

# On Knowing Humanity Journal

Creating a Christian faith-based approach to anthropology, incorporating insights from theology into ethnography and analysis, and allowing religiously committed anthropologists to speak freely of the ways in which their commitments inform their theory and practice. Raising new questions and lines of research on subjects such as: the significance of humanity's unique calling in nature for personhood and the construction of culture; the underlying reasons for humanity's destructive behavior toward self, others, and the environment; and the role that divine redemption and hope play in human lived experience and practice. Reincorporating teleology, in the sense of purpose, into scientific understanding, inviting dialogue between anthropologists and theologians of all persuasions into a deeper understanding of the human condition, and encouraging the doing of anthropological research and writing through the eyes of faith.

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# Relics and Icons: Their Role in Healing, Conversions, and Miracles

Darrell Pinckney

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This paper explores recent claims and experiences of healings, miracles, and religious conversions as expressed by members, parishioners, laity and clergy from the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches located in northeastern Pennsylvania. I choose the term *more recent* to describe the experiences of consultants which have occurred within the past ten years or less as opposed to those experiences described from previous years or centuries ago. The claims and experiences described by these consultants have had profound effects on them, leading to life changing beliefs. The claims are very real to the aforementioned interlocutors and many border on the realm of the supernatural. In the past, such beliefs in divine intervention have been dismissed by social scientist and cultural anthropologist camps as well as others who strongly adhere to objective, traditional science. In this paper, I will seek to demonstrate how prayer, relics and icons have had life changing effects on people who came into contact with them or had sought out help through prayer. The relics, icons, and prayer, therefore, are all authentic and instrumental to the faithful.

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## Introduction

Through the centuries people have recognized the physical and spiritual healings, mystical power, miracles, and religious conversions that have taken place through the intercession of saints, martyrs and other holy persons—especially through prayer, or by coming into contact with artifacts associated with saints and martyrs such as relics and icons. The same people seek the intercession of the saints and martyrs through God only, and therefore, are not seeking the help of saints and martyrs alone. Interestingly, not all those interviewed who have experienced a positive change were active members of either the Roman Catholic or Orthodox churches when they came into direct contact with a relic or icon. These people have expressed that it was through contact with the relics and icons, prayer, or a combination of activities that resulted in a positive outcome, change, cure, miracle or religious conversion.

## Some Historic Background

Christian relics are associated with specific people such as a saint, martyr, or confessor to a specific historic event associated with the history of

Christianity. But Christianity is not alone in the veneration of saints and relics. Other religions have also venerated relics and religious artifacts associated with their beliefs through their own history. For this I point to an Islamic relic which includes hair fragments from the prophet, Mohammed, that is currently secured in a dome-like reliquary in Mecca, close to the Dome of the Rock. “Relics of Mohammed, who died in A.D. 632, are like-wise revered, these being two hairs of the prophet which are kept in a reliquary resembling a domed temple that stands several feet high beside the huge rock in a building in Jerusalem called the Dome of the Rock” (Cruz 2015, 2).

The veneration of relics is not a new story. Throughout history, there have been many attempts—some successful, others unfruitful—to find the relics or remains of saints and apostles of Christ that early Christians had stowed away during times of Roman persecution. Helena, the mother of Constantine, for example, traveled to Palestine and Jerusalem between 326 and 328 A.D. to search for relics associated with the crucifixion of Christ. It is uncertain where Helena began her search for these relics following her arrival in the Holy Land.

It had been rumored that the True Cross was hidden in the Holy Sepulcher, which had been

covered with a mound of dirt and further concealed by the Jews by the placement of various pagan buildings in an effort to discourage Christian worship. Slightly different versions of the findings have come down to us. One maintains that only a few chosen Jews knew the exact location, and that one of these, named Judas, having been touched by divine inspiration, revealed the site to St. Helena (Cruz 2015, 61).

While some historians and scholars argued that there is enough of the “True Cross” to have been available to build a fortress, it is also interesting to note that the original True Cross—the cross used to crucify Christ—was reported not to have been affected by the taking of samples. “St Paulinus of Nola (ca 353-431 AD) in one of his letters refers to the fact that no matter how many pieces were removed from the cross, it grew no smaller in size. This has been likened to the miraculous multiplication of the loaves and fishes at the feeding of the five thousand” (Cruz 2015, 63).

However, relics were not always genuine, nor original, and because some unscrupulous characters with opportunist motives found prospects for financial gain, some relics were manufactured locally and artificially. They were then sold to naive pilgrims during their journeys to the pilgrimage sites and passed on to later generations as authentic. Furthermore, some clergy disapproved of the veneration of relics. “Gregory the Great for a time expressed displeasure with the interference, dismemberment or the removal of the remains of the honored dead from one place to another, although he offered to send the Empress Constantina some filings from Saint Peter’s chains, a type of gift often mentioned in his writings” (Cruz 2015, 5).

When the Second Council of Nicaea met in 787 A.D. at the Church of Hagia Sophia, the purpose was to restore the veneration and purpose of holy icons which had been suppressed in earlier times by Leo III.

The council declared that icons deserve reverence and veneration but not adoration, which is reserved for God. It was also decreed that every altar should contain a relic, a tradition that has been retained in both modern Catholic and Orthodox churches. (Encyclopaedia Britannica)

The Second Council of Nicaea made it clear that relics were welcomed back into the mystique of Christianity—that they could be fully venerated by the faithful, and furthermore, made to become a permanent fixture of any new churches erected, as

directed under Canon vii which reads, *Relics are to be placed in all churches: no church is to be consecrated without relics* (Catholic Encyclopedia 2021, n.p.).

The Council of Trent, which met in 1653, further sanctioned the veneration of holy bodies by the faithful. However, the Council also called for the abolishment of superstition surrounding them. For example, the twenty-fifth session reaffirmed it is not the relic of the saint that is powerful itself, nor is it the saint alone of whom the faithful request their intercession who affects a change for any positive outcome. It is through God alone that the saints intercede for the faithful. The faithful seek for help by asking the saint to pray for us. Hence, the Novena—where prayers are prayed by the faithful for nine consecutive days in the hopes that God will provide the help or grace one is requesting. So, as it is with Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox, parishioners do not worship the relics. They venerate the relics of the saints because of the way the saints demonstrated their love for others and their love for Christ. How the saints lived their lives became an inspiration to both religions.

To the Protestants, the veneration of relics was in direct violation of God’s first commandment, as well as a prolonged vestige of paganism. But as much as Protestants ransacked and destroyed the reliquaries, leaving remains of the relics and bodies of saints recklessly scattered in open view, Catholics were only too quick to salvage the artifacts, and many of the personal items and body parts of the saints were quickly retrieved and collected for safe keeping until such a time when Catholicism was restored to a more benign standing.

In the Introduction to *Relics and Remains (Past and Present Supplement 5)*, Alexandra Walsham provides a brief description of holy relics as a remnant of the complete holy being. The author also defines the power of the icon which she describes having equal holy power (2010, 12).

A relic is ontologically different from a representation or image; it is not a mere symbol or indicator of divine presence, it is an actual physical embodiment of it, each particle encapsulating the essence of the departed person, *pars pro toto*, in its entirety. In practice, however, the lines dividing these two have often been permeable. In ancient Byzantium and modern Eastern Orthodox cultures, icons function in much the same way as relics, while within the western Christian tradition pictures and statues that bleed, sweat, or shed tears exemplify the ease with which

images can make the transition from signifier to sacred object in their own right (Walsham 2010, 12).

Walsham views relics as living connections to history—as left-over traditions handed down from history, serving as a type of memorial that is in danger of departure. Walsham goes on to describe relics as spiritual electrodes that send sacred energy to a temporal sphere. What Walsham does not discuss in her chapter is how the holy relics associated with saints and martyrs were instrumental in helping the faithful to find spiritual and physical healing, nor does her chapter describe how the lives of the faithful were changed as a result of that healing process through relics.

Victor and Edith Turner, on the other hand, viewed relics and icons differently—describing them more like artifacts with sympathetic magic power that is symbolically associated with the person in order to gain influence over a particular situation. “This over-emphasis on signifiers at the expense of meaning led to the attribution of magic power to relics, paintings, and images; they became fetishes operating by principles of sympathetic and contagious magic, rather than serving as vehicles of religious and ethical ideas (Turner 1978, 197).

Having been one faith in the early church up until the Schism of 1054, the two separate faiths do share beliefs in, and veneration of, some of the same saints. For instance, both churches refer to the prophet Elisha’s remains, based on the following scripture passage:

Once some people were burying a man, when suddenly they saw such a raiding band. So they cast the man into the grave of Elisha, and everyone went off. But when the man came in contact with the bones of Elisha, he came back to life and got to his feet. (2 Kings 13:21)

Furthermore, some Christians who were either glorified by the Eastern Orthodox or canonized by the Roman Catholics are recognized by both churches, such as St Anthony the Great, St Augustine of Hippo, Basil the Great, Pope Benedict II, St Leo the Great and more. (The saints listed here were recognized by both churches prior to the Great Schism of 1054.)

### **Establishment of Canon**

The remains of saints and martyrs were viewed as holy and life-saving and were therefore held in high

esteem by Christians. So, veneration of saints by Christians began very early during the spread of the early Church. We can see in Acts 19:12 that items dropped by Paul were quickly retrieved and treasured by the faithful. Furthermore, the saints were often viewed as having direct consultation with God. Christians yearned to be closer to the saints and those martyrs who died for their beliefs even if it meant to share space with them in death in the cemeteries or catacombs. As the Christian population grew, especially in urban areas, organizations with devotion to Christianity began forming.

In some cities, Christians organized themselves into such funeral societies, and therefore it made sense for them to gather at their cemeteries. But even more importantly, many heroes of the faith were buried there, and Christians believed that communion joined them not only among themselves and with Jesus Christ, but also with their ancestors in faith. (Gonzales 2010, 110)

By joining a group such as a funeral society, the dearly departed were afforded a greater opportunity to share space with a holy person or saint—often where saints were concealed, such as in a catacomb. “To these Christians, the saints were very much alive to them. The saints were more present to the Church on earth, because the saints lived in the presence of God. The saints were not dead; indeed, they were more alive than the Church on earth” (Hahn 2018, 127).

Canon Law helped to prove the authenticity of the relics for public veneration. Authentication is required by the Roman Catholic Congregation for the Causes of Saints and must be sealed in a reliquary. Additionally, it must also be accompanied with a certificate of authentication signed by a member of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

Through the course of time, canons would be approved by Christian Church officials which would provide the proper parameters on the recognition of authentic relics. Canon Law, it was thought, would help to prove the authenticity of the relics so they could be publicly venerated by the faithful. Since then, the canons have been updated over the centuries by the Roman Catholic Congregation for the Causes of Saints, but not by the Eastern Orthodox Church. So authentication is required for relics in order to be publicly venerated and sealed in a reliquary within the Roman Catholic church. In addition, certificates of

authentication are then prepared for the relic that was authenticated.

While deceased members of the Eastern Orthodox faith are *glorified*, deceased members of the Roman Catholic faith are *canonized*. The veneration of saints in the Roman Catholic Church requires the deceased person to satisfactorily meet several stages in the canonization process. During the first stage, the member is referred to as Servant of God. If conditions are met at this stage, the process is then raised to the second stage of Venerable. After having met the parameters for this stage, the member is then raised to the third stage of Blessed. The fourth and final stage is canonization and the member is now referred to as a Saint if the Blessed has been proven to have performed two miracles after their earthly passing, although only one miracle is required for a confessor.

The relics themselves are remains of holy saints, martyrs and other holy people. “The word ‘relic’ comes from the Latin word, *reliquiae* which means ‘remains’ and therefore, may contain components of holy people that were venerated by the Church. ‘Veneration’ itself by definition means to have great respect or reverence for a person or object associated with said person. Reasons for extending such care and respect to the saint and associated relics are mainly due to the belief in the holiness of the soul of the saint which awaits the reunion with its mortal remains during the resurrection” (Pinckney 2021, 18-19).

*First-class relics* consist of artifacts associated with the passion of Jesus Christ. First-class relics may also consist of the remains of the holy saints, such as fragments of bone, hair, and skin.

*Second-class relics* consist of objects that have come into close contact with a saint such as clothing and artifacts associated with the saint that were used in their lifetime

*Third-class relics* consist of artifacts that have in the past, come into contact with first or second-class relics and may consist of remnants of clothing that have touched a first- or second-class relic.

Saints chosen by the Eastern Orthodox religion do not require the manifestation of miracles during the lifetime of the church member. However, they must demonstrate that they have lived a virtuous life, are endowed with recognizable holiness, and their writings or manuscripts are found to be completely within the Orthodox Christian tradition. Unlike the Roman Catholic nomenclature process, there are no assigned classes of relics for Eastern Orthodoxy as all Christians can become saints if they were baptized, chrismated

(E. O. form of confirmation) and received the Eucharist sacrament.

Through the work of the Holy Trinity all Christians could be called saints; especially in the early Church as long as they were baptized in the name of the Holy Trinity, they received the Seal of the Spirit in chrismation and frequently participated in the Eucharist. (Greek Orthodox Dioceses of America, 2021)

So, in the Eastern Orthodox faith all Christians must work to become saints. There are items that are considered to be miraculous—that is, having been bestowed with divine power such as the icons of Eastern Orthodox saints. The actual images which are prepared from paints from vegetable and mineral pigments, an egg yolk binder, water, and applied to canvas and finished with gold leafing are not alone worshipped. Rather, the inactive object of the content or subject matter is venerated. To the Eastern Orthodox, the images become the gathering place between the saints that are with God and the living parishioners. Likewise, the icons follow a sacred tradition. Like Saint Paul, Orthodox Christians do not merely imitate the way of Christ—in his words and gestures. Instead, they integrate the Lord’s way of life into their inner being. The same rhetoric is applied to the icons. Finally, many of the icons can appear dim or somber in shades or perhaps dimly lit because the iconographer (the artist who creates the icon) is avoiding shadows. That is, he is not illuminating the saint with any light source as light sources can cast off natural shadows. There is a logical reason for this and it originates with the saint—that is, the state of grace that the saint is in. This state is also found in God’s Kingdom where no shadows exist and all is surrounded with light.

In some cases, icons have been reported to stream holy substances, referred to as “myrrh” in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, and the images are therefore referred to as miraculous images. The myrrh that streams from the images is an oily substance, amber in color, and streaming down the icon where it can be collected on cotton wadding. Oddly, the oil streaming does not appear to cause any damage to the original artwork or framing surrounding it. In some cases, the framed icon may actually be a printed copy or lithograph copy of the original icon. The copy therefore, would begin streaming after it was touched by an icon that was already previously streaming myrrh

oil. In the past, attempts were made to explain the myrrh streaming phenomena. For example, members of scientific communities examined the icons, their encasements, and searched for hidden reservoirs, or other conduit-like devices that could have been found responsible for the steady streaming of myrrh. But the studies have not provided any objective facts (nor any conduits) that could explain the myrrh streaming phenomena and the effects it has had on believers—and not just believers from within the Eastern Orthodox church. Others outside of their membership have also come to venerate the myrrh streaming icons themselves that cannot be explained. There is even more difficulty in explaining the healings, miracles, and conversions that have occurred to people after they have come into contact with the myrrh streaming icons.

What do the relics and icons represent to both Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians today? Where Edith and Victor Turner (1978) viewed them as clothed in images or symbols (my wording—not a quote), and others saw them as representations of bygone eras and medieval facsimiles, I was curious if parishioners and those whose lives were permanently impacted by them viewed them as the meeting place between God and humanity. Additionally, it was important for me to understand how their lives changed by these artifacts and what the change meant to the believers.

### **Interviews with Participants**

The methodology I chose to discuss the experiences of consultants consisted of informal interviews from both Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic faiths. Volunteers were sought by the clergy from the parishioner bodies to include members from two Roman Catholic churches. While only parishioners of Roman Catholic faith volunteered (rather than clergy), the opposite phenomenon occurred among the Eastern Orthodox churches I visited. That is, only members of Eastern Orthodox clergy volunteered to be interviewed, rather than any of the members of the parishioner body. Here, clergy were interviewed from four churches and one monastery. Each of the consultants interviewed from both faiths were asked the same questions. However, due to the length of the responses during the study, not all of the responses can be discussed here. I had also consented to the consultant's desire to expand on their responses to questions and to freely allow themselves

to take the conversation where they felt most comfortable. Therefore, the interview questions I listed served more as a guide to seeking information than a rigid formula to follow (see the appendix). Hence, responses I included here may seem out of place or awkward. Nevertheless, I do believe these responses best summarize the faith and experiences of the consultants whose lives were impacted through prayer, intercession, or coming into contact with relics and icons from the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox faiths.

#### ***Louise***

Louise is 79 years of age and has been a devout Catholic for her whole life. She has a keen interest in relics, and prayer is an essential element of her spirituality. Through prayer, Louise has overcome many obstacles in life.

*Louise:* As time goes by, I'm going to reflect on my life. And yes, she [Mary, the mother of Jesus] not only brings you closer to Jesus, she also shares things about him that you would never realize, through what you read, what you've come across, she shares her son with you more and more. And then Saint Anne, two other times, she came to my rescue. And like you're saying about relics, I had the holy water from Saint Anne in Quebec. And with my last baby who died, they had trouble with me, my blood wouldn't reproduce, I had water in my lungs, they couldn't stop me from coughing, and they were really worried and I drank it and I asked her to help me. And she stopped it. They brought up machines after that and after all the coughing I did for hours, they thought it [the holy water] would damage my lungs. They took a picture and my lungs were fine. So that was two big times with Saint Anne.

#### ***Loretta***

Loretta is 66 years of age and came back to the church following a hiatus in church attendance. Having been willed a glove from Padre Pio, she has found helping people spiritually to be a calling for her since her return.

*Loretta:* The help that I turn to is Padre Pio. The first time was for my sister. My sister was 50 years old and she was diagnosed with emphysema. She was diagnosed at 41 with emphysema. And that's when I

prayed to Padre Pio on a daily basis to please let my sister live until her son understands and will remember her with good thoughts and memories. And she lived six more years—five years after she was supposed to. And she didn't die from the emphysema.

Loretta also spoke of a friend of hers whom she refers to as Pauley and who had a glove that was gifted by Padre Pio to Loretta's family [see Figure 1]. When Pauley had come into contact with the glove, he believed he heard a voice say, "Get on your knees and pray!" Loretta went on to describe the event.

*Loretta:* And he got on his knees and started praying. And then he said he felt this urge to go to church. So, when he walked into the church, all these people were praying to Padre Pio. So, he said to one of the people, "I have a friend—he has a glove. He has a Padre Pio glove." "He does?," they asked. "Could you bring it to us?" He said, "I'll ask him for it." And there his journey started. The night when he went down there with the glove, Padre Pio came to him in a bubble—in the image of a bubble. And the bubble broke and he woke up. He was saturated [with water]. So now he starts this journey of going to all these churches down in Jersey. He said, "Loretta, I wanted to go down to the shore and open a pizzeria. That's all I wanted!" This happened to him in 2003. He said, "That's all I wanted to do is go down and open a pizzeria down there. I didn't want to get involved in this. This wasn't where I was at."



**Figure 1**  
*Padre Pio Glove, 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Relic*

He told me he at one time was driving and he didn't know where he was going or what he was doing. But he had the glove with him but he didn't know where he was supposed to go and he got a phone call [on his cell phone]. He was just driving down—he didn't know where he was going. He was on the Garden State Parkway. He had no rhyme or reason why he even wound up on the Garden State Parkway. And he got a phone call from one of the women that he became close with, with the glove, and she said, "There's a friend of mine who's at a hospital with a friend of hers that does not believe. But she's dying. And she'd like you to go there and bring the glove." So, he went. He went into the hospital room. The woman was lying in the bed—she was still alive. And her friend was there. And he started praying and he took the glove out and touched her with the glove. When he touched her with the glove, he also had holy oil. And when he touched her with the holy oil and glove, purple lights starting shooting all over the room. And the woman [the friend in the room] said, "What are you doing, what are you doing with that?!" The woman that was sick smiled and she passed away. So now he got so upset, but it was a good thing because he felt she was at peace. He put her at peace. So now he gets upset because he saw these purple lights. He never experienced that before. And he was really upset about it. He leaves the hospital alone. He gets down to the parking lot but he forgot he left the glove in the hospital room. So now he said, "I had to go back! When I go back, the woman is still in the room in bed. Her friend is still there. When I walked into the room, I felt the energy of madness. They were angry. It was like the Devil—I know it was the Devil because I blessed her. And he [the Devil] wanted her to die and go to Hell. And she's not going." He said it was because she was blessed—so Padre Pio saved her. And the Devil was angry. He said there was such a bad energy in the room. He said he felt anger in the room. The woman—the friend in the room, did touch the glove. They prayed together also. She said to him, "What did you do? How did those purple lights appear?" Pauley said, "I can't answer you." And he took the glove and left because he didn't know what to say to her. He never experienced anything like that before.

This here is Alan. And Alan is now an almost six foot tall, thirteen-year-old boy. I was introduced to his mother. And this is just a cross and picture of him. Alan was this young [pointing to the picture] when his mother met me and the glove. Alan had heart disease. He had a very rare heart disease. He was going to

Columbian Presbyterian Hospital [Presbyterian Columbia University, Irving Medical Center, in New York City] and he had to wear a backpack for the medication for him to live. And when she [Alan's mother] came to my house—she lives like five minutes from me—she came to my house and we prayed and we rubbed it [the glove] on his chest and we said some prayers. She took him back to Columbia from within a month from that. “The doctors at Columbia were astonished!” Those are the words she told me—that the doctor was astonished that he was healing. Today, he doesn't carry anything. He takes oral medication and he's doing wonderful.

So, if you ever come across a dollar bill and it's stamped, and it says “Pray, Hope, Don't Worry,” that's Pauley! He stamps all his money. He bought a stamp saying Pray, Hope, Don't Worry. That's Padre Pio's saying. He [Pauly] had a company that flew banners. They flew Pray, Hope, Don't Worry. So, he's sitting in Jersey, down on the shore on the beach and waiting for the plane to come by. The next thing, here comes the plane. So, here's a kid saying, “Mommy, Mommy, what does that mean—pray, hope, don't worry?” She told him, “If you pray to God, you have to have hope, and wherever you're going, don't worry, God will take care of it.” Pauly turned around and it's this twelve-year-old boy and his mother is in a wheelchair. He's pushing his mother in the wheelchair! The company started flying it for free and people would call up and ask, “Who's flying that?” This woman was very persistent and wanted to know who it was. And the company called Pauly. They said, “Listen, this woman wants to speak to you.” He said, “Okay, give her my number.” She called Pauly and thanked him because she was going to commit suicide that day and she said, “I knew that was meant for me and I want to thank you for doing that.” He's touched many, many lives—with the glove, the banner—he's really done so many things. All he wanted to do was open a pizzeria on the Jersey shore, but God has him on this journey—but he loves it. He's probably 64 or 65 years old.

### ***Phil***

My quest to find truths about relics and icons led me to an Orthodox church. Here, I had the pleasure to meet and speak with Phil—a member of the laity and a chemist whose family originates from the Carpathia area in eastern Europe. Phil had the unique ability to blend his views on religion and science together and

personally witnessed an apparition while visiting Russia.

*Phil:* Don't limit. Because what you do when you do that, you're kind of limiting God to speaking in those terms. Because God can reach people in all cultures. [Here, Phil is describing his worldview on people who compartmentalize science and religion when discussing God. He goes on to describe his own view of relics.] So, is that what we need to learn from that bizarre philosophy today, just like Saint Basil learned the Aristotelian philosophy in order to express himself? And that's what I learned from my scientific perspective. It's interesting to learn science, but it's not the end for me. And I think for a lot of people, what happens is, where you get the conflict, is science is an end. And so, when the science is an end, there's a conflict. When the science is seen as a progression, to help with the faith, there's no conflict. I'm fascinated with all the chemistry—the analysis of the shroud [of Turin], of the cross, etc. But in the end, does it matter? I had some interesting experiences. I was over in Russia when it was breaking up. It was less than a month before the change occurred in Moscow. You could see that it was all crumbling. It was just in Moscow itself that it was still intact. I was in St Petersburg at the Saint Xenia church and they have like a tomb there. It's a mausoleum, you could call it. We were on a small tour group—eight of us total. It was mid-July. We went to the earliest liturgy there was. It was probably 7 in the morning. We couldn't go on any of the tour groups because it was so early yet. I had gotten to the church. And there's this gigantic cemetery around the church. You could actually go inside. She was there—she was actually there! She was dressed in gray. It was this old woman. How she got in? She just showed up. It was very peaceful. When it was taking place, we kind of just looked at each other. Afterwards, when we were walking around the cemetery later on, we said, “That was Saint Xenia!” Because, from icons of her, we recognized her. She kind of like just nodded. She made some motions. She nodded her head. It was totally out of the blue.

It's interesting. We live in a very materialistic society. Communism was total materialism in a sense. When people had nothing from that, with what the communists were offering, this could be why they were turning to that as a thing. And they actually found something spiritual in the material. That's what hit me when I was over there. And it really deepened my faith. There's actually a presence. I think that best way I

could actually explain it, with relics, is there's like this presence of something beyond here. From our perspective, we see ordinary life. But there are two ways to explain it. These people living here were touched by holiness. Like in the Acts of the Apostles, people wanted to touch the garments of Peter, even the shadow, because it was something tangible. The same thing with iconography. There's something to it—it's visual but there's something beyond the icon. And that's what I think what it is with the relics. That somehow, something—if you want to use the word 'dimension', has touched, and they defy our understanding of materialism. The heart regarding faith. There's something there that has to draw you. If you try to put this all into a much bigger scheme of things, all of these things are just done as a means for God to draw us to him. So, if you have a friend that has cancer, and relics and prayer bring what you desire is the result, is the whole thing because God is interacting with you to draw you to him? Relics aren't magic. In a reasoning sense, if you have a relic of Saint Basil, and somebody received a cure from that, then that's what they do, then everybody would believe. Those relics would be the same thing every time. Science would say you receive a cure every time. There we are just seeing them in the material sense. Is the relic the meeting place? In other words, is there like this holiness or sanctity or something in that relic? Then some people would say, then why do I need a relic if God is everywhere? I could be in the middle of a desert with no relics or no anything. That is sanctified and God could help. If so, then why does he use these other instruments [relics]? It's to bring people to himself. Sometimes I think because we are at this age, so we are so much more advanced, but there is no way to take care of this thing now [an ailment], the same means that worked 2000 years ago will work today if you have faith. And that faith was the same back then as it is now. When does a relic come into being? When you go back to the Acts of the Apostles, Peter was still alive. He was still present. Even his shadow. When you go back to Moses—the darkness—the unknowingness' of God in a sense. Again, I ask myself the purpose. For example, Saint Basil—he lived for a century. With Saint Basil's church, in which I was raised in, I find myself so much in tune with him when I read about him. A person who lived back so long ago. Is that what brings the connection? Or is that why I renovate the relics? It's something I first did without thought—I just did it. And I, not knowing who Saint Basil really was.

### *Father Cassidy*

At an Orthodox seminary, I met up with Father Cassidy—a member of the clergy from the seminary. To start off our conversation, we began talking about the holiness of objects and substances which led to a discussion on holy water. He has a personal interest in relics and icons and shares how a myrrh streaming icon impacted the lives of people he knows. He begins here with a discussion of the effectiveness of baptism.

*Fr. Cassidy:* And so, the blessing of water takes the water from the fallen world, and asks God to make it water that is essential in communion with him—sacred water. That happens in part on that day because when you and I are baptized, in part, the baptism is washing of the outside of the person. What you would call a holy bath. However, what's really happening is the cleansing of the soul. So, there's an external part to the baptism and an internal, unseen part. When Jesus was baptized, he didn't have any need for that cleansing, especially on the soul, because he was perfect as God. So, what happened was when he touched the water, the water didn't cleanse him, he cleansed the water. So that's our perspective on holy water, what holy water does, and where it comes from.

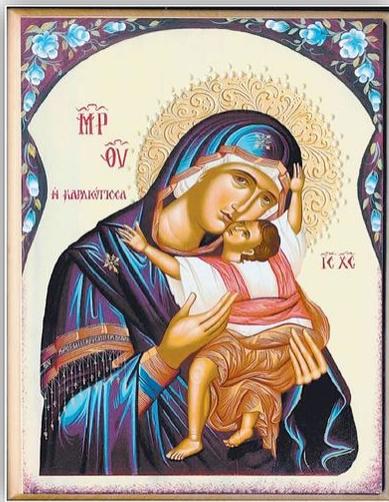
We have in the monastery church, the relics of fifteen to twenty saints. The chapel there, where there is a reliquary, has all of the Apostles. The whole place is a reliquary. There are lots of relics here at [the seminary].

One saint that has become particularly dear to our family is Saint Xenia of St Petersburg [c. 1719–1730–c. 1803, who is a patron saint of St. Petersburg. After the passing of her husband, she gave all her possessions to the poor], who is known to help people to find jobs and we thank Saint Xenia for helping our daughter-in-law to find a job recently. I often ask the intercession of Saint John Chrysostom. He's universally considered the greatest preacher that ever lived by everyone including the Baptists that knew he exists. So, it would be routine for me to ask his intercession for my teaching or my preaching.

*Interviewer:* Had any phenomenon occurred while praying for the intercession of the saint associated with the relic during the time of need?

*Fr. Cassidy:* I could tell you one personal story and I could tell you a few anecdotes that are not my personal stories. My personal story is there is a miracle working and myrrh streaming icon called *Kardiotissa*, "The Tender Heart" [See Figure 2] which means

related to the Mother of God, that is down in Taylor, PA. This icon has been streaming myrrh for a long time—like years. When I say streaming, I will share with you that I am not a skeptic of these things. But I am a Thomist—I have to see it to believe it. And until this experience, I never saw it before. November, a year ago, we had a meeting here of the missionary board I serve on. The board members came from around the nation. And one of them is a friend who was the pastor of this church in Taylor. And they asked—could he bring his cion? The abbot said that would be fine. It had visited here before.



**Figure 2**  
*Kardiotissa Icon Reproduction*

*Fr. Cassidy:* Often times, by the way, we will refer to those icons as if they were people. So, they might say, “she’s” visited here before, not “it.” It’s a very personal kind of thing. So, this wonderful, miracle-working icon was brought out here and came into the church of the monastery church and was in a glass case about that size [points to an 11” x 12” frame much like a shadow box]. And it had a big glass on a hinge. So, the glass is kind of to protect the icon from too much lip prints or something [indicating how pilgrims kiss the icon], stuff like that. The glass—it was like its own ecosystem. There was so much myrrh in there that it was raining on itself. The glass was completely dripping on the inside and at the bottom, about right here [indicating where a cloth was located] was a big wad of cotton swabbing—wadding they might call it or batting. Anyway, it was a big stack of it down there. Completely, dripping, soaking wet like you could wring

it out like a washcloth. And all of the myrrh is coming from that icon for years and years and years. The priest went through the church and he put the cion like this [indicating a tipping motion] and it would just pour into your hands. And he went around and like poured it into the hands of many people that were there. Then after we served the service, he put the icon on the stand in the middle of the church where it’s on an easel like a podium. And we served a beautiful service of Thanksgiving or intercession to the Mother of God or something like that. And then he tore a big piece of that cotton and gave it to me for me to stand there and to anoint people when they would come up and kiss the icon. And then they would turn to me and I would anoint them on the forehead with the myrrh or their hands if they wanted. And I probably anointed a hundred or hundred and fifty people. And I’m telling you there was more myrrh in my hands when I finished than when I started. It’s just myrrh, myrrh, myrrh, everywhere—myrrh. I did not experience a healing, although I wish I would have. I did not experience any particular sense of comfort or peace but more bewilderment like “whoa!” But what I did experience is this: The question came to me, what am I supposed to do with my hands now, because when you come in contact with something that miraculous, if you wash them, you would be dirtying your hands. If you’re hands are just completely drenched in this holy oil, if you washed your hands with soap and water you’re dirtying them, as nothing else would be more pure or holy [than the myrrh oil].

### *Father Lawrence*

From my trip and visit to an Orthodox church, I had the pleasure of listening to the church celebrant, Father Lawrence, talk about the Eastern Orthodox icon, the Kardiotissa. Fr Lawrence shared stories with me about the Kardiotisa and how the myrrh streaming icon changed the lives of many.

*Fr. Lawrence:* There are some amazing things that happened over the course of time—just mind boggling. We even had a man die here in the church. He had a massive heart attack during one of our Wednesday services. And I took the icon [Figure 2] back and it dripped on him. The nurses were doing compression on him—CPR. There was no respiration, no heartbeat—nothing! When the myrrh hit his chest, he made a whoosh sound. He took a deep breath, opened his eyes and started singing, “Oh Mary, Mother of

God, pray for us! Mary Mother of God, pray for us!” It was wild! He’s since passed—not from a heart attack—he lived for another five years. When they got him to the hospital [during the heart attack at the church], they could not find anything wrong with him or what caused the heart attack.

I always liked this one: This was a woman who had an inoperable brain tumor. There was nothing they could do because of the location, the size, all of that. She was just waiting to go. And a friend of her’s had come here. And I gave out some myrrh. She grabbed an icon card, took it back to her. And she was a woman of some faith, but not some extreme religious person. For lack of options, she decided to sleep (she anointed herself every night with the myrrh), went to bed, and slept with the myrrh and icon card under her pillow. And one morning she woke up and just to find a mass of this stuff on her pillow. So, it scared her to death. So, she jumped up, grabbed her pillow, got herself together and she said she felt fantastic! She went to the hospital and the first thing they did was analyze the stuff on the pillow. That was the tumor! It had come out her nose during the night.

There was another one and this one I like a lot because we have a lot of experiences with couples who are unable to have children, coming a lot to see the icon. And with this particular one—they were from Ohio and they’ve been trying to have a baby for ten, twelve years. “Nothing,” the doctors said, for various reasons and they [the couple] never gave up hope. Also, they came out, made the trip from Ohio to here for one of our Wednesday night services. We didn’t have a lot of myrrh because we came off of a big trip from a big church and gave everything away. And so, it takes time for it to accumulate so we didn’t have a lot. So, the sub-deacon’s brother, gave her a little tiny piece [the myrrh-soaked cotton] and she took it and ate it! I never saw that before. So anyway, a couple of weeks later, I get an email—she’s pregnant! She carries the baby to term without issue—goes through delivery smooth—everything’s good! The baby is born—a little boy—and the doctor’s watching, the nurses are watching after the baby to make sure the hands are moving, the feet are moving and functioning as it should. And, they notice that the little guy’s fists were clenched and he wasn’t moving his fingers. And being a little concerned, they watched. Finally, the left hand opened up, the fingers move, but not the right one. So, they gently pried his fingers open and sure enough, there’s a piece of cotton in the little guy’s hand!

We get people coming from all over the world to visit the site and ask for her intercession. We had a nun from the Holy Land—she was diagnosed with terminal cancer. She stayed in the church for three days—stayed here and prayed with the icon constantly. Went back to the Holy Land and I found out about a year and six months later—no cancer. It was gone.

I even had a couple of scientists come once to debunk the thing. They couldn’t—and they were so arrogant, I mean rude! I was cooking in the kitchen, and I didn’t expect them. I was in the kitchen making something for a festival. And I just let them in the church and left the icon out for them. They were very arrogant and I left them to do whatever they needed to do. I left them for about a half hour or 40 minutes. I came back in and here’s both of them—and they’re research doctors with PhD’s—and both of them on their knees in front of the icon crying. And they apologized. They said, “we didn’t realize what we were going to find.” So that was pretty amazing. They came with one purpose and left with a change of mindset.

### *Father Stephen*

At another Orthodox church, I interviewed the church celebrant, Father Stephen who began talking about his daughter who had injured her arm during play. He responded by helping the child with applying healing oil from Saint Nektarios.

*Fr. Stephen:* I got this oil of Saint Nektarios and rubbed it on her arm and probably 10 minutes later she’s happy and bouncing around with no problem. Another man I knew—he converted. He married a woman from Macedonia. He had a tumor the size of a grapefruit on his colon. And so, she [his wife] was anointing him with this oil every day. They were gonna take his colon out because they couldn’t separate one from the other. So, they went in and it came out sooner than it was supposed to and they came out to her and said, “What’s happened?” The doctors said, “Well, we went in there and instead of being this thing the size of a grapefruit, it detached itself from the colon and it was flat like a pancake that was full of some weird oily substance we couldn’t quite explain.”

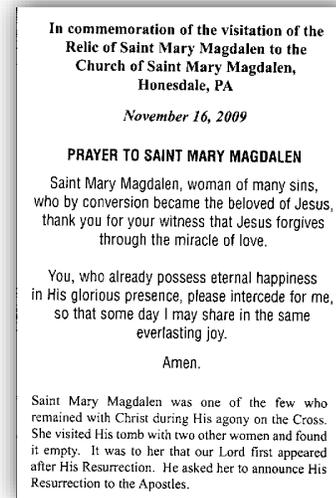
There’s a story about him [St. Nektarios] where they couldn’t get a bishop or couldn’t get a priest for a long time because it’s a remote area. They finally wrote the bishop and said thanks for sending us a priest. They were like what are you talking about? He came, he married people, he buried people, he baptized,

chrismated, preached, he was fantastic! “Well, who’s this priest, we don’t know anything about it!” So, they went up there. They looked at the records and it said Archbishop Nektarios. And they took it to a handwriting expert and he said, this is his handwriting. So, things like that happen around him all the time.

### *Lizzie*

Through a Roman Catholic church, I interviewed a family that was contacted by the church for my research and met Lizzie. Lizzie is the spouse of Jeffrey and they have three children (three girls). I had the pleasure of meeting with this family at their home. The family are active parishioners in a local Roman Catholic church. They have access to relics which they include into prayer daily. Lizzie was personally affected by prayer and relics.

*Lizzie:* That’s the thing about relics—they’re filled with Jesus. My friend had a profound conversion experience with the tibia of Mary Magdalen. It was on tour [See Figure 3]. And she was interested in the Catholic church at the time. She was agnostic. As she was asking questions, and seeking answers, she went to some people she was getting to know through the church and was interested in the relic, which is unusual, because if you’re not Catholic, or even are Catholic, you’re going to see someone’s body parts [laughs]. It was a little strange. And she went and she describes going, not like with an understanding of what she was doing, and she started weeping. Mary Magdalen was in front of her and she just started weeping. It was a big moment. Later she was baptized, confirmed, etc. Now in September, she’ll be making solemn vows with the Hawthorne Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne, NY!



**Figure 3**  
*St. Mary Magdalen Commemoration Card*

*Lizzie:* Why do we venerate the saints? Because there’s a God in Heaven and we see examples of people like us and that gives us hope. All of this should be geared toward a relationship with the Lord. So, if you’re venerating relics, it’s to increase our devotion. A friendship with the saints is ultimately ordered to love Jesus and worship God. Like the church, you should go to mass every Sunday to stay in a relationship with God.

As Jeffrey pointed out, by vehemently rejecting the concept that one can just get what they want by doing some things and obtaining some powerful artifacts, we are instead turning to Christ. Like Jeffrey, I concur

that this is where the confusion enters occasionally into one's Christian faith. The holy artifacts, or relics—once part of the saint or once part of a saint's life in some way—are not magical objects that can be rubbed like a magic lamp to have one's wishes granted. They are holy and they are there to remind the faithful that the saint, during their lifetime, did all they could to live the life that Jesus requested of them, or to accept similar pain and sufferings as Christ had. Some have died in his name and they are the martyrs. So it is really through Jesus Christ that we seek help, aid, and assistance for our troubles and concerns, and not the relics of the saints alone.

*Interviewer:* Which saint do you pray to most frequently?

*Lizzie:* You know the reason I have such devotion to Saint Anne is ten years ago—I was raised Catholic, baptized, and went through all the sacraments of the time. And I fell away from the church. In high school and college. And I happened to be very anti-religion and very sad. Starting in 2011 it changed. I used artificial contraception. I was no longer doing anything that made that necessary. And I was becoming less and less comfortable with that. But I was so ready to give it up but afraid to go off of it. Maybe I wouldn't be able to have children when the time came. And I remember it was this time of year, and I ran into the church but was supposed to fill it [the prescription] and I forgot to. So that night I went to bed and I had a dream that I had a child—I had a daughter. And the only thing given to me was this baby and I had to name her. It was up to me to know the name—what it was. So, I'm looking at this baby and it came into my heart that this is Anna.

I woke up that morning and I met this woman with a devotion to Mary Magdalen. She was a new, zealous Catholic, so I wake up in the morning and I see it is the Feast of Saint Anna. That's interesting. And I read about her. I found out that she was against birth control. So I just stopped. I never filled it again. It felt like it was the first time I really had a relationship with a saint. I was finally at a place where I wanted to be a mother. For all those years, I was very anti-motherhood. It felt like it was an invitation from her to trust her: "Just trust me on this. You don't need this. I'm going to take care of this." Fast forward a couple of years, I'm being married and had our first daughter. And we did encounter her relic on our honeymoon. We saw her relic in Quebec City, Canada. That was the first time I think where, like through the intercession of saints, I was asked to do something very definite. That was a very spiritual sense.

### *Gretta*

Through a Roman Catholic church, I met with Gretta who has years of teaching experience in the elementary schools. She too held a similar view of relics as Lizzie. That is, the faithful ask the saints to pray for us on our behalf in Heaven, and the faithful do not ask the saints directly for assistance.

*Interviewer:* Have you prayed to ask the saints or martyrs to pray for you (for assistance)?

*Gretta:* Yes. Not actually praying to them. When I teach, I always teach to be careful in how you use the word "pray." The definition of prayer is opening our hearts and communicating with God. So, when you talk to people who are not Catholic, or children who wouldn't understand, they may think that they're God or a substitute for God. I say, "No, we ask their prayers for us." That's why we say, "Saint Anthony, pray for us," "St John the Evangelist, pray for us," because we're asking them to intercede for us.

The interview came to a close when Ida [a lady I interviewed for the research] stopped by and mentioned how in history they would only bring the relics out during communion because the people were taking them home. Some would do dark stuff—even with the Eucharist. I do recall through prior research how those involved with Black Magic, Voodoo, and other dark arts, would include holy artifacts, crosses, and such in ritual, which to the Christian is blasphemy and against God. One just never knows what some other person's intentions are. Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox parishioners are protective of their faith and protective of those they love. So, it is no wonder that both churches and their parish members are protective of the relics, the Eucharist, and other religious artifacts that are blessed with God's authority. Perhaps those lost in those dark practices should be prayed for as the saints would have done the same. The light of God's love is there for all, and for those who became lost along the way.

### *Carla*

Through a Roman Catholic church, I met and interviewed Carla, a 53-year-old woman and artist. Carla's belief in the power of relics was very strong.

*Carla:* I think that's what attract me so much to relics. Saints don't care who you are, they don't care

what you believe or don't believe. It will heal people no matter what religion you are. If you think about it, from the beginning of time, people honored their dead. We still honor our dead. They put them in cemeteries or in crematoriums and on a shelf. But we still honor the dead. So why would we not honor the dead saints? They were given a grace by God and accepted it. So, God lives within them as he lives in each of us and that's how I look at it. And I think that's why the dead should always be honored because he is in them. They are part of God. So, for me to have a relic of a saint, it doesn't change the fact that it was part of God and is still there.

### *Christy*

Christy is 60 years of age and a Roman Catholic who prayed to Mary for assistance to help her with her physical ailments. She can now do many physical activities she was unable to perform before choosing to pray for assistance.

*Christy:* They had this one particular icon. It was an icon of Our Lady. It's from Hawaii, "thy holy icon, O Lady Theotokos, blessed myrrh has flowed abundantly." And it's a myrrh streaming icon. I was singing with St Tikhon's from September of 2011 and this was in 2012, Memorial Day weekend, because they had the icon there. I was having problems going up and down the stairs. I was getting real bad heart palpitations and getting winded. I couldn't breathe. And so, I'm standing in line for Bishop Michael to anoint us with the myrrh from the icon. And it was funny because he was saying everybody's name as they came up. And all of a sudden, I get up because I'm not well and I say, "Momma, you are the divine nurse, you have to do something. There's something going on with my heart, I can't do anything about this. I have no insurance right now. I have no doctor, you have to handle this." And I get up and Bishop Michael literally looks at me and goes, "Oh hand maid of the Lord" and anoints me and I feel this warm rush go right through me. And I had it happen a couple of months earlier, the same thing happened when he anointed me on the Feast of Saint Nicholas. But so, I had this sensation of this warm rush going through my body and said to one of my friends, "I'll be right back. Stay here." And I went inside St Tikhon's. I walk in, and to test it, I ran up and down the stairs three times and I was like, "Thanks Mom!" And I literally, from that

point on, have had no issues going up and down stairs, losing my breath or any. That was one episode.

### *Father Mark*

During the course of my research, I was put into contact with Father Mark who serves an Eastern Orthodox church, a sixty-nine-year-old of Russian-Ukrainian descent. He too expanded on the significance of the myrrh streaming icons and how the myrrh streaming oil was analyzed in laboratories.

*Fr. Mark:* With the original icon, which is the Hawaiian icon, was brought to St Mark's and the priest found out that his icon was streaming. But the original Hawaiian icon they asked [name unclear] of Russia if they could have it analyzed. He agreed and the caretaker of the icon was going to be in Pennsylvania, agreed to it. They went to three different laboratories. And each laboratory did not know that they were analyzing it. And the result was, they found a rose fragrance that's indicative of the Garden of Gethsemane where the Mother of God reposed. The oil was from the olive tree in Libya, an Orthodox monastery, but that olive tree has been extinct for one hundred and fifty years. And the third thing [ingredient] they found was that water and oil used—usually, oil rises to the top—but this gels together with no problem. And each laboratory discovered that. So how did the rose from the Garden of Gethsemane get to the icon? How did the olive oil that's indicative to a monastery in Libya that's been extinct for 150 years get to this icon? And the fragrance is very important.

A woman had stage four pancreatic cancer. I went to her home, anointed her with the holy myrrh, prayed to the Blessed Mother for her holy intercession and the intercession of Saint Genevieve and other saints. I forgot I was visiting her and I remember I didn't do a follow up on her. So, I decided to call her. When I [originally] visited her, she was in a hospital bed, fourth stage, receiving palliative care. And I said to her daughter, "How's Jean? I haven't talked to her." Her response: "She's doing the dishes, Father, want to talk to her?" I am not surprised, not impressed by miracles, because miracles are normal in the church. See it every day.

### *Edward*

From a Catholic church, I had the pleasure to interview Edward, a parishioner who has been a

Roman Catholic for his entire life. Edward believes strongly in repetitious prayer, what he calls discipline, in order to receive divine blessings and assistance which he believes helped to save his life.

*Interviewer:* Was there any cause or concern attributed to illness, misfortune, and you made a request for guidance?

*Edward:* I bought a new truck seven years back. I was living down in Long Island at the time. And I'm driving along Sunrise Highway and it's like a seventy-mph highway. And all of a sudden, this new truck, decides to stop. I didn't know what was wrong with it. I couldn't move and it was in the worst place. It was a bend and with concrete embankments on all sides. There's no shoulder. And people are zipping by me blowing their horns because I'm stopped. You can't see me because you're coming around this curve and there I am. I'm just going, "Mercy, God, mercy, God." And I opened the [passenger] window—I was going to go out the passenger window because the cars were just missing my truck. All of a sudden, I hear a beep and there's a tow truck next to me with his lights on in the next lane so people can see him. He goes, "you need help?" So, I said, "yeah!" He got out and put cones out and he towed me off the road. That's immediate answer to prayer. I'll never forget that. I just felt the presence of God right there. There's been other times too. Simple, nothing exaggerated. But these things happen to everybody in their lives and they don't understand it. The response that I got is because I'm a Catholic, it's because I say Hail Mary's, it's because I do things over and over again. The first response I had was to pray to God right away for mercy! That's the discipline. It's like the soldier who's doing 500 pushups. It's like the marathon guy running 25 miles. It's over and over again because it strengthens us. It forms us—it becomes part of our being.

### *Ted*

At a Roman Catholic church, I interviewed Ted, a parishioner who has also been a lifelong Catholic. Ted briefly described some of the history surrounding the apparitions of the Virgin Mary that occurred in Medjugorje, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the Risen Christ statue, also located in Medjugorje.

*Ted:* Are you familiar with the Divine Mercy? In the book, she's recommending that everyone do the Divine Mercy every day at 3:00 pm [the hour of Jesus'

death]. When I came back from the cabin, my wife had all these papers spread all over the floor. She said "we're going to Medjugorje." I truly believe that was divine intervention—to get her to go there. As soon as we got close to where the apparitions were happening, there was a peace that came over us, and I can't explain it to this day. We were there five days and the whole time we were there, that peace was there. Once we left, it was back to the regular real world. The site is located in Kosovo. Phenomenon has been occurring since in 1981.

The knee of the Risen Christ is in Medjugorje, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Water droplets—all over. You wipe them off, and they reappear. And they have been tested and they are human tears. I believe the statue was put there 1991. But it didn't start leaking tears until around 2004. Some of what I read is because [the knees] that's as high as the Blessed Mother could reach while Christ was on the cross. A little background . . . there are 6 kids that know 10 secrets. When the secrets are going to be made available to the world, 7 days prior to the secrets being announced, the visionaries will tell the priest which has already been contacted. That priest will pray for 7 days and fast. Three days prior to the event happening, that priest will notify the world. There will be a permanent sign given (the third secret) that no one will be able to explain. The theory is that the twenty fifth of June, 2021, is 40 years, which represents 40 years in the desert, 40 days here. They think it's very symbolic but nobody knows because the visionaries will not say the secrets until such time they are allowed to.

The interesting thing about that is that they've taken one of these visionaries and placed them under hypnosis and asked them about the secrets and they don't reveal them. They're protected in that manner. There's also a parchment paper—although they really don't know what it is—with the secrets written on it. But nobody can read it. But when the secrets will become available, they will be able to read it from the paper. They can't decipher it. [The Vatican has examined this object. Ted then showed me a book that one of the visionaries wrote.] We met her when she was there. She was at that time getting the apparitions daily in her house. And that's where a small group of people could go and she was there. I was in the same room with her. She's in a tremendous amount of back pain right now, as all the visionaries ever had in the past, will all suffer. And she has suffered. That's my speculation. Pope John Paul II has read some of the secrets. After one of the visionaries died, she had a vision of him [Pope

John Paul II] with the Blessed Mother, all in white, very happy and younger in age.

### **Anthropological Analysis**

The best way for me to describe the sense of place, depth of feeling, and empathy for those interviewed in this study, is to turn to Glen Hinson's *Fire in my Bones, Transcendence and the Holy Spirit in African American Gospel*. Hinson probably described it best as an ethnographer when he recorded one of his consultants exclaiming, ". . . you got to be *in it to feel it* . . ." (Hinson 2000, 1). As Hinson goes on to describe Elder Richardson's belief as a Baptist singer—that God is really with one when one is really in it—a feeling of spirit enables a connection as a channel to God, a feeling of immanent joy that touches one's soul. So an immense, transformative feeling and connection is shared by both the Baptist singers (Hinson refers to them as saints) and members from the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches.

"There is a transformative feeling that moves the soul of the parishioners of both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches which is very similar to the way it moves through the gospel church described by Hinson. In many ways, people that turn to relics and icons of these churches are filled with spirit—even those who keep a distance from them, as we have seen with the scientists who investigated the Theotokos Orthodox icon. And to these believers of the icon, it is truth" (Pinckney 2021, 210).

"The saints of the African American sanctified community say that soul is the domain not of the body or mind, but of *spirit*. And when the Spirit touches spirit, the soul rejoices in an epiphany of truth and knowledge. To the parishioners I interviewed from both faiths, the healings, miracles and conversions were definitely a lived reality. And like Hinson, I also had a limited view of what that reality was until I began the interviews. It was not the Catholic mass and its congregational responsorial or bells that pulled me into the shared feelings and emotions of those I interviewed. Nor was it the choir singing or incense of the Divine Liturgy that captured my awareness of a true lived experience. It was the oral descriptions of parishioners and how their faith grew stronger and how their lives were impacted that over-saturated my senses, much like the emotional pull described by Hinson in his second chapter of *Fire in my Bones*." (Pinckney 2021, 210-211)

"To fully realize and understand the expressions of the parishioners and clergy whose lives were impacted, changed, or healed, we as the reader have an obligation to have to shake off all our invisible robes of judgment" if we choose this road. Therefore, we allow their subjectivity to override our objectivity. That is how one captures a better or complete understanding of their words, their meanings, and their experiences. To help us to better identify with our interlocutors or consultants, I use the analogy of a house to make my point. Here, as anthropologists, we attempt to climb through the window of someone's life. "We may not necessarily have the same vision, smell the same smells, see what the other sees, hear what the other hears, and feel what the other feels. But, we take up temporary residency in their home to pull back the veil of privacy as an attempt to connect with them, while leaving our presuppositions, judgements and bias outside the window. We will not need that baggage we left behind under the window if we want to wear what they wear, walk where they walk, and feel what they feel—as long as we are invited to do so" (Pinckney 2021, 212).

I had agreed with Hinson that to weigh any supernatural encounter with disbelief is not only troublesome, but detrimental to the consultants and their testimonies because it negates the significance of their experiences and beliefs, which leads to abandonment of objectivity itself. Supernatural and paranormal investigator Paul Roland made a similar point in his text.

We operate at the lowest frequency of existence on the densest level, the physical plane. Naturally, we tend to believe that what we perceive is real and that anything we cannot touch, taste, see, smell, or hear does not exist. Our world appears solid, but as science has recently discovered, this is an illusion created by comparatively low processing power of the human brain which cannot see the spaces that exist between matter at the subatomic level. It is comparable to looking at a photograph in a newspaper. We do not see the millions of dots that makeup the image and the white spaces in between unless we look at it through a magnifying glass. Nevertheless, the dots are there. (Roland 2010, 96)

So if human intellect is only functioning on its five senses, then it may be that we are missing much more that is occurring around us all of the time and possibly without our knowing.

## Theological Analysis

In the end, one may ask what is faith in the intercession of saints? Is it an all-embracing confidence in what we learn from our Sunday school lessons, catechisms, the liturgy, the sacraments, the relics, and icons? Or, is faith much more than all this? Is it a logos—a deep knowing in our internal being that is always present—something we rely on to guide us in life or spiritual development? One may ask if it is based on what we learn from others—the personal stories of healing, both spiritually and physically, and perhaps conversions as well. For many, faith may be based on the events that influence us, the paths we choose, and immediate options available to us when we are confronted with difficult times.

We can find evidence of faith in the saints who in turn had faith in Christ through the testimonials of the faithful that were helped, saved, cured, and healed through belief in the relics, or in the saints themselves that intercede for us on our behalf in Heaven. Many have witnessed the miracles in the churches, the hospitals, and in the home that have demonstrated time and again, that faith is very real and intercession brings about real change in the lives of the faithful.

So, while faith may be just a belief to some, and nothing more, perhaps because they have not lived the experience nor witnessed the intercession of the saints, faith to many others is like a fountain that runs in our veins and nourishes our relationship with the divine. Often times, we need to recharge that fountain, and for many, the Church is there for them. But we must bring God into our own homes, and into our personal fountains to really feel that connection to the saints. We must internalize that life giving force and allow it to flow and recharge our faith—the fountain of our relationship with God. The relics and miraculous icons can be the vehicles we need to recharge the faith that is in all of us. They can be vital to us to strengthen and nourish the fountain of faith. The saints are very real and so is their ability to intercede for us on our behalf. All we have to do is ask for their assistance—to pray for us in order to restore peace in our minds and health in our bodies and to give us renewed faith that can once again flow within our fountains (Pinckney 2021, 219-220).

Miracles, as expressed, do occur, and to many of the faithful, they occurs every single day. For the faithful I have talked with in this study, their strong faith in the saints and relics they venerate for assistance have produced physical and spiritual healing, conversions

and miracles. As one consultant expressed, the theology of relics must be experienced and is very unique to the faithful—they are the meeting place with God.

## *Physical Healing*

In considering the Padre Pio glove, a knitted glove that was reported by Loretta, it is commonly known that Padre Pio had worn gloves on both hands to cover the marks of the stigmata, which is a divine favor bestowed on one; the marks of the crucifixion that develop on their body correspond to the same marks found on the body of Jesus. In 1918, all five marks of the stigmata began appearing on the Padre's body and he suffered the unending pain every day for the next fifty years. "Doctors said he lost up to one cup of blood a day through the bleeding wounds and the holes in his hands were so large at times they claimed it would have been possible to stick their entire finger completely through the wound to the other side" (Sniadach 2010, 144). Reportedly, the blood from his wounds emitted sweet-smelling perfumes. The glove I examined from Loretta also emitted a sweet smelling perfume—that of roses. Such an aroma typifies the sufferer to be in a state of holiness. The presence of this aroma is the first test in determining a true stigmatic. The aroma is known as the Odor of Sanctity and is said to be given by God to represent one's holiness and love for Him. The second test is a blood test. Although physically, medically, and physiologically impossible, the blood which flows from the wounds of a true stigmatic, more often than not, is a different blood type and does not match the stigmatic's own blood" (Sniadach 2010, 140).

While Padre Pio's glove may not have healed the dying woman in the hospital that Pauley brought to her, the same glove has surely been accredited with many miraculous healings. Furthermore, one cannot provide a reasonable explanation for the purple lights that flashed and darted across the hospital room when Pauley placed the glove on the chest of the dying woman in the hospital bed.

Father Stephan's discussion of the tumor that had miraculously been healed through the intercession of Saint Nektarios is another example of the healing power of the relics and icons. Additionally, the healing oil from the myrrh streaming icon, the Kardiotissa, has healed an unknown number of people from tumors, cancer, and other physical maladies. Additionally, it is associated with the ability to cure infertility, as claimed

by Father Lawrence. The most extraordinary testimonial was the ability of the myrrh streaming oil of the Kardiotissa to restore life back to a parishioner who suffered a heart attack and passed while attending the Divine Liturgy.

“Not only did the parishioner revive, he sprang to his feet and began singing. Other than the application and usage of a defibrillator, a device that sends an electric shock directly to the heart to someone in cardiac arrest, it would be difficult to find a scientific method or instrumentation to revive a person who has “flatlined” on a church floor. In fact, a defibrillator was not used in this case. The oil from the icon therefore, had to have some positive impact or effect on the heart attack victim. And the victim just did not slowly awaken and sit up in a pew with a dazed expression—the victim immediately recovered, stood and sang a church hymn, completely without the application of science” (Pinckney 2021, 224).

The case of infertility experienced by women and evidence of this condition being miraculously reversed after coming into contact with myrrh streaming icons cannot be explained easily. There appears to be no scientific evidence pointing to the curative properties found in the myrrh streaming oils or the icons themselves—that is, no curative properties that many women seek to allow them to conceive healthy fetuses. Likewise, the myrrh oil and rose water alone have not been found to physically contain any curative properties that can be used to eradicate cancerous tumors and other physical ailments from the human organism. The changes that occur biologically to the cancerous growth as the myrrh oil comes into contact with the body is unknown scientifically. Spiritually, much more must be occurring and on a miraculous scale. As Father Lawrence indicated in the interview, not all are cured by coming into contact with the myrrh streaming icon and its streaming oils. The same oil that was used by Father Mark underwent three separate laboratory testings, with each laboratory unaware of the oil’s origin. How interesting that results indicate the rose fragrance originates from the Garden of Gethsemane where the Mother of God reposed. The oil too originates from Libyan olive trees which have been extinct for one hundred and fifty years. And finally, the oil is known to unnaturally mix with water evenly, and not separate when left undisturbed.

To the faithful, the belief in the curative power of these artifacts is not a faith in the objectivity of science, but a faith in their personal beliefs either by witnessing or by personal encounters with the relics and icons. To

those who experienced conversions from a secular and atheistic perspective to the belief in a higher holy power, a birth of faith has entered into their consciousness in the healing power of the relics and icons. Therefore, belief in the intercession of the saints is very real to them, as much as those who hold a strong belief in modern medicine’s ability to cure people of biological maladies. A main difference one could point to is that there is no guaranteed methodology to scientifically falsify the healing power of icons and relics, or to even determine the curative properties of either. There simply is no litmus test or simple qualitative or quantitative test that one can conduct on the relics and icons to determine a sense of the divine. Perhaps this is because no litmus test has been developed for faith. One is forced to ask, what do we have here?

“We have faith and miracles that occur and science struggles to provide a valid explanation for the cures that manifest when people put their trust and faith in the relics and icons of the saints. One can decant or bottle wine and one can bottle tea, but one cannot decant or bottle faith. Faith is real when it occurs—when it happens to one who has it or desires it—and that faith is manifested through God. When one has faith or receives it through prayer, or devotionals, or through contact with the divine, then one knows they have the faith as expressed by the parishioners, laity, and clergy from both the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. They have experienced this faith first hand because they experienced the positive changes that occurred to them without the benefits of modern medical science, or in conjunction with medicine” (Pinckney 2021, 226).

As many parishioners and clergy of both Christian faiths believe, miraculous healing is not a guarantee when spiritual people or parishioners pray, or seek the intercession of the saints. Not everyone will be healed and there does not appear to be any predictable pattern. Color, ethnicity, sex, gender, or choice of spirituality does not appear to be a prerequisite or caveat. No pattern has revealed itself.

This is also evident in the case of a woman whose physiology was not allowing her reproductive organs to bring a baby to term. After coming into contact with the myrrh streaming icon, she, a member of the Eastern Orthodox church, was able to conceive. A Texas A&M professor was astounded by this and viewed it as God revealing himself in the language of science. Ergo, if medical science cannot interpret this phenomenon and provide a logical explanation for this

event, what other reason do we have to believe that the unborn child was not miraculously healed through healing power of the myrrh streaming icon? Perhaps the question should be, how is it not divine intervention?

But the faithful must also keep in mind that the miraculous healing which occurs is only temporary. As Father Mark mentioned to me, any healing or cure received in the church is temporary because we are all living beings. Healing through the saints, the relics, and ultimately through Jesus Christ is temporary for our life, and death becomes a bridge to heaven. The purpose of a cure is that we repent, intensify and prepare ourselves for eternal life with Christ.

### *Spiritual Healing*

The spiritual healing that I have documented from the interviews may be more subtle to the reader, but much more profound to the person who experienced the change. Restored faith and a change of heart has led people to reconsider their outlook on life—from that of a negative, self-destructive behavior to one more positive and with a stronger belief in their faith. And they have attributed that change to a faith in the relics and icons of the saints that intercede for them. From my discussions with members such as Loretta, I learned of the stories of a healed conscience and how a contemplation of suicide was prevented simply by coming into contact with the message of Pray, Hope, Don't Worry—a message attributed to Padre Pio.

I learned of how Louise's lifetime of nervousness and chronic uncontrollable urge to cry was alleviated through prayer. Through prayer again, a laity from the Eastern Orthodox church reaches a rare, and balanced acceptance of science and faith together. And through Lizzie, her lifelong outlook or view of not wanting children had changed to a desire to have children—four infants no less—by praying for the intercession of Saint Anna.

One may question how prayer works. Is it a matter of faith building through repetitive prayer and confidence in an all-knowing and universal theistic deity, or just the outlier of chance that prayer appears to be answered? To some, faith is essential to have for prayer to be instrumental in helping one connect with God, to talk with God and explain one's situation with God. Thomson Jay Hudson, the author of *The Law of Psychic Phenomena, A Working Hypothesis for the Systematic Study of Hypnotism, Spiritism, Mental Therapeutics, etc.*, would confirm those beliefs held by

the faithful today, that continuous prayer is naught without faith. "It is the Divine essence within us which produces the effect, and operates in strict accordance with Divine law. It confirms and explains that which Christ taught so earnestly and so persistently, namely, that we must have faith, or our prayers will avail nothing" (Hudson 1893, 263). Some without faith have been unable to express it or feel it and prefer to utilize more finite or fixed processes of reasoning. People with faith, however, rely more on prayer and a 'knowing' that their prayers are heard. Some are fortunate enough to see their prayers answered and, in many cases, it validates the healing processes to them that they have either witnessed or experienced for themselves. To some, there is an ultimate connection to the divine and they view the relics as connections—connections all leading to Christ. As Father Mark had said, "the longest journey has the shortest distance—from the mind to the heart. Close our minds, open our hearts."

### *Spiritual Conversion*

Spiritual conversions have also occurred, and with conversion, I am referring to the acceptance of a new spiritual belief. This is where the individual abandons or excludes all other religious beliefs or denominations and then accepts and adopts one particular religious belief or set of beliefs from one particular denomination. Through Father Lawrence we learn of the two scientists who arrived at an Orthodox church to scientifically study, measure, test and collect samples from the myrrh streaming Kardiotissa icon of the Theotokos. Here, what was a denial of divine intervention and an admission of atheism, became a transformation of paradigms—a total conversion experience. But this was not the only religious or spiritual conversion expressed by Father Lawrence. There was also the spiritual conversion of a Muslim to Eastern Orthodoxy during a religious service. On the Roman Catholic side, we hear of the conversion of a female atheist to that of a Roman Catholic nun simply by coming into contact with a relic from Mary Magdalen. Another conversion was attributed to the Roman Catholic green scapular, an article of devotion worn around the neck.

But does a religious conversion mean we have to give up a life we are familiar with and start a new regime of thinking, acting and treating others? Does it happen when our current paradigms are challenged by coming face to face with a stronger reality? While that may be

the case for some, spiritual conversion for others does not have to be traumatic as it was for the Apostle Paul. It can be a renewed partnership with Christ and the realization that Christ is the Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world. Conversion may mean forgiving others of sins committed against another. It may be a self-cleansing for others and spiritual renewal. Yet to others, it is all of these. “A Christian is not simply somebody who stands a better chance of being ‘saved,’ but a person who accepts responsibility to serve God in this life and promote God’s reign in all its forms” (Bosch 2012, 500). A conversion process had occurred to Victor and Edith Turner when they were looking for deeper ontological values of ritual—something beyond the symbolic. Their studies of the Ndembu of Africa had a major impact on them, and Marxism, they found, could not account for the rituals they witnessed and participated in. In *The Slain God*, Timothy Larsen hones in on the transformative process that the Turners went through:

Therefore, while ‘primitive’ beliefs and practices made it impossible for E. B. Tylor to accept Christian claims, in a complete reversal, traditional African religion made it possible for the Turners to take Christianity seriously once again. Vic testified that when he witnessed a Catholic priest presiding at Mass: I felt in the texture of his performance something of the same deep contact with the human condition tinged with transcendence that I had experienced in central Africa when I attended rituals presided over by dedicated ritual specialists. (Larsen 2014, 183)

So, in their quest to search for deeper values, they turned to western religion. By 1957, the Turners had found that value during the consecration of the bread and wine in the Roman Catholic Mass. I have met some in life who have experienced a much subtler conversion process. For them, it was acceptance of a new religious canon and a new identity for themselves that they came to accept and embrace. These people appeared more grounded, more focused, and more open to others whom they previously had turned away. Robert Hefner describes the conversion process in *Conversion to Christianity*.

The most necessary feature of religious conversion, it turns out, is not a deeply systematic reorganization of personal meanings but an adjustment in self-identification through the at least nominal

acceptance of religious actions or beliefs deemed more fitting, useful, or true. In other words, at the very least—an analytic minimum—conversion implies the acceptance of a new locus of self-identification, a new, though not necessarily exclusive, reference point for one’s identity. (Hefner 1993, 17)

### *Miracles*

When it comes to “miracles,” or what people describe as such from their own personal experience, we discover how these events or occurrences impacted their worldview and spiritual beliefs. Through the Padre Pio glove relic, Loretta described how the life of her own biological sister was extended for an additional five years despite a life-threatening condition. At Medjugorje, parishioners from St. Mary Magdalen church described the miraculous manifestation of water from the Risen Christ statue near the knee on the cross. The water was tested and is allegedly of the same substance found in human tears. Interestingly, the height of the knee on the statue was reportedly the height that the Blessed Mother could reach while her son was on the cross, and there she wept for her son.

From Edward, we hear how he was saved from a vehicle accident, possible injury and death by praying to God on a busy highway on Long Island, NY. A mysterious spirit manifested in front of Phil and several other witnesses in Russia during a pilgrimage which we learn the group had attributed to Saint Xenia. The spirit allegedly interacted with Phil and his fellow pilgrims.

While it would be very difficult to recreate the same experience at the same mausoleum, and under the same environmental conditions that Phil experienced with his co-pilgrims, a secularist would argue that the group had a momentary total suspension of objective consciousness, and their witnessing of the phantasm could have been induced by some unknown environmental condition—a subjective condition. However, each member of the group had witnessed the same phantasm or spirit and were able to deduce that the spirit was of intelligent design and acknowledged their presence. According to Phil, each member of the group positively identified the spirit as Saint Xenia (Pinckney 2021, 232).

According to Father Stephan, the oil of Nektarios is a miracle because we learn it healed a man with a tumor the size of a grapefruit. Yet, there is also the

body of the saint himself to consider who some believe can walk from place to place posthumously. Additionally, the same saint is said to have married, buried, baptized, chrismated, and preached to people posthumously. A handwriting sample that was analyzed by a graphologist suggests the sample is the handwriting from the same saint.

Regarding the flashing purple lights observed in a hospital room as reported by Pauley, the same lights were witnessed by several people when the glove of Padre Pio was brought out and placed on the chest of a dying patient. From Father Cassidy, we learn of the myrrh streaming Kardiotissa icon, and how the sacred oil had multiplied in volume before his very eyes. Many more experiences were described than I can discuss here.

## Conclusions

Based on the testimonies of the consultants interviewed, spiritual and physical healings, conversions, and miracles have occurred over time. The experiences of those witnessing the events are very real to those whose lives have changed possibly for the better, have been healed, or experienced such changes through prayer, intercession of the saints and martyrs, or by coming into contact with relics and icons associated with such holy people. As such, these lived experiences become the reality of people who go through positive changes and improvements in their lives, and many of them border on the supernatural. For them, no true litmus test or scientific measurement can prove or disprove the authority of their lived experiences. The healing, miracles, and conversion are not necessarily restricted to just believers, parishioners, laity and clergy of the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. Therefore, the relics and icons and supernatural activity believed associated with them, are not just artifacts that became fetishes operating by principles of sympathetic and contagious magic, rather than serving as vehicles of religious and ethical ideas as Victor and Edith Turner suggested (Turner 1978, 197). Nor are they just representatives of bygone eras. To the faithful, they are living and active—not left-over traditions handed down from history as suggested by Walsham (2010, 13). The testimonies of the consultants are authentic descriptions and beliefs in the holy power of prayer, relics and icons.

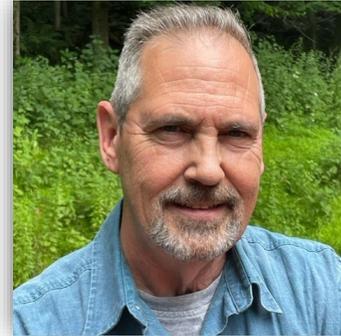
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## Appendix

Age\_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity\_\_\_\_\_

Area raised\_\_\_\_\_

Current location\_\_\_\_\_

Age at when regularly attending church\_\_\_\_\_

Current declaration of religion\_\_\_\_\_

Do you have access to any relics? (For example, I have a small relic from the Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha that I include in prayer.)

Name of saint or martyr associated with relic(s)?

Have you prayed to ask the saints or martyrs to pray for you (for assistance)?

How often do you pray (to include a saint or martyr in your prayers)?

Was the cause or concern attributed to illness, misfortune, request for guidance, other?

Have your concerns been answered through prayer?

Had any phenomenon occurred while using relics in prayer or during the time of need?

Do you pray regularly, daily, at home, other location?

Which saint do you include in your prayers most frequently?

Other religious identity held in past?

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# African Gods in America's Bible Belt: The Challenges of a Santería Community in the Southern U.S

Tony M. Kail

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Members of the Afro-Cuban Santería religious community in the rural southern United States practice a living spiritual tradition that provides identity, ethical standards, and a system of biological and psychological healthcare. The challenges faced by many practitioners in this geographical region, often referred to as the 'Bible Belt,' result from bias, misinformation, and lack of resources for practitioners. My ethnographic fieldwork with this community focuses on exploring the needs of the community and the challenges that practitioners face: needs that include the need for sacred space, material goods used in the ritual practices of the religion, as well as access to community ceremonies. This paper looks at the complexity of Christian and Santería relationships in the South and the need for Christians to understand the effects of colonialism and ethnocentric attitudes toward members of this misunderstood religion.

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## Introduction

My fieldwork with a local temple in the traditions of Regla de Ocha or 'rule of the Orisha' began with an attempt to understand the types of challenges that the community faces in the observance of ceremonies and community gatherings. As someone who has lived in the southern United States, I was quite familiar with regional bias and historic racism toward African based religious traditions. Controversial practices such as animal sacrifice placed the religion into a marginalized place in the communities where they exist. Regions where disdain for pluralism occur have the ability to create hostile environments both philosophically and physically for practitioners.

It is amidst these challenges that the religion of Santería, or 'Ocha' as it is colloquially called, must exist with various survival practices. The religion itself as an African traditional religion had to survive the forced conversions of African slaves by Spanish colonialists. The ritual practices have adapted a number of techniques in order to continue in the face of social challenges. Certain ceremonies must be performed in secret in order to avoid social conflicts.

Although somewhat familiar with the religion at the onset of this research, I would find that observing and experiencing ritual would bring me an increased understanding of the complexities of ritual life. Ceremonial practices including animal sacrifice took on new meanings as the multi-layered conversations between devotee and the deities revealed the living nature of the religion. Ceremonies and material culture were neither rehearsed nor static. Members of the community approached daily life with one eye open to the spiritual at all times. Daily events and stresses were filtered through the worldview that the Orishas (deities), the ancestors and the dead all had a place in daily life. Likewise daily dedication in the form of ritual, dress, and behavior demonstrated dedication to the Santos (saints).

## History

Santería developed from the religion of the Yoruba people of West Africa. In the mid-sixteenth century thousands of Yoruba were taken into slavery and transported to British, French, Spanish and Portuguese colonies in the Caribbean Islands. Many of the Yoruba were forced to work on plantations as

slaves. The spiritual and healing traditions of the Yoruba were taken away as many slave owners forced slaves to abandon their traditional practices and observances. Many Yoruba were forced into conversion into the slave owners' religion of Catholicism.

In order to keep traditional religion alive, the Yoruba and several other ethnic groups would observe religious rites in secret. As many ethnic communities met in houses called *cabildos* they could celebrate the dances, songs and practices of their spiritual traditions. Cabildos were identified by specific religious groups known as Regla. The Yoruba religion was referred to as Regla de Ocha or 'rule of the Orishas', a name that is still used today to refer to Santería. The Orishas are the deities from the Yoruba religion of Nigeria. The Catholic saints of the slave owners would become a form of camouflage for the propitiation of the Orishas. For instance, church services dedicated to the courageous Saint Barbara would internally become services for the powerful African king known as Changó. Remnants of this marriage between saint and Orisha can still be seen in churches such as Capilla Santa Barbara in the town of Güines in Cuba. The marriage also spills over into the worship of the Orishas in the religion of Santería. Altars and shrines display images of African deities and Catholic saints interchangeably.

Understanding the oppression that the religion experienced under slavery and religious persecution gives us insight into the dynamics of the culture. Miguel A. De La Torre, Professor of Social Ethics and Latino Studies at Iliff School of Theology states,

Thus Santería became the religion of an oppressed people. To truly understand the worldview of Santería, it is crucial that it is approached on these terms. We begin by recognizing that followers of Santería are not interested in proselytizing, nor in justifying their beliefs to outsiders. Only those who are willing to take a step toward the orishas are entrusted with more in-depth information. The closer one moves toward the orishas, the more the mysteries of Santería are revealed. (De La Torre 2004, 3)

De La Torre stresses the importance of understanding how the religion formed amidst an oppressed people. This explains why the knowledge of the religion is guarded and passed on in a trusting relationship between clergy and initiate.

## Contemporary Reactions

The 1980's became a time of exoticism and curiosity when it came to depicting African cultures in America. A historic precedent was set by Hollywood in the post slavery U.S. where African traditions such as Voodoo and Hoodoo were featured as the national 'boogeyman'. Depictions of these traditions often reeked of colonialism and racism. The southern United States would become witness to acts of abuse and violence against practitioners of African traditional religions and folk healing practices. In cities like Memphis, Tennessee there were campaigns that focused on arresting individuals who practiced forms of herbalism, spiritual readings and folk healing (Kail 2017, 101).

As the 80's loomed, the Mariel Boatlift brought thousands of Cubans to the United States. As many Cubans arrived, Americans who had never encountered Cuban culture before were often basing their understanding of Cuban culture on media depictions. Amidst the rich cultural traditions that arrived came a number of spiritual traditions. Santería was depicted as an exotic practice as demonstrated by early documentaries and writings about the religion. In 1980 The New York Times ran an article headlined *Ritual Slaughter Halted in Bronx By A Police Raid* which described the practitioners of Santería as practicing a 'primitive rite'. The Associated Press produced a documentary in 1981 about the new "Santería or Cuban Occult in Miami," as it was titled. The religion was described as a 'cult,' and terms such as 'black magic' and 'murder' are used in the narration. Hollywood would soon catch up to depicting Santería as a religion practiced by drug dealers and evil cultists in shows like the 1985 season of *Miami Vice* and the 1987 movie *The Believers*.

Animal cruelty agencies and police departments began to distribute information about Santería to their departments. Information was frequently very shallow and included illustrations of hand tattoos found among Cuban criminal enterprises to quietly draw conclusions about the religion. I became interested in the religion, and would go on to research and later write about it, for police and first responders. I would discover that much of the information reflected in public safety circles and in Hollywood was based upon bias, fear, and misunderstanding.

## Ethnography (Abridged)

### Ceremony

Sweesh . . . the spray of Bacardi rum on the back of my neck and back is warm and wet. I turn around to see a short Cuban woman gripping the bottle and filling her mouth with the magical substance only to see her spew it on the backs of men and women waiting to be cleansed through the priestess's saliva and rum. A cackle erupts from the beak of a chicken that is raised to my head. Rubbing it against my body the priestess begins with my head, shoulders, waist, then feet. "This is for your protection," she tells me. A group of devotees dressed in white huddle around a terra cotta tile adorned with cryptic symbols sketched in white chalk. I would learn that the symbols are echoes of the ancient Yoruba divination system known as Ifá. I watch as the priestess draws the symbols that were given to her many years ago in Cuba identifying her life path in the religion of the Orishas.

It was this life path that brought her to this moment. Madrina, a 52 yr. old Cuban Santería priestess known as a *Santera* is fighting for the life of a man and his son. Madrina's work as a priestess of the Orisha Yemayá serves humanity through offering counsel and spiritual guidance to those that come to her shop. Her knowledge of the spiritual realm, herbal remedies, and the physics of the esoteric place her in a unique position to bring aide to those clients suffering from physical and, even worse, spiritual sickness.

The day began with a startling revelation when it was discovered that one of the goats that was to be offered at the ceremony was found dead in its cage. This was a sign that the witchcraft (*brujería*) was strong and the animal had taken the hit sent by the negative energy. There had already been enough worry since this battle had begun. The witchcraft had been sent to an unsuspecting father. He and his son were born in Mexico and had come to the United States where they started a construction business. Someone in the family who was envious had sent something harmful to affect the father. One afternoon as the man stepped out of his truck he immediately fell to the ground and was paralyzed. Through a hazy video on her cell phone Madrina showed me video of the man in a hospital bed unable to move his body. She advised me that the physicians could not find what was wrong with the man, nor could mental health professionals. Through a series of spiritual consultations it was discovered that someone in the family had placed a spiritual working

on the man. Madrina and her assistant Dawn performed rituals involving the use of a photograph of the paralyzed man. The man's son Donald came to Madrina seeking healing and protection from this work. Part of the work concerned discerning if the attack on the man was the work of the dead (*muerto*) or a demon.

On this hot Saturday morning I watch as Madrina's daughter Suhey walks out of the shadows of a makeshift wooden barn. She holds a bird in her right hand. Its wings flap furiously as she walks toward the shrine for the *eggun* (ancestors). The group of huddled white dresses opens as she approaches the sacred tile. She mutters something to Madrina as a look of concern comes over the priestesses' face. The bird has died in her hand. A somber feeling sweeps over us. This was yet another sign that there was something powerful at work.

Madrina retrieves a chicken from the barn and the call to the ancestors begins. Prayer known as *moyubar* begins. The prayer calls out to nature, the deities, ancestors and spiritual elders. It offers respect and seeks permission to proceed with the ceremony.

A familiar song that accompanies the sacrifice (*ebbo*) of the animals begins "*Ya ki nya, Ya ki nya loro, Bara ya ki nya, Ya ki nya loro, Ya we se, Ya we se loro.*" The song speaks of the feeding of the head, or '*ori*', which is where the soul and our destiny reside according to Yoruba belief. Another line of the song speaks of the sacrifice taking away bad luck while the last speaks to the manner in which the sacrifice is offered, and offers a prayer that we will not ever be killed in the same manner.

The animal is killed and the blood from the animal is poured upon the tile, the *Teja de Eggun*. In the Yoruba religion the tile is mentioned in ancient stories known as *Patakis*. These are stories from the literary body of the Yoruba Ifá religion. This story comes from the section known as *Odun Ojuani Hermoso* in *Ire AkrIkú lese Eggun*, or, 'A good health through an Eggun'. The story tells of how a devotee wished to communicate with his dead brother. Orúnlá, the deity of divination, advised him to consecrate a clay tile that will represent the door of the dead. He then advised him to light nine candles. Candlelight would represent the immortality of the spirits. A dove is to be given as a sacrifice along with a gourd filled with water and honey is to be poured over the offering. Dawn shares with me that when the dove is passed over her body at the beginning of this ceremony she feels a feeling of sacredness come over her. Suhey and Madrina stand

before the shrine with Suhey holding a wooden staff adorned with the face of a man. This is the *Pagugu* staff for addressing the dead.

There is a saying in the religion “*Ikú Lobi Osha*” or “The dead stop the saint,” which implies that you must address the dead before you can address the saint. The saint, or *santo*, refers to the religion’s deities known as Orishas. The Orishas are manifestations of the creator deity known as Olodumare. The Orishas were once humans that have now transcended into the spiritual realm. Dawn and her sister Tonya tell me that this is why the Orishas have an understanding of humanity because they once were human too. The Orishas govern aspects of nature and humanity. Each Orisha has a particular domain that they are known for. For example, the Orisha Oshún governs the river waters and governs all matters related to love. She is also known for assisting in matters related to maternity, so for this reason pregnant mothers may call on her for assistance. Each Orisha has specific attributes in regards to favorite colors, numbers and foods that they prefer. The Orisha Changó likes apples while the Orisha Elegguá prefers corn nuts and children’s toys.

Suhey lights a cigar and begins to blow smoke onto the Teja tile. She begins to sing. The song is known as *Oro a Eggun*. The *oro* is a cycle of prayer songs that are sung for the ancestors. The song is traditionally taught orally.

*Aumba Wa Ori, Aumba Wa Ori*  
*Awa Ósun Awa Oma*  
*Leri Oma Leyawo Araonu Kawe*

Madrina and her daughter are leading the ceremony as Dawn and her sister Tonya stand to my left. Tonya has brought a paper plate containing materials including palm oil (*corojó*), peppers and powdered eggshell (*cascarilla*) and placed it at the base of the tile. A pair of white candles are placed and lit on a plate beside the tile. After the chicken is offered to the tile, honey is poured onto the tile. The shiny golden liquid covers the blood and washes away some of the chalk symbols.



**Figure 1**  
*Prayers offered to Olofi in the Presence of the Ancestors. (Kail 2021)*

Madrina offers a prayer and holds her hands to the sky. Suhey takes four pieces of coconut and throws them to the ground. The coconut is one of the primary instruments used in communicating with the gods. The coconut known as ‘Obi’ is used in a form of divination that provides guidance from the spiritual realm. The pieces of coconut have a brown colored side of the skin and a white colored side of the flesh. They are thrown, and the pattern in which the pieces land is interpreted as an answer. If the pieces land with the white side up this is known as ‘*Alafia*’. This is an affirmative answer to a question that may be asked of the Orishas.

A large rooster is rubbed over the body of the young man that is the center of the ceremony. The animal is offered to the Eggun to remove any negative energy on the man. I am prompted to cleanse myself as anyone in the ceremony is vulnerable to attacks of negative energy. I am instructed to take a handful of powdered eggshell and to place both hands filled with powder on my head, then to my waist and to my feet. I am then instructed to go in front of the Eggun tile and clap my hands together and to blow the powder onto the tile. The remaining members of the group follow suit and we are then advised to go inside.

Donald is to undergo a number of rituals on this day. I am told, “he has a sickness,” by Suhey. He is instructed to sit on a stool as Suhey, Dawn and Tonya begin to place materials on the table beside him. I can see piles of cotton, cigars, bottles of rum and powdered eggshell being laid down. Dawn calls me into the kitchen where she tells me that she and her sister have

to get their 'heads cleaned' and I cannot see their heads uncovered. I duck into a corner of the kitchen with my back turned. Dawn and Tonya are having a monthly spiritual cleansing as it is required in the initiation process that they are undergoing.

Dawn and Tonya are new initiates into the religion. As part of their initiation, they are recognized as 'Iyawos' or 'brides of the Orisha'. After undergoing several ceremonies their heads are shaved and they are instructed to wear white and to cover their heads for at least a year. There are certain taboos they must avoid such as shaking hands and looking into mirrors. I had noticed that they have a bathroom mirror covered with paper to avoid seeing themselves. Mardina advises Dawn to tell me that there must be several 'cool' heads because there will be a lot of Ebbós (sacrifices) that will be given today. It is said that when the Orishas are fed they can become 'hot'. This can create a lot of direct energy from the Orishas which can be very powerful.

Donald sits atop a stool as Tonya walks around the room carrying sticks of burning incense to cleanse the ritual space. Suhey begins the ritual of '*La Rogación de cabeza*' where the priestess performs a cleansing of the head where '*ori*' resides. She begins to apply cocoa butter, cotton, rice, and water to Donald's head. Coconut is placed on his head and the head is wrapped in cloth. Afterwards he sits down on the couch. I ask him how he feels. "Good, tired to be honest. I'm kind of feeling light," he tells me. Donald's head cleansing is part of the ceremony called '*Santo Lavado*' known as a 'washed saint that protects the head'.

I peer into the kitchen as I watch clear plastic cloth being taped to the floor and walls. A white candle encased in a glass jar is placed in the right corner of the room. A pile of coconut shells rests in the center of the cloth. As members of the temple begin to walk toward the plastic there is a feeling of transformation where the plastic becomes a sacred point of focus. Tonya and Dawn begin to slide several iron pots filled with iron implements including railroad spikes, knives, horseshoes and small agricultural tools across the floor. The pots represent the Orisha Oggún, god of iron and metalworkers. Suhey begins to pour rum and honey on to the implements.

I peer across the living room and see amidst the blue plastic bowls that there is a bowl containing a photograph of Donald's father. His father's image smiles as he stands next to a flowing American flag. After a series of consultations with the Orishas, Dawn tells me that Mardina has determined that the readings revealed that Donald's spiritual mother is Yemayá.

The Orishas also revealed that Donald's mother should not beat down Donald's father verbally by disrespecting him. This makes him anxious and can bring about bad health. Suhey retrieves a bundle of the fresh mint and begins to sweep across Donald's body cleaning him with the energy from the plant.

I watch as Suhey scratches two pieces of the coconut meat off of a shell. She throws them into a bowl containing several stones. She dips her hand into a bowl of water and splashes it on the 4 pieces of coconut piled in front of her. The doorway to the kitchen opens and Mardina enters carrying a small black and white goat in her arms. Dawn leans in and rubs corajo on the head of the goat. The goat's front legs are lifted as Mardina salutes the animal by pressing the animal against her knees. Donald chews a piece of coconut that he was given and it is placed in the animal's mouth. Suhey and Mardina bring the goat to the iron pot of Oggún as they prepare to offer the goat to the Orishas.

Hollywood has conditioned much of the West to consider the sacrifice of animals as just a barbaric act of cruelty. But animal sacrifice can be found in many religious cultures throughout the world. The traditional practice is neither savage nor senseless. There is consideration given to the type of animal that is used and its connection with the Orishas. The act is very intensive and is part of a complex conversation between the practitioner and the deities. The manner in which the animal is offered is considered as the animal is cut in such a way as to sever the carotid artery where the animal does not feel pain. The sacrifice is placed in the context of a conversation with the Orisha that tells the practitioner if the offering was accepted or if there is more to be done.



**Figure 2**  
*A Santera Spiritually Cleanses the Client's Head in the Rogación De Cabeza. (Kail 2021)*

As Suhey tosses the coconut shells to the floor they land with the white of the shells facing up. “*Alafia*” Suhey announces. The sound of a familiar song begins to rise as the room reverberates with, “*Ya ki nya, Ya ki nya loro, Bara ya ki nya, Ya ki nya loro, Ya we se, Ya we se loro.*” The goat’s throat is cut and the goat is lifted above the iron pot and plastic bowls. The blood begins to drip onto the iron implements and then is dripped onto the stones in the plastic bowls.

Following the sacrifice Suhey throws the coconut shells again. “*Monte*” she utters. This means that the Orisha want the body of the goat to be taken to the woods or forest. Madrina drags a black trash bag from the kitchen. This process would be followed several times during the day as more goats, chickens, Cornish hens and guinea fowl were offered to the Orishas. Disposing of the sacrifices according to spiritual tradition presents challenges to practitioners. Dawn recalls one experience at which she and some other members of the temple were having to perform a ceremony where an animal was to be left at a specific location. This was also to be accompanied by a ceremony that was to take place at a body of water. The ceremony took place in an obscured location at a public park. Dawn described how a car pulled into the area as members of the temple were conducting the ceremony. A man and woman peered out the windows of their car and yelled out, “*What are ya’ll doing?*” The woman’s insistence to know what was going on was tainted with ethnocentric tones as she demanded to know what was happening in what amounted to ‘her’ park. Dawn’s mother sharply responded with, “It’s none of your business what we are doing!” Fortunately, the man and woman drove away. However, this is just one example of the challenges that are faced in observing the religion.

“Wait till you attend a *Misa*. You will see some things!” Dawn opens her eyes widely and shakes her head in affirmation. “Yeah you will!” Tonya agrees. The *Misa* is a spiritual mass that comes from the influence of French Spiritism or *Espiritismo*. The practices come from the works of a nineteenth century French educator, Allan Kardec. Kardec organized a number of spiritual practices that involved techniques to communicate with the dead. Practices include spirit channeling and table tipping. Kardec’s book, *The Spirit’s Book*, is widely available in many religious goods shops or *Botánicas* that carry products for the practice of Santería. Kardec’s books are frequently placed on a devotee’s spiritual altar for the ancestors known as the *Boveda*. *Espiritismo* teachings focus on

God and several spirits that have been created by God. Spirits are revealed during spiritual ceremonies called *Session Espiritistas*. These seances are traditionally held using a table covered in a white tablecloth. This is called the *Mesa Blanca*. Flowers, candles and a bowl of water are placed on the *Mesa Blanca*. Additional materials including a bottle of Florida Water cologne, and powdered eggshell may be placed on the table for cleansing. The bowl of water is used to capture negative energies that may manifest during the ceremony.

Devotees who serve as mediums may fall into trances and demonstrate possession by various spirits. A number of spirits from various cultures are known to manifest including spirits of West African women known as *Madamas*; Gypsy spirits known as *Gitanas*; Indigenous spirits known as *Indios*; Pirates known as *Piratas* and African spirits known as *Congos*. Prayers from Kardec’s books are read and songs are performed for the spirits. The songs or *cantos* are used to call on spirits and to elevate spirits.

Madrina sings to me songs that are performed at *Misas*. The following is a popular song sung in spiritual masses throughout the world:

Para la Coronación Espiritual:

*‘Oh venid protectores!*

*Oh venid!*

*Seres guía de nuestra misión*

*Oh! Venid protectores a la tierra*

*A ver que linda coronación*

*En coronación, En coronación*

*Baja los seres’*

In English:

*‘Oh come protectors*

*Oh come!*

*Oh come protective beings guide our mission*

*Oh come protectors to earth*

*To see what a beautiful crown*

*In coronation the beings descend’*



**Figure 3**  
*The Boveda is a Sacred Space Created for the Immediate Ancestors. (Kail 2021)*

The ceremony continues through the afternoon. At one juncture the Orisha Oyá who is the goddess of the cemeteries and wind is called upon by the priestesses. The conversation between Madrina and the Orisha through the use of the coconut shell combined with offerings reveals that the father should have 9 distinct fruits placed under his bed. The number nine is a sacred number to Oyá and is the number of the dead. Following hours of prayers, offerings and divination it becomes apparent that the struggle for the father and son's health and protection is not only a spiritual battle but an excruciating physical fight.

I watch as Madrina, Suhey, Dawn, and Tonya struggle with holding the animals. Sweat pours from their foreheads as they sing the ancient hymns of the gods and goddesses of Africa. After each point of the ceremony the blood, feathers, urine, and excrement are cleaned up in intensive labor. It is as if the group never rests. When a member is not moving in the ceremony, they are preparing herbs, tools, and various materials that will be used in the next segment of the ceremony.

During one of the moments of rest in the late afternoon one of the ladies tells me that there will be a ceremony for the Orisha Olokun later in the evening and that I should definitely stay for the event. As evening draws near the floor of the kitchen is swept and cleaned. Several paper plates and bowls filled with various foods are placed in a circle on top of a blue cloth. They are filled with dried beans, dried plantains, dried corn, seeds, and a number of assorted foods. An offering of a duck is made to Olokun. The duck's body

is placed onto a blue cloth inside a wicker basket in the center of the circle of food. Dawn tells me that this is a ceremony that is done for abundance and can increase wealth and health in the lives of participants. She invites me to take part in the ceremony.

I am guided to stand alongside everyone else surrounding the circle of dishes of food. She tells me that I am to start at a plate and to take some of the food and place it to my head, shoulders, waist and feet and then to throw it into the central basket. The group begins to sing a Yoruba chant:

*“Yemayá Asesu, Asesu Yemayá, Yemayá Asesu,  
Asesu Yemayá,  
Yemayá Olodu, Olodu Yemayá, Yemayá  
Olodu, Olodu Yemayá  
Asesu Yemayá, Yemayá Asesu, Asesu Yemayá,  
Yemayá Asesu,”*

We pick up handfuls of the dried foods as the song sways us around the circle. Once we have all offered all pieces of food we stop moving. There are however pieces of food that are not touched by specific members of the circle. These are foods that may be sacred to a particular deity or prohibited by a specific taboo.

The basket is lifted onto Donald's head. We are instructed to place our hands on the basket where it is rocked back and forth like an ocean wave. The use of the blue cloths and the motion of the rocking waves allude to Olokun's domain of the ocean waters. For Olokun was the protector of Africans stolen from their homes and brought across the waters to Cuba. The ceremony closes and the day ends.



**Figure 4**  
*Ceremony for Olokun. (Kail 2021)*

### *Daily Life and Worship*

Dawn guides me through her kitchen space into the living room. To the right is a table covered in white cloth. This is the *'Boveda'*, a shrine for family ancestors. There are nine glasses of water on the table representing spirits. The glasses are shadowed by a decorative crucifix with an image of Christ hanging from its arms. Photographs of loved ones that have passed on are propped around the edges of the table. A small dark-skinned doll dressed in the colors of the Orisha Babalú Ayé sits against the back of the table. His hat is purple, and his clothing is made from sackcloth. Dawn explains that she purchased him in Cuba on her last trip. A stick of burning incense emits a smoky trail from the table. There is a candle for Our Lady of Guadalupe alongside a bottle of wine and a bundle of flowers on the table.

Dawn opens a small closet door in her kitchen to reveal a shrine to the Eggun. The terracotta *'Teja'* tile can be seen in the darkness of the closet. The chalked symbols of divination results are drawn across the tile's face. Dawn points to a cluster of flowers that were given to the Eggun. "They were almost dead and now look at them," she tells me. The beautiful blooming roses appear as if they are about to bust open in their fullness.

Tonya invites me into her bedroom to show me her Orishas. As she pulls back the doors of her closet, she reveals a chasm filled with various tools, statues, and offerings of fruit and vegetables. The top shelf of her closet is lined with colorful ceramic tureens that hold the sacred stones representing the Orishas. Gold colored bells and crowns adorn some of the tureens. The far-right corner of the closet is home to the shrine for Changó, the god of thunder and lightning. His shrine is a wooden vessel known as the *'Batea de Changó'* and houses his sacred stones which are called *'thunderstones'* or *'Piedras de Rayo'*. These stones are created when lightning strikes the earth. The wooden vessel is placed upon a wooden mortar referred to as *'Pilon'*. The wooden tools of Changó also rest upon the vessel.

On the far left of the closet a white and blue ceramic vessel hold the stones for Yemayá. The vessel known as the *sopera* has a historical lineage back to days of persecution in Cuba. Thompson (1993) states that during days of persecution *soperas* could pass for porcelain collections and could be hidden in wooden cabinets easily. A small bowl of seashells recalling her place as an ocean deity sits beside the vessel. The back

wall of the closet is decorated with an ornately decorated fan and is covered with the clothing and tools representing Tonya's patron Orisha Elegguá. The familiar face of Elegguá is seen on the floor in a decorated stone that features cowrie shells placed in a traditional form of facial features. Green and yellow beads surround the crown of the stone indicating that it was given to Tonya by a high priest or *'Babalawo'*. A black iron pot representing the Orisha Oggún as well as a terra cotta plate containing iron tools representing Oggún and Ochosi sit beside him. A statue of a Native American warrior stands guard beside the Orishas. There are offerings known as *'Addimú'* placed in the shrine consisting of cucumbers, squash, melon and flowers.

The squash in the shrine became an object of focus one day as Tonya shared with me a story of healing. Tonya had been wrestling with some issues related to her health and marks on her skin. She had taken her concerns to her Orishas for healing. One day she discovered that one of the squash had become discolored and began to have a dark mark on its skin. Tonya watched in wonder as the mark mirrored the injury on her skin.



**Figure 5**  
*Shrine for the Orishas. (Kail 2021)*

Dawn tells me that the Orisha Oyá had been wanting a special offering. Pieces of corn are placed in water where they begin to grow roots. This brings about blessings of prosperity to the devotee. I ask Dawn how she knows when an Orisha is sending a message like a request for an offering. She says, "There is a gradual opening up to specific vibrations. The Orishas are personal as they were once human beings they understand what it is like to be one of us. They can relate to us." I ask her, when she gives an offering,

how does she know it is what her Orishas want. Tonya chimes in, “It is like dialing into a frequency. If things don’t work, such as a candle that doesn’t light, [it] can be telling us something is not exactly right.” Sometimes the Orishas give messages to their children through dreams. Tonya had a dream about someone in Cuba who lived across from Madrina’s property. This person was practicing witchcraft and ‘throwing’ brujeria that was causing Madrina’s relatives to get cancer.

As I walk through their home I see the mirror above the bathroom sink that is covered with a piece of poster board, and am reminded if Dawn and Tonya’s dedication to becoming brides of the Orisha. The process of becoming a bride of the Orisha is a long and complex journey. A spiritual reading is performed to identify which Orisha is your guardian Orisha. The first step in the journey involves receiving sacred necklaces called *Elekes*, or *collares* in Spanish. Each necklace contains a specific number of colored beads. The color and number refer to a specific Orisha. The plastic beads are 2-mm in size and are strung on cotton cloth. The necklace is prepared by clergy and is charged with spiritual energy, *ashé*, in a ceremony. The necklaces are washed in the sacred liquid, *omiero*. The necklaces provide spiritual protection from the Orishas. The beads identify a person as being dedicated to the Orishas. The first five necklaces traditionally given are dedicated to Obatalá, Changó, Yemeyá, Oshún and Elegguá. The necklaces are treated with respect and come with a number of specific instructions regarding their wear.

The next step of the journey involves receiving the protection of *Los Guerreros* or Warriors. This is a group of Orishas that guard the home of the initiate. In the sacred teachings of the religion, the Orishas Elegguá, Oggún and Ochosi travel together. Elegguá is presented in the form of a cement head with cowrie shells for facial features. Oggún is presented in the form of an iron pot containing various iron tools. Ochosi is presented in the form of a metal crossbow. Lastly the guardian angel Ósun is presented in the form of a metal chalice adorned with bells and a small rooster topping the chalice. Initiates are instructed to place Ósun on top of a high place in the home where Ósun can watch for danger. If the chalice tips over this is a sign that danger is near. The warriors are invited into an initiate’s home where they will take place in a special ceremony.

The initiate undergoes a ceremony known as *Cofa*. This ceremony determines which Orisha ‘owns the head.’ Yoruba tradition says that the head is the place

where the soul resides. Once it is determined which Orisha rules the head the focus of the journey is to have the Orisha ‘crowned’ onto the head of the devotee.

The primary initiation in the religion focuses on the alignment of the devotee with their guardian Orisha. The ceremony is known as *Kariocha* which means to ‘put the Ocha (Orisha) on the head.’ In the Santería culture this is referred to as ‘making the saint,’ ‘making santo,’ and ‘making Ocha.’ The ceremony involves the shaving of the devotee’s head and the ritualistic placement of various substances and tools to the head of the devotee. The initiate receives tools to interact with the Orishas including the stones, the seashells known as *Caracoles* used in divining the will of the Orisha and the tools known as *Herramientas* used to represent the Orishas. The set of caracoles is referred to as a *Mano* or ‘hand. It is traditionally a set of 18 cowrie shells. Two of the shells are placed to the side and the remaining 16 shells are known as the *Diloggún*. These shells are used by the initiate to communicate with their Orisha

The ritual ends in a rite known as *Asiento* where the Orisha is seated into the head of the initiate. Various materials including cocoa butter and coconut are fed to the person’s head or *Ori*. There are specific animals offered to the Orishas during this ceremony. Dawn and Tonya underwent the ceremony in Cuba.

The following day is known as the ‘*El día del medio*’ or ‘middle day.’ The initiate sits and eats lunch at a table prepared for them. Following the lunch the initiate is dressed in colored clothing that reflects the Orisha that rules their head. The initiate is presented to the Santería community in a drumming ceremony.

The next day is known as the *Day of Íta*. On this day the initiate receives a spiritual reading given by a diviner. The initiate receives a list of various taboos that they must observe during their life. The initiate also receives information regarding the identity of their mother and father Orisha in the religion. The details of this ceremony are recorded in a book known as the *Liberta*.

The initiate begins their year in white clothing. Three months into the year the initiate takes part in a ceremony called the *Ebbó Meta* or three-month Ebbó. The initiate now known as the ‘*Iyawo*’ observes various rules such as eating meals on a mat and using a specific bowl and spoon for their meals.

During one of the Ebbó Meta ceremonies that I was allowed to attend, I witnessed one of the more misunderstood concepts in the religion. The concept

of trance possession is a phenomenon that is frequently misunderstood and misrepresented in Western culture. Trance in Santería involves the consciousness of a devotee being taken over by a spiritual being. Frequently this being is the Orisha 'riding' the devotee, as it is referred to. During the ceremony Madriona fell back against a wall almost shattering several plates that were displayed on a wooden shelf. Her daughter cried out "Mama!" As Madriona's body stiffened and stood straight there was a feeling of something entering the room. The priestesses' face began to change, developing a stern look. Her voice began to utter in Spanish. She pointed to Tonya and began to speak. I was informed that this was Yemayá speaking, and she had things she needed to share with Tonya regarding her health.



**Figure 6**  
*Throne for a Child of Elegua in Cuba. (Kail 2021)*

### **Health**

One of the primary reasons that many of Madriona's spiritual godchildren sought refuge in the religion deals with issues related to healing. Madriona has an Orisha that is considered a spiritual doctor that can bring about healing. When Dawn and Tonya's family first sought help from Madriona the family had been sick with the Covid-19 virus. Madriona concocted several herbal remedies to complement the medicines prescribed by a local physician. She also provided spiritual services to assist in their healing. Dawn describes her first encounter with the religion in the midst of the pandemic.

With our family, there has always been a general familiarity with the religion. My mom has always had that general familiarity with it. We didn't understand the connotations of it but we were always aware that the necklaces signified protection. We had no context other than that. My mom has always been on the search for those type of items for protection. It wasn't until she received her Guerreros that someone explained, and it started to make sense. She received the collar for Eleguá and we got a little more context into what that meant. There's always been a general familiarity with it. We've been with different *centro* families but every family that we were with I guess were not practicing the religion correctly in the sense they would like to put work on to you so that you would come back to them for help. Madriona was very straightforward and honest, she gave us the help that we needed. And that was within a year because that's how dire the situation was. Even before we started the process to become Santeras she helped us when we were sick with Covid. She didn't really know us but sent us medicines to our house. And really and truly that's just the type of person she is. It speaks to her character. Just imagine if we were sick in Panama, I don't think they would have done anything. Or no one would try to come visit us to see if we were okay. I guess like in the words of Madriona, she acted in such a way because that as she said that was her duty as a Madriona.

Sickness in the religion can be attributed to a number of causes. One of the causes could be related to neglecting the Orishas. Once an initiate has been crowned with the Orisha they are considered responsible for a regular maintenance of offerings, sacrifices, and to maintain their shrine. Neglecting this could create issues in the life of the devotee that is in need of that particular Orisha's protection. Santería tradition teaches that everyone is born as a child of a particular Orisha. If a devotee is misidentified as being a child of an Orisha by spiritual leadership then the devotee can undergo harsh challenges that mimic sickness.

Dawn shares with me that there are cultural terms for good and bad states of health. When you have good health and good fortune this is commonly known as *Iré*. You are typically at peace and may be blessed financially in some cases. Brujeria and the breaking of taboos associated with the rule of the Orishas can result in *osogbo*, Or constant bad luck, chaos and

misfortune can be associated with absorbing negative spiritual energies. Cleansings and various rituals may be required to remove a devotee from this state of being.

### ***Social Interactions***

Members of the Santería faith in the Mid-South, such as Mama Oggún, describe feelings of isolation and marginalization amidst the religious landscapes of the region.

As I am sitting with members of the temple in a popular Chinese restaurant, I can't help but notice the stares and glares from people around us. Tonya tells me, "A lot of people give us looks because we are dressed up in all white. But they either confuse us for being Muslim or for being nuns." Her sister adds, "I feel like they think it's like a stylistic presence. I've found a couple of times when people were brave enough to ask me, 'why are you dressed in all white?' I'm like, 'It's for religious purposes.' Then they are like, 'oh.'" Dawn chimes in, "We were looking for furniture, we went to the furniture next door and the lady was so nice. She asked if we needed anything. Very nice. We went to the furniture store next to it. They don't say anything to us. Nobody would even look at us. As we were moving around the store you could just see the glares. It was just like water and oil. It would be different if we're like shrouded in black and hunched over." Dawn laughs and shakes her head. "I was in the grocery store and this lady said, 'I just love your outfit, I love your style.' She just registered it as a style. And I was at Starbucks and this person wanted to talk to me about being dressed in white. They made a joke like, 'It must be hard to keep it clean,' and I said, 'You have no idea.'" Mama Oggún leans in, "We went to Wal-Mart and there was this lady, she looks at us and she said 'Oh Jesus,' and stepped back. I did the sign of the rosary and said 'Amen!'" This reaction by outsiders would be repeated as we were walking on a busy downtown street in Cuba and a woman started shouting "Leave in the name of Jesus," as she noticed the priestesses dressed in white.

### **Observations**

An analysis of the challenges faced by the Lucumi (a word frequently used to refer to the religion, language and people of the Yoruba in Cuba) community in the Mid-South seeks to not only understand the needs and barriers of those who

practice the religion but to also gain an understanding of how society may possibly be contributing to these challenges.

During fieldwork I encountered examples of supernatural experiences that helped me gain an understanding into the behavior of members of the community. I observed the emotional strain on the faces of practitioners when witchcraft took the lives of animals set aside for sacrifices. I observed the stress and desperation and the toll it took on practitioners' bodies as they gave offerings to Orishas that continued to speak through divination about getting rid of malevolent works that trapped a young man's family. Sweat pouring from foreheads, muscles bulging in arms from gripping animals and repeated throws of divination tools.

In each of these cases there was the element of supernatural directives that motivate physical needs. The deity was instructing the practitioner to do more, give more, and seek more. When a deity advises a practitioner to take an offering to the river, the practitioner is left with a decision. Do I obey and risk being arrested or harassed by possible onlookers, or do I disobey and risk spiritual danger? When a deity speaks to a priestess and tells her to obtain a particular type of herb in order to bring healing to a client, does the lack of resources place the priestess in a difficult place spiritually?

There are several things needed for religious practitioners to practice the religion. One of the important needs is for space. The practice of Santería requires using specific spaces for ceremonies, shrines, and communal gatherings. The delineation between the 'sacred' and the 'profane' must be made for these spaces. The profane are those places that are available without special ceremony or ritual (Moro & Myers, p.52). When I became familiar with sacred spaces in the community it became easier to identify the profane spaces as well.



**Figure 7**  
***Ceremony for Oko,***  
***Orisha of Agriculture and Fertility.*** (Kail 2021)

An individual's sacred spaces used in the religion include a place for the dead (*muertos*), a place for ancestors (*eggun*) such as the *boveda* and spaces for the *soperas* that hold the sacred stones (*fundamentos*) of the Orishas. Communal spaces such as the traditional *Igbodu* (*Igbodún*) are needed as they serve a number of functions within the religion. They not only contain vessels and tools of the Orishas but they also provide a space for initiation. Brown speaks of the function of the threshold of the *Igbodún*, "Important values are constituted by the opposition of 'inside' and 'outside' of the room. The room's threshold represents the fulcrum of neophytes' initiatory rites of passage and irrevocably divides their old lives from their new lives 'in the santo'" (Orsi 1999, 165).

The practice of *Santería* involves using a number of elements of material culture. Material culture includes the sum or inventory of the technology and material artifacts of a human group, including those elements related to subsistence activities as well as those which are produced for the ornamental, artistic, or ritual purposes (Smith 1986, 183). Access to material culture is necessary for the practice of the *Lucumi* religion. Material culture such as jewelry is not only an integral part of initiation, but is also used as an indicator of membership in the community as well. Specific materials such as the items that represent *Los Guerreros* are necessary in order for the practitioner to have access to specific spiritual domains. Materials such as seashells, powdered eggshell, and cacao are necessary in order to perform specific ceremonies.

As *Santería* is a religious and healing resource for devotees, practitioners say that access to spiritual supply stores like *Botánicas* and to traditional healers is necessary for healing needs in the lives of practitioners. Among folk healing traditions such as

*Santería* many have gained recognition for their role as an informal mental health care system offering a cultural reality that combines health, illness, and treatment options (Pasquali 1994).

Wellness in the religion is encouraged in many different formats. On the day of the *Íta* it occurred to me that many of the directives for the life of the new initiate deal with guidelines for health and wellness. For example, specific dietary restrictions are frequently given during the life reading. Spiritual wisdom concerning specific taboos that include smoking and drinking alcohol are frequently mentioned in these readings. These directives also include instructions regarding social relationships such as the value of showing respect and self-protection.

As medical healthcare addresses issues related to biological agents, *Santería* also addresses supernatural agents related to witchcraft. Witchcraft is defined as an anti-social psychic power (Douglas 1966). Anti-witchcraft therapies are an integral part of the *Lucumi* healing traditions. Spiritual cleansings can be performed by ritual specialists to aid devotees in removing witchcraft and sorcery. Sometimes initiations are required in order for a particular Orisha to provide spiritual protection for victims of witchcraft. Specific ceremonies can be performed that release tension for victims of malevolent magic. This may be something such as a spiritual bath prescribed by an experienced herbalist or priest. Many *Botánicas* also carry amulets used to combat witchcraft, including bracelets made from coral and specific seeds that can be worn for protection.

### ***Santería, Christianity, and Colonialism***

Throughout history colonialism and ethnocentrism have often been motivated by religious fervor. As Christians encounter *Santería* they must understand that many of the historical traumas that the religion and its practitioners have endured have come as a result of religious motivated colonialism. The needs, values, and culture of those who have suffered as a result of colonialism should be valued by those with the heart of Christ. Likewise, there needs to be healing that is initiated by the Christian community. It is the name of the Divine and the sacred teachings of the Christian faith that have been used and twisted to endorse abuse and slavery throughout modern history.

The practices of African traditional religion have endured both in Africa and throughout the world despite the horrors of slavery. In Cuba members of

various African communities formed slave societies where indigenous traditions could be practiced without the suppression of traditional beliefs. These societies became active in physical and spiritual resistance toward colonialism. Members of these societies were documented as being involved in military skirmishes, including giving aid to pirates that were fighting the Spanish in La Habana in 1539 (De La Torre 2004, 195).

Attacks on African religion have been recorded not only as physical attacks on practitioners but in a philosophical sense as well. Depictions of African religions as primitive and void of morality have managed to remain in pop culture and the consciousness of many non-Africans around the world.

The line of colonialist thought toward African religions has suppressed the notion of ethics among African traditions. As Christians engage members of African religious traditions, it is imperative that they do so in an informed manner. This requires reliance on solid cultural, historical and philosophical understanding of the religions, along with an understanding of how colonialism and issues related to race have affected cultural views on these traditions.

### ***Medical Outreach***

Christians providing healthcare in communities where Santería is being practiced may encounter various aspects of the religion's healing traditions. From those serving in local outreach to medical missions, it is important to understand the patient or client's perspective. Client's may be reluctant to speak of their tradition. Physical and verbal communication is necessary in order to give clients the sense of peace and safety.

For instance, one of the first visible indicators of those in the Lucumi faith may be the presence of sacred jewelry in the form of necklaces or bracelets. It is important that healthcare providers do not touch these objects as they are considered sacred. Touching objects may communicate disrespect and can potentially affect lines of communication between providers and those they are seeking to serve.



**Figure 8**  
***Sacred Jewelry Plays an Important Part in the Religion. Jewelry can Serve as a Symbol of Social Status and Spiritual Protection. (Kail 2021)***

The use of herbs in the Santería religion is a very important part of the tradition's approach to healing and wellness. Clients may share that they utilize herbal treatments for a number of physical and spiritual issues. It is important as we serve in providing medical care that we understand as opposed to attack traditional approaches to healing.

It is also important to have an understanding of the client's ethnohistory. The ethnohistory looks at the lifeways within a particular cultural context. It can provide insight into the client's perception of illness and how illness is treated within a cultural context. This can aid in immediate treatment or in creating a treatment plan for the client.

### ***Empowerment and Gender***

In order to understand the role that Santería serves in the lives of its followers, it is important to realize that the religion encourages ethnic and racial pride in the community. The power that the religion demonstrated as a mechanism for survival for many Africans is a respected aspect that brings about feelings of pride and empowerment to many followers. In addition, there is an especially important role that the religion plays in regards to gender. Female practitioners amidst world cultures where male domination and machismo is highlighted find that the religion presents a very different view of them.

Female deities in the Santería pantheon are highly respected and honored. Oshún is the mighty power of the river waters bringing fertility and love. Yemayá is

the mighty ocean waters that carried the bodies of Africans to Cuba. Oyá is the great power of the wind and storm. Although they may be worshipped in communities where there is gender inequality, male practitioners give them honor and dare not incur their wrath. The aesthetics and cultural terminology associated with initiation into Santería honor female initiates as queens and daughters of powerful deities. Female Orishas are relatable to women as their mythology describes their dreams, hardships and struggles. Patakis are filled with stories of heartbreak, love, and empowerment that provide relevant instruction on living.

The ability of the Orishas to appear in the form of trance possession and the opportunity for adherents of all gender backgrounds to become vessels for the deities communicates messages of equality. For example, a young female initiate may be ridden by the Orisha Oyá and can communicate warnings and directions for much older male initiates in the ceremony. There is no consideration of the initiates gender or age as the deity speaks through her. She in turn becomes the goddess.

### ***Overcoming Fear and Intolerance***

Christians who serve in communities where African traditional religions like Santería are present may succumb to fear and apathy toward those who they might not understand. The religion of Santería does not focus on proselytizing or forcing beliefs on those outside the faith. Still, over the years I have witnessed situations where the discovery of dead animals, candles, or spiritual supply shops have immediately brought about fears and bias against African spiritual communities. In one case the discovery of a dead chicken alongside a candle and several pennies brought fears that a ‘Santería cult’ was targeting a suburb. There have been instances where the discovery of animal sacrifices have led to assumptions that practitioners would “move on to killing humans.”

The Church plays an important role in how practitioners of the religion are viewed in the community. Demonization and false information about the religion can create hostile communities where practitioners are feared or even attacked. These patterns can be seen in cases throughout Africa where false information about child witches and devil worship has fueled a host of campaigns of violence (Priest 2020). Promotion of false information about the

religion can become a case of ‘bearing false witness’ against practitioners.

The Santería religion promotes a number of principles that Christians can relate to and encourage: reverence for nature and the environment; respect toward elders and ancestors; loyalty to Deity; and love for our community are all honorable practices that adherents of both religions can agree upon. The differences between the two faiths theologically come with the focus on the numerous deities in Santería as opposed to the sole worship of Jesus Christ for salvation. De La Torre speaks to this difference:

Their view of the gods is simply different from Christianity’s view of God. Thus it is right to say that Santería is not Christian, but not because it condones idolatry. It is not Christian because it rejects Christianity’s main premise that salvation occurs through the work of Jesus Christ who was God incarnate, affirming instead a multitude of gods who guide humans through never-ending life cycles. (De La Torre 2004, 215)

In looking at the historical development of Santería, the abuse and oppression of those embracing African traditions at the hands of colonizers that claimed to be Christian cannot be forgotten. It is imperative that Christians seek to humbly promote the teachings of Christ, which do not seek to colonize but to bring individuals to the understanding of the love of Jesus Christ. The message of Jesus Christ replaces the scourge of colonialism with compassion, mercy, and peace that passes all understanding.

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# Three Paradigms in Emerging Christian Witchcraft

Jeremy McNabb

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Over the past five years, the emergence of something called Christian witchcraft has alarmed many who have heard of it. Ethnographic research has shown that it is a product of many things: religious deconstruction, decolonization, and even popular culture, but the effect seems to have been one of empowerment for women and queer folk, a healthy respect for other religions, an assertion of agency and consent within religion, and a decentralization of authority in those places where it exists. The informal, popular form of religious deconstruction has created this room for Christian witchcraft, but religious decolonization has played a key role in how the various forms of Christian witchcraft have categorized themselves, and these categories have closely mirrored pre-existing categorizations developed by Dorothee Sölle: orthodox, liberal, and radical.

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In the early 2000s, a newspaper article focused on an occult bookstore owner in Dover, Delaware, who participated in the City of Dover's Pagan Pride Festival as a Christian Wiccan. At that time, I was involved in ministry in a fairly conservative setting and doubted that a Christian could also be a Wiccan. But more than a decade later, while I was going through my own religious deconstruction, I recalled that article and wondered if, perhaps, in light of all the things I now believed I had been wrong about—LGBTQ rights, original sin, pluralism—if I hadn't judged her too quickly, too harshly, and I began to wonder: Could a Christian witch truly exist?

At the beginning of 2019, before I enrolled in the Masters of Theological and Cultural Anthropology program at Eastern University, I inadvertently stumbled into a Facebook group that claimed to be an online meeting place for Christian witches. Upon further searching, I found several more scattered across various social media outlets and requested to join nearly all of them. Surprisingly, as I was accepted into these groups, I found that there was more substance to them than I had initially expected.

This left me with a question: Had I, in the process of rethinking my own beliefs, completely bypassed a surprisingly wide and seemingly viable revolution in the theology and doctrine?

Before going any further, a brief word about how I define "modern Christian witchcraft" in this paper:

What I am studying is the modern, first and second-generation of Christians coming out of mainstream Christianity, who choose to incorporate some form of witchcraft as a spiritual discipline. In this study, I have intentionally excluded synergistic religions like Vodou and Santeria, not because they are unimportant, but because they are belief systems unto themselves, and do not represent a paradigm shift coming out of mainstream Christianity. Additionally, I have excluded those who practice the Solomonic magic which comes from the works of people like John Dee. This too is its own tradition, predating the evangelicalism that modern Christian witchcraft seems to have developed in response to. It is my hope that these groups' exclusion is understood as a respect for their own boundaries and not as my deeming them unimportant or uninfluential.

The additional lines which I had to draw in order to define what makes someone a Christian witch may seem almost arbitrary, given the access to knowledge about mysticism and world religions that are available to people via the internet. Without boundaries, however, this ethnographic study could have continued indefinitely. In truth, nearly as much has been left out as has been included. Primarily, I relied on Christian witches to define themselves through simple self-identification, because the task might have been impossible otherwise. The Baptist who privately invokes saints may see themselves as a witch, even

though the Catholic who invokes them simply considers themselves to be a good Catholic. The Pentecostal woman who learned from her Appalachian grandmother how to make a poultice from foraged herbs might keep her secrets from everyone at church, but open up in a group of pagans online. Things that my own grandmother used to say—superstitions from the watermen of the Chesapeake Bay—came back with surprising familiarity, and she would *never* have called herself a witch. Christianity itself, the miracles, the rituals, transubstantiation, speaking in tongues, can be seen as magical. Even the pronouncement of salvation at baptism is as much a locutionary utterance as “So mote it be.” More than once, I had the uncomfortable sensation that some of my own mystical leanings might not be witchcraft merely for the reason that I hadn’t called them such.

Practically, the typical Christian witch attends church, perhaps even a conservative church which would frown upon their practices as a witch. In private, there is little difference between prayer and spell-casting. Some even describe spell-casting as a type of prayer performed as a private theatre. In my research, personal altars, candles, wands, sigils, potions, are all employed to various degrees. Depending on the type of Christian witch, other beings may be invoked, but rarely if ever, would they be demonic.

There is a problem of ambiguity when it comes to discussing witches. Assumed definitions of words like *witch* and *witchcraft* share certain qualities in different places in the world, but not all definitions are totally commensurable. Whereas E. E. Evans-Pritchard describes witchcraft among the Azande as both an impersonal force and an inherited trait (1976, 1-7, 13), and Robert J. Priest, Abel Ngolo, and Timothy Stabell primarily describe it as a malevolent, powerful, misfortune-causing characteristic (2020, 6), this paper will deal with witchcraft in the alternative sense described by Priest *et al* (2020, 6): the contemporary American and European context which is found among Wiccans and neopagans (though Christian witches are not necessarily either of these). A key difference is the prevalence of intentional, often benevolent, learned or invented spiritual practices which are meant to bring about change in reality either through some elemental power or non-human entity.

As I chose this topic for study and began my ethnographic research, I wasn’t quite sure what to expect. These were groups that existed primarily online, and moreover, it appeared to be a fringe movement. I worried that the demographic I had

chosen would turn out to be just a niche assortment of beliefs with no real rhyme or reason to them. On the contrary, what I found was that: 1) all of these people were deconstructing their faith, at least in an informal sense of the word, but 2) there was definitely a spectrum of theological development, and that the spectrum was oriented around decolonization.

That being the case, we will need to determine what is meant by the terms “deconstruction” and “decolonization” when they are used by Christians practicing witchcraft.

Jacques Derrida, in his book *On Grammatology*, uses the term *deconstruction* to discuss the process by which information moves from the brain into speech or writing, and then from speech and writing back to the brains of the audience. This is already too in-depth a definition for the purposes of most Christians who are deconstructing their faith. It isn’t that they lack the intellectual prowess to consider deconstruction on Derrida’s terms, but rather, they lack the immediate necessity. Popularly, the term is simply used to indicate that long-held or long-asserted beliefs are being weighed and measured, then re-embraced, modified or else discarded wholesale. Many Christians find their faith strengthened by this process. Other Christians abandon their faith when it is found wanting. Others still find their faith changed into something almost entirely new. Of this last category, a surprising number of Christians have openly and intentionally found value in incorporating a degree of witchcraft into their faith. For many, witchcraft is one way of re-discovering God, using rituals, practices, and holding beliefs which have, typically, been foreign to mainstream Christianity. Here we have a strange paradox, though: In the past, women accused of witchcraft were generally not actual, practicing witches. Adopting the label for oneself today can bring on a sense of liberation from certain expectations of Christianity, but it also opens one up to ridicule and ostracism, and so practitioners use witchcraft secretly and with a certain frame of mind, but most of them are not “out” as witches to their friends and families because the dangers of being associated with witchcraft are still enough to jeopardize one’s home, family, or ministry. In some cases, the mere association with the subject matter is enough to jeopardize one’s career—as I personally discovered and will later detail in this paper.

One witch explained to me that it was the Bible itself which led them on this path of deconstructive discovery. They said,

It involves close examination of Scripture and going back to the original language. Then I started questioning stuff like “why is it so wrong to be gay?” and realizing it takes a lot of mental gymnastics just to say the Bible doesn’t contradict itself. From there: examining all kinds of things that don’t make sense; eventually: becoming universalist (or at least, having a broad view of who doesn’t go to a punitive hell), looking at and embracing the pagan roots of Christianity, examining why I believe in God/Christ at all and why should I go on believing.

Many conservative Christians have taken umbrage with the term “deconstruction”, but alternative suggestions such as reconstruction, remodeling, or reforming, are all functionally synonyms as far as a construction trade metaphor goes.

What matters, with regards to our definition of deconstruction, is that beliefs about God, the Bible, salvation, authority structures, and many others are being re-evaluated with the help of seminary education, scholarly and popular books, and respected educators.

The process of decolonization, or else the lack of such a process, is what tends to shape the form that a Christian’s witchcraft will take. For the Christian witches I observed, decolonization could be defined as the undoing of colonialism. More specifically, decolonization de-centers imperial and colonial presuppositions about how the world works and what is seen as normal versus what is seen as exotic or aberrant. It is an intentional rejection of the established power as the status quo. For decolonizing Christians, this may mean reconsidering things like biblical lineages and whether fictive ancestors can be as true an ancestor as one’s genetic ancestor. It may mean reconsidering the substance of things like inerrancy, original sin, and idolatry in a global context as opposed to a Western (mostly European) view.

When primarily directed at Western colonialism, decolonization for those who choose to remain in the Christian faith, also means directly seeking to undo the religious domination that had forced indigenous practices underground and towards extinction and also the commodification which is so frequently present in capitalist societies.

If deconstruction demolishes theological barriers to God and to reality, decolonization demolishes cultural norms which bar one from their own history and place in the world. Decolonizing Christian witches seem to have two main goals: 1) to discover, evaluate and

potentially embrace those practices which were indigenized to a people group (usually their ancestors) before their first contact with Christianity, and 2) to examine the religious and cultural practices one already has and determine if they have been culturally misappropriated from somewhere else, and then to abandon them if necessary and make amends for any harm done. In other words, many Christian witches see the cultural and religious practices of pre-Christian and non-Christian groups as a collective reflection of the *imago Dei*, or at least they ought to be respected by Christian witches as such. It is important to note here that how this manifestation of the image of God takes place is defined differently by different groups of Christian witches, and this will be further elaborated on later in the paper.

What is happening right now in Christian witchcraft is a dynamic sorting of beliefs. Without intentionally creating denominations, Christian witches still tend to gravitate into one of three predominant forms (described below).

In his landmark work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas S. Kuhn talks about the paradigms which will cement a group together and the paradigms that will cause it to divide into smaller sects (2012, xxiv). Christian witchcraft is no exception to the theory he lays out. Within the first six months of observing some of these groups online, it became very clear which paradigms were being adopted to align these Christian witches with one another, and also which paradigms were dividing them into groups. Christian witchcraft is united by a paradigm of decentralized power in the Church and by seeing God’s interactions with humanity *outside* of a church building or formal congregation as equal to or even preferred to those interactions within a church or congregation.

The crisis which faces the Church, in the eyes of these Christian witches, is the friendly co-existence of theological orthodoxy with moral corruption. Like the sciences, theology and biblical study must reckon with emerging cultural issues, and in this case, the issue is the repeated inability of mainstream evangelical Christianity to answer questions of equality, integrity, and compassion, which calls into question the pre-existing theological model. Most of these Christian witches began their process of deconstruction after becoming angry, hurt, or frustrated by their church’s handling of racial tension, LGBTQ+ issues, or sexual exploitation and the covering up of the same. For them, the puzzle to be solved is how the presence of

the Holy Spirit and such harmful behaviors can co-exist for generations without resolution. Christian witchcraft is not a novelty, but a passionate attempt to save one's faith from the belief-ending contradictions one has experienced.

In addition to the motivating aspects, there are certain tools of the trade which seem ubiquitous across all groups of witches, such as the altar. The altar has played a role in Christian churches for as long as Christianity has existed, and home or family altars have been popular among more wealthy or devout Christians for almost as long. Most Christians in North America do not tend to have altars within their homes, but for Christian witches, the personal altar is one of the first steps one takes in becoming or accepting oneself as a witch. The altar serves as a place of worship and prayer, as well as for spell-casting, but it does not indicate a place of conversion, as in so many Protestant traditions.

The altar is a private, and sometimes single-purpose location, frequently the top of a piece of furniture. Though there are no rules about what constitutes an altar, and the implements of practice vary greatly from one witch to the next, there are certain items which can generally be found there: candles, either as an offering or for use in candle-magic; statues and icons representing Jesus, saints, angels, ancestors, and even other deities; wands used for focusing magical intentions; a Bible or individual scriptures; sigils; crystals; grimoires or a book of shadows; incense; tools of divination like Tarot and Oracle cards; active spell jars or other works in progress; as well as ingredients for spells. Some witches often employ a travel altar, which may be as simple as a decorated piece of cardboard tucked in a binder, or they may simply use a piece of cloth.

How one adorns or decorates one's altar changes as one's practice grows, but generally reflects an aesthetic that is unique to that person. I have seen pictures of altars on which every spare inch is filled with candles and other articles, and I have seen other altars which have only a single candle or crystal, and everything else is organized neatly into a small box to the left or right of it. One witch described a desk which served as an altar, and their magic informed and influenced the writing and other artistic work they pursued there. The altar is as unique as the witch who cares for it.

The practice of divination is common across all forms of Christian witchcraft, but how and why it is practiced varies greatly. Some Christian witches see it as a form of prophecy, while others believe that other,

more elemental, powers are at work. There is also some debate over who can practice which kinds of divination, but that discussion is too long and still too undecided to be included here.

No single explanation summarizes how all Christian witches find permission within themselves to embrace something as seemingly contradictory or apparently anti-biblical as witchcraft. In my ethnographic studies, I discovered and elucidated three very different approaches to justifying at least some form of witchcraft.

For ease of discussion, I have termed these three clearly distinct paradigms within Christian witchcraft: Liberationist, Liberal, and Adventist. These three groupings exist on a spectrum or axis which moves from left to right, going from actively decolonizing to disinterested in or even suspicious of decolonization. In my research elsewhere, I referred to this as the Liberation-Adventist Axis (or LAA) (McNabb 2021).

A brief note about the choice of names: The liberation group is so named because liberation theology and indigenous liberation inform much of their hermeneutic and interpretation. For the most part, they do not label themselves as such, though many are openly admiring of such writers as James Cone, Gustavo Gutiérrez and Rosemary Radford Ruether—all liberation theologians. The liberal group is, generally, in line with most popular conceptualizations of what it means to be liberal. Their view of truth tends to be subjective and their expectation of God is that he is graciously permissive and forgiving of all trespasses, and they, in turn, are more open to magical exploration, even if it defies biblical or cultural rules. The final group, Adventist, represents the largest social media-based group of Christian witches. It was one of the earliest groups of Christian witches to have a presence online and is administrated and moderated by a disproportionate number of Adventist Christians who have incorporated their distinctive beliefs into their witchcraft. This is just the briefest of descriptions. These groups, their beliefs and justifications, will be described in greater detail below.

As surprising as it may seem, Christian witches, upon stepping into social media groups in order to be part of a community of Christian witches, tend to decide very quickly whether that particular group is a good fit for them. Here is a brief description of the three forms of witchcraft they will likely encounter.

## Liberation

Christian witches who are liberation-minded have already been introduced as Christian witches who are decolonizing their practice, abandoning Western religious frameworks, and returning to traditional or ancestral practices, and whose tradition or ancestral practices are seen as a fulfillment of the *imago Dei* or the “image of God.” To them, these practices can draw them closer to God rather than drive them away, as Western Christianity has so frequently taught.

It bears explaining that there is a difference in saying that all cultures bear the *imago Dei* and saying that those within a Christian tradition should treat all cultures *as though* they bear the *imago Dei*. In the first scenario, there is an implication that all the good in a non-Christian culture actually comes from a creating deity that they do not know. It becomes a way of robbing a culture of the credit for all the good they do, and condemning the rest. The preferred phrasing acknowledges that within the Christian tradition, we believe God is the creator of all, and we respond accordingly, treating every culture with the dignity that is due to them in such a worldview. In a way, the phrase “created in the image of God” becomes a statement about the worthiness of all people, their cultures, and their personal agency to have our utmost respect as Christians.

Donald Senior and Carroll Stuhlmueller, in their book, *The Biblical Foundations of Mission*, describe the occupation of the missionary as follows: “The gospel comes in the person and the message of the missionary as a free and respectful invitation. The gospel-bearer must be aware that he or she is not the proprietor of all truth but bears a gift of God’s salvation that, in many ways, the non-Christian has *already experienced*” (Senior & Stuhlmueller 1999, 3) [emphasis added]. Those cultures which missionaries encounter, and therefore the religions belonging to the ancestors of missionized and colonized people, have already experienced what Christian witches of this type would likely call a gift of God, or perhaps the *imago Dei*.

Scott Sunkuist writes in *Understanding Christian Mission: Participating in Suffering and Glory*, that all cultures, being made of people marked by the *imago Dei*, must therefore have within them the capacity to glorify, point to, and communicate with their creator (2013, 248-249).

Liberation-minded Christian witches are not seeking to dismantle the gospel-bearing aspects of

Christianity in order that ancient, pagan ways may resurface, but rather that the unbiblical coercion and imperial colonization which has masqueraded as soul-saving work, often as a precursor to industrial development, may be cleared out of the way so that the naked gospel—the rebalancing of power and agency on behalf of those at the margins—may take place. Importantly, this decolonization is not something which has done harm to Christianity by infecting it, but rather, this decolonization is often born out of a gospel-minded mission, once one’s political or imperial motives have been done away with. To the colonized, the naked gospel can be a liberating and decolonizing force, even from the Christians they have encountered in the past.

To summarize a very long exegetical portion of my research, the biblical condemnations of paganism and witchcraft, for the Liberation-minded witch, are condemnations of the *imperialism* which has venerated itself with the local religion, and the imperialism itself must be condemned because it represents powerful people and structures which have set themselves against the poor and the vulnerable. In their view, the biblical authors were not attempting to address the folk magic of rural or oppressed peoples.

## Liberal

In the middle of the LAA, we have those Christians who I have categorized as Liberal Christian witches. The usage of liberal is not meant to be pejorative, but rather a description of their generally subjective view of truth. Many Liberal Christian witches are not too concerned with issues of cultural appropriation; neither are they beholden to the worries of heresy or apostasy that mainstream Christians and Adventist Christian witches tend to be. Overall, their approach to witchcraft seems to be that God’s grace is big enough to cover any missteps or sins one might commit while exploring magic for oneself. Because of this, an individual witch within the Liberal group may have a larger repertoire of spells and magic available to them than their counterparts to the left or right. There is an interesting comparison which is often drawn by witches of this type. Their general dislike of the legalism found in mainstream Christianity often informs their displeasure at the assertions of more liberation-minded witches that some of their practices are misappropriated from vulnerable cultures. To them, this too is legalism.

Another nearly universal quality of liberal Christian witchcraft is the belief that God is a universal figure, playing the role of god and goddess in every other religion. For this group, inclusion frequently means believing that other gods—Allah, Zeus, Odin, etc.—are the Christian god behind a veil. The liberation-minded group would take exception to this as a form of spiritual colonization. In other words, telling a Norse pagan, for instance, that their god is secretly the Jewish or Christian Creator, implies that Christian witches have a deeper understanding of the Norse god than his own followers do, that they are somehow privy to a secret about Odin which had been kept from Norse pagans.

One interesting revelation while working with these two groups is that the deities of other religions do not generally have a salvific role as Jesus does in Christianity, nor are they as interested in seeking worship. They do not possess the jealous monotheism of Christianity and can be completely content “working with” a witch without receiving worship.

The majority of my previous research revolved around Liberal and Liberation groups of Christian witches, as they present the greatest distinction from mainstream, evangelical Christianity. Liberal Christian witches largely discard much of evangelical Christianity’s core beliefs, whereas Liberation-minded witches bypass popular evangelicalism with an alternative spiritual paradigm of liberation theology.

### **Adventist**

In early drafts of my ethnography (2021), *Fast Falls the Eventide: The Emergence of Modern Witchcraft in Response to Mainstream Moral Crisis*, I referred to the group on the right of the LAA as “Bible witches,” a name that was chosen by one of the smaller groups I observed on social media. I discovered, however, that one of the largest groups, with more than 1,000 members, is heavily influenced by Seventh-Day Adventism, and in some cases actually referred to themselves as Adventist, the major similarity being the emphasis on a Saturday Sabbath or Sabbat.

This group, as a whole, has deconstructed enough to accept and encourage women in leadership roles, and is more often than not LGBTQ+ affirming, but they have more in common with mainstream evangelicalism with regards to their soteriological beliefs. Unlike both Liberation and Liberal Christian witches, Adventist witches do not work with metapersons other than the Christian Trinity. They do

not work with (and in some cases forbid even discussing) angels, saints, other gods, demons, and other supernatural beings. While they employ both astrology and Tarot, they view these practices as a type of prophecy—a Christian spiritual gift mentioned in I Corinthians 14:1—which should be accompanied by prayer, and should not involve Tarot or Oracle decks which depict pagan pantheons or demonic imagery. Many hold to a Young Earth Creationist position, though this is hardly unanimous, and many, if not most, still believe in Hell. This group represents less of a paradigm shift from evangelicalism than a careful reinterpretation of how the Holy Spirit moves among Christians.

While the previous two groups contain a diversity of ethnic backgrounds, Adventist Christian witches tend to be white, and practices borrowed from cultures from the Global South tend to be viewed with suspicion, whereas “celtic” magic (a term so broad as to almost be useless) and Appalachian magic are seen as more acceptable.

According to my observations, when one chooses to participate in Christian witchcraft, one can begin at any point on the LAA, depending on one’s convictions. Bear in mind that the LAA is a classification I have assigned to a consistent series of automatic self-groupings among Christian witches, but it is not something that is presented as a clear or intentional choice in any of the groups I observed. Those who begin with Adventism may move further to the left over time, into Liberal or even Liberation forms of witchcraft, but it is incredibly rare for a Christian witch to move from Liberation into Liberal or Adventist witchcraft. The motion tends to be from right to left. Occasionally, a liberal Christian will experiment with the restrictions that fall on them by moving left, but this move is not always permanent.

While finishing up my ethnographic research with Christian witches, I skimmed through Dorothee Sölle’s *Thinking About God: An Introduction to Theology* (1990), and landed on her discussion of the three biblical frameworks or paradigms that she uses when speaking about Christianity. She also cites Kuhn’s definition of paradigm as, “a “constellation of convictions, values, and modes of existence which are shared by a particular community” (1990, 7). The categories that she works with, namely, Orthodox, Liberal, and Radical, bear an uncanny resemblance to my own categorization of Christian witchcraft.

The paradigm shifts which are required to justify both Liberal and Liberation Christian witches start

with a perceived problem: Why does mainstream Christianity allow abuses against marginalized people to flourish within its community? Put another way, why is the fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control mentioned in Galatians 5:22) not evidenced in the community where the Holy Spirit is said to reside?

For most mundane (non-witch) and non-deconstructing Christians, this question isn't a problem. Most assume that they are, in fact, bearing the fruit of the Spirit, or else they argue that Christians who do not bear the fruit of the Spirit are not living as they should. At the beginning of their deconstruction, many witches and deconstructing Christians were told not to follow Christians (who are flawed) but to follow Christ (who is perfect).

For many, this simply sidesteps the problem. The theological solutions which they are presented with often fail to resolve the reality that they are witnessing with their own eyes and ears. In many cases, the trust they placed in the Bible, in God, in truth, is the beginning point of their deconstruction. They come to believe that the Christian community is not living up to its own standards. Church scandals, non-affirming theology, racial tension, political division, and personal slights all appear to be anomalies in a theory that says Christians should manifest the aforementioned fruit of the Spirit. This leads to a crisis that threatens the status quo of the deconstructing or pre-deconstructing believer; it may even threaten the stability of their faith. The incommensurability of these anomalies requires more than another reinterpretation of old beliefs. Instead, these Christians find themselves in a kind of liminal state where their former beliefs are no longer solidly reliable, but the answers that they do latch onto seem to be little more than an undeveloped notion or hunch.

The deconstruction and perhaps even adoption of witchcraft which follows this crisis is nothing less than a personal revolution, and as Christian witches and deconstructing Christians find one another and begin to compare stories, they find other people who were experiencing the same anomalies across towns, states, nations, and even continents. These anomalies become intractable; Christians who become aware of them lose the ability to simply set them aside.

Before this crisis, the Bible, and specifically verses like Galatians 5:22 (already mentioned) are held at a distance without a great deal of scrutiny. The verses transcend the reality which Christians are experiencing. This transcendent quality allows for a

centralization of faith to take place, centering the Christian belief on the Bible or on the teachings of various religious authorities. During deconstruction and decolonization, Christianity loses much of its transcendence and instead, becomes immanent. Doctrinal belief, interpretations of scripture, and sermons are expected to tangibly relate to the lived experience of the deconstructing believers. When they do not, those doctrinal statements, interpretations, and teachers can be discarded, much in the same way that some pagan and indigenous groups will destroy an idol when it fails to stop a famine or blight.

As far as puzzling out the problems of patriarchy, racism, and heteronormativity go, this shift towards immanentism proves itself up to the task, as Strathern (2019, 64) and Hefner (1993, 13-16) have argued. Not only does deconstruction create pressure towards immanentism, immanentism then plows the way to creative re-construction and reformation. Codified texts produce a clerisy who are invested in keeping their congregation's eyes, and the eyes of other Christians, upon the text which authorized them, but a religion that adopts a more fluid handling of its sacred texts and possesses no clearly delineated authority structure will allow erupting movements to grow and change without a status quo or infrastructure to be threatened.

Christian witches, by defying the obvious strictures of Christianity by adopting the term *witch*, in some senses, make it plain that they are no longer concerned with gatekeepers of doctrine or congregations. For many, allowing witchcraft a place in Christianity would represent dirt in the Church's carpet. Formlessness, interstitiality, and liminality are characteristics of Christian witchcraft, which generates an uneasy anticipation, both in witches and in the mundane. One knows what to expect from a person carrying a package up to your front door, or carrying a Bible up to a pulpit, or taking a toilet plunger into the bathroom, but there is an uncertainty about a person wearing a pentagram or concealing a wand. This open-ended expectation grants the witch power.

So too, an intellectual witch's theological statements or descriptions of practice, including an ethnography like the one I published, can generate unease because they represent, for most Christians, the road left untraveled. In my experience, few things have been more unnerving to those trying to reconvert a witch than a witch who wields intimately familiar scriptures in an unfamiliar way.

As a brief example of how this unfamiliarity works itself out in the lived experiences of deconstructing people, I have a personal anecdote. While working on my ethnography, I applied to and interviewed for a pastoral job at a church. During the interview process, I had a very good experience with the church elders, then a very good secondary interview with various parents and teenagers. The senior pastor and I had discussed liberation theology and church history, which were two passions that we shared. A third and final, in-person interview was a formality, I felt, and I would not have been surprised if they were prepared to offer me the job before I left.

I was the first to arrive at the church for the interview. Sitting in my car, I kept an eye out for the faces of those I had met through Zoom meetings. Once they started arriving, I made my way to the same entrance they used, but being nervous, I didn't see a puddle in the parking lot and I managed to get dirt on my dress shoes. I shook it off as best I could, scraped off whatever was left on the doormat outside the church, but still managed to carry a small amount into the church's foyer.

"No worries," said my host. "It's just a little dirt."

We all sat down, re-introduced ourselves, even though we had spoken several times already, and chatted naturally about church growth, teenage problems, and team dynamics. They asked about my background, my schooling, and then they asked, "So what is Theological & Cultural Anthropology?"

That was easy enough to answer, but I wasn't expecting the next question.

"What was your master's thesis on?"

I told them that I studied the emergence of modern Christian witchcraft, and the next questions came faster than I could satisfactorily answer them:

"What makes a witch Christian?"

"At what point are they just a witch?"

"You're not a witch, are you?"

"What are you doing to make sure that their souls are right before God?"

The worried intensity of the exchange made me regret exhausting all the other possible topics of conversation so early. The interview ended on the topic of Christian witches and that was a little unsettling. Despite all the positive experiences I had had leading up to that point—with the pastor, with the elders, with the students and their parents—I felt rushed off a little too quickly.

And I was right.

The day after my job interview, I received an e-mail from the hiring committee. It said something to the effect of, "Thanks for interviewing with us, but we've decided to go with one of the other candidates."

A few days later, the job listing showed up again. They hadn't chosen a different candidate over me; they had simply rejected me in the easiest way they knew how. Merely studying the topic of Christian witchcraft had cost me an opportunity to further my career. My proximity to Christian witches actually drew me into the effects of marginalization that I had been recording in my ethnographic work. To be sure, the degree to which this discrimination affected me was minor in comparison to what many witches have experienced, but it was a pattern that I would see repeated over and over as my research and writing continued.

Mary Douglas wrote in *Purity and Danger*, "As we know it, dirt is essentially disorder. There is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder. If we shun dirt, it is not because of craven fear, still less dread of holy terror . . . Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment" (Douglas, 1966, 2).

When I stepped into that New Jersey church to meet what might have been my future team members, little did I know that I had tracked two kinds of dirt into their building that day. There was the dirt on the bottom of my shoe from the parking lot, but there was also the dirt—the theological disorder—of Christian witchcraft that I tracked in with my mind and my history of study. The first, they knew what to do with; it could be dispatched with a broom or vacuum. They weren't equipped to deal with the second, other than to put as much distance between their impressionable teenagers and myself as possible.

Christian witchcraft is seen as a violation of the usually agreed upon barrier between theology and witchcraft. For many, it would represent an irremovable stain in the Church's carpet. This illustrates the strength of the "normal" theological view in the West; the strength of the current paradigm is such that even a group with a coherent and internally consistent theological stance, such as the liberation theology of the liberation-minded Christian witches, looks like mental gymnastics or nonsense to those who aren't familiar with it. Thomas Kuhn once said that in order to make a paradigm work, chemists had to beat nature into line (2012, xxix). Whether we're talking about Christians on opposite sides of the issue of

witchcraft, or on opposite sides of the Calvinist/Arminian debate, or even among the three groupings within Christian witchcraft itself, it is tempting to see the other side or sides doing something similar—bending the scriptures and metaphysical reality they describe into an acceptable shape.

The differing paradigms that appear in Christianity do not exist in a vacuum, not even from one another. There is now and has been, historically, interplay between the opponents of every major controversy in church history. In the Nicene and Athanasian creeds, we see a response to Arianism. In the debates between Augustine and Pelagius, we see their conclusions being narrowed and sharpened by their disagreement with one another. There is no Protestant Reformation without Johann Tetzel, and no Counter-Reformation without Martin Luther. So too, there is no modern Christian witchcraft (at least of the sort I studied) without the rigidity of modern evangelicalism, or perhaps even without the specter of the Satanic Panic of the 1980s. What all of these traditions have in common, however, is a belief that chasing their own distinctions is at least partially guided by the Holy Spirit working within them.

To work out one's salvation with faith and trembling in the Christian tradition, as described in Philippians 2:12, is to invoke an outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Michael Welker, of the University of Heidelberg, in his 2019/2020 Gifford Lectures addresses this directly:

Let us concentrate on the notion itself of the outpouring of the Spirit. This phenomenon implies that the divine Spirit can be “invoked”—that is, petitioned to descend upon human beings—but also that those receiving this outpouring are in their own turn “summoned” to respond in a life-changing way. The outpouring of the Spirit is a realistic event that within the context of natural theology can be conveyed particularly by way of its effects on human circumstances. (Welker 2021, 23)

Welker describes a life-changing, or perhaps paradigm-shifting, event that follows the moving of the Holy Spirit in a person's life. The conclusions that a discerning Christian makes, the new paths they follow, the old paths they reject, are in some way a reflection of the Holy Spirit's work in their mind and soul. This makes no claim of inerrancy or infallibility with regards to their choices, but it highlights that which the Spirit has revealed to them.

Coming back to the idea of paradigms as constellations of ideas, Welker elaborates that there are often multi-polar constellations, where two or more ideas are centered in the movement. In Christian witchcraft, infallibility of scripture is centered in the Adventist group, grace-filled freedom is centered in the Liberal group, and God's liberating work is centered in the Liberation group, but all are moving together as a single constellation towards the goal of a church which is experiencing equality of race, of women, of LGBTQ+ folks, and of religious dissenters.

More broadly, I hope it can be said that Christianity as a whole has many poles or paradigm centers, but that the constellation as a whole is moving towards a kingdom of righteousness and holiness, however that may be defined. The people who make up the Church are acting, thinking, and believing together, under the influence and outpouring of the Holy Spirit, even when they sometimes act in conflict with one another. This is the iron which sharpens iron. This back-and-forth dialogue between those who are called orthodox and those who are called heterodox moves the church forward with greater understanding of itself, but also requires an increasing degree of humility.

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# Salvationism Examined

Jacob Winn

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There is much to examine regarding the nature of The Salvation Army, its role within Christianity, and Salvationists as members of a cohesive global community. From their outward focus to the reverence they have for their history, there are many distinguishing features which set Salvationists apart and warrant further study. In this article, various aspects of the Salvationist experience are examined, points researched and observed in person, to present the reader with several different aspects for their consideration.

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## Overview

The Salvation Army is a movement within Christendom with much to teach us. I spent time in 2020 and 2021 working alongside Salvationists and doing ethnographic research at the same time. It became readily apparent to me that within the Salvationist ethos lies much treasure. Within that treasure, there is much which may apply to all beneath the Christian banner. Ultimately, the all-encompassing commitment to fighting for the faith is something that Salvationists embody to the fullest and is a rich treasure trove of lessons for all.

Salvationists live out a mission that is all-encompassing. To be a Salvationist is to partake in a grand battle that covers all areas of life. Drawing on my experience and research, I aim to point to the ways in which the Salvationist experience is shaped by an overarching ethos which drives the entirety of the paradigm of the organization. The most significant current to run through the Salvationist experience is the notion that a global community can form a cohesive unit, with themes, motifs, and expressions which unite the movement's adherents across time and space.

## Incarnational Observations

My firsthand observations of Salvationists took place throughout the ten months I worked at a Salvation Army corps in 2020 and 2021. A "corps" of The Salvation Army is essentially the name of one of their brick-and-mortar locations meant to serve the public. This naming convention is typical of The

Salvation Army, with many of the elements making up the Salvationist experience being named in the manner of various facets of militaria, from "officers and soldiers" to "commissioning" and more.

This imagery is not a mere hollow element of the Salvationist experience. Instead, these words are charged with meaning. Far from being empty symbols of formality, these militaristic designations point to a central focus of the Salvationist mission. The Salvationists I worked with always kept to the terminology, never substituting in more traditional Christian terms. For instance, the officers were never referred to as "pastor," but were instead referred to by their rank, even though officers in Salvationism are roughly synonymous with pastors in other Christian denominations. Far from being merely ceremonial, the terms unique to Salvationism are used ubiquitously and are thus integral to the Salvationist experience.

The ethos of warfare is not out of place in the broader Salvationist paradigm. This harkens back to the earliest days of The Salvation Army, when it wrestled against the forces of darkness amid the misery of Victorian slums. Theirs was not a casual sort of mission, not the sort of mission wherein the do-gooder tosses a few coins in the direction of the needy and then proceeds upon their merry way. Much to the contrary, theirs was a mission of total war, fought in the trenches hand-to-hand against some of the greatest forms of desperation ever to be unleashed upon the human condition. This mission has continued into the present, where the total war for lives and souls continues.

The history of the movement is something that is commonly held in high regard by Salvationists. Fidelity

to the founders of the movement, William and Catherine Booth in particular, is at the forefront of much of the Salvationist experience. Anecdotes from the lives of the Booths are often shared among Salvationist officers and soldiers. I heard many of these stories myself, and found them to be very enlightening to the nature of the Salvationist mission. One I heard several times was of a speech by William Booth in which he returned to the line, "I'll fight!," after listing people's various dire straits, thus emphasizing the notion that so long as there are people in need, the fight continues for Salvationists. These sorts of stories serve the purpose of galvanizing the Salvationist mission.

The missionary vision of the Booths is still alive and well within The Salvation Army, the current organization. Despite being beyond a century and a half removed from The Salvation Army's founding, and over a century removed from the death of William Booth (Catherine had died several years earlier), the ethos of the Salvationist experience today is in strong continuity with that set forth by the Booths in those early days of the movement.

For many, Salvationism is a generational experience. It is not unheard of for Salvation Army officers to be the children of Salvationists themselves, sometimes even the grandchildren of other officers. This was certainly the case for many of the Salvationists I met and worked alongside. Some came from Salvationist families with a multitude of ties to the movement. This generational connection reinforces the history of the movement. Many soldiers and officers of The Salvation Army are walking in the shoes of their parents or grandparents.

Additionally, corps locations often serve as multi-generational presences in their surrounding communities, sometimes for a century or more. The Salvation Army corps I was at had a plaque inside it from the previous corps building located in that same town which had been established many decades before. The Salvationist presence in a community becomes an imbedded part of the community fabric. From humble beginnings in Victorian London, The Salvation Army has grown into an enduring presence in myriad communities around the world.

One aspect of Salvationism that adds an interesting dynamic to the community engagement of corps locations is the fact that Salvationist clergy (those called "officers") are reassigned to new locations every few years. So, while a corps may be a steady presence in a community for over a century, the officers managing

that corps will have changed a significant number of times during that span. While this can lead to some congregational uncertainty, as successive officers manage things differently than their predecessors, it can also result in a paradigm in which the corps is defined by the laypeople (those called "soldiers") who make it their home. These soldiers are the families who anchor themselves at particular corps locations and serve those surrounding communities throughout the years. In many ways, this creates a situation in which the soldiers are the lifeblood of the corps locations. While officers come and go over the years, the soldiers, by contrast, serve as an enduring presence.

Beyond the corps level, Salvationists come together on a few other levels. Keeping with the militaristic language, the next level up is that of the division. The division oversees a larger area than the individual corps. Divisions gather together from time to time, and there tends to be a high degree of collaboration and cooperation between the various corps locations within a given division. At the corps where I spent my time, other Salvationists (particularly officers) from elsewhere in the division were a common and welcome sight. At the level above the division is the territory, encompassing several divisions. Beyond that, the global Salvation Army works together as a whole, overseen by their elected general, who functions as the head of the movement, and others at their global headquarters in London. These various levels each have their unique foci, and local institutions may have their quirks, but they nevertheless tend to work together well with others and amongst themselves. A Salvationist visiting other Salvationists on the other side of the world will still feel among their kindred in the movement, with shared imagery, language, and vision. This was relayed to me by a number of the Salvationists with whom I spoke.

This wide ranging cohesion and integration is significant. To maintain an organization that is so widespread as a single united force is a daunting task when viewed in the abstract, yet it is something that Salvationists have managed with great success since the Victorian era. The endurance of the movement speaks to the motivating power of the Salvationist mission and message.

In its day-to-day expression, the Salvationist experience is centered around the notion of "others." One story from the life of William Booth that has great importance to Salvationists and is told frequently to this day is an account of Booth and the word "others."

As the story goes, William Booth once intended to send an encouraging telegram to all the officers. However, telegrams were quite expensive at the time, and thus a brief message was decided upon. The message that Booth sent to the world's Salvation Army officers simply read "others". This story encapsulates the Salvationist ethos. It is truly an others-centered movement. This is the reality on the ground for thousands of Salvationists around the world and was a sort of mantra which I personally heard repeated many times. William Booth hoped to instill in Salvationists "hearts made hot with love for God, for Comrades, for perishing souls, for noble work, and for every other good thing possible to men or women on earth or in Heaven" (Booth 1902, 50). This disposition of the heart is something that his message instills in Salvationists to this day.

Many Salvationists work to assist those trapped in cycles of addiction and other self-destructive behaviors. This has been a hallmark of Salvationist work from the very beginning of the movement, as Salvationists have always been known for their opposition to the vices that burden humankind. In fact, William Booth met his future wife Catherine for the first time at a temperance meeting in 1852 (Murdoch 1994, 27). Today, The Salvation Army provides several different outlets and resources to those struggling with addiction. I recall sitting with a Salvationist who had worked for a time at one of The Salvation Army's facilities dedicated to substance abuse rehabilitation and hearing their stories of the different happenings at that location. The overriding sense was that Salvationists pour themselves wholly into the mission of providing compassionate assistance to those who are struggling.

Additionally, The Salvation Army assists those who are in dire straits financially. This takes several forms, from thrift stores selling affordable items to corps locations to providing a wide array of free or otherwise affordable activities for the larger community. Salvationists have long been known for helping those in various degrees of destitution. One well known story that I heard during my time with the Salvationists, and subsequently read more about, was the story of how in the early 1890s The Salvation Army got into the match manufacturing business in London, opening a factory that only used red phosphorus for making matches, as opposed to the more dangerous form of phosphorus used by other match manufacturers at the time (Horridge 1993, 121). In other words, Salvationists provided a safer working environment for match

workers, who otherwise faced very harrowing conditions in the workplace. This same spirit of bettering the conditions of many is alive and well in the organization to the present.

These services and those like them bring Salvationists close to the various scenes of struggle and misfortune that befall people. Experiences serving the less fortunate strengthens the resolve and the continuing efforts in the face of difficulties to carry out the Salvationist ethic of living the fight. That is, the fight that Salvationists engage in is something that is to be lived out with one's whole life. The battle in the trenches for souls and the betterment of the masses is something that requires a total devotion. This was woven into the movement by the millenarian vision of William and Catherine Booth, that of a world won to Christ and all the needy served and rescued from their various afflictions and infirmities. While Salvationism is not an explicitly millenarian movement today, I nevertheless heard fond praise of the millenarian visions of the Booths on more than one occasion from Salvationists I worked with. In various forms, this millenarian vision still provides a great deal of the fuel for the fire which burns within the heart of the movement and provides it with optimism and determination.

The hope of the Salvationist is a Christian hope, and indeed the Salvationist movement is, at its core, a thoroughly Christian movement. This has been the case from its very inception. William Booth did not begin his journey in ministry as the first general of The Salvation Army. Rather he cut his teeth as a circuit-riding Methodist revivalist prior to the foundation of the Christian Mission (which was later renamed, "The Salvation Army"). The Methodist-holiness roots of the organization come through in its theological leanings to this day. In fact, I once asked some Salvationists about what other Christian denomination they felt was closest to theirs, and they as one pointed to Methodism, highlighting the Booths' connection to Methodism and the holiness movement.

Beyond this, however, much of The Salvation Army's approach to bringing nonbelievers into the fold could be categorized as being welcoming and open to all. Just as with their service, Salvationist evangelism is open to everyone, often (though not always) with a particular emphasis on the most vulnerable in society. The Salvation Army is seen as a safe Christian outlet in many communities with good reason. I was once told that Salvationists in some regions are often asked to perform services such as funerals for the homeless,

since their compassion extends to those in society who are overlooked and neglected by others. For the most part, Salvationism has succeeded in its goal of being a branch of the Church known for its service to the needy and its compassion and openness to all.

In keeping with the spirit of openness, Salvationism is strongly egalitarian. This is something that has been a hallmark of the movement from its inception and used to draw a lot of fire, particularly in the early days (Sandall 1979b, 161). It included giving full equality to women, for instance. In my time with the Salvationists, I never detected as much as a single hint that men were given preference to women in any way, and indeed I saw the movement as thoroughly, genuinely, and holistically egalitarian. In fact, the equal role given to women within Salvationism is a distinguishing characteristic of the movement.

Another uniqueness of the Salvationists is in their treatment of the sacraments. The Salvation Army is non-sacramental, meaning they do not practice sacraments such as baptism and communion as part of the church services they offer. However, it should be highlighted from the outset that Salvationists are *non-sacramental* and not *anti-sacramental*, a distinction that they are understandably keen on emphasizing. In other words, they do not perform the sacraments, but are in no way hostile to such practices. In fact, it is not unheard of for Salvationists (particularly soldiers) to be baptized and take communion in other church settings, acts which do nothing to harm their reputation among their fellow Salvationists. Ultimately, the fact that The Salvation Army does not practice the common Christian sacraments serves to reduce the sense of a barrier-to-entry for participation in their church services. In short, the fact that Salvationists are non-sacramental means there is no pressure for a person in the surrounding community to be baptized or take communion in order to attend a Salvationist church service. However, this can cause some consternation for those coming to Salvationism from other, more sacramental, Christian denominations. In these cases, the Salvationist stance on the sacraments can be a more sensitive subject.

For the Salvationist, the fight is all-encompassing, and the whole world is a mission field. William Booth expected the believer to “give themselves to the work of enlightening and saving their fellow men” (Sandall 1979a, 65). The enduring service of The Salvation Army serves as a sort of sacramental act in and of itself, a notion that was not lost on the Booths. In fact, Booth himself frequently said that he wished for Salvationists

“to observe continually the sacrament of the Good Samaritan” (Sandall 1979c, 67). There is a sense in which service brings one especially close to God in a way that is akin to that experienced in the waters of baptism or in the partaking of communion. For that reason, one would not be altogether mistaken to consider service as a sort of sacrament for the non-sacramental Salvationists.

Adding to the Christian drive of Salvationists, it is worth noting that even within the services provided by The Salvation Army which are not explicitly church services, the Christian message shines through. Many of the community services performed by Salvationists have an evangelistic component. The holistic focus of Salvationism leads to a paradigm in which there is no hard and fast distinction between the “sacred” and the “secular.” The upshot of this is that all the services provided by The Salvation Army, whether these be church services, social services, or a hybrid of the two, contain elements designed to assist in meeting all the needs a person has: those of both a physical nature and a spiritual nature.

The character embodied by Salvationists in their holistic mission is that of wholehearted commitment to a life-defining cause. One could argue that it is only through this sort of tireless devotion that the Salvationist movement has had the kind of worldwide impact that it has over the past century-and-a-half and counting. The reach of their movement is a testament to the power of a global community united around a common cause.

In some sense, it seems that Salvationists have tapped into a strain of primitive Christianity which made the church of Acts into such a powerful gathering, hallowed down through the ages of Christendom. The ethos is one of service and evangelism as a single combined pursuit, rather than two different ones. While it is unclear just how much Salvationists may see themselves as heirs to that special facet of the Acts church, an outside observer can readily pick up on the similarities, as I certainly did in my time around Salvationists. It does not take a microscope to observe that the DNA of that early church clearly flows through the Salvationist’s veins.

The Salvation Army strongly promotes Christian unity. Battle is a unifier for those on the same side of the conflict. This is the case for those engaged in “the fight.” The fact that the Salvationist ethos focuses on an ongoing fight for the holistic wellbeing of others places them within a context of unending struggle. Theirs is ultimately a Pauline struggle against

principalities of spiritual darkness, but a struggle nonetheless. This unites Salvationists with one another in an enduring way. Additionally, this makes the Salvationists beloved siblings of other Christian denominations, as ultimately “the fight” is one shared by all of Christendom, albeit one which Salvationists are particularly adept at addressing head-on.

Every Salvationist has a role to play in this ongoing struggle. There is no such thing as a Salvationist who is unimportant to the cause. Each soldier and officer has work to do, a part in the grand fight. This sense of purpose is immensely valuable. A search for purpose is a common theme among humankind throughout time. People follow all manner of paths in that search, a search that is often quite unfortunately forlorn. For The Salvation Army to offer an answer to that search for purpose in such a positive and mutually beneficial way is a testament to the power and effectiveness of the Salvationist message.

This point relates closely to another, namely the balance between an outward ethos and care for individual Salvationists. Despite the collective focus of The Salvation Army, the individual is not forgotten. Every individual under the Salvationist banner (and those outside) is to be valued in Salvationism. Even collective change begins with change in individual hearts and lives, a fact of which Salvationists are certainly aware. The individual’s needs are of great concern to the Salvationist. Therefore, there is a distinct balance between the collective and the individual that is struck by Salvationism, and while others are to come first for the Salvationist, this is not meant to be at the expense of the individual’s own needs.

With the ultimate goal in mind of helping others, one need only look to the many lives turned around and improved by Salvationists in order to see that this goal has been accomplished many times over and will continue to be achieved by the global community of Salvationists.

### **Salvationists as a Global Community**

Unlike most human communities, Salvationists exist in a wide array of locations around the world yet still constitute a clearly definable culture. Furthermore, their continuity with their history allows for a paradigm in which they operate in the legacy of those who have gone before them and pave the way for those who will come after. Similarly to how the larger Christian Church is sometimes divided into the Church

Triumphant and Church Militant, with members dead and yet living being united into the whole, one can look at Salvationists as a group united through the generations.

As a group bound by shared ties of assent to certain values and beliefs, as opposed to a group bound by birth or geography, one could see the overarching cohesion of Salvationists to be tenuous, always just a few practical disagreements or theological disputes away from fracturing and collapsing. However, time has proven that the glue holding the group together into a cohesive whole is rather strong. It is worth noting that there have been no major splits within Salvationism for well over a century, a feat not achieved by many other Protestant denominations. Therefore, the ties that bind Salvationists together, though they are not ties of blood or location, have nevertheless proven to be exceptionally solid. One reason for this could be the group’s outward focus, which puts an emphasis on serving on the frontlines, thus leaving comparatively little time for the kind of behind-the-scenes squabbles which undermine many similar movements.

An examination of the Salvationist experience shows that a powerful ethos can effectively unite a large group of people. In Salvationism, the message of the fight gives a strong anchor to all that is done. The militaristic language of The Salvation Army is not without cause and has proven itself to be highly effective in galvanizing and mobilizing a movement. This serves as an indication that groups which draw people from a wide range of settings to be their core base can bring that base together despite their differences through a masterful use of ethos. Thus one can find Salvationists on opposite sides of the world engaging in the same fight, the same struggle for souls and the betterment of humanity.

Naturally, getting an entire group of people to agree on one unifying ethos is no simple feat. It does not take much to imagine myriad ways in which people could divert from an ethos and thus sever their union with the ethos-giving movement. Various disagreements, misunderstandings, and drifts in vision and motivation could be involved. Thus, it does not suffice to have just any ethos to unite a group, but instead there must be an ethos that a group can genuinely rally around. A hollow ethos would likely do no good in uniting such a vast array of people as is done by the strong ethos of Salvationism. Therefore, one can discern how the militaristic ethos that makes The Salvation Army rather unique is also likely to be one of the primary

reasons for its long-term effectiveness and relative longevity as a cohesive global movement.

Furthermore, looking to Salvationists provides the observer with evidence that a widespread affection for a movement's history can provide a set of common values and understandings for all its participant members. Such is the case in Salvationism, where Salvationists hold a deep respect for their predecessors. The esteem that Salvationists still hold for the Booths connects their movement in the present to their movement of the past in a contiguous and streamlined manner. When a group is in-touch with its predecessors in such a way, it fosters a sense of purpose and mission within the group, who are thus able to see themselves as walking in the footsteps of those who came before them and perhaps picking up where they left off.

In addition to their admiration for preceding persons, Salvationists are also held together by their admiration for the traditions set forth before them. Many of the elements of Salvationism, not least of which being the unique terminology, could have been discarded over the past century had there not been a deep respect for the traditions handed down through the generations. Because of this respect for traditions of the past, Salvationists have been able to preserve many of the elements which bring them together and make their movement unique.

The nature of an externally focused group is one that creates particular social dynamics. A group that is built in many ways around those who are outside of the group is one that seems poised to have a significant impact on the communities around it. This further requires a paradigm in which members of the group in question are in strong agreement with the group's mission. If the members are not on board with an outward-focused mission, there would seem to be little incentive for them to stay. That is not to say that individuals within the organization are neglected, far from it in fact, but merely to say that the onus is on members of the group to be focused on helping those outside the group. The Salvation Army works to serve the public at large and does not solely exist for the benefit of the soldiers and officers. This promotes a sort of charitable selflessness. Selflessness may not be an easy motivator at first, but once embraced wholeheartedly it becomes a powerful driving force. Salvationism reflects the early Christian church in that an array of people are arranged into a cohesive unit around notions of selflessness and Christian charity.

There is an interesting interplay between two seemingly opposed principles, uniformity and hierarchy, that may also help explain the cohesion found in The Salvation Army. The two-tiered nature of Salvationism, of officers and soldiers, results in a geographically settled base, but an itinerant hierarchy. This creates a social dynamic wherein the base (the soldiers) contribute a significant amount to the on-the-ground, frontlines dynamic of the group in question. Meanwhile, the hierarchal roles within the group (the officers) are far more ephemeral. However, the latter is somewhat offset by the great degree of uniformity within the Salvationist hierarchy in terms of overarching goals and mission vision. Nevertheless, two-tiered dynamics within a movement, organization, or group often lead to two different subcultures forming within the cultural whole. Since the roles of soldier and officer have such unique functions, it is only natural that there would be some differences between the experiences of the two, even if only in relatively minor ways. This is offset by the overall cohesion in the organization, but it is a distinction worth mentioning. Subcultures pose no threat to their parent culture so long as they do not become countercultures. This is applicable to social groups in general. A subculture allows for a diversity of experience and expression, while a counterculture functions as a contrary element within the whole which could ultimately lead to the whole's subversion, weakening, and disintegration.

The layers of hierarchy in Salvationism result in a structure in which major decisions are often made through a bureaucratic process. While such structures could be labelled as Byzantine by some, there is an argument to be made for the necessity of bureaucratic machinery in a large organization. The primary argument in favor of bureaucratic machinery is that it allows for work on the ground to move forward unimpeded by concerns which are delegated up the ladder. Thus, when groups reach a certain size, it seems to be a natural consequence of such growth for them to fashion some manner of bureaucracy. So long as those on the bureaucratic level work well with those on the ground level, and vice-versa, this arrangement can flourish. However, issues may arise if there begins to be a disconnect between those at the front and bureaucrats up the ladder. This can be offset by a chain-of-command which puts some degree of separation between those on the ground and those making the decisions. The system implemented by The Salvation Army generally succeeds in this.

A movement founded on millenarian vision can be propelled far into the future on the strength of that vision. The vision set forth by the Booths has given The Salvation Army an organizational lifetime's worth of fuel. The Booths were driven by a genuine desire to save the world and win it to Christ. As Salvationist historian Dr. Roger J. Green puts it, "William Booth can be understood only by seeing him as someone driven by a religious impulse to save the world from itself" (Green 2005, 103).

There is little else that can inspire people to jump into the fray of a movement more than a good millenarian vision. Although Salvationists are not explicitly millenarian today, that spirit of winning the whole world to Christ still resides within the movement. Working toward a glorious future is something that has rallied people for centuries in all manner of settings and conditions. The vision of such a future can serve as a sort of brass ring on which all the members of a group may focus as one. By pushing forward toward the vision of the future that they all share, those within a movement sprung forth by millenarianism can work in their day to achieve that grand vision for the future.

### **Lessons for Broader Christendom**

There is much that the Christian at large can take from the Salvationist experience. Many of the overarching elements which define the experience are not limited to Salvationists alone. They are elements that have been integral to the Christian Church as a whole, including its various denominations. But some of the practices which define the Salvationist experience have become foreign to parts of the larger Christian Church, despite having been present at the Church's very beginning.

For instance, the book of Acts describes the early Christian movement in ways that parallel the Salvationist movement, and that are instructive for the larger Church even now. In Acts 2, for example, the Day of Pentecost is depicted, wherein the Holy Spirit fell upon the gathered believers and many were brought into the fold. In Acts 2:5-11, we are reminded that those who bore witness to what God was doing were of a great and diverse multitude, yet they each heard the message in their own language. This speaks to the multicultural appeal and pan-ethnic aim of the Christian message. In other words, this account shows that the Christian Church (and indeed, one could point to Pentecost as a time in which the Christian Church

came into being in a definitive and distinct form) is an institution with goals ultimately extending to all people, a point that is returned to throughout the narrative of Acts. It was not intended to be tied to a certain earthly nationality or ethnicity, but instead was meant to transcend these erstwhile divisive categories and exist across the vast spectrum of humankind.

The Salvation Army embraces the core ethos of that goal. Salvationists exist amongst all manner of human societies, nationalities, and ethnic groups. Salvationism is not tied to any one portion of humankind, but instead seeks to serve the entire multitude. Social class is also not a matter which excludes someone from Salvationism. Salvationists are known for caring for the marginalized, and in doing so, they conform to the vision of a Church for all that is presented in Acts.

Later in Acts 2:42-47, the text tells of how the believers relinquished their worldly possessions and shared what they had with others, particularly those in need. Salvationists are so well-known for their care for those in need that they are often mistaken for a social organization alone rather than a denomination of the Christian Church.

In Acts 3:1-10, the apostles Peter and John restored a beggar's ability to walk, showing great care to a man who many had passed by each day. In similar fashion, Salvationists frequently show a great deal of compassion to those facing situations of destitution and extreme poverty, as well as those struggling with various physical ailments. Again, the notion of service to those in need rises to the forefront.

In Acts 3:32-37, the point is reinforced that the early believers shared their material possessions with those in need. This underscores the point that material items were of comparatively little value to those of the early Church in comparison to the greater value they placed upon their service to others. Likewise, in Salvationism, most Salvationists are not known for their material wealth, but are instead defined by their gracious and abundant service to others. An unfortunate trend in modern Christendom is for the excessive wealth and ostentation of those within the Church, especially leaders, to be highlighted by critics both inside and outside the faith. This has the potential to bring great shame and condemnation upon Christianity, as its public witness becomes one far from that of the Christian ideal of Christlikeness. However, Salvationists do not often (if ever) appear in these sorts of public rebukes. There is no prevailing notion of Salvationists as gaudy or ostentatious, and thus the

Salvationist movement is generally spared some of the criticisms made of other denominations for their extravagance.

Delving further into Acts, in chapter 6:1-5, we see that feeding the hungry became a focal point of the early Church's ministry. Again, this is an area in which Salvationists excel. Feeding the hungry is a service offered by The Salvation Army around the world. In Acts 6, the text shows how the Christian ministry is not devoted to spiritual needs alone, but instead has something to offer to all areas of life. This holistic ministry focus is something that resonates deeply with the Salvationist mission.

Departing Acts and moving further into the New Testament, one can see the Pauline undercurrents of the Salvationist ethos. Paul was no stranger to militaristic imagery. In one of the most famous portions of the Pauline writings, Ephesians 6:10-17, Paul describes the "armor of God," in which he uses militaristic imagery to describe the virtues that Christians should embody. By connecting Christian virtue with militaristic language, Paul is making clear that militaristic terminology can be tailored to a Christian ethos and effectively convey elements of core Christian thought and practice.

In 2 Timothy, a letter which Church traditions consider to be the swan song of the Pauline writings, Paul returns to militaristic language. In 2 Timothy 2:4, he compares Christian perseverance to the life of a soldier. In 2 Timothy 4:7, Paul writes of having "fought the good fight," something which naturally resonates with the Salvationist notion of "the fight." In this letter, therefore, Paul reaffirms the importance and helpfulness of militaristic imagery in the Christian ethos.

In these Pauline texts, the usefulness of militaristic language to the Christian life is made clear to the reader. Salvationists embrace this ethos more than any other Christian denomination in prominence today, and although it makes them stand out as unique, and may even be viewed as quaint, it falls in line with the type of language used in the New Testament.

I believe that this type of militaristic ethos could be useful to a wide range of Christians today. That is not to say that all Christians would necessarily be well-served by adapting the exact terminology of Salvationists (such as having officers and soldiers, corps, and a general), but merely that militaristic language can help illustrate elements of the global Christian experience. It has the potential to galvanize believers into a wholehearted service of the Christian

cause, due to its associations with selfless service and fervent dedication. With all that noted, however, the effectiveness of the militaristic ethos of Salvationists is less in areas in which militarism has negative connotations and painful associations. In these specific cases, Salvationists use discretion and wisdom to not present their ethos in a way that would cause discomfort among the people they seek to serve. This goes to show that while a powerful ethos can be an effective tool, some flexibility with it can be greatly beneficial, especially in the context of a global movement.

Humankind seems to have an innate sense of wanting to be a part of something greater than any one individual self. This bears itself out time and time again as people get swept up into a fervor over movements and causes far and wide. Belonging to a larger unit that pushes for an idealistic goal has been the salve for many a wound of the human experience for a very long time. Salvationism taps into this in a way that seems to go deeper than the average Church denomination. In a normal setting, to be involved in a church to some equates merely with the attendance of Sunday services, perhaps even an occasional attendance at that. Such a connection is much harder to make in a Salvationist setting, as the all-encompassing notion of service that is put forth makes it much harder for one to fall into a nominal, complacent Christianity. Instead, their ethos makes it far more likely that a Salvationist will give themselves to a holistic ministry that gives them a purpose in all areas of life. In other words, it is quite difficult to compartmentalize Salvationism. Because of this, Salvationism is more likely to fulfill the aforementioned longing in human nature for participation in a grand, overarching movement with noble goals. If the Christian Church as a whole were to adopt such a mentality, it is quite possible that many more people would find that need for belonging and purpose met within the Church's walls.

On a similar note, the millenarian vision that still undergirds the Salvation Army is something that would be of great benefit to the broader Church. This vision is not solely unique to Salvationism, and indeed there are other denominations and factions within denominations in the broader Christian Church which are much more explicitly millenarian than today's Salvationists, such as those adhering to eschatological postmillennialism. But the Salvationist mission is millenarian without being postmillennial, and this could be an example to those within Christianity who are not postmillennial in their eschatological

viewpoint, but wish to embrace a strong forward looking vision and goals. If this outlook were universally embraced within Christendom, it would help bring the entire global Church into the fold of those who work holistically to transform the world.

The others-centeredness of Salvationism is something else which would benefit the Christian Church if widely embraced. This too is something that is not altogether foreign to most sectors of the Church, though it is not always emphasized at the level or with the vigor of the Salvationists. In many parts of the Christian Church today, there is an overriding sense that the most important question is, "What is my faith doing for me?" However, this is far from the Christian ideal. That is not to say that the individual should be somehow dissolved or forgotten in the Christian ethic, but merely that the sacrificial approach to the Christian life as modeled by Christ points toward a manner of living in which the primary focus is upon others. Based on the message of Scripture, serving others should be a driving force in the Christian life. This is true of the Christlike ethic, it is also true of the Salvationist ethic more specifically, and it should be true of the larger Church and could produce positive results from missionary work to mutual aid.

The balance that Salvationism strikes between the high standards set for those on the inside of the movement and the low barriers-to-entry set for those on the outside is something else that the Christian Church as a whole could benefit from adopting. People are often alienated by the Church because of a church's wholesale sway to one side or another of these two interlocking principles. A church with low moral standards may be beneficial to those who are merely seeking, but at the expense of antinomianism. On the opposite side of the matter, a church with high standards may beneficially reflect a thoroughly biblical morality, but at the expense of those outside the church becoming alienated from Christianity because of perceived judgementalism and harshness from Christians to the world at large. Salvationists are able to avoid this by appealing to both sides in their proper fashion, with those inside the church being held to a high standard of conduct, while those outside the fold are nonetheless welcomed inside the doors unconditionally and with no judgement. The ideal result of this, then, is that those who come inside the doors with unconditional openness are brought to Christ and stay within the fold, leading to them then committing themselves to the higher standards that are held by those inside. If this sort of approach were

adopted by all Christians, far more within the Church would improve their standard of morality in keeping with the biblical ideal while also allowing for a situation in which those outside the Church are not turned away and are instead welcomed in with open arms. It is a delicate balance to find, but Salvationists have navigated the matter effectively and thus have much to teach the Church at large on the issue.

Finally, it is unfortunate that some within the Christian Church do not even realize that Salvationists are a denomination of Christianity in their own right. If Salvationists received more attention from their siblings in the faith and were thus able to teach the Church as a whole many of the elements which have made the Salvationist movement as successful as it has been, it would be quite beneficial to all.

### **In Summary**

The Salvationist experience is one filled with richness and insight for all. This often-misunderstood movement within the broader Christian Church has a remarkable history, with a record of service to the faith leading right to the present. From their extremely powerful ethos, to their adoration for their history, to their compassionate focus on others, Salvationists embody many noble and virtuous traits which could benefit the whole of Christendom, and even the whole of humanity, if embraced by all.

Salvationists, the officers and soldiers of The Salvation Army across the world, are quite a fascinating group. United by their shared beliefs and participation in the Salvationist cause, this group transcends geographic and ethno-cultural boundaries and forms a united global movement. Despite being so widespread, to the point of ubiquity in countries around the world, Salvationists near and far are of the same accord. The unity and cohesion of this global group of Christians speaks volumes to the effectiveness of the ties that bind them.

Salvationism embraces characteristics that have been prominently featured in the global Christian Church down through the ages. Most especially, they are at the forefront of carrying the sacred fire of selfless service to others that has been a mainstay of the Christian movement since the first century AD. The role they play within the broader Christian Church, though often under-appreciated, is nevertheless vital and integral to the holistic mission of Christianity in the world today.

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# Oildale: Assimilation of Convicted Felons

Autumn von Hindenburg

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The ability to assimilate is often thought to be a simple matter of rejoining society after incarceration, however, for those who are convicted felons, it is anything but. There are many factors that make assimilation difficult and/or impossible. This research takes a dive into individual experiences and stories that give explanations of the difficulties encountered by ex-offenders attempting to assimilate into their home community of Oildale, a small town in central California.

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## Introduction

Assimilation back into society is generally expected of citizens who have experienced incarceration. There is an expectation that they will conform to specific ideas and behaviors, regardless of different backgrounds, experiences, or paths of life. These different paths include cultural backgrounds, familial units, education and incarceration. The rules of assimilation are set by the society in which we live, but may or may not make it easy for previously incarcerated individuals to rejoin their communities.

Oildale, California is a small town with a high incarceration rate. Kern County, to which Oildale belongs, has a total of 27 jails and prisons and has some of the highest crime rates in the state of California (Kern County 2022).

According to the World Bank, the state of California has a population of over 39 million people (The World Bank 2020). Out of this population, over 2.3 million people are incarcerated in 1,833 state prisons, 110 federal prisons, 1,772 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,134 local jails, 218 immigration facilities and 80 Indian Country jails (Sawyer and Wagner 2020). There are also military prisons, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals and prisons located in the US territories (von Hindenburg 2022, 2).

With this information, are previously incarcerated individuals, specifically those who have been convicted of felonies, given the chance to assimilate?, or do they have the opportunity to assimilate back into the society that convicted them in the first place?

California is the most populated state in America, with plenty of financial and service resources and yet this group is marginalized and underserved. They are marked for life for crimes they have committed in the past and are not given many opportunities or tools to assimilate back into society once they have completed their prison sentence. The United States is a country that brings together people from any and every background and offers freedoms and opportunities that are not available in other countries around the world, and yet, for a myriad of reasons, we are failing these individuals. Their ability to assimilate is assumed, so they are not given considerations and tools that take into account the larger circumstances from which they hail. Without this knowledge and understanding, we, as a society, are setting previously incarcerated convicted felons up for failure.

Human beings are emotional and complex. Our social systems are messy with our rules and expectations. The point of this ethnography is to find out if convicted felons can assimilate after they have returned to the place where they were convicted. In order to understand their situation, there are numerous factors that need to be considered. The considerations range from socio-economic, familial and cultural factors, to addictions, abuse, gangs, lack of education, violence, medical issues, and generational habits that perpetuate the cycle (von Hindenburg 2022, 57).

## Abuse

Abuse comes in many forms and is complicated. Out of the 22 interviews I conducted with ex-offenders in Oildale, 6 admitted to being directly exposed to abuse. This childhood exposure to abuse has proven to lead to higher arrest rates (Widom 2017, 188). It also leads to a diminished ability to function and a lack of problem-solving skills (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2019, 3). Childhood exposure to abuse also manifests in the way the victims seek out attention as adults.

Many of the interviews conducted for this project highlighted the consequences of abuse. The interview with Dan and Nikki was one of the more difficult ones. My intention was not to interview these two together. I had planned on interviewing them separately, but this was not how it worked out. Dan and Nikki are a couple and have been together for two years. Dan is quite controlling and Nikki abides by his rules.

Dan and Nikki both grew up in Oildale. Dan grew up in a happy home but was always restless and defensive, aggressive. He always felt like an outcast, even though he was never excluded. Even during the interview with me, he was quite aggressive. He is not a very large man but he is willing to fight for whatever he believes in, whether he is right or wrong. He has been convicted on many charges: assault and battery, domestic abuse, drugs and weapons. He doesn't have legal employment because he currently has a warrant out for his arrest.

Nikki did not have a stable home. Her home life was very fractured. Her father sexually abused her, and when her mother found out she immediately called the police and pressed charges. Nikki speaks very highly of her mother and holds no grudges or blame towards her. It was a huge blow when her mother died from cancer around the time when she was 12. Nikki and her siblings moved around until they settled with her grandmother. While the living quarters and money was tight, love was limitless. Nikki never got into drugs, but she did enjoy drinking and partying. One night after a party, she drove her car into someone's house and was convicted. Nikki did not do any time in prison, but was required to go to rehab and complete many, many hours of community service. She no longer drinks and is now a substance abuse counselor. She has been able to have her record expunged, which opens up more doors for her future.

When I asked what the future held for these two, there were very different reactions. Nikki is simple.

She wants a loving home with a lot of kids. Dan however, has kids and does not want any more. During the interview, I could see the defeat Nikki felt after this conversation. Her eyes were watery and a black eye was starting to show through her fading makeup. The entire interview was completely controlled by Dan. He cut Nikki off and spoke for her. When Nikki did answer or speak, she sought his approval after every answer.

The interview had a significant effect on me: "This is the one interview that broke my heart. It's the one that I wanted to stop in the middle and scream at Dan and steal Nikki away. I wanted to shake her and tell her that she deserves better. That she's worth more than he tells her or allows her to know or feel. I wanted to scream and tell her there are programs to help her and there is someone out there who would fulfill her dream of family and love, and that Dan is not that man. However, I didn't. This is where compartmentalization comes in and this is the part of the process that can be quite difficult" (von Hindenburg 2022, 40).

As is the case with many people who have experienced childhood abuse on some level, all attention is welcome whether it is negative or positive, and these social difficulties coupled with posttraumatic stress are linked to criminal behavior in adults (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2019, 4).

## Social Ties

Criminal activities and gangs go hand-in-hand. The relationships with gangs lead to social ties that are often strong but dangerous. The draw to gangs generally comes from a lack of trust in the governmental systems, protection agencies and the fear of victimization (Ross and Jang 2000, 405). Many who are drawn to gangs are also drawn to the camaraderie and to the bonds that are difficult to gain but easily broken.

The first interview I conducted was with a man named Mark. I let him take the lead, and absolutely nothing went as planned. Mark is a small man with a personality that's larger than life. He has an infectious laugh and knows how to draw people in with his exaggerated movements. He talked about his childhood and about how he was drawn to a life of crime. He came from a fractured home and struggles with drug and alcohol addiction.

"He was introduced to crime and gangs from the beginning and never imagined that he would be able to take another path. He felt this was the journey God had given him. Although he's not necessarily a

religious man, he does believe that no matter what, God will always accept him. By the end of the interview, Mark had told me that he was heading back to prison. He was expected to turn himself in to complete an 8-year sentence for a weapons charge. He broke his parole and now has to go back to prison. When I asked him how he felt about it, he just shrugged and stated how ‘that’s life.’ There was no emotion behind it at all. Only acceptance” (von Hindenburg 2022, 20).

I learned that Mark had started in YA (Youth Authority) at the age of 12 and went down for an attempted murder charge by the age of 18. Mark was out for 14 months before going back. He is currently back in prison.

Out of the 22 interviewees, 3 were associated with gangs. All 3 interviewees joined gangs because they wanted to be a part of something where they felt worthy and loved. Even though these 3 interviewees logically understood gangs could lead to a life of crime, the family-like camaraderie meant that they belonged somewhere and meant something to someone.

## Drugs and Alcohol

Substance abuse and addiction is often linked to criminal activities and rates (Miller et al. 2006, 333). Out of the 22 interviewees, 21 stated that they struggled with addiction and/or substance abuse issues. Drugs and alcohol are often used to bring people together, and yet they can be quite destructive if the boundaries are crossed into addiction and abuse (Winlow 2007, 373).

“While conducting interviews, every single person mentioned how drugs and/or alcohol brought people together and [bonded them]. It does not mean the best decisions were made but it helped to give a bond to people who felt they had no ties to anyone. There was a mutual feeling of a lack of love and appreciation and these joint activities gave meaning. ‘The use of intoxicants or stimulants is so widespread that it must be regarded as part of normal society. Caffeine is clearly addictive, but it is hard to imagine any culture giving up coffee, Coca-Cola or chocolate. The line between normal social activity and substance misuse cannot be drawn on purely scientific grounds: it depends on social norms’ (Guha 2009)” (von Hindenburg 2022, 61).

The interviews with Burt and Kate were not done jointly one, but their stories are intertwined so I wrote them up together. They’ve been married for 10 years

and clean from hard drugs for 4 years. Unlike Dan and Nikki, there were no problematic issues between them.

Kate was the first woman I interviewed. She is a tiny woman, maybe topping the scales at 110 pounds. Her small face is taken over by her huge almond shaped eyes and loud and infectious laugh. Her eyes hide nothing. She is a very happy woman and can laugh over the smallest thing. Burt is a tall man with a huge bald melon head and large eyes that are set deep in his face. He’s also full of jokes and laughter, very animated.

They were both willing to share anything and everything. For any question I asked, there was an answer. Both Kate and Burt grew up in Oildale and got involved into drugs at a young age. Kate had a more stable childhood, where Burt did not. He got involved in crimes and drugs early on. They didn’t get involved in drugs together but it was something that brought them together as a couple. Kate trafficked drugs across state and country borders and was a high-end prostitute. That’s how she met Burt. It was an instant attraction for both of them.

Both Kate and Burt are convicted felons. Kate was convicted for drug trafficking and Burt was convicted for drugs, violence and gang related crimes. They both struggle with addiction and they both have found solace in rehab and church. According to Kate, “Addiction is tough. Once you’re an addict, you’ll always be an addict. You just replace one addiction with another. It doesn’t matter what it is. It could be working out or diet soda. Addiction is exactly that” (von Hindenburg 2022, 49).

Eventually, they both cleaned up their lives. They had two kids and Kate was been the driving force with the ultimatums. She wanted to do better not only for their future but for the future of their children as well. While both Kate and Burt were happy, they yearned for more. Kate wanted to go back to school to finish the requirements for her drugs and alcohol counseling certificate and Burt wasn’t quite sure what he wanted to do next but he knew he wanted something more. Overall, the both of them felt blessed to be able to get out of the cycle of drug usage, instability and crime.

Sadly, a few months after this interview, Burt is using drugs again and has been abusive towards Kate. She pressed charges against him and is filing for divorce. Kate seems to be doing well and wants no part of the cycle that has consumed so much of their lives.

## Education

For this research, I broke education down into two categories. One category being high school and higher education and the second category being those who had earned certificates.

“There are many reasons as to why education is important. Not only does it help give a person stability but it helps to hone in on skills like critical thinking and it helps to build and reach goals we set for ourselves” (von Hindenburg 2022, 61).

When it came to the completion of high school 16 out of the 22 interviewees had accomplished this and 4 went on to higher education and/or certificates. The thing I found interesting about the correlation between level of education and crime rates was that as a whole, there isn't much research available, while on the individual scale, there was usable data.

The scale of education with the 22 interviews was inconsistent, with no correlation between education and partaking in criminal activities. However, it did get me thinking about zero-tolerance policies in the education system and the school-to-prison pipeline that so many kids from marginalized communities end up becoming a part of.

Zero-tolerance policies are based on pre-determined punishments or consequences to a behavior regardless of the severity of the offense. Even though the initial intent of zero-tolerance policies were aimed at preventing violence and other problematic behaviors, in many cases zero-tolerance policies have been inappropriately implemented as students are removed from school for relatively inconsequential infractions. (Palmer 2019, n.p.)

This was not something I tackled in this ethnography, but there is a well known association between being raised in a marginalized community and ending up in prison, whether it's because of economic status, familial ties or color of their skin.

I had one interviewee who had access to advanced education. Sam is someone I have known for many years. Sam's story is quite interesting. He is currently in his 50s and happily married with many children. Sam comes from a very supportive family and he has an advanced education. His parents paid for his college education and paid for him to travel the world. However, Sam was exposed to drugs in college and found himself drawn in. When I asked Sam about his

college experience he stated, “I was so doped out, I don't remember much. Even on the day of graduation I would sneak away for quick bumps of coke” (von Hindenburg 2022, 28).

Sam's life quickly spiraled out of control after college. It started with drugs charges and escalated to drugs and weapons. In the beginning, his parents bailed him out of trouble by hiring lawyers and paying the bail to get him out of jail, however, lessons were not learned and charges kept coming, and finally Sam's parents put an end to their support.

Fast forward to today and Sam is doing well. He is 12 years clean. He hasn't even had a traffic ticket. He is happily married with loads of kids. His wife works while he stays home with the kids. He is very proud of his House Husband status. After years of difficulties, Sam has done well to forge a path that is completely different than his previous life. He has a loving and supportive wife, parents who are still a major support system, and a whole gaggle of kids who are loud and happy and bring much joy to his life.

Again, there does not seem to be a real correlation between education level and a life of crime. Sam had all the cards stacked in his favor and yet he was drawn to a life that was completely opposite of what he had been shown.

## Family

When it came to the familial background of the interviewees, the scale bounced around from loving and supportive homes to fractured homes and time spent in foster homes and youth authority. Fifty percent of the interviewees came from fractured and/or abusive homes. This doesn't indicate a strong correlation between family and criminal activities.

There are two interviews that have similar outcomes and yet their family lives are drastically different: Carrie and Frank. Carrie mentioned that her childhood and homelife growing up was perfect. Her father worked in the oilfields and her mom was a homemaker so there were never any issues of abandonment. She has three siblings and was never abused. She grew up in a supportive and loving home but struggled with many things from early on. Like her father, she struggles with alcohol addiction. She also struggles with her ability to build and maintain relationships of any kind and she mentioned that she has mental illness issues, but didn't elaborate. When Carrie is sober, she is the kindest, gentlest and friendliest person. When she drinks, she is loud and

aggressive. Carrie is a large woman standing at 6'0" tall and topping the scale at 250 pounds, and she uses that size as a tool to intimidate others. Carrie has been charged with multiple DUIs, assault, and threatening to kill others. She has spent time in prison for these convictions and her addiction issues combined with her mental health issues have made for disastrous results. In prison, she received no type of help, and on the outside she struggles with her ability to trust the professionals who are meant to assist with her needs.

On the other hand, Frank grew up in a completely different manner. Frank has never had stability or a life without crime. He was raised in the foster care system with no knowledge of who his biological father is and no connection with his biological mother. Frank states that he's never been abused, nor has he been loved or supported. Frank committed his first crime (robbery and assault) at the age of 11 and was sent to Youth Authority (YA). From there he was introduced to drugs and gangs and this set the course of his life. He has battled with addiction and crime throughout his life and sees no change in the future. Frank states that, "even though gangs help with connections, no one cares about you and this makes you not give a shit about yourself. Who cares if I die? No one" (von Hindenburg 2022, 23).

These are two examples of different familial backgrounds and yet the outcome is similar. There does not seem to be a direct connection between familial support and crime. Carrie had a supportive and loving home and Frank did not, and yet their lives somewhat mirrored one another. Family influence is definitely on a case-by-case basis.

## Poverty

Poverty and crime tend to go hand-in-hand. However, for this ethnography the sample size is too small to make that judgement. Still, according to other research, "being poor put youth at a higher risk for delinquent activities and childhood family poverty and neighborhood poverty put youth at a higher risk of delinquent behavior which leads to being arrested as an adult" (Widom 2017, 189). Both familial and neighborhood poverty leads to a negative effect on psycho-social adjustments (Berti and Pivetti 2019, 124). This in turn can lead to someone seeking out camaraderie and companionship on any level available, which may draw them to affiliations with criminal activities" (von Hindenburg 2022, 63).

Again, it is camaraderie and bonding that we seek as emotionally driven creatures. If we know others who have the same struggles, it's easy to fall in line with certain lifestyle choices. According to Mark, "when you grow up with the bare minimum, you want things. You want all things. You want the best of the best and you'll do whatever you can to get that" (von Hindenburg 2022, 19).

## Life in the System

Only 4 out of the 22 spent their youth in the system on some level, to include the foster care system and Youth Authority. For those raised in the system, there does seem to be some amount of dependency on the state, as it was forced onto them as children, and at the same time there is a large amount of distrust because of the lack of consistency between the different agencies.

As mentioned previously, Frank who is 29 years of age has spent only about 3 years from the age of 11 to 29 out of the system. He was placed in YA when he was 11 and has continued his dependency on the system, in some way, shape, or form. He sees it as a sort of safety net. The rules are simple and he knows what to expect when he gets locked up again. The question is never if he'll be locked up, it's only a matter of when. Since he was introduced to a life of crime at such a young age, this is the path he feels he was meant to be on. Frank doesn't necessarily trust the system, but since it's all he's known for most of his life there's a level of comfort that isn't available elsewhere.

## Violence

I expected this number to be higher. Ten out of the twenty-two interviewees had been exposed to violence as children and it came in many forms. The main forms were either they were abused themselves or they were exposed to domestic violence (of someone else), but usually it was a combination of both. According to Widom, exposure to neglect and childhood abuse helps to promote the continuation of the cycle of abuse in adults (Widom 2017, 187).

"According to the ten interviewees, there was a continuous insecurity in feeling unloved and/or unwanted and with this, they sought out attention in any way they could find it. Often times the attention that was received was negative. When there is a cycle of abuse, any attention is better than no attention at all. Childhood victimization can lead to post traumatic

stress disorder (PTSD), other health and mental issues and instabilities, substance abuse and further incarceration as adults (Greene et al., 2014, 1570)” (von Hindenburg 2022, 64).

This was apparent in many of the interviews. In the case of Dan and Nikki, she remained loyal to the Dan and the attention she received from him because any attention is a validation that she was seen. The makeup covered black eye and tense atmosphere was frustrating to me as an outsider but it made me realize that abuse is a major factor in the choices that are made.

### **The Ability to Assimilate**

Each of the nine issues stated impact a persons’ ability to assimilate.

“To assimilate is to become part of a different group, to adapt and/or adjust. These adaptations or adjustments are not necessarily what has happened. Out of the twenty-two interviewees, fifteen have assimilated to life outside of prison and for a majority of the fifteen this assimilation has happened back in their old stomping ground in Oildale. This is not to say that they are law abiding citizens, this simply means that they are doing enough to not get caught breaking the law so they are not sent back to prison” (von Hindenburg 2022, 64). Much like most things in life, assimilation is not a black and white issue. It is a gray area with multiple layers.

Anna had her first child by the age of 14 and came from an abusive home. She had never been in trouble or caused any issues, but things never came easy for her. She had multiple children by multiple men. She barely made it through high school, but has always been a hard worker. This all changed around the age of 26. According to Anna,

I was out partying and I was wasted. I was off from work for the weekend and I was taking advantage of my time off. All my kids were being taken care of so I decided to let loose. I was at a friend’s house so I thought I was safe. I ended up hooking up with a random guy and next thing I know, I’m so wasted I’m allowing him to slam me up with dope. At this time, I had never done anything more than smoke weed and drink. That was it. I became addicted. Next thing you know I’m turning tricks and doing shit I never imagined. I’m trafficking drugs and weapons. I lost the kids I had and the kids I would end up having. I was arrested and charged and now

I’m a goddamn felon all for what? Fucking drugs. Now, I see my kids periodically and I’m dealing with addiction. I’ve been clean for a few years but damn, it’s a disaster how quick my life spiraled out of control. I now live in a dumpy apartment and my ability to earn a living is limited. I also continue to surround myself with dirtbags. I can’t seem to get away from it. When I’m around people who don’t live this lifestyle, I feel as if I’m being judged. (von Hindenburg 2022, 21)

Anna has relentlessly tried to move forward but she continually feels as if she simply can’t. Her education is limited, as is her work history. Anna feels as if her past is dictating her future and she cannot cut ties with Oildale, so the vicious cycle continues. This interview encompasses so many of the aspects mentioned in this research. Anna has assimilated in her own way and is able to do what she needs to do to make ends meet and to stay off the radar of the authoritative agencies. But she is far from doing well in her personal and family life.

Another example of the complexity of assimilation is my interview with Jason. Jason was my final interview and one that is extremely personal. It was the one interview that I was a bit reluctant to take part in. Jason and I have an entire lifetime of friendship, and I was worried that I wouldn’t be able to compartmentalize. However, I also felt this connection would work well to get the point across. I am taking this entire interview from the original source:

As I’m standing in line at the grocery store, I hear my name being bellowed across the store. I know that voice. I would know that voice anywhere. I look over and there he is. All 6’6” and 300 lbs. of him. He has tattoos on his face, neck, arms, hands and most of his body. He is loud and happy, always laughing and joking. He has a damaged body. One that has years of drugs, fights and abuse written all over it. He has a partial plate of teeth since he lost some of his in fights. All 300 lbs. runs up to me and hugs me. He picks me up and laughs from excitement. It’s Jason. Jason and I haven’t seen each other in a few years but we’ve always kept in touch. Jason and I have known each other since we were about 5 years old. He was a fat, shy kid. One that was a bit insecure. I, on the other hand, have always been a bit more on the extrovert side and we meshed together from day one. We were always friends. There was never any question about it. His

dad, like a majority of male figures in The Dale, worked in the oilfields. His mom worked in retail and eventually opened her own fishing shop. We were always welcomed at each other's houses and treated like siblings. We grew up fairly close to one another. We could walk to each others' house. His brother was a few years younger than us so he was always forced on us. We laugh about that now, but when Jason and I were kids, it would annoy us. Jason began to change once we hit high school. As I mentioned before, he was always a bigger guy and shy. He did get picked on a bit and as we hit high school, he was done with it. Jason turned to The Dale and started getting into trouble. He began getting into trouble and running with kids who were into drugs. Jason's parents tried everything to change his path and he just refused the help. This led to a very long journey into incarceration and drugs. (von Hindenburg 2022, 50-51)

As I mentioned previously, I was not planning on interviewing Jason. I felt the connection was too close and personal. However, when I told Jason about this project, he jumped at the chance. He seems to think our connection will make it even better since I'm not an outsider. I figured, why not?

*Jason:* Whatchu wanna know, sis? Hell, you can probably answer any question you have with your own answers. Your Dalian [from Oildale, or The Dale] ass is from here. You know how and what it is.

*Me:* No, I know things from my perspective. I don't know anything from your perspective. We grew up together but we've led very different lives. I can't tell you what you know or feel. That's for you to tell.

*Jason:* Damn sis, look at that college education! Haha! Dalians aren't supposed to be smart.

*Me:* Haha! You're a clown! Let's go!

*Jason:* Okay, okay. I'm an open book for ya sis.

*Me:* Righty-O! Tell me, why you chose to drop out of school and hang with the "bad kids"? I mean, you had a bit more of an opportunity than the rest of us.

*Jason:* You know my parents were quite tough on us. My mom, all 5'0" of her, had no issue beating the living shit out of us. You know, both of my parents were really tough on us. There was no affection. We were boys, it was a different time. Tough love and all that.

*Me:* But your dad worked very long hours, so it was your mom who was the disciplinarian.

*Jason:* Yeah, all of us had households like that. There was no affection, just discipline. It was normal. We were all abused in some way. Hell sis, your house was no different.

*Me:* Yeah, all of us Dalians had similar childhoods. But what was the catalyst? Why did you veer the way you did?

*Jason:* I was just looking for acceptance. The drugs scene and the druggies in the scene are quick to accept especially if you're doing the same dumb shit. I always had friends and I wasn't lonely.

*Me:* Did you ever feel like the friends you had in these circles were really your friends?

*Jason:* They were my friends at the moment. Hell, I'm clean now and I couldn't tell you where these people are. I cut everyone off to stay clean too.

*Me:* I'm so glad you're clean and doing better.

*Jason:* Who are you tellin'? I lost everything in that world. I couldn't be happier now.

*Me:* You're now gone from The Dale. Would it have been possible to stay clean and sober here?

*Jason:* Hell no. I tried numerous times over the years to clean up and go straight. I would have successful times. I worked in the patch [oilfields] with my dad and was a bigger presence in my daughter's life but I would always go back to it. Hell, I couldn't even raise my daughter. She got screwed. Her mom and I were both complete screwups. Good thing my mom stepped up to raise her or she would've been lost in the system going through who knows what.

*Me:* Why did you leave? What was the final straw?

*Jason:* Sis, you know what happened.

*Me:* Nope, you need to tell me in your own words. This is your story.

*Jason:* Okay, well I was living in this doublewide trailer with some girl that was my "wife". She was h-bombed out [heroin addicted/high on heroin] and the place was a mess. I never did heroin, but I was doing meth and pills and drinking. I wasn't doing any better than her. Next thing I know the cops are busting through the damn door. I knew I was going down for this. I'm already a convicted felon. I haven't been to prison but I've spent some time in county. My parents have always helped me with lawyers and all that so I've always been lucky. But damn, not this time. They got all the agencies out there to bust my ass. I'm compliant because what the

hell else am I gonna do? I call my parents and my dad tells me that he's done. I'm 35 years old and I need to figure it out. I'm about to go down for drugs and weapons and I got some chick h-bombed out on my couch. I got dogs barking and screeching in front of the trailer and my life is a goddamn mess. I know, this is it for me. I gotta get clean and get the hell outta here. So they take me to county and my parents, brother and my so-called friends are not responding to me at all. I tried to call you but you were out of the country so I called your mom. She came to county and was just there for me.

*Me:* I know, she told me a bit of what was going on. I then called your parents and told them what she had told me. They told me they had washed their hands of you. They were done with cleaning up your messes.

*Jason:* That is what finished me. Even though they didn't agree with my lifestyle, they had always been there. There was only a few of you left so this was the moment I was done with all of it. So anyway, I was charged and I got a really light sentence. I don't know how. I thought for sure I was going down. I was sentenced to four years and only served one and half years. God was looking out for me, that's for damn sure. I had six months of parole to finish out. During this time, I stayed at my parents and didn't go anywhere unless I was with one of them. Can you imagine that crap? Almost 40 years old and having my parents escort me everywhere because I have no control. I've seen so many die and get eaten alive, I had to get out and get away.

*Me:* So, how did you decide on where to go? And how to get there?

*Jason:* We all spent our childhoods hunting and fishing. Our dads were out there, you were out there. This is how we spent our childhoods and it's something that's enjoyable. I had been a few times to Idaho to hunt and fish and I really enjoyed it, so I chose to go there. I came up with a plan and talked to my parents about it. I worked for my dad to save up the money and my dad made a few connections in the area so I was able to find work fairly easy. The money is good and the work is consistent. It keeps me busy and I love it. I can hunt and fish, there are actual seasons and the people are nice.

*Me:* Do you think you'll ever move back?

*Jason:* [At this point, Jason looks at me like I've got snakes coming out of my head.] What in the hell do you think sis? It's bad enough I have to come back to visit my family. I'm trying to get my daughter

and dad to come live up there with me. My dad wants to come up as soon as he retires and my daughter is 18, so she's all over the place. Since mom died, dad is selling the house and he's ready to get things in order to go. I'm shocked you came back to be honest.

*Me:* Life throws curve balls. You just gotta roll with them. What are your next steps?

*Jason:* I'm staying in Idaho. I ain't never moving back. Even my visits are less and less. I'm hoping dad moves up, but we will see. Right now, I'm happy in my life. I'm clean and have been for 5 years. I have a good job, money and a girlfriend who is not the same type of girl I dated here. She has her own career. The best way to describe her is she's nice and caring. No drama.

*Me:* It's such a huge difference from before and I'm so proud of you. You've really done well. It's nice to see you happy and successful in your life. There are no more late-night hospital calls or calls from lockup.

*Jason:* Don't be gettin' all sappy on me sis! Haha!

*Me:* Haha! Ohhh lord! Thanks for telling me your story, Jason. I really appreciate you opening up.

*Jason:* Well, you know all this but you're welcome. (von Hindenburg 2022, 55)

California has a recidivism rate of 50% (State Recidivism Comparison 2022). This means that 50% of convicted criminals relapse and reoffend, or repeat crimes from their past. In order to break this cycle, they need support from multiple avenues (Widom 2017, 193). However, if they are returning to the same area where their criminal activities took place, then they are not likely to receive what they need to stay out of trouble. Difficulties with navigating the legal system along with a subculture riddled with crime make it hard to get away from a previous lifestyle. So, to the question: Is it possible to assimilate back into society if this is where the crimes have been committed? The answer is, yes, however the meaning of assimilation may vary and much support is needed.

## The Role of Religion

As previously mentioned, human beings are emotional and complex. All the various factors that I investigated were inconclusive in terms of predicting who would and would not end up on a criminal path. Moreover, the meaning of assimilation varied. Still, there is another factor to consider, that of religion.

Religious beliefs or ethics were mentioned a few times during the interviews but not in an exact manner. There were mentions of God and church, but nothing too extensive. For instance, two interviewees, Kate and Jason, felt more at ease when they were connected to a higher power, but did not say much more than that.

“When it comes to their belonging and attendance to a church, they tend to gravitate to what I like to call outlying churches. These churches tend to be Christian churches, but they are not as strict as some of the more populated churches, for example, Catholicism. These outlying churches have a higher population of attendees who have rediscovered religion or discovered a new belief system for the first time. There may be a high number of recovering addicts, a high number of people who have been incarcerated, or who are looking for belonging and acceptance without outrageous expectations. They are also extremely involved with rehabilitation and outreach programs” (von Hindenburg 2022, 68).

In Oildale, these churches set up services that cater to the community. They have hygiene services, food kitchens, medical services and other types of outreach programs that may offer opportunities for betterment for the future. These churches tend to have a higher level of acceptance without judgment in comparison to the more mainstream stricter churches. There are levels of forgiveness and understanding of the difficulties that so many people struggle with in life.

## Conclusion

As I previously mentioned, the information gathered through this ethnographic research surprised me despite having grown up in Oildale myself. The various personal journeys of my informants were all enlightening and meaningful to me because they described different pathways emerging out of the same societal context. In terms of my own pathway,

“I grew up in Oildale. I am quite familiar with the negative aspects that are associated with The Dale. Although I never got involved with drugs or crime, most of the people I grew up with and knew did get involved and I did witness the devastating consequences because of these actions. I am also aware of the subculture of The Dale. There is a multigenerational reliance on social programs while, at the same time, there is also the attitude that is anti-government, anti-police and anti-authority. It’s an interesting combination. I am also quite familiar with the poverty that so many of us grew up with. Crime,

drugs and low socioeconomic status are often times associated with one another” (von Hindenburg 2022, 72).

One thing I did learn from the experience of doing this research was that we all crave support. We all want to be part of something. This is what allowed me to make different decisions from those I grew up with. I had familial support to take different chances and to forge my own path. A majority of the interviewees did not have this kind of support.

In addition, my idea of assimilation changed throughout this project. It is situational as well as individualized in subcultures such as this one, and the number of factors that need to be considered seems endless. It’s easy to sit back and judge and make comments about how things could have been done differently, however that is not always possible for everyone. Assimilation is a process. It’s one that requires patience and understanding and allowance for errors. As a society, we have completely failed this marginalized community. Without support, the right kind of support, those in difficulty in Oildale cannot move forward in life. Societies are meant to be inclusive, not exclusive. If support is not offered and opportunities are not available, then we will continue to perpetuate the cycle of exclusion which results in devastating consequences for those excluded.

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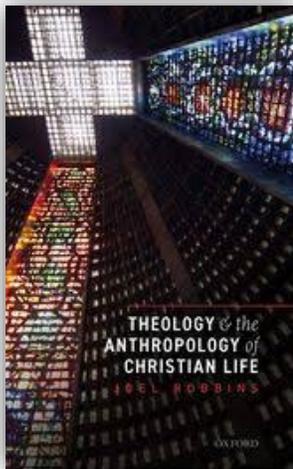
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## BOOK REVIEW

# Theology and the Anthropology of Christian Life

By Joel Robbins

Reviewed by Dena Loder-Hurley



Oxford: Oxford University Press  
2020

In his most recent book, *Theology and the Anthropology of Christian Life*, Joel Robbins advocates for a dialogue and exchange of ideas between the fields of theology and anthropology. The introduction begins with an apologetic disclaimer of his limitations in the field of theology and a stated hope regarding the theological reception of his book: “that whenever I do burn myself on issues about the temperature of which I know too little, I’ll do so in interesting enough terms that rather than being tempted to look away in embarrassment, theologically and philosophically informed readers will want to get over the resulting pain with me” (2). This vulnerable posture of humility may endear readers and invite them to entertain his argument with greater curiosity and generosity, a grace seldom extended in academic circles. His admitted limitations do not prevent broad ambitions, including a “transformative interdisciplinary encounter” he hopes to stage, driven by a strong conviction that the time is now (4).

The introduction includes a rich literature review where Robbins acknowledges those already devoted to fostering the exchange, including a mention of *On Knowing Humanity Journal’s* own editor Eloise Meneses and editorial board member David Bronkema. One of the reasons he believes the time is right for the exchange is due to the disruption taking place in both disciplines. Anthropology has developed a relatively recent interest in studying Christianity, and in theological circles, recent developments of “world” or “global Christianity” have moved the perceived center of Christianity away from a predominantly Western orientation. Anthropology’s commitment to “field work” and seeing things from their informant’s point of view theoretically affords anthropologists greater latitude to accept an explanation referencing the power of a divine figure(s), where other fields may have theoretical commitments requiring them to set such explanations aside. Theology, therefore, offers the anthropologist tools to better understand their informants’ motivating factors, theoretical resources, while anthropology offers the theologian a means by which to understand fellow believers from cultures or cultural backgrounds different from their own.

Robbins uses specific theological concepts to facilitate the dialogue, beginning with cultural change due to divinely inspired discontinuity and disruption. Robbins describes the difficulty to describe or analyze radical change in anthropological terms, while acknowledging how many in Christian circles, particularly Evangelical ones, have no difficulty with this concept. From the blind man who miraculously received his sight in John 9 to the Apostle Paul himself who was blinded on the road to Damascus, radical disruption is par for the Christian course. Robbins utilizes this theological concept as a theoretical resource for analyzing his own fieldwork with the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea. Where traditional academic traditions would be prohibited from considering the actions of a divine actor, theology

offers a way to explain or at least understand what has happened, as the Urapmin themselves would understand and explain it.

Robbins also utilizes sin and atonement to explore concepts of failure as either an individual, personal issue or a matter of an external enemy adversary. An emphasis on personal failure often results in a more individualistic focus on increasing strength of character and one's own belief in the struggle against sin. Conversely, the identification of an external adversary necessitates tapping into the power of God as the victor or perhaps severing relationships with those familial ties or relationships that might be hindering that power, a development of the concept of discontinuity within Christianity (68). This differentiation provides much fodder for current conversations about the nature of individual, personal responsibility and a need for punishment and justice, concepts which play out in various theological theories of atonement which can inform the proposed answers to contemporary problems.

Robbins also explores the prosperity gospel, describing how both theologians and anthropologists have penned "troubled response" to its various forms (80). He draws on both disciplines' fundamental views on humanity, citing Clifford Geertz's view that human beings are "incomplete animals" and arguing that "anthropology . . . is a discipline founded on a notion of the incompleteness of the human individual and its lack of self-sufficiency" (98). From this position, he discusses the tendency of anthropologists to suspend judgment as a matter of a disciplinary commitment and the opportunity for anthropologists to learn from theologians about the method for making informed judgements from a place of humility in service to humanity itself. Although anthropologists often advocate for an understanding of cultural formations as making sense within their context and thus not being irrational examples of simple ignorance, there is still a need for ethical considerations and evaluations.

Reading the 167-page book took far longer than I anticipated, mostly because the discussion sparked connections and ideas in my own mind I wanted to explore. For readers already engaged and committed to the interaction, dialogue, and exchange of anthropology and theology, Robbins delivers well, drawing on both fields succinctly yet masterfully. Although some might say the book favors the esoteric, this book will delight those who enjoy playing with ideas and scaling complexity.

Readers of *OKH Journal* will find a kindred spirit in Robbins and his ambitions because the possible interdisciplinary transformations of theology and anthropology have been at the forefront of the journal's mission and purpose from the beginning. What may be perceived as an esoteric interest in wider circles are inherent to the DNA of the journal's editors, writers, and readers. An academic or theoretical commitment to ignore a divine actor is misplaced if a divine actor exists and is acting. Anthropology's primary research question, "What are the humans here doing?" is expanded to include what they believe they are doing. Allowing for the inclusion of belief likewise expands the field and enhances understanding.



**Dena Loder-Hurley** is a graduate of the Master of Arts in Theological and Cultural Anthropology program at Eastern University. She has research interests in organizational anthropology, especially as it relates to fostering equity, diversity, and inclusion within organizations and communities. She is a REALTOR® with The Flanagan Group of Keller Williams Elevate and is active in the Social Equity Task Force of Keller Williams Realty International.

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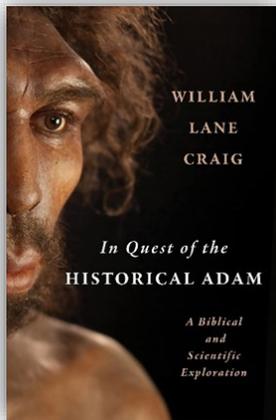
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## BOOK REVIEW

# In Quest of the Historical Adam: A Biblical and Scientific Exploration

*By William Lane Craig*

Reviewed by Megan Stueve



Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans  
2021

Author William Lane Craig attempts to tackle one of the big theological questions: Where does biblical Adam fit in the ever-expanding tree of human evolution? A theologian and philosopher, by nature Craig is attuned to asking the big questions and this one seems the biggest. If science can show the plenitude of human ancestors and the Bible can tell us the story of Adam and Eve, where do the two overlap?

Craig separates his book into four parts, beginning by detailing the question at hand, followed by a breakdown of the biblical evidence and then the scientific evidence for Adam, finishing with an integration of the two into one cohesive answer. His argument begins with the fact that scientific theories relating to human origins are constantly updated as new evidence emerges and as such the theologian also needs to update their understandings with each new piece of evidence. He touches on this to highlight the adaptability of the modern Christian to an advancing world and show that the biblical story is not an

outdated fairytale from a time gone by, but instead a history that holds true above and outside of these changes.

After laying out his argument in the first section, the following section spends six chapters breaking down the verses in Genesis 1-11 and the history of previous theological arguments related to those verses. Seemingly checking boxes as he goes, Craig makes sure to discuss all the major theologians and their lengthy discourse. At times this causes the reader to lose Craig's voice, but he returns at the close of each chapter to once again incorporate his own perspective. He discusses the definitions of myth, legend, and folktale to ask the reader if the Christian creation story belongs in one of those categories. He delves into the creation stories of neighboring regions to compare our story with those clearly marked fictional. He uses math and science to discuss the ages of the antediluvians and whether there would be enough time post-flood for the animal population to rebound to its current numbers. Ever the devil's advocate, Craig gets ahead of these tough and sometimes unapproachable questions with a poise and tact that dismisses the literal interpretation of the Hebrew creation story in favor of the figurative. He succinctly suggests that the argument is not if the Bible presents a historical accounting of the fall of humanity but whether the account is of a historical event.

In the third part of his book, Craig moves on to discuss the scientific evidence for Adam within the known ancestors of modern humans. He begins by putting up some parameters, effectively confining Adam to the *Homo* lineage based on his conditions for humanness. A discussion of cranial capacity, hunting techniques, burial practices and artistic capabilities allows Craig to posit that Neanderthals and Denisovans arise in a world post-Adam. Most crucially, Craig reminds the reader that DNA from

Neanderthals and Denisovans runs through their own blood, therefore our biblical progenitor must have emerged prior to interspecies breeding. Given the lengthy and sometimes dizzying tangle of theological arguments in the previous section of the book, one would hope for a similarly lengthy discussion of this side of the argument. Although the author does touch on all the right paleoanthropological points and hits on all the key authors, the reader is left feeling a little lopsided. Perhaps Craig's intention was to entice the reader with just enough information to encourage one to explore the possibilities and conduct research on their own.

In the final section of the book, the reader finally hears the author's voice. This shift from technical jargon to personal reflection truly shows the passion the author has towards the subject matter. He concludes that biblical Adam must have existed somewhere during the existence of *Homo heidelbergensis*, which is the last common ancestor between *Homo sapiens* and Neanderthals. Based on the variability in human genetics, to have a single paired couple be the progenitor of humankind to the exclusion of their contemporaries would require the date range of *Homo heidelbergensis* for biblical Adam. Therefore, Craig pinpoints the existence of Adam to fall roughly within 1MYA to 750KYA. A worthy hypothesis, the reader is left with an answer that is something not provided in theological debate or scholarly cogitation. The introduction of genetics to this conversation is something not often considered, yet it remains one of the most solid pieces of evidence for the existence of Adam—and Eve—outside of the Bible.

Written by a theologian, the most fitting audience for this book seems to be students of theology. It provides an excellent introduction to the basics of human evolution from a theological perspective. It announces that God exists in a world inclusive of science. And with a few seemingly offhanded comments sprinkled throughout the book, Craig once again spurs the reader to learn more. For instance, referencing only a few short Bible verses, Craig casually mentions these giants living in isolated groups, cursed for breeding with us, and cast aside as fallen warriors. Are these Nephilim our Neanderthals? Perhaps the Bible has provided us with direct evidence of our evolutionary cousins, and perhaps with our interests piqued, William Lane Craig is saving that for his next book.



**Megan Stueve** is a research archaeologist at Desert Research Institute in Las Vegas, Nevada. She has research interests in Neanderthal thanatology, human impacts on the ancient environment and Southwestern Archaeology.

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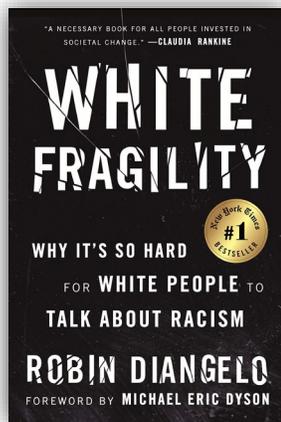
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## BOOK REVIEW

# White Fragility: Why It's So Hard For White People To Talk About Racism

*By Robin DiAngelo*

Reviewed by Nakia Vongvirath



Boston MA: Beacon Press  
2018

Robin DiAngelo's book, *White Fragility*, was written with white readers in mind. DiAngelo wrote this book to try and help white people realize how their dependence on white supremacy shapes the social norms of American society. She goes into detail on the pitfalls of racism and how subtle racism can be. DiAngelo also discusses her personal experiences as a race sensitivity trainer and how her groups react to her direct way of teaching. She is not afraid to call white people out on their racism and to show how it affects people of color. She also self reflects, pointing out examples of her own racism in hopes she can teach white people how to respond to direct criticism of racist behavior. It is DiAngelo's goal to shake white readers and make them reflect on their own racist behavior. In this review I will discuss the main points of her argument that white fragility is a defense mechanism that white people use to support their

belief that they are not racist, and to convince others that they are not racist as well.

"Though white fragility is triggered by discomfort and anxiety, it is born of superiority and entitlement. White fragility is not weakness per se. In fact, it is a powerful means of white racial control and the protection of white advantage" (2). This quote summarizes the main discussion of the book. White supremacy, according to DiAngelo, is the reason why people of color (mainly African Americans) cannot achieve racial equality in America. White Americans benefit from being white, and whether they acknowledge that privilege or not, it is the way our society operates. In DiAngelo's discussion on the difference between white prejudice and the prejudice of people of color she mentions an obvious fact. People of color can be prejudiced of white people, but they lack the ability to work their prejudice into laws and legislation to inhibit white people in any way. That is because white people have privilege and power over social, cultural, and legal systems and processes, something people of color do not have.

DiAngelo believes white people have triggers for their white fragility, such as: whenever their racial integrity is threatened. Once someone white says or does something that would be considered racist, the white person becomes either angry or defensive if challenged. Then, they deny being or saying anything racist, and/or leave the situation. They accuse the person of color offended of being too sensitive, and in doing so ignore the feelings of the person who was offended. "In fact, when we try to talk openly and honestly about race, white fragility quickly emerges as we are so often met with silence, defensiveness, argumentation, certitude, and other forms of pushback. These are not natural responses; they are social forces that prevent us from attaining the racial knowledge we need to engage more productively, and

they function powerfully to hold the racial hierarchy in place” (8). The purpose of white fragility is to disrupt the passing on of knowledge about race and racism. According to DiAngelo the interruption of the force called racism is a lifelong commitment because the mental conditioning produced by the current race framework is a constant in our society. DiAngelo stated in the book that her conversations with white people about race were so predictable she likened them to a shared script. Through the white cultural lens white people mistakenly see themselves as objective and unique individuals. But in point of fact, white people are responding with a collective mindset that enforces white supremacy.

DiAngelo discusses an adaptation of racism called “the good/bad binary” and describes how it was derived from white people seeing the atrocities committed in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. northern whites labeled southern whites as racist, and racism meant extreme prejudice and malicious acts of violence towards people of color. In doing that northern whites were able to see themselves as not racist because they believed themselves to be incapable of committing such acts. So now to call someone racist is to attack their very character, and such an attack must be defended. But in doing so, all attention is on the charge and not the behavior. The good/bad binary is a way for white people to be comfortable in their own race worldview. According to DiAngelo, if a white person is safe in their understanding that they are on the “not racist” side then there is nothing for them to do. But this way of thinking hinders them from expanding their knowledge on racism or acting productively to end racial inequality.

DiAngelo discusses a form of white fragility called “white tears”, specifically “white woman’s tears” and how this one act has been and continues to be one of the most destructive acts of white fragility. She discusses how throughout our history, black men have been tortured or killed because of the distress of white women, using the death of Emmett Till as an example. In one of DiAngelo’s classes a black man stood up, but was having problems expressing himself. So a female black co-facilitator stood up to help and encourage him. It wasn’t long before a white woman stood and tried to speak for the black man. When she was corrected by the black woman, the white woman began to cry. At that moment all attention was directed at her in an attempt to console her, which completely negated what the black man was trying to say. No one was

interested in him anymore. The only thing that mattered was regaining the white woman’s self-worth.

DiAngelo’s book on white fragility was enlightening for me. She wrote this book from a white person’s perspective, but made it relevant for all readers. I could tell she did a great deal of research and self-reflection before she wrote this book. Her insight on how white supremacy has been imbedded in the social norms of our society is a wakeup call for our nation. DiAngelo does not mind exposing her own racism in this book. I find her refreshingly honest since it puts her in a very vulnerable position to admit there are times that she can be racist. And at the same time, she is trying to offer other white people the tools to acknowledge their own racism. This book is strong medicine for white people who do not want to admit that white supremacy is profoundly present in our society. If white people could accept that being white comes with privilege, I believe they could have a greater understanding of how it feels to live without that privilege. That would be a good beginning for real change in this nation. DiAngelo stated in her book that white fragility can be a means of bullying because it takes advantage of white power and control. This bullying is understated, but ever-present. Reading this section, I believe DiAngelo understood (probably by observation) how people of color have to censor ourselves and curb our behaviors to accommodate white people. As a black woman I know it is a daily habit that is done unconsciously and consciously. It is nice to see that a white person noticed this behavior and deemed it unnecessary and wrong. This book was written to help white people understand what white supremacy truly is, in the hope that understanding it will help prevent it in the future. I would recommend this book to anyone who wants to learn that lesson.



**Nakia Vongvirath** graduated from Eastern University in 2021 with a master’s degree in Theological and

Cultural Anthropology. Her research interests are in social anthropology and linguistics. She wants to study what society's reactions are to social issues and the language used to communicate those reactions. She wants to be able to pursue these interests with a Christian frame of mind so as to show a Christian's perspective in her research.

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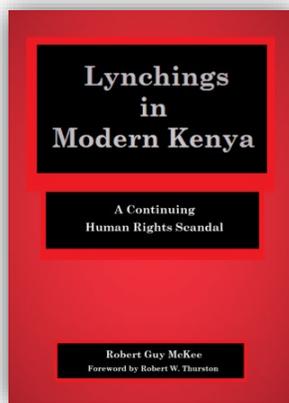
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## BOOK REVIEW

# Lynchings in Modern Kenya: A Continuing Human Rights Scandal

By Robert Guy McKee

Reviewed by Patricia Manwaring



Victoria, BC: Leanpub  
2005

A few years ago I came across a video on YouTube showing a woman being stoned to death in Iran. They had dug a pit and planted her in the ground and she was stuck. Unable to move as the rocks began sailing towards her. There was terror in her eyes and something more; disbelief that her entire village, people she had known and loved, could just stand there with rocks in their hands, ready to end her life. The stones began to fill the air. A rock hit her on the side of her head, and I didn't want to have this woman's death seared forever in my mind. I looked away.

This is exactly the opposite of what Robert Guy McKee does in his book *Lynchings in Modern Kenya: A Continuing Human Rights Crisis*. He does not look away. For over twenty years McKee has compiled meticulous notes in his Kenya Lynching Database (KLD) on the vicious reality of mob justice. Armed with spreadsheets, file directories, data and statistics, McKee sets out to “tell the world the facts” to the end that lynching in Kenya would be abolished.

Mob justice is so common in Kenya that a 2016 article in the *Standard* asks, “Has mob justice been absorbed into our culture [so that it] no longer seem[s] to be an evil act?” (65). In an “upscale Nairobi shopping center” a thief is caught trying to steal a cell phone; immediately a mob forms and stones to death both the man and two accomplices (12). The crowd then disperses and everyone continues on about their day. “A 35-year-old man is stoned and clubbed to death in ‘zero tolerance’ of the alleged theft of three dozen teaspoons” (29). People are lynched on a daily basis for theft: cars, clothes, milk, chickens. They are lynched for rape, suspected witchcraft, murder, land grabbing, stealing purses or goats. Lynching in Kenya happens daily for a myriad of offenses whether trivial or terrific.

McKee includes data for two hundred reported deaths from April-August 2013. A separate line for each person reported to be lynched.

5/4/13—‘Mob lynches iron sheets thief’/1/theft/stoned (31)

8/4/13—‘Sisters accused of witchcraft lynched’/2/gang-raped and then killed (31)

21/7/13—‘Suspected goat thief lynched’/1/theft/beat (37)

12/8/13—‘Residents burn theft suspect’/1/theft/beat, burned (38)

Nameless murder victims. Entire lives reduced to a line testifying to a violent death.

Are these the facts that will save Kenya?

Two goals listed when describing the KLD are: “quantifiable generalizations about Kenyan lynching” and “allowing other researchers and interested parties to consult and help further develop the KLD” (81). For years McKee has kept watch on the death toll in Kenyan newspapers. But is keeping an account of

violent death enough to save a life? Quoting a Star Article from Aug. 19, 2013 that puts the number of lynchings that year at 335, McKee states that were the lynchings to continue “at the same rate for the rest of the year, there will be about 577 lynchings in 2013, or about 1.58 persons lynched per day” (29). One and a half people is a hard number to comprehend as people’s stories vanish into statistics.

McKee makes a comparison between lynching in America, specifically from 1880-1930, and that of modern Kenya . . . comparison that complicates his argument. To try to understand the ontology of a modern witchcraft culture that seeks to take justice into its own hands, most often as a response to theft, by making a comparison to the dark pages of the American past is problematic for multiple reasons. McKee does not account for the fact that prior to the mid-1800’s black people in the American South were considered to be property. With virtually no legal rights, they lived in the daily fear of physical, emotional, and psychological violence. He chooses to focus on the Jim Crow era without acknowledging the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and the racial violence that underlines lynching in America. To say that “Americans concerned with lynching” should be “shockingly alarmed” by the death of 508 people in 1993 at the hands of mob justice in Kenya because “it is more than five times per capita the 230 lynched in America in 1892 which was the worst recorded year of US lynching history” (84), misleads the argument due to a difference in the definition of lynching.

McKee states that the Kenyan definition for “lynch” differs or “clearly departs from an American and British English dictionary definition” in which “lynch” is synonymous with “hanging” (10). Kenyans rarely employ the method of hanging in mob violence. Instead, the Kenyan press and media define the word “lynch” to mean: extrajudicial mob violence (3 or more people) that results in the death of the accused without regard to method. By that definition the numbers for America, past to present, would tell a different story. Could we then consider the death of George Floyd to be a lynching? Three policemen respond to theft at a convenience store after Floyd tries to pay with a counterfeit \$20 bill. The response to this theft was cruel mob violence, authorized by the state, that resulted in the murder of George Floyd.

Violence in America is devastatingly common today in our land of liberty and justice; perpetrated by machine guns that enable one deranged person to shoot a mass of people shopping for groceries in

Buffalo or children hiding under desks in Uvalde. McKee asks if Black Lives Matter?, taking American rhetoric to a Kenyan problem and convoluting both.

McKee notes that Ida B. Wells once said to “Tell the world the facts. When the Christian world knows the alarming growth and extent of outlawry in our land, some means will be found to stop it” (82). But we don’t live in such a hopeful world anymore. We live in a post-Christian world of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism combined with the post-internet disinformation age. We need more than headlines from a newspaper. We need more than the KLD which allows for “activists” to carefully comb the web to help make their “generalizations”, but does not require that they *be there*. We need a better story.

McKee briefly mentions that there are people stepping into the fight, even at the cost of their own lives, to end lynching; “journalists, clergy and other members of Kenyan civil society who speak to or write in the media decrying lynching” as well as “children who have somehow prevented a lynching” (26). Kenyan men, women and children fighting for reformed justice. These are “facts” that the world needs to be told about more.

As Christian anthropologists, the thing that sets us apart is that our research is not just about data and deadlines. It’s about being *with* people in a way that reflects God *with* us. God put on flesh and moved into the neighborhood and he was killed at the hands of an angry mob in a vicious and brutal way. We look and we see him bloodied and beaten and scorned, and we do not look away. But his death is not the only fact. While hanging on the cross he spoke forgiveness over the mob that had killed him. He gave his life so that others might live. He rose up out of the grave and changed the narrative of death itself, and it no longer has the final word. This story, of just one state sponsored lynching, sheds light on all the rest of humanity’s darkness.

*Ee Mungu nguvu yetu* (O God of all Creation)  
*Ilete baraka kwetu* (Bless this our land and nation)  
*Haki iwe ngao na mlizi* (Justice be our shield  
and defender)  
*Natukae na undugu* (May we dwell in unity)  
*Amani na uhuru* (Peace and liberty)  
*Raha tupate na ustawi*. (Plenty be found within our  
borders)

*National Anthem of Kenya*



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