. Re-creational building is corrected by God, honorable to God, and committed to the common good. This building does not construct the Tower of Babel that attempts to grasp God, but rather, the *Jenga* stacks which embody the playful aliveness of resting in God's good and creative grasp. Both structures inevitably collapse. Yet, the *Jenga* stack survives, because it is the game of continually and competitively balancing new patterns on an increasingly unstable foundation with friendly rivals. After building the *Jenga* stack, players take turns removing blocks from the lower levels and placing them on the top of the tower. This gradually weakens the stability of the stack, and leads to an eventual collapse. *Jenga* never takes the collapse too seriously, as it inevitably and enjoyably calls players to continually start over and keep going, in both playing with and trying to build higher than each other. Re-creation applies the *Jenga* experience to interreligiosity, as a practice that aspires to keep going toward God with religious playmates, cooperatively and competitively, through risk and setbacks. Re-creation also embraces *Jenga*'s African origin and etymology, as the Ghanaian game of *kujenga* (the Swahili verb, "to construct"). This insight reveals an enjoyable interplay of African play concepts which bookend the sequence of the conspirational practices of contestant theology from bewilderness to everness. *Ubuntian* bewilderment begins the interreligious encounter as a *playce* for playing out *jeongian* humiliation and sparring un-limiting*,* and *kujengaian* re-creation perpetuates this *playce* as a game of continually constructing ideas, opportunities and languages for learning the ungraspable God with religious playmates.

Complementing bewilderment's allowance of not exhausting the meaning and nature of God, re-creation playfully constructs new concepts of God in the interreligious encounter, for the sake of multidimensionalizing every faith's views of humanity and recognitions of God's presence. This construction offers a common ground for the differing thoughts, experiences, and languages for God, as an experience of shared construction that brings differing people of faith together to keep each other going in free, yet shared eschatological destinies. Conveying this unifying freedom involves a continual unfolding of new and unpredictable constructions within the stable structures of theology and religion. Thus, re-creation is theological and religious play. These playful and unpredictable constructions – *partnerships in crime* – contribute everyday, relational language for expressing the revelatory epistemology that is grounded in religion, yet stretches beyond institutional structures. These partnerships outplay social fragmentation as theality that generates the thoughts, occasions, and languages for differing people of faith to continually respond to God's ungraspability together. Re-creation pulls the interreligious encounter out of the "dead" seriousness of safeguarding differing religious identities, by putting into play the non-serious therapeia of sharing everyone's fullest and truest religious experiences and destinies. In this game of letting-be, these constructions of faith discover the meaning of revelation through prisms which allow religions to share vantage points, rather than fences which block one religion's view of another. Theality's therapeia continually unfolds the divine reality that is shared with others, by pulling the stable structures of religion rightward, toward the new directions and patterns of paradisical revelation that are recognized in the constructions with religious playmates. *Playtonically*, re-creation playfully heals people of faith from the need to monopolize all religious destinies, offering instead the powerful aliveness which keeps any faith going through confusion, failure, suffering, and death. Conspirational artists re-create when their

partnerships in crime bring people together to appreciate, celebrate, and articulate the *ilynxian* experiences of continually learning God through the dizzying awareness of an ever-expanding life of faith. Peter and Paul pioneer re-creation with their differing others as they construct new thoughts, occasions, and languages for learning God beyond their pious and zealous Jewish contexts. Christians walk in these footsteps when they are the partners in crime who can continually build toward God with religious playmates, in the playground of not grasping God.

IV. Chapter Summary

The way that *EEAAO's* Evelyn grasps her daughter Joy with transformation and healing coincides with Paul's "And Have Our Being," which makes room for Christians to breathe with differing people as con artists. The "And Have Our Being" of contestant theology sees Christians unravel and re-purpose the confidence artist identity as conspirational artists who follow the Holy Spirit's breathing into the differing religions. Conspirational artistry enables Christians to breathe with differing people, not as polarizing heroes or villains, but as creative and generous storytellers, friends, sparring partners, and partners in crime, who see and deeply play with differing religious others as deeply relatable religious playmates in bewilderment, humiliation, un-limiting, and re-creation. As conspirational artists, Christians show what it means to let God be true as those who do not grasp God, by sharing the identity and experience of being grasped by God with differing others, as traditionally conveyed in the multidimensional interstitiality of Jesus's cross, and as surprisingly portrayed in *EEAAO's* googly eye connectivity.

In the interreligious encounter, conspirational orthodoxy and artistry discovers that we are not experts of God, but rather, we are contestants who are seized by the game that we want to play forever – God's generously unlimited paradigm to think, live, and speak out God's ever-

227

learnability (glory) and ever-unfolding Paradise (goodness). The term *contestant theology* conveys the way for Christians to approach the differing religions with the togetherness of being grasped by God Who grasps us, and the challenge to be the ones who keeps the life of being grasped by the ungraspable God going for all, rather than dominating the religious sphere. In contestant theology, the Christian's goal is to keep this game of faith going (being grasped by God), because God and Paradise keep playing past cultural definitions, institutions, religions, labels of winner/loser and hero/villain, as ever-new and continually recognizable revelation.

Conspirational artistry *playtonically* heals *die-logical* impulses while transforming us into quadri-dimensional "selves"[80] who have their being with playmates in the quadri-directional interreligious *playce* as contestants (Fig. 2). Upward, the bewildering *Oh Self* realizes that one does not have enough information about God to fully label playmates as hero or villain. Downward, the humiliating *No Self* realizes that the best theological accomplishments do not grant unfalsifiable heroism, while the worst theological shortcomings do not warrant inescapable shaming. Leftward, the un-limiting *Co Self* realizes that the labels of hero and villain are too small to describe the expansively relational life of faith. Rightward, the re-creating *Go Self* plays into identities beyond being entirely heroes or villains, as contestants who keep playing in God's expanded boundaries of possibility and multiplied kinds of good, and who keep playing out God's generously unlimited paradigm to see and have one's being with the world and a differing person. Overall, the "Having Our Being"-ness of contestant theology is conspirational artistry that shares the path of Holy Spirit's breath with differing others. Chapter 5 interprets "For We Too Are His Offspring" as contestants playing in the interreligious *playce*, via the ever-directional "controller" of contestant theology that moves with and pulls at differing religions.

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[80] A special thanks to Gwendolen Jackson, who inspired this idea in a reflection about her fourfold sense of "home, habit, fracture, and amazing day" in the 2018 Duquesne University "Theological Methods" doctoral seminar.

CHAPTER 5
"FOR WE TOO ARE GOD'S OFFSPRING": CONTESTANT THEOLOGY ENRICHES AND DIMINISHES OTHER RELIGIONS

The "In God We Live And Move And Have Our Being"-ness of the previous chapters sets the stage for contestant theology's quadri-directional breathing with differing religions and the quadri-dimensional being with differing others. This Christian quadri-life with others is simultaneously being the 1) storytelling *Oh Self* who shares bewilderment, 2) friend-making *No Self* who shares humiliation, 3) sparring *Co Self* who shares un-limiting, and 4) partnering *Go Self* who shares re-creation. The conspirational orthodoxy and artistry of contestant theology follows Jesus and the Holy Spirit through the multidimensional meaning and movement of the cross, to crossover with different religions and collide with differing people in the sharing of God's ungraspability. Paul's "For We Too Are His Offspring" crosses over with the words of Athenian poets, *moving with* them as fellow *genos* – "the aggregate of many individuals of the same sort."[1] Paul's exclamation is also a collision, as he *pulls at* the Athenian understanding of God's offspring, by using their words to describe the distinctive Christian identity.

The biblical narrative of Paul moving with and pulling at Athenian culture frames him as a *contestant*. This term carries multiple layers of meaning, describing one who competes in a game of exhibiting talents (or deficiencies), such as singing, dancing, answering trivia questions, or making one's case clearly with another,[2] "opposing,"[3] and "bringing action."[4] Each of these

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[1] "G1085 - genos - Strong's Greek Lexicon (KJV)." Blue Letter Bible. Accessed November 16, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/4tph3nks.
[2] "Contestant," Vocabulary.com, accessed November 16, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/mv448u7d.
[3] "Contestant." Vocabulary.com derives this layer of meaning from the French root, *contestere*.
[4] "Contestant." Vocabulary.com derives this layer of meaning from the Latin root, *contestari*.

root layers enjoy a conceptual life of their own. Through the lens of play theology, each layer can be unified in a common ground, to describe the one who exhibits talents and deficiencies in ways that both oppose and keep everyone together in the competitiveness of the game. One is a contestant for as long as the game is in play; the game's end determines winners and losers. In the game that does not end, there are only contestants who choose to keep playing through oscillating states of winning and losing. When Paul's Christian exclamation moves with and pulls at the Athenians, it grants a way for both religions to keep playing, in the sense that he grants the Athenians a new way to understand their recognition of God, while also declaring a distinctive Christian recognition of God in Jesus Christ. Paul's moving with Athenian thought and practice enriches their faith. He adopts the words and insights of differing others in a way that expands their legitimacy and scope, showing that they speak to contexts beyond the Areopagus. Yet, Paul's pulling at Athenian religion with the revelation of Jesus Christ diminishes their faith. He adapts the words of differing others to the detriment of their confidence in their singular recognition of God. Paul challenges the Athenians to move beyond their traditional and familiar grounding by acting as a differing other who may be able to do more things with their conception of the divine than they thought possible.

Crucially, Paul is a contestant who moves with (con) and pulls at (tests) Athenian religion, while the Athenians reciprocally move with and pull at him, in their devotion to the unknown God. Paul's contesting frames religion as a reconnection – moving with others in the light of revelation. Paul also embodies religion as a way to pull at others, both as a conception of the divine that "has been tested through a long tradition of worship and sustained human faith over centuries and in millions of lives,"[5] and also as a recognition of God that tests those long

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[5] John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, Ltd., 1993), 141.

traditions of devotion held over many ages and among multitudes of people in diverse places. Thus, to be "religious" is to contest and to be contested. Contestants avoid framing themselves and differing others in the interreligious encounter as dominators or objects to conquer. Rather, being a contestant fosters a playful way of continually being a gift in enrichment and diminishment, in which one's religious identity is continually being unwrapped by the differing other (diminished) to continually discover another "toy" – a deeper layer of one's recognition of God that is only discovered with the religious playmate (enriched). This continual moving with and pulling at is the contest that ensures that no one religion dominates the sphere of faith in the earthly sphere, with the lifestyle of being grasped by the forever-game of thinking, living, and talking out God with another person. Contestants keep the movement of this game going, much like gamers keep the action of video games going with controllers, so that it becomes the play that ever-orients us to the ever-knowable God and ever-unfolding Paradise.

This mode of gaming pairs non-seriousness with seriousness as a way to be rational and non-rational, because God's ever-knowability and Paradise's ever-unfoldability extends beyond the stable structures of religion, unto the unpredictable newness of revelation. The God of the *araphel*, the whirlwind, and the Revelation, in being un-explaining, does more than simply refuse to explain Godself. Rather, God unravels the necessity and effectiveness of a reasonable explanation, because God's presence teaches God, beyond reason's capacity to convey or understand God. Paul, like Moses in the glory cloud, Job in the whirlwind, and John in the Revelation, teaches us to consider how our encounter with God involves being creatively outdone and generously undone by God in experiences of being grasped by God. These experiences look more like bewildering, humiliating, un-limiting, and re-creating, and less like us impressing God with our serious, yet deficient concepts of God. Thus, we can frame the glory

cloud, the whirlwind, and the Revelation not only as serious theophanies, but also as playgrounds in the game of God's presence seizing us into God's generously unlimited paradigm to think, live, and speak out God's ever-learnability (glory) and ever-unfolding Paradise (goodness). These games are creative and generous modes of being in God, in Whom we live, and move, and have our being, less as experts of God, and more as beginners in God. As beginners, we relate more deeply with differing others, because we all find ourselves to be fellow contestants moving with and pulling at each other in this game of conveying what it means to be grasped by the ungraspable God, as we say, "We Too Are God's Offspring."

This chapter makes three moves to present contestant theology as the playful Christian way to move with and pull at religious playmates. First, we envision faith as a spiraling play-vista in which Christianity offers one "controller" with a direction pad (the cross) and action buttons (the ideals of the major theologies of religions) for keeping this playful motion going (Fig. 3). Second, we illustrate playing with this theological game controller for interreligiosity by drawing from well-considered explanations of how Christianity offers contact points with differing others. Hans Küng contributes categories of questions for contesting a religion's capacity for theological mastery and correction. Stephen Prothero contributes a four-part unifying model for contesting a religion's commitment to the human condition. Peter Feldmeier contributes criteria of spiritual maturity for contesting a religion's engagement with differing others. Following Feldmeier, the third move describes contestant theology as the way to move with and pull at religious playmates that outplays interreligious dialogical problems, in terms of pressing the Christian direction pad and action buttons to follow the Spirit into the lives of differing others. The Conclusion summarizes the dissertation, anticipates further contributions and criticisms, and offers future research trajectories for the play theology of religions.

I. The Controller of Contestant Theology Follows the Spirit in Spiraling Faith

Gregory of Nyssa's "eternal progress" that is "both a standing still and a moving"[6]
describes the life of faith shared by Christians and religious playmates, which is grounded in
religion and stretched by revelation. Gregory's still-motion is a spiraling movement whose
grounding in a central origin point is just as meaningful as its outward, non-linear motion that
stretches beyond that point, yet moves around that nucleus. As a continuous still-moving, the
spiral illustrates the togetherness of radical opposites, contributing a movement to envision the
reason-randomness, religion-revelation, and seriousness-non-seriousness. The spiral is the
picture of play, in its depiction of the motion that moves with and pulls at an origin point. When
applied to religious origin points, this playful spiral depicts the motion which carries the
institutional conviction of beliefs unto the uncertain conviction of faith. Brian McLaren clarifies
this shade of difference by defining beliefs as "statements that a group requires members to
affirm and not question or contradict"[7] which migrate to faith being "lived out in the context of
uncertainty…[proceeding through] the deep and motivating sense that a risk is worthwhile."[8]
Following McLaren's migration, *belief* corresponds to the grounding for one's recognition of
God, while *faith* corresponds to stretching that grounding into an ever-expanding orbit of this
central point. This pattern is continually at play in all lives of faith. Spiraling portrays Christians
stretching their institutional grounding into the uncertain outwardness that puts them in touch
with differing people, who are also caught up in this stretching of certainty into uncertainty. This

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[6] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), II.243.1.116.

[7] Brian D. McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration: How the World's Largest Religion is Seeking a Better Way to be Christian* (New York; Convergent, 2016), 45.

[8] McLaren, *The Great Spiritual Migration*, 45.

moving with and pulling at pattern connects Christians to the primal movement of life itself, as described by the second law of thermodynamics, which similarly envisions stable structures (order) unfolding into new patterns (entropy). Overall, Gregory's still-moving, McLaren's migration, and the spiral pattern frame faith as moving with and being pulled at by life's ever-branching, non-linear path of outward stretching that can be shared with differing others. This spiraling holds every faith and every conception of God. For Christians, faith is following the Spirit's *inspiration* (breathing where s/he will) through this all-encompassing movement.

Spiraling is known in many ways across diverse disciplines. The outward movement and intersection of water ripples are geometric patterns which the Energy Wave Theory of classical physics studies discerns as the energy of spiraling waves.[9] Molecular biology perceives spiraling in the myriad variations of DNA's double helix, which is found in all life.[10] Botanists notice how this living pattern of existence unfolds among the leaves of trees and within the fascinating spiraling inside of flowers,[11] whose beauty Dante immortalizes through the celestial rose in the *Divine Comedy*. Mathematicians cherish this spiraling beauty in the Fibonacci sequence and in the irrational number pi, whose numbers do not repeat and cannot be fully calculated.[12] Farmers and meteorologists discern this spiraling life pattern in the looping patterns of seasons. Historians chronicle the circular nature of civilizations. Astronomers trace the cosmic spiraling of stars and planets. People are ever-amused by the spiral fun of Slinkys and Spirographs, and are ever-frustrated by the spinning loading bars on digital devices.

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[9] Energy Wave Theory, "What is Time? A definition of time based on the frequency of energy waves," YouTube video, 5:51, March 31, 2018, https://tinyurl.com/prypud3r. This definition of time occurs around 2:40.
[10] Eric Green, "Double Helix," National Human Genome Research Institute, last modified March 24, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/yck2pbcm.
[11] Elizabeth Hand, "Patterns in Nature: Where to Spot Spirals," Science World, last modified April 25, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/yp4eduym.
[12] Elaine J. Hom, "What is pi?" Live Science, last modified March 9, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/2xwse44w.

The point of this brief, yet wide-spanning consideration of spiraling is to frame it as the motion of paired randomness and reason that operates in the differing disciplines of everyday life, while also connecting those disciplines as diverse discernments of a singular primal movement of transcendent life which takes up all things. These discernments clarify how spiraling does not portray chaos or caprice. Rather, spiraling illustrates the random-ordering of ever-newness creating its own patterns, forms, and rules. Thus, spiraling is the shape of the grounded, yet multidirectional and multidimensional event that can be described as the Infinite being recognizable in the finite and the Divine being expressible in the material. David Miller understands spiraling as being seized by God's generously unlimited pattern of meaning. Courtney Goto and Lakisha Lockhart articulate spiraling as being held lightly while "molting" toward the ever-recognizable God. S. Mark Heim discerns spiraling in how Dante's celestial rose conveys *Paradiso*'s life-giving pattern, which undoes the whirlpool of hell with the whirlwind that draws one's soul outward and toward the communion with God, others, and creation. James H. Evans Jr. describes spiraling when he frames play as "the primary principle of the cosmos" that generates unpredictable newness in recognizability. Combining these diverse discernments of spiraling contributes the illustration of God's generously unlimited motion that plays with and sustains the many paths of everyday life. Overall, spiraling is the motion that pictures the contestant ideal to "keep going." Crucially, this awareness of spiraling – the image of the life-motion of faith that all can share – calls sacred and secular people to figure out their own ways of navigating this continuous moving with and pulling at motion that is common to all life.

When God's generously unlimited motion is perceived in light of the Holy Spirit, Christians can understand spiraling as the faith that moves with and pulls at other religions that is navigated by following the Holy Spirit breathing where s/he will into the lives of differing

others. This insight follows a long Christian tradition portraying the spiritual meaning of spiraling in playful ways. Early Christians constructed *Theseus and the Minotaur*-inspired labyrinths to playfully "walk out" God's ever-abiding and ever-recognizable presence amidst the laborious twists and turns of life – a *labor*-inth, of sorts. The first Christian labyrinth at St. Basilica of Reparatus was a square spiraling that featured the continual palindrome of "SANCTA ECLESIA" (Holy Church) in its center that reads the same way up, down, left, and right. Craig Wright observes how "already in this first Christian labyrinth there is a suggestion that the maze…is a mirror, an earthly object that reflects a higher spiritual truth."[13] Wright describes this fourth century Christian attempt to respond to the mystery of Christ as a mode of contemplation that subtly resembles a game of navigating the labyrinth and deciphering its central secret code.

In the 1460s, the influential German theologian Nicholas of Cusa stretched the labyrinth out of the contemplative walls of the church and into popular culture, via the "game of wisdom"[14] he invents in *De Ludo Globi*. In his "Bowling Game," players throw their dented ball through a spiral pathway of nine circles, with the hope of getting as close as possible to the central tenth circle. Players gain points according to the number of circles their ball manages to travel through. Nicholas explains the spiritual truth at play in his game:

> He who most quickly scores [the number of points] which correspond to the number of years of Christ's life—is the winner. This game…symbolizes the movement of our soul from its own kingdom unto the Kingdom of Life, in which there is eternal rest and eternal happiness. In the Center of the Kingdom of Life our King and Life-Giver, Christ Jesus, presides. When He was like unto us, He moved the bowling-ball of His own person in such a way that it would come to rest at the Center of Life. He left us an example in order that we would do just as He had done and in order that our bowling-ball would follow [in the pathway of] His, although it is impossible that another ball come to rest at the [exact] same Center of Life at which Christ's ball comes to rest. For within a circle there are an

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[13] Craig Wright, *The Maze and the Warrior: Symbols in Architecture, Theology, and Music* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 18.

[14] Nicholas of Cusa, "*De Ludo Globi* (The Bowling Game)" in *Nicholas of Cusa: Metaphysical Speculations: Volume Two,* ed. Jasper Hopkins, I.31.1196, (Minneapolis: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2000), https://tinyurl.com/3bcamjae.

infinite number of places and mansions. For the bowling-ball of each individual comes to rest at its own point…at which no other ball can ever arrive…no two balls can be equally distant from the Center…the one ball will always be more distant, the other less distant.[15]

Nicholas's explanation concerns how the game subtly yet surely trains one to both hold the "dents" of one's being lightly and continually throw themselves toward their desired destination, through restrictive obstacles and unpredictable patterns. This game teaches Christians to keep playing through the spiraling motion of life, as a way to follow Christ, despite being unable to do everything that Christ did or be everything that Christ is. In the mode of gaming, reaching the center is not the point; what matters is keeping the game of winning and losing going. Science fiction author Wolfgang Jeschke conveys this insight in *The Cusanus Game,* describing a journey through alternate timelines and universes (similar to *EEAAO*) that is based on the meaning of the spiraling path of *De Ludo Globi.* One character, while teaching the game to another, remarks with a smile, "Don't give up…That is—among other things—the point."[16] Jeschke's novel clarifies how *De Ludo Globi* conveys the Christian faith that keeps going in the form of a game.

Labyrinths and *De Ludo Globi* frame Christian faith in terms of keeping a game going with playful movements. Both games convey the spiritual truth of moving up, down, left, and right in God, toward Christ, via the Holy Spirit, with limited directionality. Labyrinths constrain one's steps to its predetermined path, while *De Ludo Globi* limits the ball's motion to its nine circles. While modern players still cherish these gaming experiences and appreciate their spirituality, they also enjoy video gaming's more interactive directionality.[17] Video game

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[15] Nicholas of Cusa, "*De Ludo Globi*," I.50-51, 1206-1207.

[16] Wolfgang Jeschke, *The Cusanus Game*, trans. Ross Benjamin (New York: Tor Books, 2013), 92.

[17] A video game is an electronic game voluntarily undertaken for enjoyment and/or education. Video gaming involves interaction with a five-part user interface consisting of 1) a platform that enables gameplay (arcade machine, electronic device, console, smartphone, or computer), 2) an input device that provides control signals for gameplay (gamepads, joysticks, keyboards, touchscreens, even the human body), 3) a display device on which gameplay is viewed (television or computer monitor), 4) an audio device that generates the game's sound effects, music, and spoken lines (loudspeaker or headphones), and 5) 3D sense via haptic and olfactory technologies which

controllers enable the player's movement to be more about unfolding the game according to the paths one takes on their own terms, and less about acquiescing to predetermined ways of playing the game. The controller's direction pad (D-pad) and action buttons enable the player's *choice* to move up, down, left, and right with accompanying actions through restrictive obstacles and unpredictable patterns in the game world. Spiraling depicts the life-encompassing motion of faith; the controller maps the playful paths chosen to move in this primal movement of life. For Christians, the cross is the D-pad for moving up, down, left, and right to start the shared life of faith, and theologies of religions are the action buttons for responding to religious playmates.

The video game controller's design visualizes how contestant theology is a Christian way to move with and pull at differing others (Fig. 3). The D-pad matches the shape and aesthetic of the cross, resonating with its multidirectional stretching and multidimensional unfolding. Players press the D-pad's four directional arrows to move their playable entity in the game world. This looks like playing *Pac-Mania* for the Sega Genesis, in which players move as the ball-like Pac-Man to eat all of the dots placed in enclosed mazes while outmaneuvering four ghosts who chase him in different ways. Controlling Pac-Man is a mode of play that combines the labyrinth's contemplative walking with *De Ludo Globi*'s contemplative rolling in video game directionality. Moving in these mazes of Pac-Dots and ghosts who chase and are chased by Pac-Man visualizes contestant theology as a controller for moving up, down, left, and right to follow the Spirit in navigating spiraling faith with differing others.

The cross playfully functions as the Christian D-pad in the contestant game of interreligious relationality. The D-pad's y-axis sustains the vertical play of moving with playmates who share the reality of God's ungraspability. Pressing the contestant D-pad upward is

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apply forces, vibrations, motions, and scents to the user (rumble packs, tactile touchpads, smelling screens). From: Wikipedia contributors, "Video game," *Wikipedia,* last modified January 7, 2023, https://tinyurl.com/bdfye5k6.

the *Oh Self*'s bewildering movement of storytelling that enables differing people to express

God's ungraspability together, while pressing downward is the *No Self*'s humiliating movement

of friendship, which enables differing people to experience the embarrassment of God's

ungraspability together. Likewise, the contestant D-pad's x-axis sustains the horizontal play of

pulling at playmates who share the realization of God's ever-learnability. Pressing leftward is the

Co Self's un-limiting movement of sparring that enables differing others to pull each other out of

being confined to the singular contexts resistant to continually learning God, while pressing

rightward is the *Go Self*'s re-creating movement of partnership that enables differing others to

pull each other into continually generating ideas, opportunities, and languages for learning God.

Through the vantage point of playing video games, the cross is seen as the Christian expression

of the directions one takes in navigating the spiraling motion of faith that are not confined to

Christian usage or control. Following how Raimon Panikkar describes the Trinity, the cross is

not just "the unique property of Christianity,"[18] but also, the D-pad for all the authentic spiritual

directions of navigating life for religious and irreligious people. Thus, the D-pad cross is

contestant theology's picture for Christians gifting the cross to differing others, as the invitation

and the challenge to keep thinking, living, and talking out the game of being grasped by the

ungraspable God. In quadri-directional and quadri-dimensional play, contestant theology's

controller holds together theologies of the cross with theologies of religions, just as operating a

video game controller requires pressing the D-pad and the action buttons with both thumbs.

On one hand, the D-pad playfully conveys how to navigate the spiraling motion of life

with both a grounding in Christ and a stretching in all directions. On the other hand, the action

buttons playfully convey enriching and diminishing Christian responses to different religions and

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[18] Raimon Panikkar, *The Trinity and the Religious Experience of Man* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), 42.

differing people who are navigating the spiral in their own ways. Just as video games require

players to use both the D-pad *and* the action buttons to interact with the game world, the

interreligious encounter calls Christians to be their truest, deepest Christian selves *and* respond to

the deepest, truest selves of differing people. This Christian response enables everyone in the

interreligious playce to "push each other's buttons," not just to cause mutual reactions of

excitement or annoyance, but also, fascination and learning. This button-pushing conveys how

Christian theologies of religions get their point across and rebuff arguments against them while

also being open to learning from others, being corrected, changing, and growing.

Pushing buttons looks like playing *Street Fighter II: The World Warrior* for the Super

Nintendo, in which players not only move their characters with the D-Pad, but also direct their

combat with the action buttons. Players begin the game by pressing the Start button. Players kick

by pressing the A- and B-buttons, and punch with the X- and Y-buttons. Pushing the directions

of the D-Pad and the action buttons in certain sequences enables the different fighters to perform

unique special moves. Pressing up, down, forward and any punch button initiates Ryu's

"Hadouken" fireball, pressing down, up, and any kick button launches Chun-Li's "Spinning Bird

Kick," and pressing forward, down, forward and any punch button unleashes Ken's "Dragon

Punch." *Street Fighter II* offers diverse ways of combining motion and action for differing types

of players who challenge and learn from one another's fighting style. These multi-button combos

are not limited to fighting games. Classic platforming games (*Super Mario Bros.*, *Mega Man*,

Sonic the Hedgehog) combine the D-Pad and the action buttons to run, spin, jump, and shoot

through obstacle-course worlds extending in all directions. Action-adventure games (*Metroid*,

The Legend of Zelda, Beyond Oasis, Castlevania) has gamers pushing buttons to navigate maze-

like environments while fending off enemies with weapons and magic. Role-playing game series

(*Final Fantasy* and *Phantasy Star*) enable gamers to push the buttons to interact with their world by exploring towns and mysterious locations, battling monsters, and talking with non-playable characters to advance the quest and keep the game going. These examples of pushing action buttons visualize how contestant theology plays out the ideals of theologies of religion as the Christian action buttons for keeping the interreligious game going.

Following Teiyu Goto's design of the original PlayStation controller, these four action buttons are arranged in a cross-like pattern that complements the D-Pad. Further, each button's "face" displays different shapes in various colors, conveying how the cross is "in touch" with the other shapes made by the movements of different religions. First, the upward button materializes Replacement's ideal into the playful movement of continually reforming religion with the differing person. This button's green triangle symbolizes 1) moving with religious playmates toward new ways of recognizing God and 2) pulling at differing others to reconsider their conceptions of God. Pressing this reform-button keeps the interreligious game going through inarticulation with the *Oh Self*'s bewildering stories for describing God's ungraspability. Second, the downward button materializes Fulfillment's ideal into the playful movement of mutual diminishment with the differing person. This button's blue X symbolizes 1) moving with religious playmates in becoming less so that God can better us through relationships with others, and 2) pulling at differing others to empty their human faith into the lack of another's faith. Pressing this diminish-button keeps the interreligious game going through non-persuasiveness with the *No Self*'s humiliating friendships for sharing the embarrassment of God's ungraspability. Third, the leftward button materializes Mutuality's ideal into the playful movement of transformative enrichment with the differing person. This button's pink square symbolizes 1) moving with religious playmates in becoming more through contributing one's

religious identity to the shared pointing to and experiencing of God and 2) pulling at differing others to become parts of the way that God is known outside of their preferred contexts. Pressing this enrich-button keeps the interreligious game going through the quantum of violence with the *Co Self*'s un-limiting sparring for learning God's ungraspability. Fourth, the rightward button materializes Acceptance's ideal into the playful movement of unifying freedom with the differing person. This button's red circle symbolizes 1) moving with religious playmates through confusion, failure, suffering and death and 2) pulling at differing others to keep constructing new ways to recognize the ever-recognizable God. Pressing this free-button keeps the interreligious game going through fragmentation with the *Go Self*'s re-creating partnering for responding to God's ungraspability. Overall, understanding these Christian responses to differing others in terms of pressing diverse, yet interconnected action buttons clarifies how the play theology of religions is not confined to one of these responses, nor is it one response detached from the others. Contestant theology combines the Christian stretching in all directions with the open interplay of reform, mutual diminishment, transformative enrichment, and unifying freedom. This interplay spotlights one response that is still attached to the others, much like how a multi-button combo involves pressing many buttons, even if one button is pressed with greater frequency. This button-pressing depicts contestant theology incorporating all authentic spiritual directions and responses to God into diverse Christian engagements with differing people.

Contestant theology's authentic spiritual directions and responses to God follow the Holy Spirit breathing where s/he will and Jesus Christ living through death, failure, and pain. Video game players experience comparable forms of this theovival by using "cheat codes" which grant them advantages to keep them to keep going through any obstacle, such as abilities to travel anywhere or skip levels, invincibility to enemy attacks, extra equipment, powers boosted to their

maximum capacity, and an unlimited number of extra lives to survive any type of death. Cheat codes are hidden parts of the game, which are activated by pressing the controller's buttons in a specific combination. Such is the case for the legendary "Konami Code." Players struggling through Nintendo games could press up, up, down, down, left, right, left, right, B, A, and Start to gain a full-set of power ups or 30 extra lives. Konami's game developer Kazuhisa Hashimoto programmed this code so that he could more easily complete games during their testing phase, but he forgot to remove the code from the finished version of *Gradius*. Players gradually discovered this code, and it became increasingly appreciated and included with other video games, such as the popular, yet notoriously difficult action game *Contra.* Today, the Konami Code enjoys iconic status as one of the most famous aspects of video gaming. As a popular way to play, the Konami Code can convey complex ideas in accessible terms – particularly, the Christian response to differing others that emphasizes being grasped by the ungraspable God's generously unlimited paradigm for sharing life that is made visible in Jesus Christ and possible by the Holy Spirit. Simply put, God (Original Player) puts Jesus Christ (Ultimate Player) into play as our ever-living Konami Code, Whom the Holy Spirit (Everlasting Player) enables us to discover and follow by breathing where s/he will. Contestant theology follows God's "cheat code" for stretching in all authentic spiritual directions as set forth in Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit, in the manner that looks like the Konami Code's D-Pad and action button pressing. The Christian quadri-directional and quadri-dimensional stretching is possible only because God expands our boundaries of possibility and multiplies the kinds of good via the 30+ year-old Jesus Christ, and grasps our theologies of religions into the Way via the empowering Holy Spirit. Thus, God moving with and pulling at Christians enables them to move with and pull at others.

The Konami Code visualizes this path in which contestant theology follows Jesus Christ and the

Holy Spirit in keeping the game of faith going with differing people, despite dialogical obstacles.

Spiraling, labyrinths, *De Ludo Globi*, video game controllers, and the Konami Code come

together while gazing into the Interfaith Flag of Interfaith Resources.[19] This interreligious image

relays David Miller's description of theology as "iridescence in the void,"[20] displays George

Lindbeck's "aesthetic" for bridging religions,[21] portrays John Hick's conviction that religious

distinctions will gradually converge and dissolve into a "universe of faiths,"[22] and conveys

Nyasha Mboti's Ubuntian zone of dispersions and collisions.[23] The flag arranges the symbols of

major world religions into diversely colored bubbles which are "stuck" to each other in a

jeongian circle floating over a black foundation. This symbolic arrangement converges distinct

religions into a shared spiraling faith, which also encompasses irreligion, which is depicted as the

void surrounded by the motion. These symbols render religions and irreligion as free, graceful,

and spirited content, instead of their formal names. Further, the flag does not restrict these

symbols to the ownership of their institutions, but depicts them gifting themselves to differing

others. The Nine-pointed star, Cross, Dharmachakra, Om, Crescent and Star, Magen David, and

the void move with and pull at each other, as depicted by the circles of light emerging where the

symbols touch. These lights contain four contact zones – an upward connection blooming like a

dandelion puff, a downward connection burning like a flame, a leftward connection flying like a

wing, and a rightward connection sprouting like a leaf. At different angles, these interreligious

lights form the shapes which the religions take in gifting themselves to differing others – flowers,

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[19] "Interfaith Flag," Interfaith Resources, last modified January 14, 2022, https://tinyurl.com/5n8z57af.

[20] David L. Miller, *Gods and Games*: *Toward a Theology of Play* (New York: World Pub. Co, 1970), 147.

[21] George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age.* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 2009), *The Nature of Doctrine*, 130-131.

[22] Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, 133-147.

[23] Nyasha Mboti, "May the Real *Ubuntu* Please Stand Up?" *Journal of Mass Media Ethics* 30, no. 2 (April 2015): 132-134, https://tinyurl.com/ms9npkds.

candles, divine messengers, and contemplative silhouettes. These lights illuminate the meaning of pressing the contestant controller's D-pad and action buttons to keep the interreligious game going with religious playmates via the Spirit-given trajectory through spiraling faith with four directions and four dimensions. The upward-blooming light exhibits religious identities being gifted to others as *Oh Selves* as it bestows the bewildering path of reforming religion with storytelling. The downward-burning light envisages religious identities being gifted to others as *No Selves* as it charts the humiliating path of becoming less with friends. The leftward-flying light depicts religious identities being gifted to others as *Co Selves* as it plots the un-limiting path of becoming more with sparring partners. The rightward-sprouting light shows religious identities being gifted to others as *Go Selves* as it guides the re-creating path of unifying freedom with accomplices. Looking across their differing hues and symbols, one sees the religions gifting themselves as non-Euclidean dwellings which continually bubble out into each other. Thus, the Interreligious Flag draws audiences into the interreligious life through a celestial *bouquet* of flowers, lights, wings, and foliage. This flag is the rosette visualization of following the Spirit through spiraling faith and into the lives of differing religions via the contestant controller, in the religious tradition of stained glass windows or mandalas, and in the pop-cultural vein of video game title screens inspiring players to "Press Start."

The Interreligious Flag maps the play of contestant theology in the interreligious playce. The next section shows Christians "doing" contestant theology with differing others. Hans Küng, Stephen Prothero, and Peter Feldmeier substantiate building "contestant connections," in which both groups push each other's buttons by contesting each other's capacity for mastery and correction, commitment to the human condition, and engagement with differing others.

II. Building Contestant Connections with Differing Others

A. Hans Küng's Contestant Questions

Swiss theologian Hans Küng builds contestant connections with his categories of questions for pushing each other's buttons in the interreligious playce. In the chapter of *On Being Christian* called "The Challenge of the World Religions," Küng writes, "Unhistoricity, circular thinking, fatalism, unworldliness, pessimism, passivity, caste spirit, social disinterestedness; the concrete questions to be put to the religions in order to provide a diagnosis…may be summed up under these headings."[24] Invoking these categories is how Küng pushes buttons to diagnose what is needed for conveying one's religion to differing others in the deepest and truest way. Küng's unhistoricity question asks, how do we describe religions which defensively focus on their core revelations to the detriment of engaging "the scientific, technical, economic, cultural, [and] political achievements which had their origin elsewhere?"[25] Küng's questions of circular thinking, fatalism, and passivity ask: do religions accurately convey themselves when they focus on the circular predetermination of life to the detriment of "coming to terms in a spirit of self-criticism with the idea of a linear or dialectical progress of history… which—quite unlike these religions, takes the unique individual person, his life and his work, absolutely seriously?"[26] Küng's caste system question asks, can a religion that advances the caste be what it claims to be with "the view beginning to prevail all over the world of the basic equality of all men" and "the modern spirit of occupational mobility?"[27] Küng's unworldliness question asks, how can a religion that renders the world as an "unreal appearance" be what it claims to be "in a technocratic society [of] turning lathes, assembly lines, laboratories, computers, [and]

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[24] Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), 110.
[25] Küng, *On Being a Christian*, 107.
[26] Küng, *On Being a Christian*, 107-108.
[27] Küng, *On Being a Christian*, 108.

administrative buildings?"[28] Küng ties together the pessimism, social disinterestedness, and passivity categories in the question, how can religions which emphasize the "mutability and triviality of all earthly things" be what they claim to be without "[producing] the prophetic "No" to coarse and superstitious forms of religion, to adulteration and degeneration of belief in God, to social abuses and inhuman conditions?"[29] Overall, Küng's categories bring contestant questions into the interreligious playce, which Christians can pose to differing people and vice versa, in a game of keeping each other genuine in their material experiences of spiritual realities.

In the interreligious contest, religions "win" to the extent that they can genuinely answer these contestant questions, and "lose" to the extent that they are unable or unwilling to do so. Küng's game of contestant questions keep the people of differing religions playing through oscillating states of winning and losing. This contest is never fully won or lost, because the contestant questions enable the religions to continually point out each other's areas of mastery and needs for correction. The religions pose the unhistoricity question to the Abrahamic religions, not to dominate them, but rather, to push them to clarify what their faith really means in the world shared by the differing people of different religions. Likewise, the religions pose the circular thinking question to the Eastern religions, not to defeat them, but to push them to clarify how their faith applies to an increasingly secularized world. Differing people push each other's buttons with the contestant questions, which are diminishing, because they expose areas for correction which go unnoticed in the home contexts. Likewise, the questions enrich differing others, because they unearth the areas of mastery that they do not notice in their singular context. Thus, Küng's contestant questions enable differing others to be religious playmates who can keep each other going through material life's challenges to faith, unto God and Paradise.

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[28] Küng, *On Being a Christian*, 108.
[29] Küng, *On Being a Christian*, 109.

Putting the *test* into the *contest*, Küng contributes valuable questions for Christians to pull at and be pulled at by differing people, with less emphasis on the *con* – the moving with people in the interreligious *playce*. In controller terms, Küng's questions favor the action buttons over the D-pad; he cultivates responses to differing others, more than a shared interreligious movement. Thus, Küng's contestant questions will be placed next to Stephen Prothero's contestant model, which unifies the movements of differing religions and irreligion.

B. Stephen Prothero's Contestant Model

Comparative religious scholar Stephen Prothero builds contestant connections with his four-part model for pushing each other's buttons in the interreligious playce. In Chapter 1 of *Religion Matters: An Introduction to the World's Religions*, Prothero explains that every religion and irreligion finds common ground and movement via "1. an analysis of the human problem; 2. a solution to that problem; 3. techniques for achieving that goal; [and] 4. exemplars who chart the path toward the goal."[30] This model unifies differing religions and irreligion in a shared quadri-move set (D-pad) of commitment to the human condition, albeit in their own "Ways,"[31] just as pressing up in one game can cause a character to look up, and cause another game's character to jump. D-pad directions remaining the same yet producing variable actions in different video games illustrates how different religions and irreligion define the same things – problem, solution, techniques, and exemplars – in diverse ways.

First, Prothero examines how "India's religions of release seek to escape from a world in which we are trapped in an endless and unsatisfactory cycle of life, death, and rebirth."[32]

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[30] Stephen Prothero, *Religion Matters: An Introduction to the World's Religions* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2020), 19-20.
[31] Prothero, *Religion Matters*, 23.
[32] Prothero, *Religion Matters*, 23.

Hinduism is the "Way of Devotion" that moves through the *samsara* problem by seeking *moksha* (release), through "the disciplines of *karma* (action), *jnana* (wisdom), and *bhakti* (devotion)" taught by yogis, "poet-saints," and other exemplars.[33] Buddhism is the "Way of Awakening" that moves through the suffering problem by seeking *nirvana* (blowing-out), through meditation, chanting, visualization and other techniques cultivated by arhats, bodhisattvas, and similar exemplars.[34] Sikhism is the "Way of the Guru" in which "learners" move through *haumai* (egoism) by achieving union with God in the realm of truth through service and meditation on *nam simran* (the Divine name) as taught by their Gurus.[35] The ways of release use the same D-pad, yet offer different problems, solutions, techniques, and exemplars to escape spiraling life.

Prothero's D-pad is also shared by "religions of repair of the Middle East [seeking] to fix what is broken through the intervention of God—through the revelation of the Torah or the Quran or through the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom Christians call "The Word of God."[36] Judaism is the "Way of Exile and Return" that follows "interpreters and words of God."[37] Christianity is the "Way of Salvation" that moves through the sin problem by seeking salvation with faith and good works in the name of Jesus Christ, under the tutelage of saints past and present.[38] Islam is the "Way of Submission" that moves through the pride problem by submitting to God in daily prayers, fasting, and affirming the unity of God and the prophethood of Muhammad, as taught by imams and sheikhs.[39] These ways of repair use the same D-pad and offer different problems, solutions, and techniques to heal spiraling life.

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[33] Prothero, *Religion Matters*, 42.
[34] Prothero, *Religion Matters,* 89.
[35] Prothero, *Religion Matters,* 142.
[36] Prothero, *Religion Matters*, 23.
[37] Prothero, *Religion Matters*, 191.
[38] Prothero, *Religion Matters*, 234.
[39] Prothero, *Religion Matters*, 305.

Prothero's D-pad is pressed by "the religions of reversion of China [seeking] to return to nature in the case of Daoism or to the glory days of the ancient sage-kings in the case of Confucianism."[40] Prothero's description of Navajo religion can be extended to also categorize Indigenous Religious Traditions as ways of reversion, particularly to life-giving interconnections with all things material and spiritual. Daoism is the "Way of Flourishing" that moves through the *lifelessness* problem by seeking the Dao with internal alchemy, healthful eating, and offering rituals learned from sages, immortals, and *zhenren* (Perfected Persons).[41] Confucianism is the "Way of Ritual Propriety" that moves through the social chaos problem by seeking social harmony through *ren* (humaneness), *li* (ritual propriety), filial piety, and self-cultivation, as taught by a *junzi* (profound person) and *shengren* (sage).[42] Following Prothero's study of Navajo religion, we can generalize Indigenous Religious Traditions as the *Ways of Communion* which move through the problems of destructive relationships with others, the material world, and the spiritual world, by seeking a loving interconnection through prayers, offerings, and ceremonies led by shamans, priests, and specialists to restore individuals and communities to health and harmony. The ways of reversion play with the same D-pad and offer different problems, solutions, techniques and exemplars to return spiraling life to a pre-broken condition.

Prothero's D-pad is also for "people who, in the name of reason, have rejected [religion] and either don't believe that the world has gone awry or are convinced that what ails us is religion itself."[43] Prothero's look into Atheism extends to the New Age Movement, which replaces mainstream religions with its own spirituality. Atheism is the "Way of No Way" that moves through the ignorance problem by seeking the knowledge afforded in critical reasoning

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[40] Prothero, *Religion Matters*, 23.
[41] Prothero, *Religion Matters*, 401-407.
[42] Prothero, *Religion Matters*, 354-357.
[43] Prothero, *Religion Matters*, 23.

and science as "freethinkers who think for themselves" and "[pursue] human flourishing in a godless universe by rejecting religion as false and harmful."[44] Following Prothero's analysis of Atheism, we can describe the New Age Movement as the *Way of New Ways*, moving through the problem of religious irrelevance by creating a new spirituality that combines the aspects of multiple world religions in self-empowering rituals led by spiritual guides who cultivate spiritual intuition in a personal way. The ways of rejection press the same D-pad and offer different problems, solutions, techniques, and exemplars to irreligiously face spiraling life.

Overall, Prothero's moves bring the contestant model into the interreligious playce, which Christians can share with differing people and vice versa, in a game of keeping each other committed to the human condition. Religions "win" to the extent that their solutions, techniques, and exemplars effectively engage religious problems, and "lose" to the extent that these problems remain unsolved. This contest is never fully won or totally lost, because the contestant model allows differing religions to continually point out and address each other's problems that go unnoticed or unsolved. Prothero's model envisions religions and irreligion using the same move set to solve the particular problems they see on their own. As differing people push each other's buttons with the contestant model, they say, *I solve my problem on my own terms, while you solve your problem on your own terms*, implying that every major human problem gets addressed. The contestant model diminishes differing others, because it exposes the human problems they do not address. The contestant model also enriches, when it connects differing others with another's "Way" to solve the human problems which a singular context does not address. Thus, Prothero's contestant model enables differing others to be religious playmates who can keep each other going in a human commitment to faith, unto God and Paradise.

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[44] Prothero, *Religion Matters*, 502.

Putting the *con* into the *contest*, Prothero contributes a foundational model for Christians to move-with differing people, with less emphasis on the *test* – the pulling-at people in the interreligious *playce*. In controller terms, Prothero's model favors the D-pad over the action buttons; he cultivates a shared interreligious movement more than a framework for interacting with differing others. While Küng and Prothero emphasize separate parts of the contestant controller, Peter Feldmeier's contestant criteria for spiritual maturity presses both the D-pad and action buttons to advance a shared interreligious moving-with that also pulls-at differing others.

C. Peter Feldmeier's Contestant Criteria

Christian spirituality scholar Peter Feldmeier builds contestant connections with his spiritual criteria for pushing each other's buttons in the interreligious playce. Throughout *Encounters in Faith*, Feldmeier "[explores] how the heart and spirit of different religions can speak to the reader,"[45] and by extension, each other. Feldmeier's "intentionally sympathetic engagement"[46] continually resonates with contestant theology, in which "Christian theology and spirituality act as a counterpoint to and a comparison with the other traditions discussed."[47] Feldmeier offers eight reflective encounters in which he stands in Christian tradition and moves in Christian spirituality to challenge and learn from differing others. Feldmeier situates the insights he gained from his version of the contest into Jack Kornfield's qualities of spiritual maturity.[48] Christians can engage and be engaged by differing others with these criteria, as a way to keep the interreligious game going with the contestant controller's D-pad and action buttons.

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[45] Peter Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith: Christianity in Interreligious Dialogue* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2011), xi.
[46] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, xi.
[47] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, x.
[48] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 277-278; cites Jack Kornfield, *A Path with a Heart* (New York: Bantam), 1993.

Feldmeier's first encounter sees Christianity's "non-negotiable" biblical doctrine contesting with Judaism's quest for "layers of revelation in [the Torah]."[49] Christians move with Jews in repairing the broken world. Both groups also pull at each other; Jews stretch Christian claims about Jesus's compassion and love for the needy beyond private doctrine,[50] while Christians stretch Jews to build beyond the Earthly paradise, toward the "final kingdom."[51] The second encounter sees Christianity's "communion with God" contesting with Islam's "[being] before God in awe."[52] Christians move with Muslims toward "nearness" with God. Muslims pull Christians out of "[being] too casual with one's sense of God so as to forget that God is indeed awesome, transcendent and absolute mystery," while Christians pull Muslims into "[considering] God as one who invites…intimacy."[53]

The third encounter sees Christianity's "clear distinction between God, the soul, Creator, and creature" contesting with Hinduism's discovery of "a self that [is] located in the very mystery of God."[54] Christians move with Hindus in a "passionate experiencing" [of] the passionate God's presence and absence.[55] The Hindu witness pulls Christians to further acknowledge how God is "overwhelming, unpredictable, unmanageable, and unconventional," while Christians pull Hindus to recognize God in Jesus Christ, Who calls religious devotion out of individualism and into a powerfully public concern for social justice.[56] The fourth encounter sees Christianity's "inauguration of the kingdom of God" contesting with Buddhism's "truth of suffering."[57] Christians move with Buddhists to "[challenge] their audiences to open their minds

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[49] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 87-88.
[50] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 91.
[51] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 91-92.
[52] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 116-117.
[53] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 117.
[54] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 127-128.
[55] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 130-133.
[56] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 139-140.
[57] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 159-160.

and hearts" and notice their blindness.[58] The Buddhist Nirvana pulls at Christians to "[let] go of

one's need to know and [continue] on the path," while Christians pull at Buddhists with

"instruction whose aim is 'love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere

faith' (1 Tim. 1:4-7)."[59] The fifth encounter sees Christianity's self-offering to God contesting

with Zen Buddhism's childlike presence in every moment. Christians move with Zen's wholistic

embrace of reality "without the stink of holiness."[60] Zen pulls Christians to "replace doctrine and

conceptualizations"[61] with a focus on ordinary life's "interpenetrating, ever-flowing reality,"[62]

while Christians pull the Zen community to "empty oneself of all things to be filled with God."[63]

The sixth encounter sees Christianity's personal relationship with the Creator God

contesting with Chinese spirituality's nameless, "way-making" Dao energy[64] and harmonious

Confucian relationships.[65] Christians move with Chinese spirituality "appreciating and honoring

the truly sacred quality of engaging human relationships as if ritually understood, and…learning

the importance of being available to and harmonious with [subtle energies]."[66] Chinese

spirituality pulls Christians to simultaneously honor its stable structures and "the Spirit [guiding]

the Church into something new,"[67] while Christians pull the Chinese "immersion in the spiritual

life" toward a more well-defined and "spiritual absolute reference," such as salvation.[68]

The seventh encounter sees Christianity's distinction between humanity and other

creatures contesting with Indigenous Religious Traditions' discernment of interrelated

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[58] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 151.
[59] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 160.
[60] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 189.
[61] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 172.
[62] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 171.
[63] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith,* 182.
[64] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 202.
[65] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith,* 210-213.
[66] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 216.
[67] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 216.
[68] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 216.

existence.[69] Christians move with Indigenous Traditions in discerning good and evil spiritual influences upon the material world.[70] Indigenous Traditions pull Christians toward ethically substantiating their identification with all of creation and their Ephesian 1:10 claim that "Christ will unite all things in heaven and on Earth,"[71] while Christians pull Indigenous Cultures to ethically rationalize their involvement with spiritual powers which possess and curse its targets.[72]

Feldmeier's eighth encounter sees Christianity's tradition-guided discipleship contesting with the New Age's intuition-led "self-authorizing."[73] Christians move with the New Age to escape the status quo and "gain spiritual insight into both themselves and others."[74] New Age people pull Christians beyond any "flat and lifeless"[75] traditions, while Christians stretch New Age people to offer something more than spiritual promises without substantive transformation.[76] Following Feldmeier's encounters and Prothero's summary of Atheism, our ninth encounter sees Christianity's dependence upon God for everlasting life contesting with irreligion's pursuit of flourishing without God and religion. Christians move with atheists, deists, non-theists, and related groups in realizing that they do not own God, especially by trying to conceptualize God as an avenue for self-serving happiness. Irreligious people pull Christians toward scientific and critical thinking that avoids over-relying upon "secondhand teachings" of religious authorities,[77] while Christians pull irreligious people toward non-empirical revelatory experiencing that avoids over-relying on human knowledge that undermines freedom, fulfillment, and happiness.[78]

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[69] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 227-228.
[70] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 232-234.
[71] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 227-228.
[72] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 232-236.
[73] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 254-257.
[74] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 253.
[75] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 254.
[76] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 254.
[77] Prothero, *Religion Matters*, 502.
[78] Feldmeier*, Encounters in Faith*, 264.

Jack Kornfield's ten criteria of spiritual maturity emerge in these religious contests. Contestants cultivate *nonidealism* by responding to differing others with a "spacious heart" for their real and imperfect existences.[79] *Kindness* emerges as contestants learn to be "gentle and loving, particularly to oneself."[80] Contestants acquire *patience* by continually "[being] with what is true moment after moment after moment."[81] Similarly, *ordinariness* describes how contestants help each other with "being wholly present in the moment," in an *integrated* spiritual life that "includes one's work, relationships, and creativity and [holds together] the universal with the personal."[82] *Uniqueness* emerges as differing others learn the value of being themselves, and not another.[83] *Questioning* results from contestants helping each other see themselves as so safe in God's grasp that "challenging questions can be asked of one's self, world, church, and even God."[84] *Flexibility* emerges as a contestant "stands stably for the deepest self, and yet engages in the complexity of life with a skillful fluidity."[85] Contestants find the sacred value of *relationship* and *embracing opposites*, and "[develop] a sense of irony, metaphor, and humor and the capacity to embrace the whole, with its beauty and outrageousness."[86] Contestants push each other's buttons in interreligious contests with these criteria which diminish, because they spotlight the qualities they have yet to acquire in the interreligious contest. Yet, the contestant criteria also enrich contestants with qualities they could only access in contest with others, beyond the isolation of their singular context. Thus, Christians can challenge religious playmates to attain these qualities and vice versa, in a game of keeping each other engaged with differing others.

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[79] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 277.
[80] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 277.
[81] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 277.
[82] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 277.
[83] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 277.
[84] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 277.
[85] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 278.
[86] Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*, 278.

Feldmeier contributes criteria for envisioning how Prothero's shared interreligious movement pairs with Küng's framework of interacting with differing others in the *contest* which evenly emphasizes Christian moving with and pulling at experiences in the interreligious playce. In controller terms, Feldmeier's criteria operates the D-pad *and* the action buttons to keep the interreligious game going as a Christian. Contestant theology picks up where Feldmeier leaves off, functioning as a theological controller that combines unifying motions and challenging responses into the spiritual playfulness with different religions and differing others.

III. Out-moving and Out-pulling Interreligious Dialogical Problems

Contestant theology envisions a game that is so enjoyably free that all could play it, so enjoyably graceful that all could be allowed to play in their own way, and so enjoyably spirited that its players would choose to keep playing it, rather than ending it with a definitive declaration of winners and losers. This playful mode of gaming frames the experience of being grasped by God, which involves God's generously unlimited paradigm for being with a differing person, and for thinking, living, and speaking out God's ever-learnability and ever-unfolding Paradise with that religious or irreligious playmate. These contests theologically play to keep the game that no one wants to end going. Contestants play to keep each other going beyond winning and losing, acknowledging similarities and differences, inflicting enrichment and diminishment, and living through the confusion, conflict, failure, suffering, death, and darkness shared by the religious and irreligious. Contestant theology flows from God (original Player) and follows Jesus Christ (ultimate Player) and Holy Spirit (everlasting Player) to keep playing out Paul's Acts 17:28 exclamation, "For we, too, are his offspring" with playmates.

Contestant theology plays out as a theological controller for moving with and pulling at playmates in the interreligious playce. As such, it "translates" Feldmeier's encounters as button combinations for keeping the interreligious game going with differing others. These combos echo how the Konami Code illustrates the Christian quadri-directional and quadri-dimensional stretching with others made possible by God empowering them via Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Contestants quadri-directionalize with Küngian questions of bewilderment, humiliation, un-limiting, and recreating, in order to quadri-dimensionalize with a Protherian unifying framework that allows the religious and irreligious to reform, diminish, enrich, and free with each other in contests which out-move and out-pull dialogical problems.

Contestant theology asks conspirational artistry's four questions to quadri-directionalize and quadri-dimensionalize the serious space of the interreligious encounter into the interreligious playce to exclaim God's ungraspability in terms of God's creative nature and generous purposes. Bewildering stories ask, *how does God teach us that we do not grasp God, through God's own ungraspability*? Humiliating friendships ask, *how does God teach us that we do not grasp God, through the presence of the differing other?* Un-limiting sparring asks, *what does being grasped by the ungraspable God compel us to add into the lives of differing others?* Re-creating partnerships ask, *how does being grasped by the ungraspable God keep faith going for all people?* In this bewildering, humiliating, un-limiting, and re-creating playce, contestants define the same moves (reforming, diminishing, enriching, freeing) in their own "Ways." As these ways differ, the hearts and spirits of differing people move with and pull at each other, playing past grave dialogical problems. Contestant theology conveys these movements as button combos on its theological controller for following the breath of the Spirit in keeping the game of thinking, living, and talking out God going with the play that ever-orients us to God and Paradise.

The *square-left-triangle-right* combo keeps Feldmeier's Jewish-Christian contest going. Pressing square relays how contestant Jews and Christians play through inarticulation to transformatively enrich each other by contributing layers of revelation and biblical doctrine to the shared pointing to the divine. Pressing left displays Jews and Christians playing through non-persuasiveness to un-limit each other from entrenched ideas of love and God's kingdom. Pressing triangle portrays both groups redirecting the quantum of violence into the energy of reforming private doctrines and utopian aspirations. Pressing right conveys Jews and Christians playing through social fragmentation to share sensibilities of re-creation for repairing the broken world. Overall, this contestant combo frames Feldmeier's Jewish-Christian contest as sparring and partnerships in which both groups continually ask and enable each other to add their recognitions of the divine into the lives of differing others, and to keep faith going for all people.

The *up-X-down-circle* combo keeps Feldmeier's Muslim-Christian contest going. Pressing up relays how contestant Muslims and Christians play through inarticulation with their bewildering stories about being grasped by God's awesomeness. Pressing X displays Muslims and Christians playing through non-persuasiveness by enabling each other to become less to be corrected and completed by God in mutual diminishment. Pressing down portrays both groups redirecting the quantum of violence into humiliating friendships which allow Christians to see God's awesomeness, and allow Muslims to see God's intimacy. Pressing circle conveys Muslims and Christians playing through social fragmentation to share sensibilities of being free to seek the nearness of God. Overall, this contestant combo frames Feldmeier's Muslim-Christian contest as storytelling and friendships in which both groups continually ask and enable each other to remember and learn God's ungraspability through the presence of the differing other.

The *triangle-up-square-right* combo keeps Feldmeier's Hindu-Christian contest going. Pressing triangle relays how both groups play through inarticulation to continually reform their individualistic religious traditions with new conceptions of the Divine. Pressing up displays both groups playing through non-persuasiveness with bewildering stories of passionately experiencing God's presence and absence. Pressing square portrays both groups redirecting the quantum of violence into the transformative enrichment that allows Christians to see God's unpredictability and allows Hindus to see God's recognizability. Pressing right conveys both groups playing through social fragmentation to share sensibilities of continually re-creating themselves and their expressions of devotion to God. Overall, this contestant combo frames Feldmeier's Hindu-Christian contest as storytelling and partnerships for asking and enabling each other to realize God's ungraspability, and to keep all faiths going in the grasp of the ungraspable God.

The *left-X-up-triangle* combo keeps Feldmeier's Buddhist-Christian contest going. Pressing left relays how contestant Buddhists and Christians play through inarticulation to continually un-limit their religious perceptions from closed minds and hearts. Pressing X displays both groups playing through non-persuasiveness in the mutual diminishment of helping each other notice their areas of blindness. Pressing up portrays both groups redirecting the quantum of violence into the bewilderment that enables people to let go of their need to know and continue on their path. Pressing triangle conveys Buddhists and Christians playing through social fragmentation to share sensibilities of reform in learning and love from pure hearts, good consciences, and sincerity. Overall, this contestant combo frames Feldmeier's Buddhist-Christian contest as sparring and storytelling in which both groups ask and enable each other to add their truths of God's kingdom and suffering into the lives of others, as a way of orienting hearts and minds to the ungraspability of God and ultimate reality.

The *X-down-circle-right* combo keeps Feldmeier's Zen Buddhist-Christian contest going. Pressing X relays how both groups play through inarticulation to share the mutual diminishment of emptying themselves to be with God and to live in their present moment. Pressing down displays both groups playing through non-persuasiveness with humiliating friendships which allow engagements with real people and situations without clinging to an over-bearing projection of holiness for protection. Pressing circle portrays both groups redirecting the quantum of violence into the unifying freedom of embracing ordinary life without relying on doctrines and conceptualizations. Pressing right conveys both groups playing through social fragmentation to share sensibilities of the ever-flowing, re-creating reality. Overall, this contestant combo frames Feldmeier's Zen Buddhist-Christian contest as friendships and partnerships for asking and enabling each other to recognize the ungraspable God through the differing other and keep each other going in recognizing the divine in the ordinariness of everyday life.

The combo *right-circle-left-square* keeps Feldmeier's Daoist-Christian and Confucianist-Christian contests going. Pressing right relays how each group plays through inarticulation by re-creating their religious ideas of Creation and social harmony. Pressing circle displays each group playing through non-persuasiveness in the unifying freedom of being available to and harmonious with sacred energies and human relationships. Pressing left portrays each group redirecting violence into un-limiting sparring that pushes people into new directions. Pressing square conveys each group playing through fragmentation to share sensibilities of transformative enrichment that leads toward a more well-defined and spiritual absolute reference. This combo frames Feldmeier's Daoist-Confucian-Christian contests as partnerships and sparring for asking and enabling each other to contribute their personal flourishing in God, the Dao, and social harmony into everyone's lives, as a way to keep them going through lifelessness and disorder.

The combo *circle-left-triangle-right* keeps Feldmeier's Indigenous-Christian contest going. Pressing circle relays each group playing through inarticulation to share the unifying freedom that emphasizes the interrelated existence of all things. Pressing left displays both groups playing through non-persuasiveness in un-limiting sparring that pushes each group to recognize good and evil spiritual influences in the material world. Pressing triangle portrays both groups redirecting the quantum of violence into reforming their religious ideas, allowing Christians to clarify their relationship with creation and allowing Indigenous cultures to clarify their involvement with spiritual powers. Pressing right conveys these groups playing through fragmentation to share sensibilities of re-creating the connections between creation, the divine, and humanity. This combo frames Feldmeier's Indigenous-Christian contest as sparring and partnerships for asking and enabling each other to cultivate connections to everything, as the way to keep going beyond relationships which damage the environment and other beings.

The *up-X-down-square* combo keeps Feldmeier's New Age-Christian contest going. Pressing up relays how both groups play past inarticulation to tell each other bewildering stories of moving past the status quo. Pressing X displays both groups playing past non-persuasiveness in the mutual diminishment of pouring into each other to gain spiritual insight into themselves and others. Pressing down portrays both groups redirecting violence into humiliating friendships allowing Christians to notice how their doctrines can be institutionally lifeless, and New Age people to notice how their innovations can be spiritually hollow. Pressing square conveys both groups playing past fragmentation to become something more with each other, in tradition-guided discipleship and intuition-led self-authorizing. Overall, this combo frames Feldmeier's New Age-Christian contest as storytelling and friendships for asking and enabling each other to learn God through God's ungraspability and with non-traditional others.

262

The *down-triangle-left-circle* combo keeps the Irreligious-Christian contest going. Pressing down relays how both groups play past inarticulation with humiliating friendships in which both groups teach each other that God is not their sole possession to selfishly conceptualize or deny. Pressing triangle displays both groups playing past non-persuasiveness in reform that allows Christians to reconsider their conceptions of God in light of science and critical thinking, and allows the irreligious to reconsider their denial of God in light of non-empirical insights and revelatory experience. Pressing left portrays both groups redirecting violence into un-limiting sparring that stretches the Christian worldview beyond a dependence upon religious authorities and stretches the irreligious worldview out of reliance upon limited human knowledge. Pressing circle conveys the irreligious and Christians playing past social fragmentation to share sensibilities of unifying freedom to pursue human flourishing, with or without God and religion. This combo keeps the Irreligious-Christian contest going as friendships and sparring for asking and enabling each other to learn God's ungraspability with differing others, beyond a singular devotion to sacred or secular authorities.

Overall, these combos enable contestant theology to out-move and out-pull interreligious dialogical problems with authentic spiritual directions for navigating life and all the ideals of the major theologies of religions. To be sure, contestant theology does not intend to confine the play theology of religion to the aforementioned combos. Instead, these combos are reliable templates for envisioning future Christian multi-directional and multi-dimensional interreligious responses. Likewise, each combo should not be understood to comprehensively articulate the nature of Christianity's contests with differing others. Instead, these descriptions preferably and properly play out as guiding frameworks which invite further development and correction, remembering that this is a comprehensive trajectory for moving ever *toward* the play theology of religions.

IV. Conclusion

Contestant theology travels a long way to "re-cognize" (to see again and to see anew) the primal premise of God's ungraspability in light of the primal principle of God's play. Over the course of this dissertation, the ideals of "dead" serious theologies of religions, which are stuck in grave dialogical problems, are gradually re-cognized in the conspirationally orthodox and artistic play of the contestant controller that follows the Spirit to move with and pull at religious playmates, via 1) the quadri-directional D-pad (bewildering, humiliating, un-limiting, and re-creating) 2) the quadri-dimensional action buttons (reforming, mutual diminishment, transformative enrichment, and unifying freedom). This play enables Christians to keep the game of being grasped by the ungraspable God going with differing religious and irreligious people without sacrificing the Christian identity, because it is patterned after the movements of Acts 17:28, "For 'In [God] we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we, too, are his offspring." Contestants play out Paul's exclamation with movements which echo the time-honored Christian practice of moving fingers upward, downward, leftward, and rightward to write the sign of the cross in the air, over oneself. This is the most basic and profound way to depict contestant theology – making the sign of the cross as a liturgical gesture for relying on the ever-present God, a fighting stance for playfully responding to different religions, and a pushing of buttons to continually engage differing others in the proper and preferable mode of religious expression – playing the game of being grasped by God that we do not want to end. The next sections present a conversational summary, anticipated contributions and criticisms, and a future research trajectory for contestant theology.

A. The Summary of Contestant Theology to Use for Quick and Easy Explanations

Contestant theology's biblical design (playful interpretation of Scripture) spiritual/ethical application (the life of faith resituated with play having a higher order of meaning) and theological scope (a theology of religions whose orthodoxy and orthopraxy is articulated in terms of playful motion with differing faiths) brings four talking points into the interreligious encounter: 1) we can never know enough about God, 2) our best ideas and language fall embarrassingly short of God, 3) we must push each other out of our singular contexts which cannot contain God, and 4) we must keep each other going toward God as religious playmates. Contestants step into the interreligious playce and exclaim, *I'm no longer afraid of failing to fully articulate faith, because I can keep telling you stories; I'm no longer out to persuade you, because I can be your friend; I do not want to minimize or bury the harm and pain of historical religious violence, because I can redirect the quantum of its force into un-limiting you from confinement to your singular context; we are different and separate entities, and we can still continually build new thoughts, occasions, and languages together, about God and Paradise!*

B. Anticipated Contributions and Criticisms of Contestant Theology

Contestant theology will encourage further considerations and research into how play grants the dialogical content and modes of expression for bringing interreligiosity and other esoteric theological ideas into relatable and relational life. This is because, at its core, contestant theology encourages theologians to "do" theology as the human beings which they actually are, and to say what they most deeply and truly wish to say about God, with their own human words, and on their own human terms, instead of allowing oneself to be puppeteered by the words and concepts of other individuals (no matter how valuable and venerated those words may be), and

265

instead of fetishizing mechanically technical language and logic. Put another way, contestant theology contributes a *playful humanness* to theologies of religions, and to theology as a whole. This is crucially important in this moment, which sees the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) such as ChatGPT, which can compose convincing essays for any prompt in seconds, or Dream AI, which can follow any prompt to compose exceptionally beautiful artwork with similar ease and brevity. These are impressive technological feats that threaten the value of human accomplishments, such as human theology. Yes, AIs can accurately analyze and synthesize theological insights into an essay (or even a dissertation) in a purely rational way, even projecting a semblance of emotion. Yet, it is unclear as to whether its machine-logic legitimately addresses the non-rational dimensions of human life in any way other than *appearing* to do so. Human theology, like human life, entails things that machine theology (at least for now) only imitates in its coldly "perfect" logic, such as absurdities, confusions, deficiencies, and shortcomings. While the implications of this insight exceed the scope of this dissertation, contestant theology does contribute a way to hold together play and religion in its way to be human and to do human theology in the deepest and truest way, in the face of increasingly powerful and complex AIs. Contestant theology may also set the stage to out-think these powerful machines, by unusually attending to randomness and non-seriousness.

Since contestant theology persistently incorporates relatable and relational human experiences into responding to God and differing others, it is intentionally open and subject to criticism. Indeed, how could something called *contestant* theology legitimately shy away from critical scrutiny and objectors, or – as the 2020s kids say – getting all the smoke? Unlike our potential machine replacements, human theologians do not have to worry about "the problem of a perfect argument," that is, being unable to advance a claim beyond what has already been

stated. Instead, deficiencies and shortcomings are part of keeping this game that we want to play forever going in a human way. For me, anticipating this criticism largely involves figuring out which mistakes I am willing to make, to say what I most truly and deeply want to say about God alongside differing others. Thus, when it comes to spotlighting the deficiencies in my Christian response to different religions and differing others, I err toward not being serious enough in engaging other religions, rather than making the mistake of treating them too seriously as unsolvable problems or ultimate threats. While my intention was to join non-seriousness to seriousness, I recognize that my orientation to non-seriousness entails weaknesses and limitations, such as overgeneralizing the traits of different religions and underexplaining the tendencies of differing people. Yet, non-seriousness is open to growth and correction in a way that seriousness, by itself, is not. This entails the aforementioned weaknesses in the short-term, but in the long run, cultivates and incorporates criticisms to make more well-informed claims.

I anticipate four categories of criticisms for contestant theology. One style of criticism will challenge contestant theology's scholastic credentials by saying that it is *not academic enough*, because it is a bewildering claim that does not make the intellectual moves which are currently held in high esteem, and it theologically values video games, anime, sci-fi movies, and comic books which are deemed as irrelevant and irreverent. A second form of criticism will challenge contestant theology's aspirational motives by saying it is *not humble enough*, because it is a humiliating claim that de-emphasizes modesty to share the inability to grasp God, to the consternation of so-called "experts" of God and religion. A third type of criticism will challenge contestant theology's capacity for virtue by saying it is *not ethical enough*, because it is an un-limiting claim that does not play by the rules of influential ethicists, social justice activists, political figures, ecclesial authorities, critical theorists, or cultural influencers. A fourth sort of

criticism will challenge contestant theology's overall usefulness by saying it is *not practical enough*, because it is a re-creating claim that continually builds new ideas without loyalty to production- and consumption-oriented ideologies.

I anticipate and welcome these criticisms, because I am addressing real people who, like myself, are not always academic, humble, ethical, or practical enough, and who do not grasp God, but recognize God in weird, unexpected, and irrational ways. Metaphorically speaking, contestant theology is like finding a seat on the bus ride shared with a wide range of real people, more than it is about driving in the space of one's own car. As such, it is a way of keeping Christians and Christianity in the interreligious conversation when they would rather not deal with others, and when others would rather not have them in their space, even though they both recognize God and Paradise inside and outside of traditional contexts. I write this dissertation as someone who, in his youth, first learned about heaven by finding the hidden sky world in Level 2-1 of the Nintendo video game *Super Mario Bros.* Obviously, this theological origin story radically differs from the starting points for foundational theologians such as Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth, biblical metaphysicians such as Robert Sokolowski, and decolonial specialists such as Vine Deloria and Ada-Maria Isasi-Diaz. Yet, we are all thinking and writing about recognizing God in our own ways, whether we consider ourselves as part of the game that we want to play forever or not, because this is the game that we are all called to play; it is not about grasping God, it is about being grasped by God, alongside of another and keeping the game of thinking, learning, and speaking about God going forever! For me, this is what theology is all about! I can't see how anything else could be better than this, but I am open to being proven wrong. My hope and my challenge for critics and supporters is to remember *your* version of finding God in the weird and unexpected way that is particular to you and only you – and

268

develop it into the exclamation that you can bring into the interreligious playce that you feel, with your whole being, is the greatest story ever told. To do this, you must criticize *and* construct – diminish *and* enrich – pull at *and* move with – *you must be a contestant*!

C. Future Trajectory of Contestant Theology

Contestant Theology is the game of being grasped by the ungraspable God alongside of a differing religious playmate. This play theology of religions discovers the interreligious game that is played forever, both because one wants to play it forever, and because one is called to play it forever within the grasp of God's play, which is God's generously unlimited paradigm for sharing life that is made visible in Jesus Christ and possible by the Holy Spirit. This forever game follows how S. Mark Heim draws from the *Divine Comedy* to envision differing people of faith attaining the ultimate destinies which they aim for. Yet, rather than a theology of religious ends, contestant theology moves toward a theology of religious *continuings*, following Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit through life's "Game Overs" to continually keep going via the "New Game" of playing with religious playmates in God's expanded boundaries of possibility and multiplied kinds of experienceable good – "a kingdom of play," as David Miller calls it, in his closing comments for *Gods and Games*.[87] In contestant theology, the ultimate destiny is keeping the game that we want to play and are called to play forever going with differing people, in the ever-learnable God's grasp and across the vista of ever-unfolding Paradise.

Contestant theology's ideal boils down to the phrase *keep going*. Thus, it naturally offers a future trajectory for further research. Just as David Miller closes *Gods and Games*, we will encapsulate future directions for the play theology of religions in four playful words. First, as we

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[87] Miller, *Gods and Games*, 176.

continue to see how the play theology of religions raises interreligiosity from the "dead" seriousness of dialogical problems, we may also continually realize that religion – etymologically remembered as the careful bringing together into lives of special devotion – is actually the game that is preparing us for the play of *theoligion*: the way of being brought together not by the most supreme and serious human efforts of deligion and meligion, but by God's generously unlimited non-serious seriousness – God's play! Second, framing the interreligious encounter as a playground expands Hick's universe of faith into a multiverse – or a *theoverse* – of faiths, in which God is less *central* and more *immanent* in the shared religious and irreligious dimensions. Third, as we continue to understand the value of playfully breathing together, we may also continually realize that the next move naturally describes how different religions and differing people laugh together in the *playtheism* that could somehow hold together panentheism's religious insistence of God continually becoming what God loves while transcending what God loves with atheism's irreligious discovery of meaning without God, in an embrace that resembles Batman and the Joker finding common ground at the end of *The Killing Joke* – reminding us of the *Living Joke* in 1 Corinthians 15:55's and Hosea's 13:14's taunt that forms the playful heart of the Bible: "'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?'" Fourth, future scholars may advance the conspirationally artistic concept of *playtonism* as a way to counter and unravel increasingly influential conspiracy theories which are weaponized by clown-nihlists who take glee in manipulating people with capricious and false worldviews. In these future trajectories, contestant theology keeps going in the biblical design, spiritual-ethical application, and theological scope of Acts 17:28 to play out the primal premise which ever questions our grave attempts to grasp God, and the primal principle which ever exclaims the game in which God grasps us.

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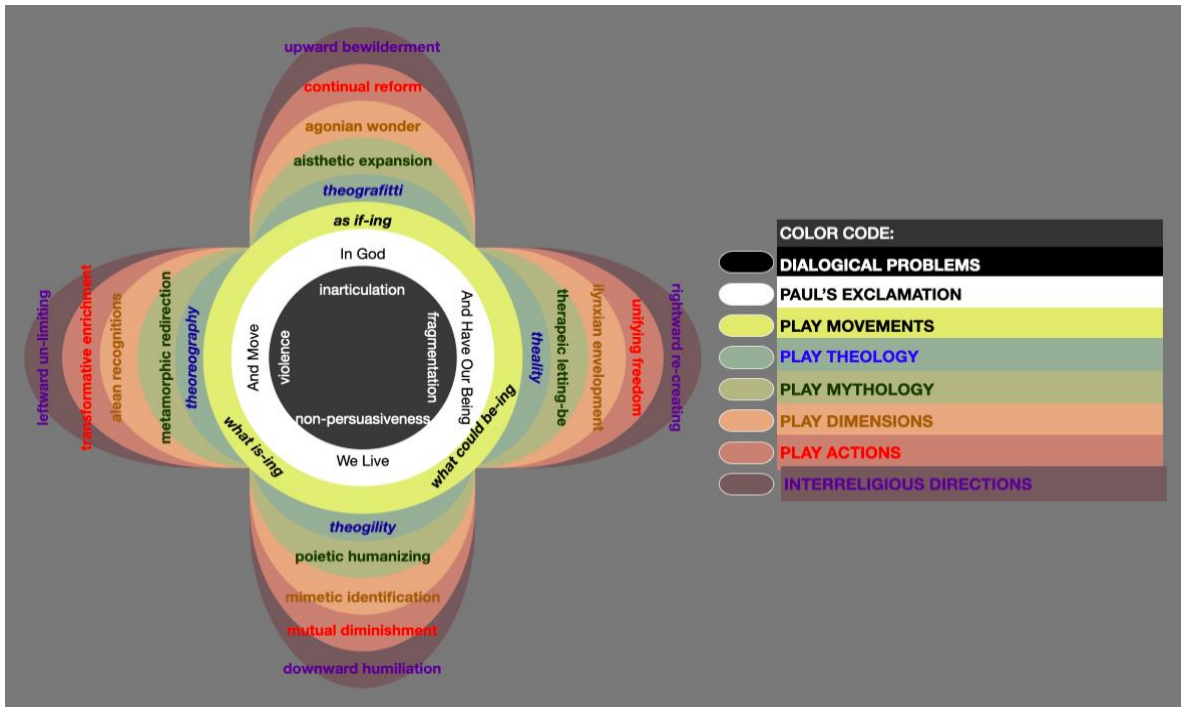
APPENDIX

Fig. 1: Jones, Jr., Gregory D. *Conspirational Orthodoxy Quadri-directionally Plays Through Dialogical Problems*, 2023. PNG File.
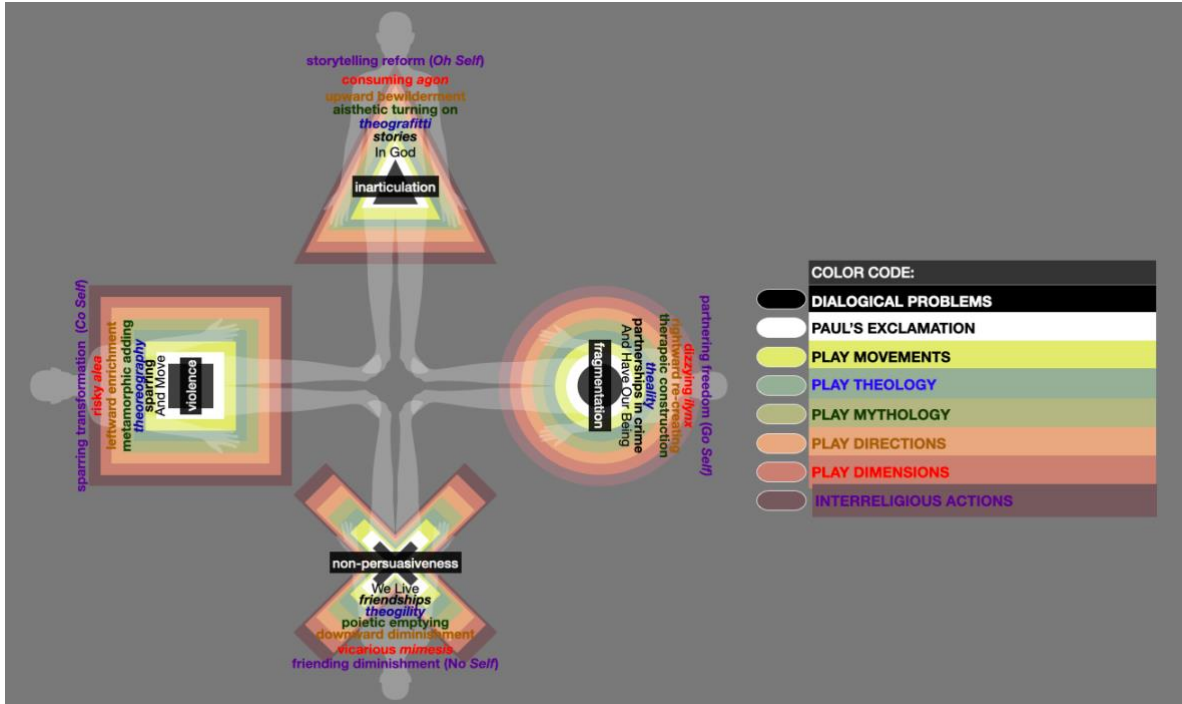
Fig. 2: Jones, Jr., Gregory D. *Conspirational Artistry Quadri-dimensionally Plays Through Dialogical Problems.* 2023. PNG file.
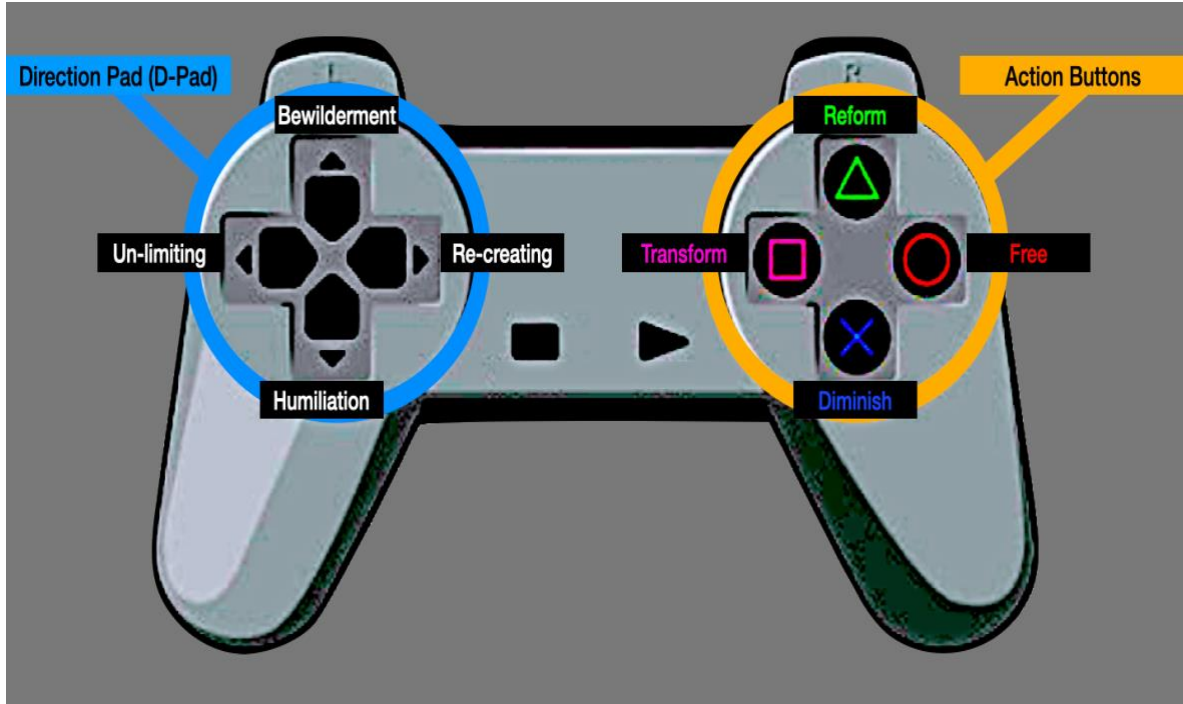
Fig. 3: Jones, Jr., Gregory D. *Contestant Controller*. 2023. PNG file.