

DISCERNMENT AT THE PERIPHERY: RACE, COLONIALITY, AND THE DEMONIC

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A dissertation
submitted to the Faculty of
the department of Theology
in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Boston College
Morrissey College of Arts and Sciences
Graduate School

February 2022

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Abstract: Although underemphasized by contemporary theologians, demonology haunts some of the most important theological and social questions of our time. Specifically, demonology is a necessary site of Christian reflection in light of the contemporary social and theological problems of colonialism and anti-Black racism. This dissertation charts pathways for a contextual, prophetic, and decolonial Christian demonology for the 21st theology.

This dissertation first retrieves underappreciated attempts to revive demonology among 20th century American and European theologians. This theological tradition, which I dub “Euro-American political demonology” endorses possibilities for Christian demonology as a political theological doctrine in a world of violence and systemic injustice. The second chapter, drawing from Black studies and decolonial theory, analyzes the precise role of Christian demonology in the emergence of the anti-Black colonial reality. Returning to Euro-American political demonology, the third chapter assesses whether this demonological tradition responsibly and effectively speaks to the anti-Black colonial context, putting these thinkers in conversation with liberation, postcolonial, and decolonial theologies. I determine that Euro-American approaches demonology, while instructive, do not take sufficient account of the modern anti-Black colonial context, nor the particular implication of demonology in the emergence of that very social reality.

Aligning with emerging decolonial approaches to theology, the final two chapters turn to Black and womanist reflections on demonology, demonization, and the practice of discerning the spirits. For Black American populations, demonology has remained a salient language for articulating resistance and healing in a world of demonizing, anti-Black, violence. Womanist theology, in particular, approaches demonology in the context of the difficult praxis of Black persons discerning their divine dignity living under a colonial matrix that demonizes Black flesh. The final chapter traces the themes of demonology and discernment in the literature of James Baldwin, commending Baldwin as a resource for decolonial approaches to demonology. Baldwin, particularly through his literary work exhibits a Black grammar of the demonic which frames the drama of discerning the spirits. For Baldwin, discernment is an embodied and communal praxis of embracing possibilities of Divine love and resisting the powers of anti-Black coloniality.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project and its author are blessed by a veritable “cloud of witnesses.” Indeed, there are too many to name. First, I wish to recognize my dear friends and colleagues Katie Mylroie and Nicholas Hayes-Mota, who served as especially close companions in the dissertation journey. We walked together, siblings in faith and work, in times of triumph, disappointment, pandemic, and grief. There are a multitude of other beloved conversation partners at Boston College who have shaped my thought, work, and life in countless ways. These include CJ Baldelomar, Byron Wratee, Sara Bernard-Hoverstad, Laurel Marshall, Sarah Livick-Moses, Nathan Wood-House, Tiffany Lee, John Kern, Noemí Palomares, Chanelle Robinson, Kim Humphrey, Elyse Raby, and Andrew Massena. I am further overwhelmed by the love I have known through my Lilly Graduate Fellows Program family, who have provided the refuge of a home during these past several years. I am humbled by the countless other friends who prayed, loved, and encouraged all the way: Nathanael, Moni, Joe, Val, Jocelyn, Matt, Leah, Andrew, Emily W., Fernanda, Renee, Liz, Melissa Z., Bryn, Mollie, Burton, Vince, Kearstin, Jacob, Anginette, and William.

Several mentors and teachers have shaped my thought and life. Most acutely, of course, are my esteemed committee members: Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones and Brian Robinette. They have both served as thoughtful mentors for many years. Amey Victoria is a visionary scholar, liberating presence, and an ever-faithful companion in both triumphs and defeats. Brian is a sharp theologian and a sage guide through the professional, intellectual, and spiritual pathways of this vocation. I value that they both

help keep my priorities grounded in the love of God and others. There are several others who played significant roles throughout my graduate formation: Lisa Cahill, M. Shawn Copeland, Colleen Griffith, Fr. Brian Dunkle, Mary Ann Hinsdale, Fr. Michael Himes, Todd Johnson, and Fr. Dean Borgman. I must also thank Mara Willard in particular, an incisive thinker and inspiring mentor. She has helped me comprehend all the ways that education can bring more wisdom, compassion, and conviction to the world.

My gratitude for Andrew Prevot is beyond words. He has shepherded this project, and its author, with unending wisdom, patience, and grace. I believe that the paragon of a meaningful role model is someone who makes you enthusiastic for all the possibilities of what your vocation can represent and accomplish. Andrew's curiosity, assiduousness, and faithful witness have modeled the sort of scholar I aspire to be.

I am blessed by a large family, by blood and by marriage and by "accident:" Johnsons, Kingdons, Kinards, Toombs, Bertholds, Bourdeaus, Ndukwes, Avignons, Brutuses, and Coichys. The fact that there are too many to mention by name is a great blessing.

Above all it is my Love, my Everything, my JCJ—who has made it possible to be the person that I am.

DEDICATION

To one whose demons I could not exorcise in time.

INTRODUCTION

Although buried under a cacophonous news cycle, the Archangel Saint Michael became one of many surprising flashpoints in the “culture wars” in the tumultuous year of 2020. In June, one month after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, the conservative Catholic publication, *Church Militant*, wrote a piece ridiculing a white British woman named Tracy Reeve. Reeve had recently launched an online petition to change the artwork on the official badge of the Order of St. George and St. Michael, an order of the Crown of England.

Originally instituted for citizens of the then-British territory of the Ionian islands in the Mediterranean, the badge is bestowed by the Crown upon foreign diplomats, and features both an image of St. George slaying a dragon, and St. Michael standing on the neck of a vanquished Satan.¹ Tracy Reeve’s petition cited a disquieting resemblance to the murder of George Floyd, who was killed by a white police officer who pressed his knee down onto Floyd’s neck for over nine minutes. She claimed the badge was racist on account of the fact that, in the image, St. Michael is clearly white, and the subjugated, chained, Satan is clearly dark-skinned.

¹ “The Order of St. Michael and St. George,” *Royal.uk*, <https://www.royal.uk/order-st-michael-and-st-george>, accessed January 6, 2022.

The Church Militant, appealing to its intended reactionary audience, made Tracy Reeve out to be an overly-sensitive social justice warrior. The article quoted conservative Member of Parliament Ann Widdecombe, who said “equating the triumph of St. Michael over Satan to an even in modern-day America is either the product of severe ignorance or a deliberate provocation.”²



Figure 1. This image of the badge is featured on Tracy Reeve's petition.

White supremacists, however, seemingly disagreed with Widdecombe. While details are scant, indirect sources mention that United States intelligence was in fact monitoring white supremacist usage of images of Saint Michael overpowering Satan. It “had been embraced by

² Jules Gomes, “BLM Wages War on Archangel Michael,” *Church Militant*, <https://www.churchmilitant.com/news/article/blm-wages-war-on-archangel-michael>, accessed January 6, 2022.

white supremacists because it was reminiscent of the murder of George Floyd.”³ In fact, both St. George and St. Michael have an iconographical history linked to racism and xenophobia. During the Spanish Reconquista, the image of St. Michael defeating Satan was regularly used as a symbol for the defeat of the Moors. In one prominent altarpiece (below), Saint Michael appears as a soldier amidst a battle against the Muslim armies. The “Saracens,” in this image, stand in



Figure 2

³ Jason Zengarle, “Can the Black Rifle Coffee Company Become the Starbucks of the Right?” *The New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/14/magazine/black-rifle-coffee-company.html?referringSource=articleShare>. Accessed January 6, 2022.

place of the typical iconography of a monstrous and bestial Satan—a Black “infidel” lies dead on the ground, underneath St. Michael’s foot.⁴

Both in the streets, and on social media feeds, a different demonological discourse also emerged in 2020. Black Lives Matter protests spread all over the country in the wake of George Floyd’s death, as well as the deaths of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery earlier that year. On June 9, 2020, a statue of Christopher Columbus was torn down by protesters in Richmond, Virginia. The next day the American writer Victor LaValle, known for horror and science fiction novels, tweeted: “Black Lives Matter protests are essentially a national exorcism. If seeing them makes you rage and shake and froth at the mouth, maybe you’ve got a demon in you.”⁵

LaVelle was not alone in ascribing something demonic to the political moment. For some preachers across the country, Ephesians 6 became a source of particularly relevant imagery in 2020. This chapter, traditionally attributed to the Apostle Paul, talks about spiritual warfare against “the devil’s schemes,” which are identified with “rulers,” “authorities,” “power,” “principalities,” and “wickedness in high places.” At the funeral for George Floyd, civil rights activist and pastor Rev. Al Sharpton’s built a refrain from Ephesians 6 as he eulogized about the “breath” that God places in each human being—the “sacred” breath stolen from George Floyd by Derek Chauvin and the racist systems that made his murder possible: “You don’t have the right to take God’s breath out of anybody. . . . But you don’t look at it that way, because of your wickedness.” Sharpton added two words to the end of the statement: “Principalities.” “Darkness.” Shifting (without using his name) to Donald Trump specifically, Sharpton began a refrain, “you’re scheming on how to spin the story, rather than [how] you can achieve justice.

⁴ Jean Devisse and Michel Mollat, “The Frontiers in 1460,” translated by William Granger Ryan in *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, II.2, edited by David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2010), 173.

⁵ Victor LaValle on Twitter, June 10, 2020, <https://twitter.com/victorlavalles/status/1270877499904479232>.

Wickedness in high places.” He continued, “you take rubber bullets and tear gas to clear out peaceful protesters and then take a Bible and walk in front of a Church and use a Church as a prop. Wickedness in high places! . . . You weren’t holding up no Bible when Arbery was killed in Brunswick. When Taylor was killed in Louisville. Wickedness in high places!”⁶

Although living in a modern society that supposedly no longer believes in demons, demonology lurks within the social and political fabric of North America. This haunting presence of demonology did not first appear in 2020. In 2014, Darren Wilson testified before a grand jury regarding the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, he made the discomfiting claim that Brown’s face looked like “a demon.”⁷ Such associations go back millennia. In the 4th century, the desert monk Saint Antony is told to have encountered the devil in the form of an Ethiopian child. Athanasius, the narrator, ascertains that the blackness of the boy’s skin is a reflection of the darkness of the devil’s heart.⁸ At the same time as demonology has been a totem for demonizing Blackness, Black Christians have referred to Ephesians 6 and other Scriptural passages related to spiritual forces of evil to describe their experiences of the dramatic violence of white supremacy.⁹ Demonology, therefore, intersects with fundamental questions of race, colonialism, power, and resistance that are at the heart of our contemporary world reality.

“Discernment at the Periphery” attempts to bring demonology back into theological view, making the case that it is an issue of fundamental theological importance for the 21st century. It is

⁶ Al Sharpton, Eulogy for George Floyd, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwDd5r43U7Y>, accessed January 6, 2022.

⁷ Sabrina Siddiqui, “Why Darren Wilson Said He Killed Michael Brown,” Huffington Post (November 25, 2014), https://www.huffpost.com/entry/darren-wilson-testimony_n_6216620.

⁸ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, trans. Philip Schaff, vol. II.4 (New York, NY: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 577.

⁹ Delores Williams, “A Womanist Perspective on Sin,” in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie Maureen Townes (Mayknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1993), 144.

an unacknowledged thread at the heart of some of the most pressing theological problems of our era: What role has Christian theology played in producing the social imaginaries that dominate our socio-political reality? How can theology properly understand the nature of evil, particularly as it is experienced by the human beings who live on the undersides of tremendous systems of evil? How is it possible to resist the evils of our age with authentic spiritual, ecclesial, political, and ethical force? These are some of the questions that “Discernment at the Periphery” confronts.

To approach these questions, I provide a twofold argument. I make the case that demonology is relevant, worthwhile, and important for theology today. I also clarify *what sort* of demonology is needed for our time. The answer to these questions ultimately lies in attending to demonologies that emerge from human beings living at the peripheries of our world and society. Those who live under the brunt of the wickedness in high places. The ones who have had to learn how to discern the nature and realities of evil in our world in order to survive, resist, and “work out” the salvation of Christ’s liberation.

The Theological Situation

My argument takes its methodological cues from theologies broadly categorized as “contextual.” The idea of a contextual theology almost needs no explanation as it is now widely recognized that all theology is, and should be, contextual. My particular approach to contextuality is inspired both by Paul Tillich’s notion of theology as correlation, and the witness of liberation theology, which centers the realities of the poor and oppressed as the primary contextual locus of theological reflection. Writing in my position as a North American theologian, I understand my context as one dominated by the social imaginary of anti-Black

coloniality. It is this situation that makes demonology of particular importance, and directs the quest for determining what sort of demonology is necessary in our time.

Paul Tillich, the German Protestant theologian, argues that theology represents the theologian's attempt to articulate the Word of God as a response to the given "situation" of the world. Tillich is trying to navigate between two extremes. On the one hand is the risk of a contextual reduction of the Gospel to current whims. On the other is the danger of the theologian pretending they own a pure, timeless, message. The latter sort of theology purports itself to be universal but in actuality merely implies an unacknowledged, foregone, and irrelevant situation. The "timeless" Gospel proclaimed by certain American constituencies today, for example, tends to reflect mid-20th century conservative cultural anxieties. Instead, Tillich opts for "correlation," which is "a way of uniting message and situation." It attempts to perceive the "questions" asked by the current moment, and discern the "answers" given in the Gospel.¹⁰ Tillich's method of correlation leads him to prioritize existentialist and phenomenological philosophies, believing that the fundamental questions of his time related to the human quest for meaning. Tillich's penchant for framing "situation" in intellectual terms, as a conversation between question-askers and question-answerers, is chastened by the contextual theologies of liberation theology.

Liberation theology prioritizes contextuality so radically that the modifiers "liberation" and "contextual," are sometimes used interchangeably.¹¹ Liberation theology challenges the methods of contextuality that a figure like Tillich represents by pointing out the failure of much of European (and white American) theologies to discern the most pressing and truly universal facts of the world situation—that of the billions of human beings in conditions of tremendous

¹⁰ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Three Volumes in One* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1967), Volume 1, 7-8, 60ff.

¹¹ See Angie Pears, *Doing Contextual Theology* (Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 2009).

social, political, and economic oppression. The quest for meaning is a problem, perhaps, for mid-20th century bourgeois. For the majority of the rest of the world, there is also a quest for sustenance and survival. Bonino José Míguez, a Methodist theologian involved in the emergence of Latin American liberation theology, posits that articulating theology in the Latin American setting necessitates “an awareness of the situation.”¹² The situation Míguez ascertains, however, is somewhat different from Tillich’s.¹³ Míguez sees widespread starvation, disease, lack of resources, and political tyranny and violence. Importantly, rather than framing the situation as the revelation of a question, Míguez observes that the situation calls for a response of liberation, not mere intellectual satisfaction. Instead of existentialism, Míguez and other liberation theologians turn to philosophical tools of social analysis and praxis in order to respond to the situation by following the commands of the Gospel to liberate the oppressed.

Contextual methodologies that link themselves to the project of liberation further implicate traditional European theology by revealing the ways that European theology has been shaped by situations of power, domination, and colonization. The “situation” is not simply something that theology attempts to observe objectively from outside itself; rather the situation also shapes the theological subject. As Willie Jennings recounts in his recent book *After Whiteness*, the historical fact of colonialism represented not just a political reality but an intellectual one, entwined with the theological academy. The project of colonialism enacted a “horror pressed on intellectual life. . . where peoples were determined to be stuck or in stages of development, predisposed to excellence or mediocrity and forced to believe that old world Europe and its new world allies held the truth and transcendence of the human and the world

¹² Bonino José Míguez, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1975), Kindle Location 336.

¹³ In fairness, Tillich (especially in his earlier work), is thoroughly engaged with the political situation of his time, however he is limited to a largely Eurocentric frame of vision.

itself.”¹⁴ In other words, colonialism shaped (and was shaped by) an account of the intellectual life that reduces authority to a particular set of subjects seeking to pull the world into its authoritative purview. To speak about the situation is also discern and evaluate the theological discourses that have shaped and been shaped by it, requiring a dialectic that moves between situation and proclamation, rather than seeing these as hermetically sealed discourses, as Tillich seems to.

Ours is a world defined by *anti-Black colonialism*. This is the world situation into which I hope to speak. The world continues to be defined by tremendous social forces that relegate all that is not white or European to subhuman and subservient status, a process of violence initiated against Black persons in particular and longstanding ways. The sociological facts, despite attempts to soften them with reference to more benign explanations (the “freedom” of participants in the market), should speak for themselves. In many ways following the patterns set by the traditional colonial powers, “gender. . . ethnicity, race, place of residence and socioeconomic status, continue to shape the chances people have in life.”¹⁵ As of late 2021, for every 100 global persons classified as “low income,” 8 total doses of a Covid-19 vaccine have been administered. For those in the “upper middle” or “upper” income levels, the rates of vaccination are 135 and 149 doses, per 100 persons, respectively.¹⁶ In the United States, mass incarceration decimates communities of color through grossly disproportionate imprisonment of its Black and brown citizens for crimes committed at comparable rates across racial groups.¹⁷ The power that the wealthy have over the policy mechanisms of the global powers, particularly

¹⁴ Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 52.

¹⁵ “World Social Report: Inequality in a Rapidly Changing World,” published by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020), ii.

¹⁶ See *Inequality.org*, <https://inequality.org/facts/global-inequality/>. Accessed January 6, 2022.

¹⁷ See *FairFightInitiative.org*, <https://www.fairfightinitiative.org/the-history-causes-and-facts-on-mass-incarceration/>. Accessed January 6, 2022.

the United States, is established fact. To write as a theologian in the 21st century, particularly on a North American continent which is, in many respects, the colonial “center,” is to attempt to speak the Word of God into a world of complex systems of power that target Black bodies in particularly cruel ways.

This designation “anti-Black colonialism” connotes two related, but partially distinct, concepts—coloniality and anti-Blackness. My approach to both is informed by the bodies of literature known as decolonial theory and Black studies, which include overlapping figures such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, and Achille Mbembe.

Decolonial theory emerges in the wake of the collapse of traditional colonial powers in the 19th and 20th centuries, and the struggle of colonized peoples for liberation and independence. Amidst these changes, a variety of interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks have emerged to understand the history of colonization, respond to its purported collapse, and resist its current (if any) manifestations. Decolonial theory is a particular strain that originated primarily among Latin American thinkers,¹⁸ and Afro-Caribbean intellectual traditions. Black Study/Studies is broadly defined as a Black intellectual tradition of “Black people” who “began to engage in scholarship about Black people, in resistance to hegemonic opposition and in close relationship to cultural practice.”¹⁹ This definition by Abdul Alkalimat relates Black studies as a modern phenomenon largely driven by the quest to understand and resist the modern and contemporary anti-Black reality.²⁰ Alkalimat focuses on the emergence of Black studies in North America, but it is

¹⁸ Néstor Medina, “A Decolonial Primer,” *Toronto Journal of Theology* 33, no. 2 (2018): 280-281.

¹⁹ Abdul Alkalimat, *The History of Black Studies* (London: Pluto Press: 2021), 29.

²⁰ It is important not to reduce Black Studies to just one of its many intellectual traditions and philosophical “camps.” The fact that Black Studies largely revolves around understanding the Black experience in a white supremacist milieu that produced the racial logics that reduce bodies to essential categories of “white” or “black” is not to necessarily follow the tact of Afro-pessimism. Afro-pessimism is a recent philosophical school in Black Studies that thinks of Blackness as the endemic abjection of Blackness in the world that white supremacy has created. Lewis Gordon objects that Black autonomous persons also exist as subjects beyond the essentializing

important to recognize the contributions of Afro-Caribbean and African thinkers to this field of study, several of whom I mentioned above. I read these intellectual traditions of decolonial theory and Black studies together as presenting an understanding of the current world situation of anti-Black colonialism.

The decolonial frame is somewhat distinct from “postcolonial” and “anticolonial” schools of thought, although much is shared amongst them. My approach to decolonial analysis emphasizes, very broadly speaking, three overlapping chronological lenses. The first refers to a shared observation among many mid-20th century European and global scholars that the Western intellectual tradition exhibits a peculiar “ontological” approach to thinking about the world.²¹ For decolonial theory, this “ontological” framing represents the presumption that all of reality can be known and described—and that the male European producers of Western thought have privileged access to that comprehension of reality. The latter is often implied, or “baked in” as a hidden paradox, given the purported universalizing language of the ontological outlook (i.e., despite often maintaining that all persons theoretically have access to the ontological reality, this tradition has had to come up with dehumanizing explanations as to why some do not—perhaps especially in the context of encountering the religious “other”). A second “era” refers to the emergence of the classical colonial powers, particularly the Spanish and Portuguese empires in Latin America, *as a constitutive aspect of “modernity.”*²² Arguably decolonial theory’s most singular contribution, it rejects the tendency to bifurcate European modernity from European

binaries of whiteness. See Gordon, “Phenomenology and Race” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Race*, edited by Naomi Zach (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017), 298.

²¹ Genealogically mapped through the thought of Jacques Derrida and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the overarching critique of Western ontology is more often associated with the “postcolonial” theory, but much of this line of thought is endorsed by decolonial theorists.

²² Enrique Dussel writes, “modernity appears when Europe organizes the initial world-system and places itself at the center of the world history over against a periphery equally constitutive of modernity.” *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of the Other and the Myth of Modernity* (London: Continuum Publishing, 1995), 10.

coloniality—emphasizing the intersections between them. Decolonial theory, thirdly, attempts to theorize the continuation of colonialism into the modern and contemporary eras beyond the collapse of the traditional colonial powers. Sometimes this third era is referred to as “neocolonialism,” but the general tenor of decolonial theory is its emphasis the millennia-long coordination of the Western colonial project.

Foundational decolonial theorist, Sylvia Wynter, refers to the early modern emergence (and contemporary persistence) of the white, bourgeois, European “conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself.”²³ That is, for Wynter, colonialism involves systems of power that operate to read and/or remake the world in the image of this (white/European/male) ethnoclass, which projects its own position as universality. Walter Mignolo similarly identifies colonialism as “the underlying logic of the foundation and unfolding of Western civilization from the Renaissance to today,” operative within and underneath its self-understanding as “modern” and taking its own particular experience to be the “zero point” of all truth.²⁴

Central to this understanding of colonialism is the function of classification—by which the colonial subject categorizes and defines the rest of the world according to various hierarchies. Such systems of classification are far from morally neutral but presume or impose evaluative designations. Aníbal Quijano maintains that Western colonialism produced, in the process often described as the emergence of “modernity,” a set of purportedly rational and “scientific” classifications that represented “social discriminations which later were codified as ‘racial,’ ‘ethnic,’ ‘anthropological’ or ‘national.’” Importantly, Quijano points out that, despite rhetoric

²³ Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument.” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.3 (2003): 260.

²⁴ Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 2-3; 78-81.

about overcoming these social hierarchies, the simple sociological fact remains that those who, today, are “the exploited, the dominated, the discriminated against, are precisely the members of the ‘races’, ‘ethnics’, or ‘nations’” that the colonial classification system produced.²⁵ In other words, the classifications of coloniality persist in the contemporary “post-colonial” global situation. Among the most significant and long-lasting of these classification systems is the racial one, which created the idea of the superior white race, and subhuman ones, with Black bodies among those typically relegated to the very bottom of the hierarchy.

Along with my focus on coloniality, I also use the term “anti-Blackness” to describe the current world situation. Theologians Vincent Lloyd and Andrew Prevot argue for the use of anti-Blackness as the preferred analytic term for understanding the contemporary situation of violence and subjugation against Black persons. The reasons for using the term anti-Blackness, as opposed to racism or white supremacy, are numerous. A few of the specific reasons given by Lloyd and Prevot are instructive for my choice to use the term. First, there is the fact that there is a unique quality to the Black-white binary in the modern, Western, world. While not ignoring other forms of violence informed by racial logics, the violence against Black persons in both the global and North American context has such a pervasive and peculiar quality that it requires its own mode of analysis. Second, anti-Blackness is more than a set of sociological facts about bias or wealth disparity across demographics, which are the factors that language of “racism” tends to emphasize. These concrete instantiations are actually symptomatic of a deeper cultural, psychological, and spiritual animus. Third, the language of anti-Blackness attempts to defy the misleading universalist and individualist logics that informs reactionary positions to anti-racism. If the contemporary social problem is merely one of racism as “preference,” the need for

²⁵ Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies* 21.2-3 (2007), 168-169

reparative and decidedly preferential policies (such as affirmative action) can be dismissed as racist.²⁶ The idea of anti-Blackness is not, however, a radical departure from previous academic or activist discussion of “racism”—indeed, despite contemporary misapplications of his vision, Martin Luther King, Jr. actively saw reparative policies that privileged Black Americans as vital to the struggle against racism, for example.²⁷

Another reason I choose to use the term anti-Blackness is the way it suggests possibilities for thinking about the violence against Black bodies beyond modern racial categories. Theorists of race and racism “debate” whether race and racism predate the modern era, or whether these are purely modern constructs that emerge with the advent of modern science, used to produce dehumanizing theories of inherited traits. I use “debate” in quotation marks because, in many fields of study, there really is no such controversy. The theory that racism is uniquely modern is dominant. There are good reasons to understand race and racism in this way. However, it is one thing to acknowledge (as George M. Fredrickson does, in his book *Racism: A Short History*) that there is “no concept truly equivalent to that of ‘race’. . . in the thought of the Greeks, Romans, and Early Christians.”²⁸ It is quite another, however, for Fredrickson (concurring with Frank Snowden) that there is “no evidence that dark skin color served as the basis of invidious distinctions anywhere in the ancient world.”²⁹ I believe this conclusion is too hasty. By contrast, my use of the idea of anti-Blackness highlights premodern, even ancient, forms of anti-Black ideology and behavior.

²⁶ Vincent W. Lloyd and Andrew L. Prevot, “Introduction,” in *Anti-Blackness and Christian Ethics*, eds. Vincent W. Lloyd and Andrew L. Prevot (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), p.xxi-xxvi.

²⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., writes “The real cost lies ahead. . . . Jobs are harder and costlier to create than voting rolls. The eradication of slums housing millions is complex far beyond integrating buses and lunch counters,” and later “*Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*” (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1968), 6.

²⁸ George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 17.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Even for scholars who hold to the theory that racism is exclusively modern, recent historiographical developments have required adding some caveats. Fredrickson acknowledges that the preliminary foundations for modern racism appear in late Medieval and early modern anti-Judaism.³⁰ However, other scholars in religious studies, late antiquity studies, and medieval studies go further. Medievalist Geraldine Heng identifies several distinct sites from which racial thought emerges—including, along with anti-Judaism, medieval Christian rhetoric about Islam. Heng observes that, not only are there emergent medieval Christian proto-racial conversations about inherited traits, there is also the “spectacular” valuation of white as a superior aesthetic value. This valuation extends to the perception of whiteness as a quality possessed by certain bodies.³¹

Christian spirituality and theology, from its earliest days, has often operated within a sharp rhetorical and aesthetic binary of “light”/ “white” and “dark”/ “black.” This binary relates to the ontological framing of Christian theology, with God/Being associated with light/white, and nothing/nonbeing/the demonic associated with darkness and blackness. At the very least, this aesthetic framework helped make modern racial categories possible. Andrew Prevot argues that the “polarized aesthetics of light and darkness” in Christianity “must bear some of the responsibility” for the modern phenomenon of white supremacy.³² But do these theological aesthetic valuations amount to anything like a widespread pre-modern animus against darkly skinned bodies?³³ Heng demonstrates that while a theological anti-black aesthetic is not always,

³⁰ See J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 79ff. Fredrickson, 18ff.

³¹ Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 181-182.

³² Andrew Prevot, “Divine Opacity: Mystical Theology, Black Theology, and the Problem of Light-Dark Aesthetics,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 16.2 (2016), 166.

³³ Heng distinguishes between “hermeneutical blackness” and “physiognomic blackness linked to the characterization of black Africans,” 185.

in all places, applied to bodies, there are many instances in which it is.³⁴ Therefore, I opt for the language of anti-Blackness in order to think about disdain toward and violence against Black bodies as a phenomenon that exists long before modernity. In fact, I contribute to the argument for premodern “racism” by making the case that Christian demonology, in its ancient roots, plays an important role in the story of race, racism, and anti-Blackness.

Thinking about anti-Blackness and coloniality together is meaningful so as to emphasize their interdependence as ways of understanding the current global situation. Anti-Blackness conjures the particular aestheticized hierarchy of Being that has existed in the Western imagination for millennia. Decoloniality emphasizes the intersectional breadth of modern and contemporary forms of oppression, impacting many constituencies in various and complex ways. The particular thinkers I emphasize in either group together ground my understanding of anti-Black coloniality as a complex Western phenomenon with premodern, modern, and contemporary manifestations. Indeed, anti-Black coloniality is not *only* the theological situation of today, it is a situation that Christian theology has lived within, often unacknowledged, for longer than many have been ready to admit.

Are Demons “Real”?

The notion of a 21st century demonology raises a number of methodological, epistemological, and hermeneutical problems. Is it possible to believe in demons today? How best should we interpret, in our context, the various terms for spirits and the devil in Scripture? Western theology has treated demonology as part of the proverbial excess fat that must be trimmed so that faith might survive the intellectual and cultural crises of modernity. Even in many relatively traditional circles, much of academic theology has relegated demonology to

³⁴ Heng, 16.

superstition, myth, or private spiritual practice. In order for demonology to return to theological reflection, some might ask, must not the ontological and epistemological questions be resolved? Would not a political theological reflection on the relative danger or utility of demonology be presumptuous without determining whether or not demons are “real”? In response to this hypothetical objection, I give both a partial *yes* and a partial *no*.

In the first chapter, I discuss attempts by several prominent 20th century theologians and religious thinkers to revive demonology. Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Walter Wink, and René Girard³⁵ are representative of several 20th century intellectual movements that sought to respond to, reframe, and, in some cases, resist several dimensions of the liberal theological project. In doing so, each of these figures suggested some level of revival for demonology. Their arguments, I argue, deftly navigate many of the epistemological, hermeneutical, and ontological problems for demonology that remain today. Avoiding either liberal theological dismissal on the one hand and fundamentalist superstition on the other, these figures make the case for demonology as a vital doctrine, especially in contexts of tremendous social and political evil.

I am particularly inspired by Paul Tillich’s identification of the demonic, almost exclusively, with the social and political forces of evil in history—and by Walter Wink, who defines “the powers” in the New Testament as the spiritual reality of systems and institutions that either serve God’s Kingdom, or rebel and become demonic powers.³⁶ In the last two chapters, I center the demonological traditions of Black American religion, which often relates “the demonic” to the systemic powers of anti-Black racism, in many ways embodying pre-Christian,

³⁵ As I will discuss in the first chapter—René Girard is not a theologian. However, he has offered commentary on several exegetical and theological issues, and has been an inspiration for several contemporary theological projects.

³⁶ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992), 65.

African, traditions of spiritual-social integralism. All of these perspectives speak to a way of thinking about the demonic very broadly as *spiritual-political forces of evil*. The demonic is spiritual in that it is mysterious, hidden, even invisible. It is political in that its primary operation is in the creation and sustaining of systems of death and destruction against human beings. Before I explain why I intentionally choose a rather loose definition, let me quickly answer a few brief objections to the definition itself.

Some will likely object that the definition of the demonic as spiritual-political forces of evil represents, along with a certain imprecision, a tragic and dangerous reduction of theology to social theory. I respond, briefly, that that conclusion would suggest the presumption of a problematic dualism, where things that are “spiritual” must be otherworldly and things that are “political” must be solely worldly. Political demonology, along with the methodologies of liberation, is a disruption of this binary—the Reign of God must always be understood as a spiritual-material reality and, therefore, so must the demonic.

Others may further object that a definition of “the demonic” that sees the demonic as necessarily political, unhelpfully undermines the other ways Christianity has thought about demons, and the way it is still understood by the billions of people for whom it is an everyday part of their faith and spirituality—e.g., as sources of temptation to individual sins, or through possession of individuals, or as perhaps correlating in some way to individual mental illness. I respond that whatever sense theology ultimately makes of these other phenomena, they cannot be apolitical. Walter Wink makes a similar point in a rather interesting way, I think, when he says that all manifestations of what is traditionally thought of as individual possession must also be put in a political context—individual possession, for Wink, is the experience of the “scapegoat” who has become the dramatic locus for things like “economic exploitation, conflicts between

traditions, colonial domination, and revolution.”³⁷ For those interested in a more analytical and metaphysical argument about demonology, Pentecostal theologian David Bradnick uses emergence theory to argue that demons relate inextricably to corporate human behavior and social structures.³⁸ Although Bradnick goes further than I do in making metaphysical claims, his conclusions corroborate my own. For practitioners who uphold traditional metaphysical beliefs, and traditional practices regarding possession and exorcism,³⁹ I believe an essentially political definition of theology should compel them to think about the complexity of demonic systems of power involved. In what ways might the rite of exorcism incur a psychological trauma that is *in itself* just as, if not more, demonic than that which might be afflicting the subject? If someone appears possessed, is it because they truly are—or because the community of which they are a part is demonic?

Over the course of my argument, I will question what I believe are Euro-centric and colonial impulses inherent in the need to adjudicate these ontological and epistemological questions. For human beings who live at the periphery vis-à-vis the colonial “center,”⁴⁰ the fact of uncanny powers of evil is a given—and the most pressing question is what is to be done about them. This is the point that Jon Sobrino makes about Christology, in that the praxis of discipleship in commitment to Christ precedes theoretical understanding.⁴¹ Furthermore, my privileging of a praxis of discernment includes a suspicion of any theological concretion in terms

³⁷ Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 47.

³⁸ David Bradnick, *Evil, Spirits and Possession: An Emergentist Theology of the Demonic* (Leiden: Brill Publishers, 2017).

³⁹ I use “traditional” very broadly and loosely to refer to those who think of demons as concrete, individualized, invisible entities that possess or tempt human beings, and that their actions can be phenomenologically ascribed to particular thoughts or actions in the life of an individual—e.g., foaming at the mouth.

⁴⁰ Enrique D. Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, translated by Aquilina Martinez and Christine Morkovsky (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1985), 53.

⁴¹ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 25-26.

of theorizing the demonic, recognizing that such concretions may differ across time and circumstances so that demonology does not become something demonic, which it very often has been.

I will therefore use the term “demonic” to refer broadly to spiritual-political forces of evil, roughly correlating to the way these are defined by Euro-American political demonology and reflected in the Black grammar of the demonic. I will use “demonology” to refer to *discourses about the demonic*—recognizing that said discourses include ones that approach “the demonic” in other ways than I do, such as anti-Black demonologies. At points, however, there may appear to be some slippage in my use of the terms. This is intentional, as an essential part of my argument is that, from a theological perspective, demonology implicates the demonic. Every act of theologically naming or systematizing the demonic (including every act of choosing *not* to do so) is a socio-political act that might be demonic. It is the practice of discernment that helps us navigate these dangers.

Two Demonological Theses—The Argument

The governing conviction of this dissertation is that, given the theological situation outlined above, demonology is an essential locus for Christian theology in the 21st century. While I believe demonology intersects with many important contemporary theological problems and questions, it is of acute significance for political theology. This conviction stems from two theses, which at first appearance may be contraindications for one another. That is, each thesis suggests a remedy that would be fatal for the other.

Thesis 1: Christian demonology is implicated in the emergence of anti-Black coloniality, which remains a persisting social imaginary for the West. Christian beliefs about, and practices surrounding, the demonic have contributed to the demonization of Blackness and played a role in

theological justifications for colonizing swaths of territory, cultures, nations, and peoples. Beyond these particular contexts, both Karl Barth and René Girard emphasize the role that the way humans talk about “demons” lends itself to scapegoating violence in all sorts of contexts. This suggests the possibility that Christian demonology is a dangerous discourse that, in being largely scrubbed from theological reflection, is receiving its necessary perdition. This is the position that, perhaps surprisingly, Karl Barth takes.

Thesis 2: At the same time, however, beliefs and practices about spirits have played a comparatively outsized role in the theology, perseverance, and resistance of many oppressed populations and their allies. In the Christian tradition, this has taken place in the context of demonology, with traditions of ascribing demonic influence to the powers of white supremacy, patriarchy, and colonialism. This approach to demonology is particularly apparent in Black religious practices in the Americas. In looking for theological resources in light of the fact of anti-Black coloniality, demonology offers possibilities of resistance.

Of course, these are far from being mutually exclusive in any necessary way. Yet, the difference between them demands theological attention and adjudication. *Discernment at the Periphery* therefore, explores each thesis and reflects on what theology should therefore *do* with demonology in the 21st century.

I do not address these questions in an exactly linear way, rather a dialectical one. Some chapters highlight the ways demonology has historically contributed to anti-Blackness and colonialism. Others highlight the resources in Christian demonology for resistance against these very same powers. The questions to which I keep returning are the following: What sort of political demonology is relevant, helpful, and meaningful in a world defined by the very anti-

Black coloniality that demonology made possible? How can it be a language of resistance rather than a language of demonizing violence?

In order to reconcile these observations, I turn to the idea of discernment. Discernment, as I discuss it in this project, has several layers of meaning. On the one hand, it refers to discerning whether (and if so, why, when, or how) demonology might be relevant and appropriate for theology. I also think of discernment as the traditional Christian spiritual question of how to discern God from the devil. These first two meanings of discernment are, ultimately, one in the same. The very discourse of demonology is itself susceptible to “demonic” evil. I glean this insight from several theologians, including Karl Barth and Emilie M. Townes, as well as from Black writers and artists (such as James Baldwin, who is the subject of the last chapter). I prioritize authors who have met the demonizing frameworks of anti-Black coloniality with critique, sarcasm, and derision—attempting to force an anti-Black world to confront the question: “Is the devil who you think it is?” I argue that the demonized peoples of history have a particular spiritual wisdom, on account of experiencing and having to escape from demonization. *Discernment at the Periphery* is therefore the decolonial praxis of demonized peoples discerning and asserting their Divine dignity in a world that tempts them to demonize their and one another’s flesh.

Chapter One establishes the idea of political demonology, and argues for its viability as a locus for theology. This chapter retrieves all-but-forgotten attempts to revive demonology by some of the most prominent theologians and theological movements of the 20th century. Rejecting the pervasive assumption that Rudolf Bultmann, thought of as the father of “demythologization,” occasioned a decline in theological attention to demonology, I make the case that Bultmann represents the beginning of an attempt to bring demonology back to

theological significance. After Bultmann, Karl Barth and Paul Tillich both (in very different, but ultimately complementary ways) follow in the same trajectory, recognizing demonology as a doctrine with particular relevance to the social and political questions of their time. In America, this project is indirectly taken up by Walter Wink, who develops his thought in close conversation with René Girard. I call the conjoined work of these thinkers *Euro-American political demonology*. The chapter simultaneously offers a constructive theological argument, contending that the arguments these thinkers make for political demonology are worthwhile and still relevant for theology today. Together, they speak to a way of understanding demonology as a worthwhile political theological doctrine. It is important to have a demonology in order to name and resist radical evil in the world (per Tillich), as well as to give due credence to tradition and experience (per Barth).

One of the most important insights of Euro-American political demonology, which is particularly relevant to the context of anti-Black coloniality, is the demonic character of demonization. Karl Barth and René Girard both point out that one of the most evil and truly demonic human activities is to demonize some Other. However, as future chapters will develop in more detail, Euro American political demonology fails to think through the problems raised by realities of anti-Black coloniality as a broad system of demonization. This oversight suggests limitations to the usefulness of this theological project for our time. More specifically, Euro-American political demonology does not recognize the particular ways that Christian demonology has contributed to anti-Black colonialism and the demonization of Black, indigenous, female, queer, and other marginalized bodies. Furthermore, Euro-American political demonology does not reflect on the problem of discernment, which has historically been an integral dimension of Christian demonology. How is it possible to discern God from the devil?

Indeed, how does one discern good and evil in the context of an anti-Black empire that rests on a system of demonization?

The second chapter identifies the demonological discourses operative in the historical project of colonization and anti-Blackness. It makes the case that the Black, colonized, “other,” and the demonic are comparable and, at times, overlapping symbols of alterity in the Western imagination. Furthermore, Christianity has explicitly forged and extrapolated these links. Christian theology in general, and political demonology in particular, must take account of this legacy in order to be conducive to anti-racist and decolonial ends and continue the work of untangling Christianity from these oppressive systems.

The third chapter returns to Euro-American political demonology in order to provide an assessment of its usefulness in the context of anti-Black coloniality. In light of the implication of Christian demonology in anti-Black coloniality, what sort of account of demonology offers a truly prophetic theology and spirituality against the powers and principalities of our age? How can demonology practice a discernment that can cut through the demonizations of empire? Putting Euro-American political demonology in conversation with liberation theology, postcolonial theory and, ultimately, decolonial theory, I make the case that the path forward for demonology lies in prioritizing the witness and voices of the demonized peoples of history.

The fourth chapter explores Black grammar(s) of the demonic—which are the demonologies of Black theologians, artists, and writers who have come to terms with the nature of evil and the possibility of salvation in the context of a demonizing theological-political order. Some Black and womanist theologians have drawn explicit attention to these demonologies, particularly James Cone and Cheryl Kirk-Duggan’s respective work on Black musical traditions. I argue that recent research in the complexity and diversity of Black diasporic religion deepens

the understanding of these grammars, beyond the temptation to reduce them to European-Protestant categories. Black grammars of the demonic reflect the blending of Western Christian and African religious traditions. I prioritize womanist theologians Emilie M. Townes and Delores Williams who together profess a womanist demonology that represents theological reflection on the diversity of Black demonologies. Womanist demonology recognizes the demonic character of anti-Black coloniality and articulates redemption (i.e., “exorcism”) as the practice of Black women in particular, and all demonized peoples in general, loving their flesh, from which they are alienated on account of the demonizations of empire.

The fifth and final chapter focuses on the life, work, and thought of the Black American writer, James Baldwin. Joining a group of several theologians who have turned to Baldwin as a theological voice and source of theological inspiration, I analyze the particular way he embodies the Black grammar of the demonic and offers pathways for Christian demonology in the 21st century. I think about the way Baldwin gives witness to the discerning spirit of the demonized peoples of history and the spiritual resources demonized peoples have relied upon to discern salvation in the midst of a demonizing anti-Black empire. My reading of Baldwin emphasizes putting him in context of his Pentecostal upbringing and the way that a Pentecostal imagination weaves its way through his literary works. The chapter concludes with a reading of two of his novels which involve questions of demons, discernment, and salvation—*Go Tell it On the Mountain*, and *Just Above My Head*.

Rather than provide a comprehensive and “final” demonology, *Discernment at the Periphery* provides decolonial “options” for Christian demonology in the 21st century. It represents the paths that demonized peoples have taken to embrace the salvation of God amidst an uncanny, deceptive, and pervasive empire of anti-Black powers and principalities.

Chapter One

Haunting Theology: Toward a Political Demonology

Although rarely acknowledged by scholars, demonology stands at the heart of some of the most important theological debates of the 20th century. For a particular handful of Christian thinkers in this time period, the explicit question of whether and how modern people might speak of the demonic became a matter of pressing concern. Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, René Girard, and Walter Wink—along with several of their interlocutors and interpreters—represent the core figures in this explicit demonological conversation. Demonology, for them, intersected with pressing theological problems of hermeneutics, epistemology, and theology’s relationship to modernity.

Specific social and political realities particularly fueled this interest in returning to demonology. Theological figures such as “the devil,” “the demonic,” and the “powers and principalities” appear most starkly as these thinkers grapple with the realities of war, totalitarianism, racism, and the universal reality of human violence. Theology has not yet appreciated the significance these specific attempts to inspire a return to demonology as a framework particularly relevant for political theology. The present chapter therefor posits the existence and significance of this Euro-American tradition of *political* demonology as it appeared in the (long) 20th century.

These thinkers can be loosely divided into two groups: The first (Bultmann, Barth, and Tillich) articulate their respective accounts of demonology in response to the two world wars and under the auspices of the particular methodological problems that hounded German Protestantism in the 19th and 20th centuries. The latter (Girard and Wink) are joined not by

confession, geography, or even discipline, the former a French Catholic literary critic and the latter an American Protestant pastor and biblical scholar, but share a common interest in articulating an account of Christian faith that absolves God of violence, thereby reflecting on the Christian symbology of Satan and the demonic to talk about violence. Girard and Wink are linked to the former German theologians by their shared interest in bringing Biblical and theological language for evil spiritual forces to bear on their respective social and political concerns. They also all share an interest in theological debates surrounding myth and hermeneutics that can be traced to Rudolf Bultmann's 1941 essay "The New Testament and Mythology," which outlines his notorious concept of demythologization as an imperative for modern Biblical exegesis. Although Barth, Tillich, Girard, and Wink all set up their accounts of demonology in some degree of repudiation of him, Bultmann sets the stage political demonology by establishing the terms of the conversation and by representing a perceived obstacle that had to be to overcome in order to once again make demonology a viable theological option. Despite the establishing Bultmann as the enemy of demonology, however, Bultmann actually has more in common with these others than they typically acknowledge.

I distinguish this tradition of Euro-American political demonology from a parallel, but less explicit, discourse in Black and Latin American liberation theologies. To be sure, mutual engagement partly explains these parallels: A handful of references to the demonic in James Cone seem at least partially indebted to Paul Tillich.⁴² Certain demonological beliefs and practices present in Black and Latinx Christian communities likely has an indirect, typically

⁴² For an initial introduction to attempts to ascertain the relationship between the respective theologies of James Cone and Paul Tillich, whom Cone cites regularly as an influence, see Robison B. James, "A Tillichian Analysis of James Cone's Black Theology," in *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 1 (1974), 16-30.

unacknowledged, influence on Walter Wink.⁴³ These respective traditions, however, represent somewhat different theologies and politics. They will be compared and contrasted in later chapters when I evaluate this initial Euro-American discourse in the light of liberationist, postcolonial, and decolonial perspectives.

In this chapter, I do not only seek to describe political demonology as a 20th-century theological phenomenon. I also lay the groundwork for *constructing* a political demonology that will later be applied more explicitly to colonialism and anti-Black racism. Therefore, along with providing a historical orientation to Euro-American political demonology, the chapter makes four specific constructive arguments regarding the theological significance of demonology:

First, Christian accounts of the demonic are useful in making sense of political and social questions. As such, political demonology is relevant to political theology. While not every figure considered below is explicitly engaged in the discipline that theologians delineate as political theology, their interest in the demonic is unequivocally political and helps them make sense of political theological problems related to responsibility, social sin, and the nature of evil. Specifically, demonology helps these thinkers name particular social circumstances that other theological categories do not sufficiently reveal. This speaks to political demonology's explanatory function.

Second, demonology is useful toward the end of critiquing and resisting socio-political evil and violence. Demonology has a place in Christian discourse as a way of responding to

⁴³ I owe this hunch to a statement by Bill Wylie-Kellerman, who has written extensively about the emergence of “powers and principalities” theology in the United States. Wylie-Kellerman points out Walter Wink’s reliance on writings by lay theologian, lawyer, and activist William Stringfellow. Wylie-Kellerman briefly mentions that Stringfellow was influenced by the language of the people of East Harlem, where he lived as a pro bono lawyer. Wylie-Kellerman recounts that Stringfellow heard, in his conversations, various institutions described as “predatory creatures arrayed against the community.” Wylie-Kellerman identifies more significant influence through Stringfellow’s encounter with “powers and principalities” theologies emerging from the German Confessing Church, which he encountered during a conference in Norway in 1947. See Bill Wylie-Kellerman, *Principalities in Particular: A Practical Theology of the Powers That Be* (Minneapolis, MN, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 4-5.

political evil. For Walter Wink, for example, demonology is a discourse that makes it possible to fully identify the extremities of evil, and human participation in it, without demonizing human beings. It is therefore useful for effective Christian political praxis.

Third, and on the other hand, demonology can also be a politically explosive discourse. Karl Barth especially warns of the dangers of demonological discourse to inspire paranoia, scapegoating, and demonizing impulses. However, his approach to demonology provides conceptual tools for reckoning with this problem. Underlying Barth's warnings is a particular understanding of the mendacity of the demonic, which implicates theological discourse about evil existing in perpetual danger of "demonic" compromise. Barth insists that the demonic operates by misdirection and deception, desiring that humans will demonize the innocent. For this reason, Barth maintains, Christians should be reluctant to speak demonologically in order to avoid this risk. Wink and Girard express similar concerns, but Barth's account is the most theologically robust. Barth therefore represents the possibility of what one might call *apophatic* demonology, a demonology not built upon disbelief or modernist demythologization, but rather a theological recognition of the dangers and paradoxes inherent in speaking about the demonic.

Fourth, the conflict between the second and third claims points to discernment as a problem for political demonology. When is a reference to the demonic appropriate? When is demonology itself demonic and counter-productive, and when is it useful or even liberating? This question relates especially to colonialism and racism, which are the interest of the rest of the dissertation. While reflection on racism and colonialism is at times an essential part of this Euro-American tradition of political demonology, there is a conspicuous absence of attention to the very particular historical ways that Christian demonology is uniquely complicit in violence. Blackness, in particular ways, has been an object of intense and explicit demonization

throughout much of Christian history. Further chapters argue that reckoning with this fact is necessary if political demonology is to have any weight or viability in Christian theology today. Are there fundamental flaws in any Christian demonology that make it susceptible to colonialist or racist impulses? Is there an account of political demonology consistent with decolonial liberation? The failure of political demonology to address the question of discernment is related to their failure to sufficiently reckon with this history of abjection. A discerning spirit is necessary for determining when and how the demonic is a symbol that lends itself to demonic, colonizing, anti-Black violence.

At the most fundamental level, then, this chapter argues that *political demonology is a historically significant and theologically viable project for theology generally and political theology in particular*. Later chapters will make the caveat, only gestured in this chapter, that if this tradition is to continue and perhaps gain more prominence in Christian systematic theology in the future it must pay careful attention to the unique, nefarious, and particular ways Christian demonology associates with the projects of colonialism and anti-Black racism. Indeed, taking seriously the project of political demonology requires discerning and unmasking its own demons.

Demythologization and its Discontents: Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Barth

The renaissance of Christian demonology in the 20th century is an event marked by several overlapping conceptual and historical ironies. The first is the positive, albeit accidental, role played by Rudolf Bultmann. He, the father of “demythologization,” unwittingly helps set the stage that makes a renewed Christian demonology possible; all this despite his insistence that pre-modern and so-called “mythological” beliefs and language, including talk of spirits, be excised from Christian discourse. A second irony is Karl Barth’s inverse position. Though not commonly identified as Bultmann’s confrere, Barth is inclined to agree with Bultmann that

Christians should be wary when speaking of the demonic. He reaches this conclusion, however, while attempting to *preserve* a place for the devil and demonology in Christian theology, something he is concerned the likes of Bultmann wrongly undermines. In both cases, these theologians' concerns about the demonic are profoundly bound up in socio-political experiences and questions about the nature of evil, political responsibility, and how to live in what they perceived to be an apocalyptic era.

Rudolf Bultmann: Warfare and Kerygma

Bultmann is often the subject of gross misunderstanding. He is sometimes minimized as a confused and unoriginal figure because of the marked eclecticism of his thought.⁴⁴ Theologians of a broadly conservative disposition are particularly hostile toward Bultmann.⁴⁵ Thomas Torrance famously categorizes Bultmann, opposite to Barth, as the epitome of modernist theology because of what Torrance identifies as Bultmann's overriding preference for scientific rationalism as the measure of theological belief.⁴⁶ Recently, David Congdon successfully deconstructs the myth of Bultmann as merely a liberal modernist. Congdon's work helpfully recontextualizes Bultmann in his roots in kerygmatic theology.⁴⁷ The misreading of Bultmann contributes to and exacerbates the relative inattention to demonology as a feature of 20th-century theology. Bultmann's theology centers around an awareness of the palpable resonance of the

⁴⁴ See John Macquarrie, *The Scope of Demythologizing* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1966),

⁴⁵ Macquarrie, 29. Macquarrie also points out critics from the left.

⁴⁶ As quoted by N. H. G. Robinson, "Barth or Bultmann?," *Religious Studies* 14, no. 3 (1978): pp. 275-290, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0034412500010805>.

⁴⁷ See David W. Congdon, "Demystifying the Program of Demythologizing: Rudolf Bultmann's Theological Hermeneutics," *Harvard Theological Review* 110, no. 1 (2016): pp. 1-23,

<https://doi.org/10.1017/s0017816016000365>. Hans-Werner Bartsch, the editor of the two-volume collection *Kerygma & Myth*, which documents some of the primary criticisms against Bultmann along with Bultmann's responses, mournfully illustrates the way Bultmann was slowly sidelined from ongoing conversations about demythologization and not given chance to defend himself against criticisms based on commonplace cliché's about his positions: Hans-Werner Bartsch, "The Present State of the Debate (1954)," in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. Hans-Werner Bartsch, trans. Reginald H. Fuller, vol. 2 (London: SPCK, 1962), pp. 1-82, 1-5.

apocalyptic and cosmological imagery of the New Testament for his time. The imagery of a dramatic conflict of powers and principalities strike Bultmann as a salient dimension of the Christian message, which deserves emphasis in what felt to him like an apocalyptic age. Bultmann's insistence on this point makes possible the future developments in political demonology.

Initially identified with Barth and kerygmatic theology, Bultmann's theology is grounded in a commitment to preserve the original witness of the New Testament message. Although sometimes caricatured as a modernist, Bultmann's comprehensive theological vision seeks to preserve the Christian message from theological distortion and critical onslaught. Bultmann's own social and political positionality features heavily in this commitment. He is concerned that Christian theology is at risk of losing touch with the apocalyptic vision and cosmic drama presented in the New Testament. This, to Bultmann, is lamentable since this message is now uniquely relevant in the comparably apocalyptic situation of a world rocked by harrowing global conflict and ascendant fascism. For Bultmann, the notion of spiritual warfare against principalities and powers is supremely relevant in an era that similarly resounds with cataclysmic tonalities.

Many interpreters consider Bultmann's infamous 1941 essay, "New Testament & Mythology," as paradigmatic for Bultmann's thought on demythologization. Bultmann's defenders rightfully bemoan the failure to contextualize this piece within the rest of his corpus. Scholars rarely deny, however, that this essay serves as the most concise representation of his mature thought on demythologization.⁴⁸ The text is also a primary fixation of Bultmann's critics

⁴⁸ Ibid., 2-3.

and a touchstone for political demonology. For that reason, the proper interpretation of the 1941 essay is of central importance.

In the essay, Bultmann wrestles with perennial Christian dilemmas of proclamation and interpretation: How to express the Christian message in a language that is relevant and appropriate to its audience? He begins by defining the “world picture” of the New Testament as one that is decidedly “mythical.” This world picture assumes a universe divided between three cosmological landscapes: Heaven, hell, and earth. The earth is a porous space filled with various spiritual actors alongside and behind the everyday “occurrences” of human beings.⁴⁹ Bultmann famously asks, “can Christian proclamation today expect men and women to acknowledge the mythical world picture as true? To do so would be both pointless and impossible.”⁵⁰ Thus, Bultmann calls for a hermeneutic of “demythologization.” It is necessary, he says, “to demythologize” the New Testament proclamation in order to preserve the salience and spread of the Christian message.⁵¹ Despite this blunt declaration, Bultmann’s argument is ripe for misunderstanding. A scant reading seems to affirm the typical assessment that Bultmann is merely a modernist who wants to replace traditional Christian dogma with contemporary, namely scientific, language. This would be a misleading conclusion, however.

Roger A. Johnson’s *The Origins of Demythologization* provides crucial context to Bultmann’s terminology and assumptions and helps to undermine particular caricatures of his thought. Johnson argues that Bultmann’s concept of demythologization should be heralded as an original and compelling “synthetic construct” weaved together from four distinct strands, or

⁴⁹ Rudolf Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology (1941),” in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1989), 1.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 3.

⁵¹ Ibid., 9.

“motifs.”⁵² Bultmann draws simultaneously, if at times awkwardly, from Neo-Kantian, early Enlightenment rationalist, existentialist, and phenomenological philosophical schools.⁵³ Each of these plays a role in his concept of demythologization.

Bultmann’s engagement with Neo-Kantian philosophical conversations helps him develop the concepts of the “object” and “objectifying,” which are among the most foundational building-blocks of his concept of demythologization.⁵⁴ Bultmann and his Neo-Kantian colleagues emphasize the precedence of conceptualization before any object of thought. “Thinking is objectifying.” It is a form of concerted mental “construction.”⁵⁵ Bultmann suggests that modes of objectification differ across the major epochs of human history. In the pre-scientific era, humans objectified according to a religious and mythological conceptualization and, more recently, according to a scientific one.⁵⁶ Phenomena once explained with reference to myths are now explained by means of material cause and effect.

Theologically, Bultmann’s particular understanding of Lutheran theology, influenced by Willhelm Herrmann, uniquely colors how he categorizes these anthropological and epistemological assertions. He distinguishes himself from his Neo-Kantian contemporaries, namely by eschewing their rosy confidence that *Sein* is present in the act of objectification and therefore guarantees some apprehension of reality.⁵⁷ He maintains the basic contours of the epistemology and confidence that objectifications have some relationship to reality, but he contrasts this mental activity with the passive self (*Ich*) who finds its fullness of being in

⁵² Roger A. Johnson, *The Origins of Demythologizing: Philosophy and Historiography in the Theology of Rudolf Bultmann* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 233.

⁵³ Johnson refers to “Bultmann’s eclectic mansion of many rooms,” p. 237.

⁵⁴ Johnson is careful to distinguish between that which is consistent and that which is subject to change and development across Bultmann’s thought. In my summary of Johnson’s observations, I only point to the assumptions that, according to Johnson, are operative once Bultmann writes the 1941 essay.

⁵⁵ Johnson, 46-47.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 79.

religion. He opposes this to the objectifying action of the mind, insofar as it is active, dominating, and de-personalizing.⁵⁸ Religion brings actualization to the *Ich*, found in passive union with the Divine.⁵⁹ Bultmann casts this anthropological and epistemological frame into the Lutheran dichotomy of faith/work.⁶⁰ He identifies “work” as “rational-technological achievement” in pursuit of “the mastery of nature.” “In work,” he explains, “man struggles to win by his powers and achievements, especially through reason and his knowing-controlling relation to nature.”⁶¹ This thinking, objectifying activity of the mind cannot and should not be abandoned. Humans must objectify to live. Nevertheless, it stands as a “law” against which is juxtaposed the Gospel of religion, union with God by faith.

When Bultmann juxtaposes mythological and scientific thinking, such as in the 1941 essay, *both* are lumped together as historically-contingent forms of objectification and, therefore, work. There are other ways of approaching myth in the context of faith, such that it can have a potential, positive, role—described below. As a means of apprehending reality, however, it falls under the rubric of work. In the modern era, where mythological world pictures have lost their explanatory power, dogged insistence on the world picture of the New Testament can only constitute an approach to myth as a work, not faith.⁶²

To be sure, Bultmann regularly attests to the epistemological superiority of scientific thinking. Inasmuch as objectification accurately represents reality, scientific thinking is a superior form of it. This suggests the influence of Enlightenment, rationalist theories of myth. To some degree, he recognizes mythology as a pre-scientific and inferior way of understanding the

⁵⁸ Ibid., 79, 84-85

⁵⁹ Ibid., 85.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 173.

⁶¹ Ibid., 84.

⁶² Bultmann, “The New Testament and Mythology” (1941), 3.

world (a *Weltbild* or “world picture”).⁶³ At times, Bultmann does think of demythologization as the replacement of mythological and naïve forms of objectification with scientific objectification.⁶⁴ Such replacement is epistemologically and apologetically necessary. Simultaneously, and without any apparent sense of contradiction, Bultmann maintains that demythologization signifies reassessing and correctly valuing the existential meaning of myth. Such reevaluation does not require rationalizing or replacing myths with science. The goal of hermeneutics is not to explain mythological language with reference to scientific categories but instead to glean existential truths from Christian myths.⁶⁵

Myth, adequately understood, is even superior to scientific thinking in the context of faith. Congdon explains that, according to Bultmann, humans often and easily mistake myths as a means of objectifying. Humans look to them to reveal objective truths about the world when this is not their purpose.⁶⁶ Instead, myths supply existential truths. Unlike scientific truths, which rationalize and objectify, existential truth allows “the subject to existentially participate in the object.”⁶⁷ Myths are thereby a means of “encounter.”⁶⁸ This is especially true for the New Testament myths, which occasion an encounter with God's revelation and the event of Jesus Christ.⁶⁹ Hermeneutics is, therefore, vital. The theologian must correctly ascertain and interpret the mythical picture of the New Testament for its significance as the conduit for an existential encounter with Christ.

But what exactly does Bultmann mean by the existential significance of the Christian message? Existentialism is a broad cultural and philosophical movement, and the modifiers

⁶³ Johnson, 167.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 14.

⁶⁷ Congdon, “Demystifying,” 9.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

“existential” or “existentialist” can have wide ranges of use. Bultmann uses the term to suggest a mode of expression that answers the questions and anxieties inherent in human existence. It suggests an awareness “of human existence as insecure,”⁷⁰ seeing as we find ourselves “threatened and dominated by mysterious and enigmatic powers.”⁷¹ For Bultmann, “existentialist thought is grounded in an authentic mode of self-understanding because existentialist thought is an expression at a conceptual level of that fundamental orientation of man to his reality which comes to expression at an existential level in personal relations: i.e., friendship, love, and trust.”⁷² The New Testament represents a message that reflects humanity’s need to make sense of its existential insecurity and anxiety, with a message of God’s action that guarantees the means of living in trust and conviviality.

It is not possible to understand Bultmann’s penchant for existentialism apart from the context of warfare. Like many of the European thinkers of his generation, Bultmann is markedly scarred by the experience of the First World War. The unprecedented destruction of the conflict shook the presuppositions of the Neo-Kantians, Bultmann included. Their optimistic epistemology and ontology “was obviously unable to comprehend the irrationality and chaos unleashed by the war.”⁷³ Bultmann’s experience of the war led him to lose his naïve confidence in a world that the light of reason can easily understand, replacing this with an image of “the world [as] abysmal darkness.”⁷⁴ The shift is evident in a 1917 sermon entitled “The Hidden and Revealed God.” The macabre Bultmann muses: As “we gaze into the abyss of our nature, and our self appears as a play of strange powers. We gaze into the abyss of life, and its opposing

⁷⁰ Johnson, 239.

⁷¹ Johnson quoting Bultmann, 239.

⁷² Johnson, 194.

⁷³ Ibid., 80.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 81.

powers are incomprehensible to us. We look down into a depth of which we never dreamed.”⁷⁵

This sense of human captivity to irrational forces of destruction is an essential piece of his understanding of the human existential condition.

It is abundantly clear in the 1941 essay that Bultmann sees the mythological picture of the New Testament as one that is particularly apocalyptic. The Gospels reflect a world situation defined by Satan's rule, whose reign is coming to a cataclysmic end. It is a world moving toward “cosmic catastrophe.”⁷⁶ The myths of the New Testament disclose that the world in which we live is dominated by “powers” that stand “over us” as terrifying and “mythical realities.”⁷⁷

Bultmann also refers to Martin Heidegger, whose particular understanding of existentialism influences his own. According to Bultmann, Heidegger depicts humans as “beings existing historically in care for ourselves” and marked by “anxiety.” Humans are stuck “between the past and the future”—at risk of dissolving under the chaotic forces of existence.⁷⁸ For Bultmann, the New Testament presents humans with choice: Shall we abandon ourselves to the Satanic powers that seek to overwhelm us? Or, shall we choose to transcend them by opting for life and future? The New Testament provides, uniquely, testimony to the “saving act of God” that alone makes it possible for us to decide for the future.⁷⁹ Such is the “kerygma” of the Gospels. The Scriptures depict the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and the experiences of the first Christians, in light of this apocalyptic vision.⁸⁰ It is this picture “of human existence” given in the myths of the New Testament that provides “a possibility for understanding ourselves.”⁸¹

⁷⁵ Bultmann as quoted in Johnson, 81.

⁷⁶ Bultmann, “The New Testament & Mythology,” 1.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 23.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 26.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁸¹ Ibid., 15.

Bultmann underscores the superiority of the Bible's myths relative to the objectifying vision of a scientific *Weltbild*. When people lived under the rubric of the mythical framework, they understood that "humans beings are not their own masters."⁸² Modern humans, Bultmann contrasts, see themselves as whole and autonomous beings who have full control over their "feeling, thinking and willing." We moderns deceive ourselves into thinking that we know what our myth-driven ancestors did not, that no "alien powers can intervene in our inner life."⁸³ Nevertheless, Bultmann contends, modern persons in the 20th-century face experiences that a modern rationalistic world-picture cannot explain. The unspeakable destruction of a world war, and the emergent, raw, dominating power of a totalitarian regime, suggests something that is difficult to articulate: We are *not* our own masters. This is the New Testament's existential message, which occasions an encounter with Christ who overcomes these uncanny powers and gives us the possibility of hope in their midst. Therefore, while Bultmann is reticent to use language like "demonic" because of the risk of slipping into objectification and unnecessary apologetic stumbling-blocks, he decisively emphasizes the resonances between the apocalyptic imagery of the New Testament and the human condition, particularly in the 20th-century.

Bultmann's contentions are part of the background of Karl Barth's engagements with demonology. His single, sustained discussion of the topic (in III/3 of his *Church Dogmatics*) is partially driven by a critique of Bultmannian demythologization and in defense of the need to preserve the alien nature of Divine revelation. Theologians, Barth maintains, must accept Scripture as it is presented, "mythology" and all. However, Barth ends up taking a position that is surprisingly similar to Bultmann's: Christians should avoid speaking of the demonic. Like Bultmann, Barth also positively contributes to the development of political demonology despite

⁸² Ibid., 1.

⁸³ Ibid., 5.

his hesitations about such a discourse. His argument posits the importance and “reality” of the demonic and provides a complex and creative account of the nature of the demonic that concretely relates to the social and political situation of the 20th-century: It is *because* the demonic is “real” and bent on propping up evil political regimes and terrorizing innocent victims that we should be reticent to speak of it.

Karl Barth’s Demonological Dialectic

Very few scholars have discussed Barth’s demonology. The few that have done so consider it in the context of Barth’s provocative treatments of evil and nothingness (*Das Nichtige*),⁸⁴ which itself is typically discussed as one piece of Barth’s complicated doctrine of Divine Providence.⁸⁵ Barth’s specific treatment of the demonic and demonology is, in most cases, of minor concern. Each of these other topics are undoubtedly important context Barth’s occasional discussion of demonology, particularly the crucial passage in Paragraph 51 of *CD* III/3. However, few have considered the social and political features that drives Barth’s approach to these questions. What is more, little attention is paid to the necessary contextualization of Barth’s reticence in his overarching insistence that the demonic is a significant and irreducible dimension of Biblical revelation, including later writings that insist more firmly on the significance of the demonic for practical and systematic theology.

An outline of Barth’s objections to Bultmann and demythologization is necessary to contextualize his discussion of Christian demonology in *CD* III. Barth’s most explicit engagement with Bultmann appears in his small pamphlet “Rudolf Bultmann—An Attempt to

⁸⁴ R. Scott Rodin, *Evil and Theodicy in the Theology of Karl Barth* (New York, NY: Lang, 1997); Krötke Wolf, *Sin and Nothingness in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2005).

⁸⁵ See G.C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (London: Paternoster Press, 1956); Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005).

Understand Him.”⁸⁶ Despite recognizing many shared concerns and assumptions, Barth describes Bultmann’s concept of demythologization as ultimately another form of theological liberalism.⁸⁷ Barth bemoans that he and Bultmann began with a similar devotion to “kerygmatic theology,” that tries “to hear and reproduce better the real message of the New Testament,” but that Bultmann ultimately undermines this project.⁸⁸

Barth explicitly criticizes demythologization on several fronts but does not provide a single comprehensive objection. He muses about the consequences or necessity of demythologization, arguing that it lends itself (whether this is Bultmann’s intent or not) to altogether losing the Gospel message in exchange for a philosophical and rationalist picture of the world.⁸⁹ Barth correctly understands that Bultmann looks to *interpret* myth in existentialist terms, but argues that this is inappropriate domination of philosophy over theology and revelation.⁹⁰ Barth’s objection suggests a fundamental disagreement about the relationship between faith and reason—whether human reason and experience can authentically synthesize with or contribute to the Scriptural witness.

Barth’s criticisms of demythologization are persuasive inasmuch as any attempt to impose rules of interpretation and analytical categories (“this is mythical” vs. “this is not”) is fraught with anachronisms that run the risk of obfuscating or dismissing critical dimensions of revelation. Barth’s concern that a historically contingent thought-form, namely existentialism, might overpower the text is a warranted one. However, Barth does not offer much of an

⁸⁶ Karl Barth, “Rudolf Bultmann—An Attempt to Understand Him,” in *Kerygma and Myth; a Theological Debate, Volume II*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch, trans. Reginald H. Fuller (London: S.P.C.K., 1962), pp. 83-132.

⁸⁷ Barth admits, in places, that it is technically incorrect to call Bultmann a liberal (p. 102), but ultimately contends that Bultmann has accepted philosophy and rational modernity as criteria of hermeneutical interpretation, in dramatic reversal of what kerygmatic theology was ultimately supposed to be about (p. 127).

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 113-115.

alternative in terms of how to appropriately interpret Scripture into a particular cultural context, which he admits is a worthwhile and necessary consideration.⁹¹ If Barth offers any sort of alternative, it is to let the Biblical language stand on its own—as an alien presentation to humans that is mysterious, confusing, and at times distressing.⁹² However, when it comes to his treatment of the demonic, there are essential resonances between Barth and Bultmann in terms of what he thinks it communicates—namely, that evil confronts us as powerful, terrifying, and overwhelming.

Many of these same points about demythologization are operative in Barth's precise analysis of the demonic in *CD* III/3. However, before examining those passages in detail, some attention to its position in the rest of Barth's theology is necessary. Volume III focuses on the doctrine of creation and it is in this context that Barth produces an understanding of evil and nothingness as the corollary to creation. As Barth's system demands, creation must be understood only in light of God's revelation in Christ. There is no "natural theology" by which one might conceive of creation previous to an account of Jesus Christ.⁹³ The same is true also of evil and "nothingness." This explains why one plausible, ultimately misleading, interpretation is that Barth sees nothingness and evil as God's *indirect* construction. Creation exists on account of God's "Yes." Creation exists not chronologically, but logically, on account of God's election of humanity in and through Jesus Christ.⁹⁴ Nothingness (*Das Nichtige*) is that to which God says "No." If God's "Yes" is the condition by which creation comes into being, should the same then be said of evil—if it exists *on account of* God's "No"?

⁹¹ Ibid., 87.

⁹² Ibid., 127.

⁹³ Kathryn Tanner, "Creation and Providence," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John B. Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 111-126, 111.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

Theological accounts of evil are often categorized as tending toward monist, dualist, or Augustinian/Neo-Platonist tendencies. Barth, in some interpretations, seems to tend toward a sort of monism. There are many reasons to gravitate to this interpretation,⁹⁵ at least inasmuch as nothingness is the (indirect) production of God's election. There are, in fact, points at which Barth speaks of God making an internal choice between different "parts," for lack of a better term, of Godself. Barth also describes evil having its functional beginning in an "eternal self-differentiation" of God.⁹⁶ Furthermore, his account of Providence maintains God's sovereignty over evil, couched in a version of Calvin's supralapsarian soteriology.⁹⁷ However, dualist interpretations exist, as well. Barth often describes evil and nothingness in a perpetual war with God that seems to precede election.⁹⁸ Wolf Krötke, in his study of Barth on sin and nothingness, is careful to interpret Barth in a way that avoids both of these interpretations. Ultimately, Krötke persuasively concludes that Barth does not ever ultimately account for the ultimate source of *Das Nichtige* and must rely on paradoxical formulations. *Das Nichtige* is, therefore, an "impossible possibility."⁹⁹ Barth's whole theological methodology, in fact, demands that evil remain a mystery. It is present as an aspect of God's revelation, but systematization of revelation will always lead to reductionism.¹⁰⁰

These metaphysical contortions might distract from the overall *picture* and *feel* that Barth intends in his account of nothingness and evil. Barth has at times been categorized as callously optimistic on account of his substantive account of Providence (which, also, has earned him the

⁹⁵ See Wolf Krötke, *Sin and Nothingness in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2005), 24; See also Christopher C. Green, *Doxological Theology: Karl Barth on Divine Providence, Evil, and the Angels* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 161.

⁹⁶ R. Scott. Rodin, *Evil and Theodicy in the Theology of Karl Barth* (New York, NY: Lang, 1997).

⁹⁷ Rodin, 118.

⁹⁸ Krötke, 26-28; See also Rodin, 166-167.

⁹⁹ Krötke, 28.

¹⁰⁰ Rodin, 4

label of a monist).¹⁰¹ However, in his most sustained consideration of *Das Nichtige*, Paragraph 50 of III/3, the language is that of war. One finds “all this talk of battle.”¹⁰² On par with Bultmann, Barth talks about evil and nothingness in cosmic, cataclysmic, apocalyptic terms. When God says “Yes” to creation, God thereby says “*Nein!*” against “the foreign power that strives against him and his creation.”¹⁰³ *Das Nichtige* is the negation of “God’s grace” and is “bent solely upon destruction and disaster.”¹⁰⁴ The reluctance to explain or systematize evil only contributes to this terrorizing image. The fact that humans can hardly fathom evil becomes part of its horror. Barth avoids Augustinian language for evil as the privation of good (allergic, as he is, to the whole Neo-Platonic framework),¹⁰⁵ finding this a too-easy systematization of evil locks God in a philosophical box. Nevertheless, this again serves to make evil all the more real and terrifying. *Das Nichtige*, he therefore emphasizes, is *not* nothing.¹⁰⁶ Humans are powerless in the grasp of *Das Nichtige* as they cannot understand, resist, or even rightly name and identify it.

In this context, at the end of Paragraph 51, Barth provides a concise account of the demonic. Rejecting the traditional Christian belief that demons are fallen angels, Barth refuses to entertain what he considers the “primitive and fatal association” of angels and demons in Christian history.¹⁰⁷ The demonic, for Barth, must be nothing more than an element of that to which God has said “No.” The demons are, however, “dynamic” manifestations of *Das Nichtige* in conflict with the Kingdom of God.¹⁰⁸ They are the soldiers of nothingness. In keeping with his overarching conception of *Das Nichtige*, Barth’s account of the demonic has dialectical

¹⁰¹ Christopher Green, 1, 160-161.

¹⁰² Rodin, 199.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 26.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 52.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 182.

¹⁰⁶ Krötke, 39.

¹⁰⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, vol. III/3 (London: T & T Clark, 2010), III/3, 519.

¹⁰⁸ Krötke, 52.

dimensions. On the one hand, the demonic is “nothing” on account of its sharp rejection by and opposition to God. It is at the same time, however, very much *not* nothing on account of its robust, active, and powerful destructiveness.

In this short passage, Barth regularly expresses reluctance to write about the demonic. Demons and the devil deserve little more than a “glance” in a dogmatic theology, he maintains.¹⁰⁹ Why this reluctance? It has to do, firstly, with his refusal (mentioned above) to systematize evil, such that humans might wrongly assume they are able to control or understand it on their own. Nevertheless, there is also a unique set of dangers that come with speaking of the demonic. Because the demonic is active in creation, it constantly tempts humans to conceptualize and imagine evil. Krötke summarizes: “Precisely when the attempt is made to capture the devil and the demons fairly in the imagination, we are on the way toward hypostatizing nothingness.”¹¹⁰

Without mentioning Bultmann by name, Barth expressly rejects demythologization that relegates angels or demons to “a world-outlook which has now been superseded.”¹¹¹ Whether Barth means this as an attack on Bultmann directly or merely the caricature of Bultmann that had, in his mind at least, become a real entity in the theological landscape, Barth is clear that the language and world of God’s revelation remain essential. This revelation includes the fact of the demonic. However, Barth takes up Bultmann’s term and repurposes it to his own ends. “Faith in God and His angels,” he declares, “involves demythologization in respect of the devil and demons.”¹¹² Differing from Bultmann’s account of myth as a particular kind of conceptual language with its unique benefits and risks, Barth defines myth in this context as essential

¹⁰⁹ Barth, *CD* III/3, 519.

¹¹⁰ Krötke, 53.

¹¹¹ Barth, *CD* III/3, 521.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

deceptiveness. As such, it is the unique occupation of demonic forces. Barth posits that the demonic is characterized by its incessant lying and deception—its myth-making. The demonic “lies by pretending, in all its nothingness, that it is for God and the creature a relevant and serious factor which has to be taken into significant account.”¹¹³

Barth identifies two primary ways that demons seek to deceive human beings: through the myth that demons are important and worth taking seriously, and the inverse myth that they are not worth taking seriously at all. These two myths, by which demons attempt to deceive humans, relate to the Barth’s complex picture for the nature of the demonic and evil in general. Evil is both powerful and weak, something and nothing. Failing to appreciate both realities, in tension, is how humans succumb to the wiles of evil. This has particular consequences for the task of theology. What demons intend, on the one hand, “is that we [theologians] should find them dreadfully interesting and give them our serious and perhaps systematic attention.”¹¹⁴ The demonic also, however, attempts to represent “itself as a mere appearance with no genuine reality.”¹¹⁵ The demonic hopes that it might be dismissed by convincing humans that they might resolve their “problems with a little morality and medicine and psychology and aesthetics, with progressive politics or occasionally a philosophy of unprecedented novelty.” The consequence is that the “reality” of the demonic remains “undisclosed and intact.”¹¹⁶ The latter deception is the one that is operative in the more popular conception of demythologization as the superseding of traditional categories.

¹¹³ Ibid., 525.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 519.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 526.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

Later in his life, Barth gives more credence to the idea that there are times to prophetically name the demonic powers and principalities of society.¹¹⁷ Because of the risk of underemphasizing and naively ignoring the importance of the demonic, theologians should at time engage in prophetic witness against demonic powers. Drawing on previous insights on this question within the Confessing Church, Barth recognizes that notion of “the principalities and the powers” is salient for Christian prophetic and political witness. Barth’s commentary on these topics influenced North American political demonology by way of William Stringfellow and Walter Wink. In particular, Stringfellow drew from Barth’s lesser-known collection of essays *Community, State, and Church*, where Barth upholds (despite some criticisms) notions discussed by some theologians involved with the Confessing Church—the Church should prophetically identify idolatrous and destructive political powers as demonic principalities.¹¹⁸

The majority of Barth’s argument in Paragraph 51 on the side of avoidance, however, and it is this argument for which he makes the most unique contribution. What is important to observe is that Barth’s conviction is based upon the presumption that demonic forces are real, powerful, and particularly bent on concrete social and political destruction. The demonic is a decidedly political category. He explains: “There has always flourished in Christianity and its theology a supposedly very realistic demonology which has suffered from the lack of this safeguard” against obsessive overemphasis, which “begins with respect instead of aversion, with reverence instead of anger and scorn.” This realistic demonology “gazes at the poisonous serpent instead of striking it.” The peculiar consequence of this misplaced curiosity is a tremendous

¹¹⁷ See Karl Barth, “Interview by Marie-Claire Lescaze,” in *Barth in Conversation 1959-1962* ed. Eberhard Busch (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press); Karl Barth, “The Struggle for Human Righteousness,” translated by Geoffrey William Brommley in *The Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 218-221.

¹¹⁸ See Bill Wylie-Kellermann, *Principalities in Particular: A Practical Theology of the Powers that Be* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2016), 10-11; Karl Barth, *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1968), 109-111.

anxiety that leads to a number of psychological, social, and political maladies, not the least of which is the terrorizing of innocent victims. Barth maintains that this was a prevalent tendency in the late Middle Ages. “Christianity,” at this time, “acquired a more or less pervasive odour of demonism,” and was therefore marked by waves of “menace, anxiety, melancholy, oppression, or tragic excitement.” The infamous witch hunts of early modernity represent the apex of this demonological obsession, where a paranoid fixation on the demonic contributed to the vilification of innocent women.¹¹⁹ An overemphasis on the demonic tends to make humans paranoid or even violent, and cooperating with demonic ends—which primarily involves demonizing innocent victims.

Other political concerns are lurking in the background as well. Throughout the 1930s and during the war, Barth maintained one of the staunchest positions against National Socialism among pastors and theologians in the German-speaking world. Involved in the anti-Nazi Confessing Church, Barth repeatedly pressed his colleagues for more dramatic opposition.¹²⁰ After the war two primary factions existed among the Christian leadership in Germany. The first, a group of conservative members within the Confessing Church, were critical of Nazi incursions into Church authority. Besides these concerns about ecclesial autonomy, these members of the Confessing Church had otherwise either been supportive of the regime or at least sympathetic to the ideals of National Socialism.¹²¹ Another, more radical, group was much more consistently critical of National Socialism and its political vision. In exile in Switzerland, Barth was often in step with this latter faction, if not often further to their left.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 522.

¹²⁰ Matthew D. Hockenos, *A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004), 32.

¹²¹ Ibid., 33, 39.

¹²² Ibid., 32.

The conservatives attempted to transform their public image after the war, claiming they had recognized and resisted the Nazi's human rights abuses.¹²³ This group of pastors authored the document, "Message to the Congregations," which glosses over the Confessing Church's mixed record of resistance.¹²⁴ Other pastors offered the alternative, "Message to the Pastors," where they present a firmer admission of guilt for Christianity's overall failure in Germany.¹²⁵ Barth took issue with both documents—neither went far enough for him. As historian Matthew Hockenos explains, "Barth wanted every German to admit his responsibility" for inaction against the regime, at the very least.¹²⁶ Notably, in his criticisms of this whitewashing faction, Barth comments on the growing penchant among those associated with the Confessing Church to relate the horrors of the previous years to evil spirits.

In a letter to Martin Niemöller, Barth singles out references to the demonic in "Message to the Congregations."¹²⁷ The document, to Barth's chagrin, suggested "that the German people were driven to commit atrocities by demonic powers."¹²⁸ Barth's abhorrence stems from his belief that talk of the demonic too quickly absolved Germans, and the German churches, of responsibility.¹²⁹

Barth draws some of this criticism from his long antipathy to Lutheran political theology, which (in his mind) naively separated the "two kingdoms" such that the Church had little it could say to or against the State, each singularly responsible for its own sphere.¹³⁰ Also in the subtext is Barth's growing awareness and disavowal of historic Lutheran anti-Judaism in the Nazi

¹²³ Ibid., 47.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 55.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 56.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 55.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 56-57.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 57-58.

ideology.¹³¹ Despite some recognizing the evil of the regime, German Christians failed in their political responsibilities by abandoning the State to the realm of the devil, against which they have no say and to which they have no responsibility. They failed to appreciate that the Gospel has itself a law, which was in direct contrast to the “law of Hitler,”¹³² bestowing upon them a responsibility to resist. Barth does not give any such indication, but there is perhaps here a parallel to his dialectical treatment of the demonic in *CD* III/3: In both cases, misidentification of the demonic leads Christians to themselves become the accomplices of evil and agents of the demonic. The demonic desires that humans might misidentify it and therefore trick them into participation in evil—which often has explosive political and social manifestations.

This underscores again that Barth is acutely aware that evil forces seek to deceive human beings into violating, oppressing, and demonizing others. It is *because* the demonic is real and important and because it seeks to do harm and violence in concrete, socio-political ways that Christians should avoid such discourse. Barth had witnessed this himself with Jewish people demonized and exterminated on the foundations of Christian motifs and theological claims, and their de facto oppressors then blaming the devil in order to avoid responsibility for their complicity. Evil, Barth seems to think, receives an unnecessary victory. Therefore, Barth summarizes in *CD*/III: “Theological exorcism must be an act of the unbelief which is grounded in faith.”¹³³ To resist the demonic is to resist speaking of it, and therefore avoid the risk of falling into the traps of demonizing or shirking responsibility for social and corporate sins.

¹³¹ Ibid., 36. See also Eberhard Busch, “Karl Barth and the Jews: The History of a Relationship,” in *Karl Barth, the Jews, and Judaism*, ed. George Hunsinger (Grand Rapids, MI, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018), pp. 24-36.

¹³² Busch, 28.

¹³³ Barth, *CD* III/3, 521.

The approach to demonology that Barth represents implicitly raises the problem of discernment. Because of the intractably deceptive nature of the demonic, it is imperative to look beyond appearances when the demonic is discussed or identified. The demonic is concerned with our misapplication and misidentification. His emphasis on demonic deceptiveness is an essential insight, which gives a theological and demonological context for the severe evil of scapegoating, demonizing, and corporate irresponsibility. A responsible political demonology must take account of this reality. However, Barth perhaps leans too heavily on a singular and reductive emphasis on silence and reticence. He does not offer much in the way of a means of discerning between appropriate and inappropriate use of demonology.

Facing Down the Demonries: Paul Tillich

Theology, understood as the interpretation of revealed religious symbols, should acknowledge and be responsive to the situation in which it is articulated. That is one of the fundamental axioms of Paul Tillich's theology, most thoroughly explicated in the first of his three-volume *Systematic Theology*. Tillich makes this case on the very first pages: "A theological system is supposed to satisfy two basic needs: the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation." The latter attends to "the temporal situation in which the eternal truth must be received."¹³⁴ Tillich finds it necessary to speak of the demonic, even to centralize it within his theology, due to this methodological principle. The situation demands it. As Tillich sees it, the 20th century is a palpably demonic age.

Like Bultmann, Tillich reflects on the tumultuous features of the 20th-century as evocative of imagery of cosmic warfare against terrifying and superhuman powers of evil. Tillich undoubtedly has his own experience as a soldier in World War I in mind. The hellish realities of

¹³⁴ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Three Volumes in One* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1967), Volume 1, 3.

war left an indelible mark, including at least two subsequent instances of psychosis. Later, his experience of the cultish Third Reich also would fuel his turn toward such imagery. Tillich's pessimistic assessment of the era refers not just to the particular destructive circumstances of the 20th-century in Europe, however, but also to a contemporaneous philosophical and literary penchant toward that which is destructive and morose in human existence: "It is not an exaggeration to say that today man experiences his present situation in terms of disruption, conflict, self-destruction, meaninglessness, and despair in all realms of life."¹³⁵ These intellectual and historical circumstances suggest, for Tillich, a recourse to demonology.

Tillich intentionally positions himself as a mediator between theological liberalism and Barthian kerygmatic theology. To him, this means finding a balance between declaring the unchanging truth of the faith and recognizing its need to be interpreted in a given situation.¹³⁶ For this reason, Tillich gravitates toward existential philosophy as a relevant language for articulating Christian theology in the 20th century.¹³⁷ Tillich resonates with Bultmann on this point but does not quite declare existential philosophy to be essentially and universally coherent with Christian theology. It is useful as the historically contingent thought-form of the era. However, his interest in existentialism does factor into his methodological starting-point in a more universalizing way—he believes that the Christian faith *should always* speak to the existential situation.¹³⁸ This is the foundation of Tillich's commitment to a methodology of correlation. Theology, Tillich maintains, attempts to draw out the ways that "God answers man's

¹³⁵ Ibid., 49.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 4-5.

¹³⁷ Tillich, Vol. 2., 27ff.

¹³⁸ Vol., 1, 62.

questions” and the ways that “man’s questions” are already under the influence of God’s answer.¹³⁹ Theology should correlate to human experiences, questions, and longings.

While scholars do not rank Tillich among the “political theologians” of the century, he has had a profound impact on the field of Christian political thought. His service as a soldier in World War I quickly and dramatically converted Tillich from a conservative monarchist to a committed socialist.¹⁴⁰ Tillich’s signature political ideals and his interest in demonology emerge together. It was out of his war experience that Tillich (like Bultmann) begins to reflect more on themes of hell, the abyss, and the demonic—especially after a “nervous breakdown” during the war.¹⁴¹ After the war, Tillich becomes convinced that “the only worthwhile theology. . . had to address the abyss in human existence.”¹⁴² At the same time, Tillich begins working and writing on the idea of religious socialism, later producing his significant book *The Socialist Decision* in 1933. For Tillich, religious socialism calls socialists to recognize the significance of a sacramental ontology for socialist thought: that is, a recognition of the sacred that appropriately “consecrates matter or concepts as divine” and avoids the idolatrous concretization of some aspect of the finite world *as* divine in and of itself. This is the demonic idolatrous underpinning of both nationalism and capitalism.¹⁴³ For Tillich, socialist antagonism to such idolatries is a theo-political attack on the demonic and the abyss.

In many respects, Tillich’s whole theological system hinges on the demonic. Not only do references to the demonic appear throughout his theological *and* political writings, but the demonic is also central right from the outset of his theological magnum opus, the three-volume

¹³⁹ Vol 1, 61.

¹⁴⁰ Gary Dorrien, “Religious Socialism, Paul Tillich, and the Abyss of Estrangement,” *Social Research* 85.2 (2018), 431-432.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 431.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 432.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 434-435.

Systematic Theology. Maintaining that every attempt to systematize Christian theology must necessarily anchor itself in a particular motif or centralizing point, Tillich emphasizes the emergence of the “New Being” found in Christ as redemption from the estrangement of a demonic world. A theological system responsive to a notably demonic situation is one “in which the self-estrangement of our existence is overcome, a reality of reconciliation and reunion, of creativity, meaning, and hope” is emphasized. Such is a theology in which Christians recognize the “New Being” that emerges in the midst of and against the demonic realities of history, and this age in particular.¹⁴⁴ Tillich remarked late in his career that most of his works should be burned; however, his writings on the demonic should be among those preserved.¹⁴⁵

“Demonic” is a frequent adjective in Tillich’s theological and philosophical works. He uses it to describe oppressive religious institutions, tyrannical political leadership, specific theological claims, and more. However, Tillich never provides a satisfying, comprehensive explication of the demonic that makes complete sense of his wide range of use. The most straightforward and commonly-recited definition, which he restates throughout the volumes of his *Systematic Theology* and *The Courage to Be*, is exemplified thus: “The demonic is the elevation of something conditional to unconditional significance”¹⁴⁶ or the “identification of anything finite with that which transcends everything finite.”¹⁴⁷ This definition particularly relates to the idolatrous aspect of the demonic. The deification, implicit or explicit, of a political leader is one of the most palpable examples of this idolatrous dynamic in Tillich’s imagination. He mentions Nero as the quintessential example.¹⁴⁸ However, this definition does not capture the

¹⁴⁴ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2, 49.

¹⁴⁵ Werner Schüßler, “Tillich’s Life and Works,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich*, ed. Russell Re. Manning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 3-17, 13.

¹⁴⁶ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, 140.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

full significance of the demonic in his theology. For a more robust understanding, one must piece it together across several works—beginning with the one, early text where he does give it focused attention.

Tillich's 1933 essay, "The Demonic: A Contribution to the Interpretation of History," provides the closest thing to a basic account of the demonic in his corpus, although it also leaves several questions unanswered and is at times frustratingly vague—later works add much more substance. The essay opens with a discomfiting reflection on the art of "primitive peoples and Asiatics" whose works, he claims, have left a particular impression on modern humanity: "We have noticed that these objects matter to us, since in them are expressed depths of reality which had, to be sure, escaped our consciousness, but in subconscious strata had never ceased to determine our existence."¹⁴⁹ Tillich argues that contemporary advances both in anthropology and psychology raise our awareness of aspects of reality that modernity suppresses and underemphasizes. He notes the existence of a "peculiar. . . artistic form" apparent in such pre-historic artifacts.¹⁵⁰ This aesthetic milieu juxtaposes "organic form" with "destructive elements."¹⁵¹ For example:

The organs of the will for power, such as hands, feet, teeth, eyes, and the organs of procreation, such as breasts, thighs, sex organs, are given a strength of expression which can mount to wild cruelty and orgiastic ecstasy. . . . When they become overpowerful and withdraw from the arrangement within the embracing organic form, they are destructive principles.¹⁵²

This description introduces the definition of the demonic as a "contradiction of form" that paradoxically exists *in* form. "Human art reveals to us the actuality of that which is positively

¹⁴⁹ Paul Tillich, *The Interpretation of History*, trans. Nicholas Alfred Rasetzki and Elsa L. Talmey (C. Scribner's Sons, 1936), 77.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

contrary to form, the demonic,” he explains.¹⁵³ These artistic examples identify something humans know, often just subconsciously, to be true of the whole of human existence: the union of form-destruction and form.

This history of religion offers further exemplification of this principle. For Tillich, religions and religious institutions very often become demonic. Religious institutions easily transform into destructive forces in the world, combining form and the destruction of form.¹⁵⁴ In the essay, Tillich provides a history of the various ways religion has historically become demonic in its institutions and beliefs. For example, ancient religions often focus on divine beings that are themselves a combination of form and form-destructive qualities. Such is the case for ancient “war gods, who consume strength in order to give strength.”¹⁵⁵ Religions take on demonic form in similar ways even today, citing “the demonic will to power of the sacred institution.”¹⁵⁶ In other works, Tillich refers to various forms of fundamentalism or theologies that attribute cruelty to God to be similarly demonic.¹⁵⁷ The demonic is present when good and evil are confused in a religious institution.

Tillich’s most basic definition, then, is as follows: The demonic is “the unity of form-creating and form-destroying strength.”¹⁵⁸ This definition also captures the existential *feel* of the demonic, as nefariously creative—able to provide for some need, representing some positive good, while also existing as a source of destruction. As such, it is sometimes difficult to detect or distinguish from the Divine.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 79.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 79.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 80.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, 3, 32,

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 81.

Some treatment of Tillich's broader ontology is necessary to make fuller sense of this definition. Tillich's initial significant discussion of the demonic in *The Interpretation of History* highlights the relationship between the demonic and the inexhaustibility of being. He explains that the demonic emerges through a "relatively independent eruption of the 'abyss.'" The abyss, per Tillich, can emerge within anything "produced by the creative power."¹⁵⁹ For Tillich, being is necessarily *inexhaustible*. As such, he understands being simultaneously as "fullness" and "power."¹⁶⁰ Inexhaustibility includes the possibility of "the abyss." Being must, by definition, always have *form* while remaining simultaneously inexhaustible. That inexhaustibility poses a risk for a "relatively independent eruption of the 'abyss,'" which is what Tillich calls "the demonic."¹⁶¹ The demonic emerges with relative independence but as an always-present possibility baked into the nature of being. The risk for a demonic irruption is always present in being but actualized independently. How is it the case that the demonic possibility exists within being but does not emerge deterministically? It comes from a quality within "everything" to "realize in itself as an individual," which includes an "impulse toward breaking through its own, limited form, the longing to realize the abyss in itself."¹⁶² He concludes that the demonic "is the form-destroying eruption of the creative basis of things."¹⁶³ For something to be demonic, it must be *both* creative and destructive. These qualities must be "essentially connected" to deem something demonic.¹⁶⁴

It is difficult to absolve Tillich of the charge of monism, an accusation that many scholars lobby. However, it is crucial to stress Tillich's insistence that God is engaged in the process of

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 84.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid., 84-85.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 85.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 91.

overcoming evil. The demonic power of non-being in existence, just as with non-being *itself*, is opposed by and will ultimately be defeated by God. This relates to a central point in *The Courage to Be*, where courage is ontologized as the nature of being to persist despite the threat of non-being.¹⁶⁵ This can (somehow) be said ontologically, and also concerning the vicissitudes of existence. The demonic breaks into history, threatening faith in the God who promotes love and justice, but is met with the courage of God.

Tillich's theories of theological language help to further illuminate his demonology. Tillich understands all religious language as predominately symbolic. Humans cannot capture God in their own language; rather, human conceptions of God "must be related to concrete elements of ordinary experience."¹⁶⁶ However, Tillich's theology is apophatic in the sense that language for God tends to fail and become idolatrous (or demonic) when it purports to say more than it can. For this reason, he rejects what he sees as rationalist accounts of apologetics. "God is not an idea" that can be argued for or defended on rational grounds. Rather, God is "an experiential reality."¹⁶⁷ God often becomes "one object among others" with this sort of classical method of apologetics.¹⁶⁸ Theologians wrongly treat terms like "First Cause" as factual statements rather than symbols,¹⁶⁹ and as such, inappropriately limit divine transcendence.

Symbolic language, on the other hand, "points beyond itself."¹⁷⁰ He says: "There can be no doubt that any concrete assertion about God must be symbolic, for a concrete assertion is one which uses a segment of finite experience in order to say something about him."¹⁷¹ Tillich refers

¹⁶⁵ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1952), 155-156.

¹⁶⁶ Martin Leiner, "Tillich on God," in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich*, ed. Russell Re Manning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 45.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 1, 235ff.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 239.

to the *analogia entis* but cautions against understanding it as a license to dispense with the centrality of revelation.¹⁷² The symbols for God are those which God reveals. It is not theology's role to adjudicate what religious symbols should or should not exist, they are given by God through revelation.¹⁷³ Theology *can* speak prophetically against misuses of symbols, or untimely applications, especially in the event of the idolatrous and demonic privileging of a symbol such that it overpowers the mystery of God.¹⁷⁴ Symbols can also "become obsolete" when they no longer correlate to a question asked by the era.¹⁷⁵

Tillich is somewhat unclear about the exact relationship between myth and symbol, except to indicate that myth is a form of symbolism. Theologians should understand the Adam and Eve "myth," for example, "as a symbol for the human situation universally, not as the story of an event that happened 'once upon a time.'"¹⁷⁶ This does necessitate some sort of translation and interpretation into contemporary language.¹⁷⁷ Tillich describes the Fall in philosophical terms as the "transition from essence to existence." Importantly, however, Tillich stresses that myth *and* symbol are the most appropriate language for God. *Adam and Eve ate the fruit*, is more appropriate religious language than *falling from essence into existential estrangement*; however, the theologian must propose the latter to interpret and communicate to her milieu and its specific questions and needs.

Tillich explicitly rejects Bultmann's form of demythologization, which he describes as "the removal of myth as a vehicle of religious expression and the substitution of science and morals." Such erasure "would deprive religion of its language."¹⁷⁸ Tillich does, however, retain a

¹⁷² Ibid., 240.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 2, 29.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 152.

role for “partial demythologization,” more appropriately understood as *deliteralization*. Deliteralization is a “necessary task of Christian theology” in that it “keeps Christianity from falling into a wave of superstitious ‘objectivations’ of the holy.”¹⁷⁹ Such superstition is, in fact, the very definition of the demonic—the idolatrous replacement of the infinite with something finite. Despite Tillich’s reliance on the common caricature of Bultmann, their respective approaches are relatively coherent. Both Bultmann and Tillich believe that myths communicate in unique and essential ways and that interpretation is necessary to avoid misleading objectifications. However, Tillich stresses the unique and irreplaceable power of myth, therefore maintaining that myths should retain some role in theological discourse along with apologetic hermeneutics and other safeguards against superstition. Tillich does not go as far as Barth, however, who tends to solely prioritize the irreducible quality of revelation. Barth pays lip-service to the need to interpret the language of revelation into concrete situations and warns vociferously against literalism but does not develop a hermeneutic for translating mythological language.

In *Systematic Theology*, Tillich contextualizes the demonic within the rest of his theology. Here, he defends the symbol of the demonic as symbolic language that theologians should preserve because of its importance in Scripture as well as its particular relevance for the 20th-century. The cross and the resurrection are the central symbols of Christian revelation, as is their contextualization in Jesus’s lived ministry proclaiming the Kingdom,¹⁸⁰ which Scripture relates to demonic powers that Christ resists and defeats.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 153.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 161.

Tillich's understanding of the human predicament also requires reference to demonology. He explains: "The truth of the doctrine of angelic and demonic powers is that there are supra-individual structures of goodness and supra-individual structures of evil. Angels and demons are mythological names for constructive and destructive powers of being, which are ambiguously interwoven and which fight with each other in the same person, in the same social group, and in the same historical situation."¹⁸² This illustrates Tillich's hermeneutic of deliteralization, finding relevant explanatory language that interprets the meaning of these symbols. For Tillich, the demonic is a symbol that evokes structures of evil in history, especially (but not exclusively) useful for describing systemic socio-political evil. It symbolizes dynamics of evil in history, which stretch beyond individuals' sinful actions but are systemic, "suprahuman," patterns of evil that dominate and "enslave" humans as groups.¹⁸³ Yet, because of his insistence that mythological symbols are preferable to their interpretation, Tillich maintains the importance of using the terms "demonic" in theology and especially in Christian political praxis.

Notably, Tillich believes that theology should avoid a literalist understanding of the demonic that renders demons as concrete, individual beings. He writes in the aforementioned 1933 *Interpretation of History* essay on the demonic: "The affirmation of the demonic has nothing to do with a mythological or metaphysical affirmation of a world of spirits." Instead, the demonic is the ecstatic emergence of evil in and through the individual and systemic actions of human beings.¹⁸⁴ The demonic primarily symbolizes *structural* or *systemic* evil (even when appearing around an individual or the phenomenon of so-called "possessed states"). It stretches beyond individual human agency but emerges amidst human activity and the previously

¹⁸² Ibid., 40.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 161.

¹⁸⁴ Tillich, *The Interpretation of History*, 85.

mentioned conditions of being, which makes it possible in the first place: “[Demons] are not beings but powers of being dependent on the whole structure of existence.”¹⁸⁵

The notion of a “demonry” or a “social demonry” as a socio-political manifestation of evil is one of Tillich’s most effective uses of the symbol of the demonic. An early mention appears in a 1924 essay on religious socialism for the journal of the *Kairos Circle*. Here he describes religious socialism as a movement and principle that demands action against what he calls the “sacramental demonry.”¹⁸⁶ This is a reference to the conservative Lutheran establishment that was resistant to democratic ideals and socialism. An idolatrous-sacramentalist mentality, which tends toward an oppressive heteronomy undergirded by religion, is one of the primary forms that the demonic takes in history. It resists culture and tends toward an authoritarian institutional structure. In *The Interpretation of History*, Tillich more explicitly outlines the notion of a *demonry* as a way of understanding the social function of the demonic. “Demonry,” he explains, “is the reign of a superindividual, sacred form” that juxtaposes creativity and destruction as social systems, political regimes, or ideologies.¹⁸⁷ The primary examples he gives are those of capitalism and nationalism, which he argues are the primary demonries of the 20th century.

In outlining the features of these two demonries, Tillich is much more specific about the nature of demonic forms in history. Recall that, for him, the demonic is always the combination of creativity and destruction. He shows how this is the case in capitalism, for example, in its creation of material wealth and prosperity while at the same time being exploitative and destructive. He writes: “Thus the social demonry of the present is revealed in its duality, in its

¹⁸⁵ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 2, 40.

¹⁸⁶ Paul Tillich, “Basic Principles of Religious Socialism (1923),” in *Paul Tillich: Theologian of the Boundaries*, ed. Mark Kline Taylor (Minneapolis, MN, MN: Fortress, 1987), 64.

¹⁸⁷ Tillich, *The Interpretation of History*, 91.

immense supporting and destructive strength.”¹⁸⁸ Reflecting, undoubtedly, on the contemporaneous rise of National Socialism (not to mention the nationalisms of the First World War), Tillich also analyzes the demonic nature of nationalism as a political tradition and philosophy. In this sort of demonry, “national things receive sacral untouchability and ritual dignity.” It is “just there demonization begins.” The “creative-supporting forces” of nationalism are its ability to galvanize “resistance to the technical economization” of the West.¹⁸⁹

While somewhat unclear on what form or strategy it might take, Tillich maintains that battling against the demonic is a religious and political mandate, one which blurs the lines between politics and religion: “The battle against the demonries of a time becomes an unavoidable, religious-political duty. Political activity gains the deeper meaning of religious activity. Religious activity gains the concreteness of a struggle against the ‘principalities and powers.’”¹⁹⁰ Tillich’s insistence that demonic language provides more concreteness to religious political praxis is intriguing. While some, like Barth, might see references to the demonic as misleading, distracting, or non-specific, Tillich finds it important that the demonic evokes a comprehension of evil social realities not possible with mere secular, fully demythologized language. This is a central insight of political demonology in its more kataphatic manifestation: Speaking of the demonic is useful for successful religious praxis against evil, ostensibly because it more accurately names the awesomeness and seriousness of an evil situation than other language accomplishes.

These constructive claims require some extrapolation, however. Tillich insists that religious people have a profound duty to act politically and spiritually against demonic systems

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 121.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 120.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 116.

in history. As such, Tillich's account of the demonic undergirds a liberating mandate for the people of God to exorcise evil in word and deed. However, Tillich does not explicitly defend what political use it is to talk about the demonic. What good does it do to recognize and name the demonic nature of a social or political situation? Does it lead to a different sort of politics? Barth might, persuasively, retort that the political consequences of talking about the demonic are purely negative: It inclines us to paranoia and the shirking of responsibility for evil we have ourselves committed as individuals and societies. Walter Wink, below, takes up these questions explicitly and offers a more pointed defense of the political usefulness of demonological language.

There is another intractable dilemma between the respective demonologies of Barth and Tillich which demands some attention. While there is some tacit agreement between them that Christian language for the demonic relates in meaningful ways to human experiences of evil, perhaps *especially* socio-political evil, they differ over whether it is appropriate theologically or politically to speak about the demonic. Tillich shows little reticence. On the other hand, Barth warns of demonic mischievousness that tricks Christians into demonizing the wrong thing, person, or system. As indicated above, Barth's insistence on silence is insufficient as a blanket rule, but it remains a compelling warning against Tillich. While Tillich recognizes that religious institutions and theologies can become demonic, he does not apply critical questions of demonology to his own theological task. How does one avoid achieving demonic ends in one's demonology? The question of discernment—who, how, and when to identify the demonic—emerges as a problem that neither Barth's nor Tillich's accounts of political demonology address satisfactorily.

René Girard, Walter Wink, and the Violence of the Devil

Initially, the emergence of political demonology is a particular discourse unique to German Protestant theologians reckoning with the two world wars and ensuing questions about political consciousness, apocalyptic theology, existentialism, and sin. This final section of the chapter considers the appearance of another (not unconnected) iteration of political demonology among a collection of American theologians, pastors, priests, and activists—namely Walter Wink—as well as in the thought of French anthropologist René Girard and theologians influenced by him. This stream of political demonology is unique for its particular emphasis on non-violence. That is not to imply that the demonologies of Barth or Tillich are violent. However, this later iteration of political demonology has the relatively unique tenor of critiquing violence in politics and society as the quintessence of demonic activity and (especially in Wink’s case) heralding non-violence as a form of resistance or exorcism. The two figures in focus here—Girard and Wink—are also asking some of the same questions about myth, Biblical interpretation, and the socio-political ramifications of Christian beliefs and practices as the aforementioned German Protestants. As such, they appear as a distinct group within this broader conversation about political demonology.

The Demonic Contagion: René Girard

French anthropologist René Girard might, at first, seem to not naturally fit into this narrative of political demonology. He is not, strictly speaking, a theologian, eschewing the designation in several places.¹⁹¹ There are somewhat contentious debates about whether Girard has any place in theological discourse at all.¹⁹² However, as a simple matter of fact, Girard has

¹⁹¹ See René Girard, *I See Satan Fall like Lightning* (New York, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 3.

¹⁹² Grant Kaplan, *René Girard, Unlikely Apologist: Mimetic Theory and Fundamental Theology* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 2-7.

profoundly influenced several theologians on account of his offering several creative, albeit controversial, interpretations of Christian beliefs and traditions. As such, his work has deservedly entered the theological conversation. More specifically, his intriguing claims about the devil and the demonic, which have not received as sustained interest by theologians as his account of the Passion or anthropology, earns him a position in this genealogy of political demonology.

Girard proposes that humans are imitative by nature.¹⁹³ Human desire is mimetic and social—humans never desire isolation. Instead, humans learn to desire what they see other humans desiring. This imitative desire inevitably leads to rivalries. Such a rivalry can lead to violence and mutual destruction. However, another option is possible: transferal of rivalry to a third party, a scapegoat. A targeted, innocent victim allows rivals to displace their conflict and ensure mutual survival. According to Girard, scapegoating violence is the foundation of all culture and religion. It allows cultures to develop with a reduced risk for internal destruction. Through ritual and myth, religion memorializes the foundational murder so that its memory and ritual repetition might prevent future outbreaks of violence: “Religion is nothing other than this immense effort to keep the peace.”¹⁹⁴ Notably, the rituals and myths serve to obscure the foundational violence¹⁹⁵ while also preserving its utility. The fact that society rests upon such a myth does not mean that either scapegoating, or mimetic rivalry, are abolished. The cycle can repeat itself.¹⁹⁶ Christianity, however, stands as a unique collection of stories and myths. The lynching of Jesus is not hidden or shrouded in “myth.” The victim is understood unequivocally to be the victim. The story of Jesus does not hide but reveals the whole scapegoating mechanism

¹⁹³ René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, translated by Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 7.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 32.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 34; 105-125.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 28, 34. Sometimes the memorialization of the initial scapegoat includes further, literal, scapegoating sacrifices. The attendant ritual is sometimes itself the new sacrifice of a victim.

and has thereby birthed the modern, secular world, which is increasingly attentive to victims that were previously hidden and ignored.¹⁹⁷

As for all the aforementioned thinkers, myth is an essential category for Girard. In his particular usage of the term, myths emerge in order to justify foundational murders and either demonize or deify a genuine victim that was at one point killed to preserve order.¹⁹⁸ Myth, then, is for Girard a relatively stable literary category that serves a particular sociological purpose—preserving the positive, pacifying effect of some murdered victim.

When Girard explicitly takes up the topic of Satan as a feature of Scripture, he repudiates Bultmann and demythologization, maintaining that these religious symbols possess tremendous and enduring significance.¹⁹⁹ Like Barth, however, Girard also develops an idiosyncratic understanding of demythologization. For Girard, demythologization is enacted by the New Testament, which reveals the violence hidden in myth and religion. In particular, the Passion narrative undermines the deceptive, violence-covering function of all other ancient myths, including the aspects of those myths that are also present in parts of Scripture, namely the Old Testament.²⁰⁰

Girard believes that the New Testament has, therefore, sparked a dramatic epochal shift in history. The Gospel accounts uniquely reveal and reject the scapegoating mechanism.²⁰¹ Humans no longer find that they need the myths or rituals that occlude violence and are increasingly cognizant of victims. This is not to say that there is, therefore, a decisive end to violence, but the scapegoating mechanism no longer works as well as it would otherwise because

¹⁹⁷ See Scott Cowdell, *René Girard and the Nonviolent God* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press., 2018), 29-36 for a comprehensive summary of this aspect of Girard's theory.

¹⁹⁸ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 38.

¹⁹⁹ Girard, *I See Satan*, 32.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁰¹ Girard, *Things Hidden*, 137-138.

it has debunked the falsehood. The revelation of the lie begins, incompletely, in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Gospels, it reaches its apex. The preaching of Jesus against the Pharisees is the first instantiation of this revelation. Here Jesus identifies the many prophets who have been killed in the past and, in doing so, challenges their erasure from Israel's national story.²⁰² The Passion narrative is the crucial element: "Jesus is presented to us as the innocent victim of a group in crisis."²⁰³ Much unlike previous myths of occlusion, the Passion narrative "is presented as a blatant piece of injustice." Unlike previous myths, the New Testament does not blame the scapegoat for its death; instead, it reveals the guilt of the murderers.²⁰⁴ Such is a dramatic reversal from all previous myths.

Satan and the demonic are of significant importance in Girard's reading of the Gospels. In *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, he identifies the rhetorical use of reference to Satan in Jesus's invectives against the Pharisees. Jesus calls the Pharisees, whose traditions build upon scapegoating murders, the children of Satan. "To be a son of Satan," Girard surmises, "is the same thing as being the son of those who have killed their prophets."²⁰⁵ That is, "to be a son of Satan is to inherit the lie."²⁰⁶ Girard posits that the Biblical writers give the name "Satan" to "the founding mechanism."²⁰⁷ The word "Satan" is entirely synonymous with the whole "mimetic process." In a sense, the first founding murder and its attendant lies are the inventions of Satan.²⁰⁸ Satan spreads through groups like a "contagion."²⁰⁹ The phenomenon on display in the Gospels is age-old, leading up to the murder of Jesus. This contagion both separates and

²⁰² Ibid., 160

²⁰³ Ibid., 167.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 170.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 161.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 162.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Girard, *I See Satan*, 19.

unites. It fractures communities into mimetic rivalries and brings them together by singling out a single victim for scapegoating.²¹⁰ The contagion, Satan, selects the victim.²¹¹ Satan is the instigator of both the initial rivalry and subsequent scapegoating.²¹²

One of Satan's most nefarious tricks is to expel himself. Girard's emphasis on this point is one of his most creative additions to political demonology. Girard points to the exchange in Mark 3, where Jesus defends himself against the accusation of performing miracles and exorcisms in the power of Satan.²¹³ "Jesus," Girard explains, "does not deny the reality of Satan's self-expulsion." Satan *does*, regularly, expulse himself. Jesus reveals that this is how Satan operates the scapegoating mechanism. He convinces a given community that evil (he, himself) is to be identified with an innocent victim.²¹⁴ The logic of scapegoating is the demonization of some innocent victim. However, in this demonization and ensuing violence, Satan is operative on both sides of the event. Satan instigates the violence and he provides the "solution."²¹⁵

Here Girard offers his version of the insight also developed by Barth—Satan and the demonic are paradoxically, deceptively, active in the process of demonization. Human identification of victims with evil is itself a "trick" on the part of the devil itself: "Satan is the violent contagion that persuades the entire community, which has become unanimous, that this guilt is real." Satan is "the *accuser*."²¹⁶ He is also "the father of lies." He is the one who spins myths that instigate and cover-up mimetic rivalry, its ensuing violence, and provides the

²¹⁰ Ibid., 21.

²¹¹ Ibid., 24.

²¹² Ibid., 32-33.

²¹³ Ibid., 34.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 34-35.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 34-35.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 35.

insidious “solution” of an innocent victim.²¹⁷ Again, with Barth, Girard places the evidence on the devil/demonic as myth-making or deluding, to instigate violence and destruction with real socio-political consequences.

While myth has a precise technical meaning for Girard, it is plausible to read his treatment of Biblical language surrounding demons and the demonic in a way consonant with Bultmann, or at least the typical caricature of Bultmann. “Satan” is simply a word given to what is an anthropological, empirically verifiable, sociological activity. “Satan” and “the demonic” are nothing but a cosmological superstructure overtop a scientific phenomenon. “Scandals and Satan are fundamentally the same thing,” Girard maintains.²¹⁸ To some degree, answering this question relies upon determining the appropriateness of reading Girard theologically. This debate is a thorny one. At the very least, it is crucial to recognize that the line between the demonic and human agency is quite blurred for Girard, and in this sense, his claims need not be read as only scientific or rationalistic. As Girard understands him to appear in Scripture, Satan is pure imitation and “the absence of being.” He has “no real subject.”²¹⁹ Satan’s lack of stable self is *therefore* synonymous with the “*mimetic contagion*.”²²⁰ To be pure imitation *is* to be a mimetic contagion. While perhaps eisegetical, Girard maintains the revelatory consistency of this claim. It reflects what some have noticed as a circularity of revelation and reason in Girard’s thought—e.g., Girard presents his claims scientifically, but they are also at the same time thoroughly religious and theological. There is a synthesis between reason and revelation such that beginning

²¹⁷ Ibid., 42.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 45.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 69.

²²⁰ Ibid.,

with one will inevitably confirm the other.²²¹ In a sense, then, there is a false choice between the cosmological/theological language and the sociological mechanism.

Girard also considers the New Testament theme of “powers and principalities.” Here, Girard’s understanding of Satan and the scapegoating mechanism is more expressly political and systemic. “The powers” refer to the societies and institutions built upon founding murders. They are not identical to Satan but “are his tributaries.”²²² This anticipates Wink’s conception of *the powers* in that the powers mentioned in the New Testament are not inherently evil themselves. Instead, the powers are instituted by God as authorities (so, Girard seems to mean, these are quite literal political powers—namely the Emperor). However, these share a special relationship with the mimetic contagion, as they are founded upon scapegoating violence.²²³ They are not to be resisted violently and are passing away in light of the emergence of God’s Kingdom.²²⁴

Satan and the demonic are therefore synonymous with violence. This aspect of Girard’s thought fits with the tradition of theological reception of Girard as a theologian of non-violence. Scott Cowdell, in *René Girard and the Non-Violent God*, summarizes: “Everywhere we look, we are finding in Girard’s elaboration of mimetic theory significant resources for the reappraisal and reaffirmation of traditional theological orthodoxy in nonviolent terms.”²²⁵ The preceding reading of Girard’s demonology supports such interpretations. It is important to offer the caveat that Girard does not seem to intend a comprehensive pacifist ethic.²²⁶ Yet the emerging picture is of violence as a human, Satanic phenomenon that does not implicate God.

²²¹ See Kaplan, 50.

²²² Girard, *I See Satan*, 98.

²²³ Ibid.,

²²⁴ As referenced by Cowdell, 62. See also Wolfgang Palaver, *Transforming the Sacred into Saintliness: Reflecting on Religion and Violence with René Girard* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020). Palaver illustrates Girard’s sense that the end of the scapegoating mechanism is the advent of the possibility of the holy, or “saintliness,” which is non-violent.

²²⁵ Ibid., 37.

²²⁶ Ibid., 65.

Walter Wink and the Powers

Walter Wink, known for his trilogy on “The Powers,” was a United Methodist pastor, professor of New Testament (at both Union Theological Seminary and Auburn Seminary), and an activist involved in peace and civil rights movements. Wink is perhaps best described as the synthesizer and scholarly representative of a North American tradition of thinking about Biblical witness to “powers and principalities” as a way of talking about and resisting systems of power and oppression. Wink is particularly indebted to the writings of William Stringfellow, a lay theologian, pastor, and lawyer who worked in East Harlem for most of his career.²²⁷ Girard is also an important influence.

The first book in his *Powers* series, *Naming the Powers*, is the foundational text for Wink’s exegetical and theological project. Representative of his dual-vocation as Biblical scholar and pastor-activist, he identifies at the outset two sources of inspiration to write a book about “the powers”: the appearance of some new exegetical studies of this language in Pauline literature²²⁸ and Wink’s own distressing experience visiting churches in Latin America resisting tyrannical governments.²²⁹ Wink means the series as more than an exegetical examination. He presents it as a contribution to theology as well as Christian social thought and pastoral practice.

Nevertheless, the first volume is mainly exegetical. Wink studies the various Greek words used in the New Testament that denote “power” or “authority,” as well as references to entities like demons, angels, and the like. He observes that New Testament terms for power sometimes denote seemingly material, institutional entities (e.g., the Roman Empire) or

²²⁷ Bill Wylie-Kellermann, *Principalities in Particular: a Practical Theology of the Powers That Be* (Minneapolis, MN, MN: Fortress Press, 2017), 24-26.

²²⁸ Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1984), ix and 6.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, ix.

supernatural beings (e.g., angels). *Archon*, for example, can refer to rabbis, emperors, or demons.²³⁰ To him, this slippage indicates that the New Testament always understands power as both political and spiritual, or material and immaterial. In some specific passages, one aspect might be emphasized over another. “Rulers” (*archai*) and “authorities” (*exousiai*) in Luke 12:11 certainly mean human rulers of various sorts.²³¹ However, other passages are more ambiguous and seem to conflate the categories intentionally.²³²

“Principalities and powers” therefore denote both “the inner and outer aspects of any given manifestation of power.” He explains: “As the inner aspect, they are the spirituality of institutions, the ‘within’ of corporate structures and systems, the inner essence of outer organizations of power.”²³³ In contemporary application, there are many different entities that one could identify as “powers.” Something as specific as a particular family unit or something as broad and intangible as capitalism can all receive the designation “powers.” In each case, there are both physical and spiritual manifestations: “as the outer aspect they are political systems, appointed officials, the ‘chair’ of an organization, laws—in short, all the tangible manifestations which power takes.”²³⁴ The inner refers to the “inner spirit or driving force” of the outer representation. These poles are mutually independent; one cannot exist without the other.²³⁵

The union of material and immaterial dimensions means that more popularly recognized “powers,” like angels and demons, are necessarily physical in their existence: “Demons can become manifest only through concretion in material reality. They are, in short, the name given that real but invisible spirit of destructiveness and fragmentation that rends persons,

²³⁰ Ibid., 9.

²³¹ Ibid., 39-40; 44.

²³² Ibid.,

²³³ Ibid., 5.

²³⁴ Ibid.,

²³⁵ Ibid.,

communities, and nations.”²³⁶ “Every organization,” he explains, “is made up of human beings who make its decisions and are responsible for its success or failure, but these institutions tend to have a superhuman quality.” An institution “develops and imposes a set of traditions, expectations, beliefs, and values on everyone in its employ.”²³⁷

Wink does not offer a sharp delineation between “the powers” and angels or demons. This is by design. God has created all the powers and intends them for good purposes. However, all powers can fall into demonic purposes and characteristics. In the final volume of the series, *Engaging the Powers*, Wink posits this mantra: “The Powers are good, / the Powers are fallen, / the Powers will be redeemed.”²³⁸ Therefore, terms like angels or demons are symbolic representations that designate whether or not a given power aligns with God's purposes. Wink identifies the demonic as merely the title given to a power “that has turned its back on its divine vocation as a creature of God and has made its goals the highest good.”²³⁹

Wink begins the first volume by offering a brief critique of what he takes to be demythologizing exegesis as a way of dismissing purportedly archaic thought-forms. He argues that the Biblical picture of spiritual powers is not as superstitious or anti-materialistic (and therefore not as incomprehensible) as modern persons might imagine it to be. In fact, he continues, modern materialist assumptions are just as mythical as any pre-modern understanding of the world.²⁴⁰ He concludes that “the biblical myth is both temporal and timeless.”²⁴¹ There is not as wide of a gap between the Biblical world and our own. At times, he does indicate that

²³⁶ Ibid.,

²³⁷ Ibid., 110.

²³⁸ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992), 65.

²³⁹ Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: the Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), 42.

²⁴⁰ Wink, *Naming*, 4.

²⁴¹ Wink, *Engaging*, 70.

modernity has strayed away from its ability to understand the Biblical world but that postmodern thinking is actually quite amenable to the Biblical context.²⁴²

Nevertheless, there is some sense of having lost something important in the modern world, which myths offer back to us. Specifically, Wink argues that loss of spiritual language for instantiations of power and systems has taken away language that fits the experience we have of systems as *more* than material. Myths enable “us to reclaim, name, and comprehend types of experiences that materialism renders mute and inexpressible.”²⁴³ We experience families, companies, and nation-states possessing uncanny powers that dominate, obfuscate and destroy with super-human strength. The biblical language of power recaptures our lost ability to speak to this aspect of our experience. “Without a means of symbolization,” he explains, “evil cannot come to conscious awareness and thus be consciously resisted.”²⁴⁴ This is Wink’s most significant contribution to the importance of a kataphatic demonology. We experience systems as having immaterial and superhuman power. The language of the powers, and the demonic in particular, provides an ability to articulate that experience and thereby more effectively respond.

A comprehensive definition of myth is difficult to find in Wink’s work. He uses adjectives like “atemporal, cosmic, supernatural” to refer to the “mythical” elements of statements about the powers in Scripture.²⁴⁵ He also clarifies that we should not think of myth as “the residue left over and discardable after everything meaningful has been explained.”²⁴⁶ He further makes some evaluative statements about the sociological significance and purpose of mythical language, which are loosely comparable to Girard in that myths relate to power and

²⁴² Wink, *Naming*, 104-105.

²⁴³ Wink, *Unmasking*, 7.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

violence. Wink posits that there are two types of myths—myths of violence and myths of non-violence.²⁴⁷ Unlike Girard, however, he maintains that myths are more revealing than obfuscating. They provide “a relatively true picture of the actual state of affairs in a given society.”²⁴⁸ Like Tillich (and, as discussed above, in some respects similar to Bultmann), Wink maintains that the view of power in the New Testament is worth preserving and perhaps presents much needed, but long lost, wisdom: “They may have been in touch with dimensions of power which our more materialistic point of view scarcely glimpses,” and that so-called “mythical” language uniquely carries this wisdom.²⁴⁹ “The myth,” he maintains, “says more than we can tell.”²⁵⁰ However, such mythical language demands interpretation rather than rote repetition. In a chapter devoted explicitly to demons, he describes his account as one that is “somewhat demythologized” in order to “counteract the tendency to personify demons as little beings in the sky.”²⁵¹ “The goal,” he summarizes, “is not ‘demythologizing’ if by that is meant removal of the mythic dimension.”²⁵²

Wink recognizes a sort of demythologization embedded within the New Testament itself, comparable to Bultmann, Barth, and Girard's similar claims. Demythologization stems from Paul's theology of the cross in that the powers are “unmasked” by the death of Christ.²⁵³ The powers are not all that they purport themselves to be. They present themselves as self-important. For example, the nation becomes an all-encompassing, comprehensive entity that obfuscates its

²⁴⁷ Wink, *Engaging*, 42-43.

²⁴⁸ Wink, *Naming*, 134.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 142.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 104.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 63.

proper role as a power under God's authority. The cross is, in this sense, a demythologizing force.²⁵⁴

On the whole, the account of myth and demythologization in Wink's work is somewhat convoluted. It is possible to synthesize a few key themes, however. Wink recognizes that the Biblical language offers a distinct way of talking that is not perfectly congruous with our own and requires some level of interpretation.²⁵⁵ However, this difference is not nearly as stark as some (such as Bultmann) seem to think, especially with modernity giving way to postmodernity. At the same time, Wink speaks of myth-making as a universal phenomenon. The myth of redemptive violence, specifically, continually finds new forms throughout history.²⁵⁶ He also maintains that the mythical language of the New Testament, at least, is a necessary medium for the truths contained therein. One wonders if Wink is consistent here, as he is quick to offer interpretations that quickly sublimate the original language—one can talk about evil “powers” without reference to “demons.” In this respect, Wink shows similarities to Tillich in the call to “deliteralize.” Indeed, similar to both Tillich and Girard, Wink sees a strong correlation between stereotypically “spiritual” and “sociological” language.

When it comes to the devil and the demonic, Wink first draws attention to the two Scriptural traditions regarding the figure of “*ha Satan*.” One identifies Satan as an angel in God's court who sifts and challenges God's people (e.g., Job), and another that considers Satan the cosmic epitome of evil opposed to God's purposes.²⁵⁷ Surprisingly, both images can appear in passages by the same author (e.g., Luke-Acts attests to both themes).²⁵⁸ The influence of process

²⁵⁴ Ibid.,

²⁵⁵ *Unmasking*, 6.

²⁵⁶ Wink, *Engaging*, 13-17.

²⁵⁷ Wink, *Unmasking*, 22-23.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 31-32.

theology on Wink is evident in the implications he draws from this ambiguity: “Satan is [perhaps]. . . a function in the divine process, a dialectical movement in God’s purpose which becomes evil only when humanity breaks off the dialectic by refusing creative choice.”²⁵⁹ It is not clear what Wink means by “creative choice,” but it does not seem to mean moral arbitrariness. Humans have the responsibility to choose good over evil. Instead, humans have the choice of whether to treat manifestations of evil and suffering as irredeemable—whether we demonize our enemy or seek their redemption. Christians should approach Satan this same way: “Satan is an autonomous spirit that rises out of the depths of mystery in God,” and we can choose to redeem him by our actions.²⁶⁰ Such redemptive actions seem to center around non-violence and demands that we interrogate our penchant for demonization. Thus, Christians ought to reconcile with those we have demonized, such as witches and neo-paganism.²⁶¹

This is not to say that Satan does not, generally, refer to raw evil in time and space and that humans should seek to expel Satan by resisting and redeeming evil structures. Wink explains: “If Satan has any reality at all, it is not as a sign or an idea or even an explanation, but as a profound *experience* of numinous, uncanny power in the psychic and historical lives of real people. *Satan is the real interiority of a society that idolatrously pursues its own enhancement as the highest good.*”²⁶² The symbol “Satan” names a particular experience of evil. Humans must choose how to respond to such a system and choose to see enemies and oppressors as redeemable.

Wink’s more direct engagement with the topic of violence in the third volume is clarifying. In this book, Wink lays out an unequivocal ethic of non-violence. This final volume

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 34.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.,

²⁶¹ Ibid., 37

²⁶² Ibid., 25.

strikes a very different, more prophetic, tone from the outset. He declares: “Violence is the ethos of our times.”²⁶³ This book is, thus, a repudiation of “the myth of redemptive violence” that “undergirds American popular culture, civil religion, nationalism, and foreign policy.”²⁶⁴ Wink compares Babylonian and Hebraic creation myths, contrasting the former as violent and the latter as non-violent.²⁶⁵ Wink expands his notion of myth by positing a particular, nefarious, and effervescent type of myth that stretches from the ancient world to today: “The victory of order over chaos by means of violence.”²⁶⁶ He refers to the myth of redemptive violence as the myth which undergirds what he calls the “Domination System.” This is the coordinated “fall” of the powers into Satanic instantiations of power, which thrive off of the myth of redemptive violence.²⁶⁷ The idea that evil powers can be overcome by violence is the Domination System's strategy to maintain its stronghold. Wink identifies the Domination System with Satan, as presented in the Gospels.²⁶⁸ Absent in this text is a reference to Satan as an aspect of God. That is not to say that that may still be Wink's theological assumption, but here the name “Satan” is merely synonymous with the system built upon the myth of redemptive violence. The practical consequences are the same as described in earlier works; however, in that reasonable suspicion of all identifications of Satan or demonizing that denies that all powers and people can be redeemed is vital.

Wink identifies the demonic as merely the title given to a power “that has turned its back on its divine vocation as a creature of God and has made its goals the highest good.”²⁶⁹ Such powers always manifest some combination of social and individual presence. Wink identifies

²⁶³ Wink, *Engaging*, 13.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*,

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁶⁹ Wink, *Unmasking*, 42.

three types of demonic manifestation: “Outer personal, collective possession, and the inner personal demonic.”²⁷⁰ The first is the concrete, individual manifestation of a social power contrary to God’s will. Wink’s example, drawn from Girard’s exegetical treatment of the same narrative, is the Gerasene demoniac. The social demon in this narrative is that of the Roman imperial oppression of the Gerasenes. A particular man becomes possessed and plays the role of the scapegoat by which the population works out its sense of oppression and alienation. “Through the scapegoat, aggression against the Romans has been transferred.”²⁷¹ This is Wink’s riff on Girard’s interpretation of the same passage. The social demon distracts its victims by turning them toward a scapegoat to displace their sense of oppression. The concrete, individual manifestation of the demonic is an illusion. It tempts the social group to scapegoat. Collective possession is similar—this takes place when a group is systematically embroiled in violent and oppressive behavior. Some form of social exorcism, which can take place in protest or civil disobedience, is necessary. The quintessential example is “idolatry” toward a nation or its leader.²⁷² Lastly, the “inner personal” manifestation is more uniquely interior and psychological—though it has broader sociological connotations. In this case, exorcism is not appropriate, instead coming to terms with one’s repressed fears and desires.²⁷³

The notion of social exorcism is the closest Wink comes to a practical political theology of the demonic and is one of the most robust contributions to the contention that political demonology has beneficial political consequences. Here Wink gives more practical teeth to the same idea articulated by Tillich that religious and political action can serve to combat demonries. Wink writes, “waving water and a crucifix over Buchenwald would scarcely have stopped the

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 43.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 46.

²⁷² Ibid., 50.

²⁷³ Ibid., 52.

genocide of Jews, but think about it—what if the church in Germany *had* staged ritual acts of protest outside those gates? What if, in churches all over the land, pastors had read from their pulpits prayers exorcising the spirit of Satan?”²⁷⁴ He references the civil disobedience of Phil and Dan Berrigan as an example of actions that combine religious and political activity in a sort of exorcism.²⁷⁵ Such an act is “efficacious simply by virtue of its bearing witness to the truth in a climate of lies.”²⁷⁶

As is already clear, Wink is quite cognizant of the dangers of demonization. Wink speaks of the way evil tends to draw us toward obsession with individual sins, of ourselves or others, in a way that distracts us from the overarching, systemic context of evil.²⁷⁷ “Behind the spreading terror of nuclear and ecological catastrophe,” for example, “is a pervasive sense that there is no one in control.” This is “the demonic” that “has become the everyday policy of national leaders.” Rather than face this pervasive evil it is “far easier to individualize it” and focus on “a single victim” that we can “incarcerate, medicate, isolate” or “exorcise.”²⁷⁸ We scapegoat individuals. For Wink, this speaks to the need for discernment to detect such misattributions.²⁷⁹ He does not, however, offer any practical steps for what constitutes sufficient discernment.

The problem of demonization suggests to Wink the need for an ethic of non-violence. In his interpretation, he offers an unequivocal ethic of non-violence, which defines the difference between God’s Kingdom and the Domination System.²⁸⁰ He draws on Girard to argue for a non-violent reading of the death of Jesus. God *used* Christ’s non-violent sacrifice underneath the

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 64.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 65.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 55.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 52-53.

²⁸⁰ Wink, *Engaging*, 135.

Domination System to undermine its power but did not require it for atonement.²⁸¹ Demonic powers killed Jesus since he antagonized and undermined “the Domination System.”²⁸² Wink does not offer a full theory of the atonement but declares general agreement with Girard as to Jesus’s death as efficacious in revealing violence. However, he registers a few points of disagreement: Scapegoating is not the only type of violence that the death of Jesus reveals and undermines. Instead, it is the over-arching myth of redemptive violence.²⁸³ He also believes that Girard ignores the language of sacrifice for Jesus’s death in Scripture.²⁸⁴

Notably, as for previous thinkers, Wink’s account of the demonic enters into complicated questions about the line between human responsibility and the externality and relative independence of evil. He points out that although the Powers emerge from human activities and institutions, “they are beyond merely human control.”²⁸⁵ It is impossible to distinguish the powers from the systems and institutions that humans create, but these powers take on a life of their own. Wink closely parallels Tillich’s handling of the same problem.

The close relationship between the demonic and violence is a compelling advancement of political demonology in Girard and Wink. It coheres closely with Barth’s concerns but develops them in new directions. The demonic *is* deceptive and engaged in various sorts of misdirection. It intends scapegoating violence through misapplication. However, especially for Wink, this does not mean that speaking of the demonic should be avoided—seeing as the demonic also prospers in its goal of seeking violence when it is *not* named. Naming the violence and its demonic

²⁸¹ Ibid., 110.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Ibid., 153.

²⁸⁴ Ibid. Other theologians, namely Sarah Coakley, make the same criticism. However, this seems to be based upon a misreading. See Cowdell, 66. In Wink’s defense, however, he wrote about Girard in *Engaging the Powers*, before Girard clarifies his position on this question.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 41.

quality allows us to combat it properly and avoids the risk of demonization by separating demonic systems from the redeemable people that the powers possess.

Conclusion: Toward a Political Demonology

With the basic contours of a genealogy of political demonology, as it develops in 20th century Euro-American thought, it is possible to gesture toward a constructive political demonology built upon these insights.

Beginning with Bultmann and traced through Wink, there is a conviction that the Biblical language regarding the demonic, the devil, and powers and principalities resonates as a language for social and political evil as humans experience it in the world. For the German Protestants, the gravitation toward this language stems from their very explicit encounters with tremendous violence in the world wars and under totalitarian control. Wink and Girard similarly draw attention to both universal and historically particular experiences of violence as resonating with the Biblical account, particularly the Gospels.

Nevertheless, there remains a difficult question as to interpretation and translation. While, as we have seen, it is an over-simplification to misconstrue Bultmann—as demanding the discarding of all Biblical themes that cannot be made sensible in scientific, rationalistic language—Bultmann’s project of demythologization does still raise the genuine difficulty of speaking of the demonic in the modern world. Whether wrestling with Bultmann’s categories correctly or the caricature, this question pervades the conversation. All the figures discussed above agree that some sort of interpretation is necessary.

Beyond this, they each diverge along somewhat idiosyncratic definitions of “myth” and “demythologizing.” In many respects, the differences between them become little more than semantic on these points. Barth does not quite grasp Bultmann’s definition of myth but offers his

own notion of demythologization that yields similar practical results: do not speak about the demonic. Girard's understanding of myth leads to similar demonological insights as Barth but is grounded in the unique contours of his system, which not all accept as sufficiently theological. Barth likely would have similar reservations. Wink's account is more convoluted and eclectic, ultimately falling closest to Tillich in maintaining the irreducible suggestiveness while also recognizing the need to translate the symbol into contemporary language. Wink contributes the unique awareness that the language of the New Testament actually resonates strongly with an emerging postmodern awareness of human contingency and porosity in the face of social and cultural systems. Tillich and Wink, it seems, have the most consistent and balanced approach to these questions.

More important than the question of myth is the following issue that is central to the project of political demonology: Is it politically liberating, and therefore anti-demonic, to use demonological rhetoric? Barth's particular account of the demonic leads him to conclude that *because* the demonic is real, meaningful, and invested in socio-political evil, we should not speak of it out of risk of demonizing others or using it as an excuse to not take responsibility to deal with concrete political problems and corporate sins. Tillich and Wink both reflect upon the line between human culpability and the demonic, but leave the space between human agency and the semi-autonomous systems humans create rather ambiguous. Girard corroborates Barth's concern about scapegoating and demonizing, providing a parallel theory that defines the demonic as a force that deceives humans in order to trick them into violence and scapegoating innocent victims. However, Girard does not intend to offer a practical theology of political demonology and does not comment on the merits of people using the term "demonic" in discourse. Wink, whose project is much more theological and practical, certainly resonates with these concerns

and incorporates similar insights into his demonology Wink might object that Barth's theology fails to deal with this problem sufficiently, simply relying on a lopsided and rigid position of silence that does not sufficiently account for the way that evil might be victorious when we refuse to use this language. As we have seen, Tillich seems to fall on the opposite side of the problem by boldly introducing the demonic into theological and political discourse without much thought as to the danger of misidentification. Wink offers the most balanced approach. However, none of these identify a rule or method of discernment that navigates between these various practical pitfalls.

In summation, political demonology is a theologically significant discourse in 20th-century Christian thought. Among Bultmann, Barth, Tillich, Girard, and Wink emerge an attention to the Christian language for evil forces as helpful for naming, understanding, and resisting socio-political evil such as abuse, racism, and war. As such, political demonology suggests a possible application to theological conversations about colonialism and anti-Black racism. However, political demonology also attempts to grapple with the ways that demonological discourse itself demonize innocent people and is therefore counterproductive in naming and resisting systemic evil. Can political demonology resist demonic evils when demonological discourses lend themselves to demonic mechanisms of scapegoating and abjection? The problem of discernment is raised by this dilemma.

In the next chapter, this problem is heightened and intensified by engaging the historical relationship between anti-Black colonialism and Christian demonology in the West. Anti-Black colonialism is, in fact, significantly and perhaps intractably implicated in the history of Christian demonology. The history of Christian demonology is one of perpetually othering and

demonizing that which is despised and repressed in the Western psyche—Blackness in particular.

Chapter Two

“The Devil Reigned in That Other Part of the World.”

The Euro-American political demonologies of the 20th century present a prophetic Christian praxis against the destructive powers and principalities that emerge in human society. This understanding of political demonology suggests a possible coherence with the idea of decoloniality. Paul Tillich, after all, underscores the demonic character of capitalism and xenophobic nationalism, both of which play roles in colonial projects. Walter Wink similarly identifies racism and imperialism being among “the Powers” of the United States and compels Christians to engage in spiritual-political warfare against them. However, this Euro-American tradition of political demonology does not consider the significant ways Christian theology has linked demonology, anti-Blackness, and colonialism. Christian conceptions of the demonic have explicitly supported the vilification, colonization, and destruction of Black bodies. While Euro-American political demonology is largely successful in overcoming epistemological and theological objections to demonology, what of the objection that demonology might be indelibly caught up in colonialist and racist projects?

While there may be a general sense of the salience of this concern, it is not one that has been thoroughly fleshed out by either theology or theory. This chapter, therefore, develops an analysis of the historical and conceptual connections between Christian demonology and anti-Black colonialism. I make the case that the Black, colonized, “other,” and the demonic are comparable and, at times, overlapping symbols of alterity in the Western imagination. Christian theology has explicitly forged and extrapolated these links. Consequently, Christianity has aided in developing a social imaginary where Blackness, and other related symbols of lack, are perpetually demonized. Christian theology in general, and political demonology in particular,

must take account of this legacy in order to articulate a theology that speaks into the current situation of the world, which exists under the auspices of anti-Black colonial systems.

The connection between Christian demonology and anti-Black colonialism relates to the problem of ontology, a theme that has received broad consideration in philosophy and theology since the middle of the 20th-century. Recent phenomenological and critical theoretical philosophical traditions have stressed that the perpetual search for an *other* dominates the Western ontological imagination. Guided by my reading of decolonial theory, I believe it is more precise to speak of the Western symbolization of that which stands ambiguously *between* Being and non-being, human and non-human. The designation of border-entities has been useful for reifying self-identity by means of contrast. Black and decolonial thinkers illustrate how Black and other categories forged by colonialism become preeminent symbols for that which resides at the borders of Being and humanity in the Western imagination.

For much of the history of the Christian West, the symbol of the demonic has operated to delineate the boundary between Being and non-being. In modernity, Blackness has in many ways replaced the demonic, existing as the persisting presence of demonology in a world that believes to have evolved beyond believing in demons. However, this is not simply a story of replacement. The intersections between Blackness and the demonic begin early in Christian history. Therefore, the symbol of the demonic and that of the Black body, in the Western imagination, exist in a longstanding symmetry and circularity of influence.

This chapter, it is important to note, risks a critical and “pessimist” reductionism. It analyzes the objectifications and *demonizations* of the Western psyche, implicating Christianity in the emergence of these dominant frameworks. In doing so, I risk perpetuating the centrality and seeming recalcitrance of the Western imagination. Many decolonial theorists, while

pioneering much of the critical engagement that influences this chapter, also warn that such analysis should not obscure the independent reality of the “majority” world or simply read them as the West’s “other.”²⁸⁶ Overemphasis on this critical mode reifies Western binaries. Later chapters move beyond this temptation to pessimism and instead centers other subjectivities, namely the witness of Black American approaches to evil and their resistance to anti-Black colonialism through techniques of discernment and spiritual-political warfare against the powers and principalities.

A few theoretical assumptions undergird the following analysis of the relationship between demonology and anti-Blackness in the colonizing framework. These supporting assumptions relate to the cultural formation of symbols at the intersections of imagination and materiality. Charles H. Long describes these intersections in terms of the “imagination of matter.” James Noel draws upon this concept to trace the links between race, religion, and imagination. “Religion,” Noel points out, “is not separate from matter.” For him, this means that “the racialized groups that appear in modernity imagine their selves and the cosmos through religious symbols.”²⁸⁷ There exists, therefore, the possibility of correlation and exchange between religious and racialized symbols and imaginations. In the Western imagination, I will argue, light and dark are mapped onto religious categories of good and evil, angels and demons, which are also applied to “white” and “black” human bodies.

I also reflect on the relationship between the demonic and anti-Black colonialism in terms of “symbolic control” as Orlando Patterson describes in his influential work, *Slavery and Social*

²⁸⁶ Enrique D. Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of "the Other" and the Myth of Modernity* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1995), 10, 73ff.

²⁸⁷ James A. Noel, *Black Religion and the Imagination of Matter in the Atlantic World* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), ix-x.

Death.²⁸⁸ Cultural symbols, Patterson insists, relate to power. One who is in the position to define or apply symbols has the authority to define social reality and relationships.²⁸⁹ Patterson uses this insight to identify the primary symbolic framework of slavery as that of “the social death of the slave.”²⁹⁰ By this, Patterson means that the slave symbolizes, for those in power within a slaveholding society, an entity that is socially dead, absent of rights and identity, yet useful to the “master” both materially and psychically. The slave is a mediating symbol, both marginalized and institutionally and culturally reified: “The enemy within who was neither member nor true alien.”²⁹¹ “The essence of slavery,” Patterson explains, “is that the slave, in his social death, lives on the margin between community and chaos, life and death.”²⁹² It is my contention that the idea of the demonic is a comparable, and in fact related, symbol in the Western imagination. The symbol of the demonic similarly resides in a marginal state between Being and non-being and serves the function of an incorporated enemy. The symbol of the demonic evokes similar meaning and supports comparable social structures as the symbol of the slave, especially in anti-Black colonialism. For white Christianity, then, the demonic and the colonized other serve as comparable and interrelated symbols of power.

As I begin to suggest above, the relationship between these symbols is not only one of parallel but is also plausibly genealogical. According to the premises of Western Christian ontology, nothingness can hardly be conceptualized, imagined, or articulated. Nevertheless, the desire (or, perhaps, need) remains to comprehend that which in human experience represents *almost* nothing. By reference to this almost-nothing symbolization, Being itself can be more

²⁸⁸ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 37.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 38.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 48. Patterson is describing one particular form of slavery, the intrusive, which is the most common globally and particularly present in the history of the West.

²⁹² Ibid., 51.

adequately known, defined, and defended. In the Christian ontological tradition, demonology has been the primary discourse that manifests this quest. Demons uniquely exist at the periphery of what constitutes both Being and Anthropos. It is, therefore, both a receptacle and resource for working out other hierarchies. The practice of demonology becomes a means of mapping human beings along a continuum of more or less demonic. From early on, Christianity has very explicitly linked this ontological hierarchy with a dualistic light-dark aesthetic that associates nothingness with blackness, and even Black bodies.²⁹³ Western Christianity further relates other gendered, cultural, and physiological hierarchies to the demonic, supplying much to colonialism's privileging of the property-owning, European male.

These genealogical connections allow the transferal of concrete practices from Christian demonology to anti-Black colonialism. As an entity that resides at the boundaries, the demonic functions as a visceral and comprehensible foil to Being and humanity. This suggests, for Christianity, the imperative to identify and resist demons rather than let them taint God's good creation. A variety of anti-demonic discourses and strategies surround these beliefs. That which is demonic must be discovered, resisted, and exorcised. These linkages both parallel and help make possible the emergence of modern anti-Black colonialism and its attendant practices of surveillance, imprisonment, and destruction. Even in a purportedly post-Christian and post-demonological age, these associated symbols continue to undergird the social imaginary and attendant practices. The Western psyche perpetually demonizes Blackness and seeks to exorcise it.²⁹⁴

²⁹³ See Andrew Prevot, "Divine Opacity: Mystical Theology, Black Theology, and the Problem of Light-Dark Aesthetics," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 16, no. 2 (2016): pp. 166-188.

²⁹⁴ And yet, as Patterson and other interpreters help reveal, exorcism (or social death) does not mean the complete erasure of that which is demonized, but is one step in its incorporation into the system as perpetual enemy.

Even for those who are uninterested in or even resistant to demonology as a locus of systematic theology, the fact that demonology is a significant factor in Christianity's anti-Black and colonist legacy demands attention for systematic theology as it comes to terms with its complicity in these systems. For those, like myself, interested in political demonology, these relationships represent a significant potential stumbling block to any such project. If demonology is to have any future—especially as a doctrine that contributes to effective political praxis—its proponents must reckon with this legacy.

While political demonology has considered *demythologization*, it also needs to engage the possibility of *decolonization*. It is true that Euro-American political demonology is at least partially cognizant that demonological discourses do not always serve justice. As Barth frames it, for example, demons hope that paranoid and demon-obsessed theologians vilify innocent victims; theology must be wary of the explosive power of demonological language. Political demonology, therefore, already possesses some categories for the reality that demonological discourses might perpetuate violence. Varying conceptions of demythologization²⁹⁵ are among the tools political demonology has used to reckon with this danger. This tradition of political demonology has not, however, escaped demonology's complicity in anti-Blackness and colonialism, even as it has sought to strip away superstitious accouterment and engage questions of violence and oppression. Demythologization has asked important epistemological questions, but it largely eschews political ones—despite the fact Euro-American demonology purports itself as a *political* demonology.

²⁹⁵ As I discuss in the previous chapter—although Barth, Tillich, Girard, and Wink each repudiate a certain caricature of Bultmann's famous employment of the term, they each redefine demythologization to their own ends or engage comparable projects by attention to questions of hermeneutics. There is general agreement, however, that literalist and fundamentalist readings tend to misunderstand the demonic and that this can have negative social and political consequences.

While this chapter is critical, it is not working toward the elimination of Christian demonology. I am, instead, laying the groundwork for a decolonized and decolonizing demonology, emerging from a decolonial practice of discernment. In this light, my own construct of political demonology combines the insights of the last chapter's interlocutors along with those of decolonial iterations of liberation theology. In keeping with my reading of both of these theological traditions, the Gospels represent an essential theological framing. The act of naming is essential to the exorcisms recorded therein. There is an implicit power in *naming* a demon as a way of demystifying an evil power's opacity and deception. Euro-American political demonology has not sufficiently named the demons of anti-Blackness, which haunt theological and demonological discourses. If political demonology has any possibility as a meaningful praxis, these demons must be named. Otherwise, it fails in its aims of resisting the demonic. This chapter, then, is engaged in the task of "critical reflection on praxis" in the tradition of Christian liberation theology. Drawing from Joseph Drexler-Dreis, critical reflection is related to decolonization, along with a commitment to dismantling white supremacy.²⁹⁶ Naming takes the form of critical reflection on praxis in light of the conviction that resisting coloniality and anti-Blackness are central Gospel tasks. This chapter therefore presumes a demonological framework even while it criticizes demonological discourses.

The chapter begins with Frantz Fanon. As a seminal thinker for both Black and decolonial thought, Fanon offers a compelling introduction to the relationships between Western ontology, racism, and Christian cosmologies of evil. In *White Skin Black Masks*, Fanon speaks in the voice of one who is at once both the damned and the devil in the imagination of white colonialism. The first section of the chapter traces similar insights in Achille Mbembe, Enrique

²⁹⁶ Joseph Drexler-Dreis, *Decolonial Love: Salvation in Colonial Modernity* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2019), 2-5.

Dussel, Christina Sharpe, Sylvia Wynter, and others who consider the place of the Black and the colonized body in the interrelated symbols of Western ontology and Christian cosmology. The chapter then engages David Brakke and Adam Kotsko. They serve as guides for understanding the particular and concrete ways that demonology has been translated into Western socio-political categories and shaped colonist and anti-Black imaginations. Brakke helps to analyze the roots of anti-Blackness in early Christian monastic spirituality, while Adam Kotsko points more directly to essential connections between medieval political theology, ontology, and neo-liberalism (as neo-colonialism).

Nothings Walking Through History

Frantz Fanon draws attention to the Christian cosmological frameworks operative at the heart of colonizing whiteness. With his characteristic and suggestive polyvalence, Fanon dramatizes the experience of a Black subject within the imaginative confines of white colonialism, along with a conscious subjectivity that undermines and rejects these constructs. Fanon is important for theology for many reasons, not the least of which are the ways he relates the contours of the colonial imagination to Christian beliefs and categories. Many interpreters particularly note his use of the imagery of hellscape, which locates the Black objects of colonialism as *les damnes* in the world that colonialism and white supremacy have projected.²⁹⁷ Fanon exhibits the perception of one compelled to imbibe this sense of inherited abnegation: “I am guilty. I don't know what of, but I know I'm a wretch.”²⁹⁸ He records the way whiteness relegates that which is Black to hellfire, both in terms of the imagined world it projects and the material realities it imposes: “All this whiteness burns me to a cinder.”²⁹⁹

²⁹⁷ See David Marriott, “Inventions of Existence: Sylvia Wynter, Frantz Fanon, Sociogeny, and ‘the Damned,’” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 11, no. 3 (December 1, 2011): 54-56.

²⁹⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008)118.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

Along with the imagery of perdition, Fanon also exhibits an aesthetics of demonology. He describes the demonic and haunting function that Blackness has in the white consciousness: "My blackness was there, dense and undeniable. And it tormented me, pursued me, made me uneasy, and exasperated me."³⁰⁰ Fanon speaks in this passage of the way that colonial categories terrorize Black people, a reality which Fanon cannot avert in the colonial context in the sense that white people indelibly link abnegation to his appearance. Fanon knows that the designations of white colonialism are "wrong," but he experiences the perpetual, confining, realities of these lies throughout the worlds under the colonial power of whiteness. This sentiment of exasperation also, however, gestures at some of the particular characteristics that whiteness attaches to Blackness and which are subsequently suggested to Black women and men. Fanon, for a moment in his narration, identifies Blackness (as it exists in the white imagination) as that which torments and haunts—something demonic.

Fanon further intimates, to his reader, "a feeling of not existing" in the eyes of white colonialism.³⁰¹ He writes of a "white gaze" that leers but which does not see. It is fixed on his Blackness, constructing it into an imagined entity.³⁰² A Black man in a white world is monstrous and unstable, seen and unseen. It is, in this respect, spectral. White colonialism's relegation of Blackness to non-being relies upon overlapping cosmological and theological images that express the position of the colonized in the white Christian imagination—as existing at the edges of life, humanity, and Being. Images of damnation and the diabolic interweave, sometimes in contradictory ways, as symbols that manifest the relegation of Blackness to the edges of

³⁰⁰ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 96.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 95.

existence. The specific conflation of Blackness and the demonic in these frameworks, however, play a singular role.

In his reflections on the Western psyche, Fanon is more explicit about the symbol of the demon in colonialism. The abnegation of Black flesh signals the ubiquity of "the black man" as a "phobogenic object" among European peoples.³⁰³ Such phobia ascribes its object "a malefic power."³⁰⁴ This anxiety is also sexual, representing a fear of "not the usual ill-treatment" but "sexual abuses."³⁰⁵ Achille Mbembe, reflecting on these categories of Fanon's, describes "black reason" (the imagination of anti-Blackness) as something that "reassures itself by hating, deploying dread, and practicing altricide: the constitution of the Other not as similar to oneself but as a menacing object from which one must be protected or escape, or which must simply be destroyed if it cannot be subdued."³⁰⁶ The cosmological imagery betrays an underlying, violent phobia of Blackness. For Europe, Fanon concludes, "Satan is black."³⁰⁷

In Fanon's observation, this ubiquitous association between Blackness and Satan in the European social imaginary is quite literal. He recounts common word associations given by his white patients when provided the word "Negro." Designations like "biological," "sex," "powerful," "animal," "devil," and "sin" dominate.³⁰⁸ "The black man is the symbol of evil and ugliness," he summarizes.³⁰⁹ A Manichaean tendency underlies these attributions—a division of the world into good and evil, light and dark, white and Black.³¹⁰ The colonized are "absolute

³⁰³ Ibid., 129.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., 133.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., 134.

³⁰⁶ Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 11.

³⁰⁷ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 165.

³⁰⁸ Later in this chapter, these designations are all related to the Christian category of the demonic—which has long been a symbol that intersects with those of animality, deviant sexuality, and somatic existence itself. All of these word associations reflect Western Christianity's marriage of Blackness and the demonic.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., 157.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 160.

evil."³¹¹ Considering the function of popular stories and comic books as forms of collective catharsis, he describes the consumption of these same stories by youths: "And the Wolf, the Devil, the Wicked Genie, Evil, and the Savage are always represented by Blacks or Indians."³¹²

While Fanon explains this demonization with recourse to underlying psychological realities, the fact of their translation into Christian cosmological contours suggests the substantive role of Christian theology. Achille Mbembe points out that, according to white colonialism, the relationship between Europe and Africa is one of Self to nothingness rather than a mere other-to-other encounter.³¹³ His observation parallels Fanon's insistence on the Black object's spectrality to the European gaze—it is both there and not there. Visibly and sharply seen as constructed, Blackness is also ephemeral, effervescent, and opaque in both the failure to grasp its reality and the ever-changing images and objectifications applied to it. More precisely, this spectrality indicates the actual function of "the other" in the anti-Black and colonialist imagination: That which is *almost*-nothing.

The signification of the almost-nothing raises the question of ontology and its relationship to Christian theology. Enrique Dussel cogently synthesizes both the ethical and epistemological objections to the project of ontology as undergirding the colonial imagination. Dussel argues that the Western ontological project is mostly one of domination and reflexive subject-formation. Western ontology needs a category for that which exists at the borders of Being. It seeks an object to dominate and thereby reify the Self, or Being. As a result, there is an intellectual (and, implicitly, psychological) need to identify that which is non-being and non-

³¹¹ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2008), 50.

³¹² Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 124-125.

³¹³ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), 4.

human. More precisely, it necessitates the designation of somethings-which-are-nothing, persons who are ahuman and *almost* nothing.

Before treating Dussel's critique of ontology and colonialism, it is important to contextualize these in Dussel's concern to reject critical engagements that reify colonist categories. Dussel does not simply reflect on colonized peoples as the West's "other," but seeks "to take on the eyes of the oppressed, those from below."³¹⁴ It is necessary to name and analyze, as a mode of critical reflection on praxis, the colonizing framework of Western ontology and Christian theology. Yet this is insufficient if it does not move toward seeing through other eyes and center other subjectivities. The latter chapters of my dissertation seek to do just that—by reflecting on and with the ways demonized peoples have rejected and offered alternatives to the demonizing ontologies of anti-Black colonialism.

For Dussel, ontology is the endeavor of any person or group that functions as the center of power, purporting to identify itself with Being. Subsequently, all peripheral, dominated, and oppressed peoples are associated with non-being. "Outside its frontiers," Dussel writes in the voice of a dominating ontology, "is nonbeing, nothing, barbarity, non-sense."³¹⁵ The category of the human, or *Anthropos*, functions the same way.³¹⁶ A dominating and totalizing ontological system divides the world into human (Self) and inhuman or "partway human" (other).³¹⁷ While there is perpetual slippage by Dussel (which reflects, in fact, the slippage of ontology itself), and of Mbembe and Fanon on this same point, it remains that enemies of the system are "representatives of non-Being." In this regard, colonial ontology does not, technically speaking,

³¹⁴ Dussel, *Invention*, 74.

³¹⁵ Enrique D. Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Aquilina Martinez and Christine Morkovsky (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1985), 4.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*

relate its objectified enemies to non-being itself. They are deemed *almost* non-being. They reside at the periphery and constitute an indispensable boundary marker.

Dussel separates *distinction* from *difference*. To authentically and justly respect another's alterity is to regard them as other (distinct), but not *wholly* other (different). A totalizing ontology identifies something as different—the enemy, or non-being. Paradoxically, the identification of the other *as* wholly other is the very mechanism that incorporates it into the system. Its identification as radical difference reduces it to something that reifies "the Same" through contrast. Therefore, "the center" of the colonial ontology erases the alterity of the other by totalizing distinction as difference and transforms it into an imagined, perpetual, alien.³¹⁸ To do so is necessary to reduce the other to a mask assigned by the system's center. This mask always relates to utility, the "for-what" which has replaced the other in its exteriority.³¹⁹

The identification of the alien, or the wholly other, serves as a means of subject-formation on the part of the colonizer. When ontology encounters difference, it feels threatened. Therefore, it must identify someone as "the enemy of the system" and designates them "evil."³²⁰ Once this identification takes place, the system returns to homeostasis.³²¹ For scholars who speak from the lens of Afro-pessimism, Blackness is the particular symbol of terror and is necessary for the Western ontological framework. "The function of black(ness)," maintains Calvin Warren, "is to give form to a terrifying formlessness (nothing)."³²² Mbembe similarly observes: "These [racial-biological] theories developed conceptions of society and the world—and of the Good—

³¹⁸ Ibid., 53.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 62.

³²⁰ Ibid., 51.

³²¹ Ibid., 50-51.

³²² Calvin L. Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 5.

that claimed an absence among Blacks."³²³ The colonizer is thus able to define himself³²⁴ as Good through the negation of the Other.³²⁵ This is comparable to what Orlando Patterson attests regarding the slave as a symbol of social death. The slave is the conquered enemy who yet serves a vital and necessary role within the system. While Dussel is probably correct that open "war is the ultimate fulfillment of the praxis of domination" and is, therefore, "practical ontology,"³²⁶ Patterson rightly points our attention to the slave as the incorporated symbol of war. Therefore war becomes perpetual within the system, even if it is cold and domestic.

He does not use such terminology, but Dussel might say that his rendering of the appearance of a colonized, marginalized person is as something spectral in the colonial theater. It is both visible and invisible, existing and not existing. Dussel describes the function of a hypothetical colonized philosopher, trained in the Western academy, who demonstrates for their colonized students "that they are like nothings walking through history."³²⁷ The colonized person feels the experience of *a nothing* that also exists in some sense—it walks, it knows time. It is the same paradox that Mbembe recognizes in describing colonial discourse as one of "incantation." Colonial discourse "claims to throw light on things that haunt and obsess it, but about which, in truth, it knows absolutely nothing."³²⁸ The colonized "is nothing but an appearance" within this imagination.³²⁹ The attraction and repulsion the colonizer feels toward its object is comparable to that it may feel toward a ghost or a vampire—something there and not there, perhaps "observed" phenomenologically and yet not-quite seen or even believed to exist.³³⁰ While the colonizing

³²³ Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 86.

³²⁴ Masculine pronouns chosen here deliberately.

³²⁵ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 188.

³²⁶ Dussel, 55.

³²⁷ Ibid., 12.

³²⁸ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 179.

³²⁹ Ibid., 186.

³³⁰ Even the traditional Christian believer does not, precisely, believe in the reality of the demonic. Demons are, by definition, a quasi-existing entity and cannot be grasped by reason. What is grasped is their lack.

subject, or the religious subject, may not consciously recognize that their belief is in something spectral, it is technically the case. Even theology recognizes this in terms of the demonic, a quasi-existence with ambiguous corporeality, and which can shapeshift into various appearances depending upon the subject's psychology. In both cases, the "other" changes shape, and the observer standing in for "the same" may be confused, terrified, and at times attracted to this entity, which is perpetually slipping beyond understanding. Mbembe, again: "White man, besieged by a mob of Negroes, drowned in alcohol and stricken with fever, wonders, 'Have I gone mad?' What would the colony be, if not a place where all sorts of mythical fabrications could be unleashed."³³¹

It is important to underscore Dussel's insistence that colonial frameworks are constructed ideologies. Dussel considers colonialism as a particular *proyecto*, or a way of intending phenomenal experience. A colonizing *proyecto* has the status of a fetish, in that it deifies a particular system. Dussel insists that liberation is the ushering in of a new reality; the dramatic emergence of that which is rendered "non-being in the present system."³³² Dussel calls this, metaphysics—an "apocalyptic epiphany of the other." This epiphany is the entrance of "a metaphysical transcendence" which undermines the fetishization of a system.³³³ Dussel looks to Fanon as a reflection³³⁴ of this apocalyptic epiphany. For Fanon, the apocalyptic "end" of the white world takes place in the subjective awareness of its non-existence: "There is no white world." Rather, "I am my own foundation."³³⁵ As an apocalyptic disruption, the colonizer might perceive such declarations to be an explosion of chaos or the demonic. From the standpoint of

³³¹ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 185.

³³² Dussel, 77.

³³³ Ibid., 59.

³³⁴ Ibid., 94

³³⁵ Fanon, 204-205.

the peoples terrorized by the colonizing *proyecto*, it is a transcendent and liberating declaration against the dominating forces of the system. This perspective, says Dussel, is a reflection of the special knowledge that “the other” has regarding the maladies of the political order.³³⁶

Fanon and Dussel introduce the colonial problem of ontology in the Christian West, and (Fanon, in particular) suggests the subsequent role of particular Christian symbols in producing anti-Black colonialism. Two other bodies of literature more explicitly relate the problem of Western ontology and alterity to the demonic: The philosophical phenomenology of the stranger and the burgeoning field of monster studies. The former, engaged with psychoanalysis, has explicitly considered the identification of “the other,” with the monstrous or the uncanny, and has more explicitly engaged the particular cultural and religious symbols of alterity than has the aforementioned decolonial thinkers. Monster studies reflects on the intersecting worlds of literature, art, social power, and culture in designating certain bodies as monstrous—with the demonic as one important category through which the monstrous is refracted.

Demons as Monstrous Strangers

Philosopher Richard Kearney reflects upon the “other” as “enemy,” and all the overlapping ways this identification takes place in culture and history. One way to describe such abjection is by means of “demonization.” Kearney does not provide a technical definition of “demonization” but instead refers to it somewhat casually, as *one* way of describing the broad phenomenon of identifying and reckoning with alienated enemies.³³⁷ The ubiquity of the term in public discourse speaks to the various ways that the demonic is commonly understood as a

³³⁶ Dussel, 43, 45.

³³⁷ Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters: Ideas of Otherness* (London: Routledge, 2003), 65

dimension of alienation. Kearney identifies three criteria for that which constitutes the alienated other: "discrimination," "suspicion," and "scapegoating."³³⁸

Such reflections build upon Freud's concept of "the uncanny." For Freud, the uncanny is the subjective, affective, experience of *strangeness*. Such experiences are often associated with specters or monsters and (in actuality) reflect the return of something repressed from childhood.³³⁹ For Kearney, then, one's identification of an alienated enemy is the same psychological mechanism by which one (as individuals and cultures) construct imagined, peculiar entities, such as monsters. "In the realm of the imaginary. . . we find creatures of our own repressed unconscious returning to haunt us as phantom 'doubles.'"³⁴⁰ Imagined monsters *and* our psychically constructed enemies are equally the projection of some forgotten and rejected dimension of "our othered self."

Kearney also draws heavily on the work of Julia Kristeva.³⁴¹ Kristeva aligns with previously mentioned themes in Fanon, Dussel, and others—particularly on the role of abjection in self-definition: "On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safeguards."³⁴² She adds the psychological and ethical insight, however, that abjection is a rejection of some aspect of the self and therefore speaks to the need for psychic healing as an aspect of social healing.³⁴³

Kearney reflects specifically on the history of Christian demonology as a singular instance of strangeness and abjection in the Christian West, relating this specifically to Girardian

³³⁸ Ibid., 67.

³³⁹ Sigmund Freud "The Uncanny," in *The Uncanny*, by Sigmund Freud, trans. David McLintock (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 147-148.

³⁴⁰ Ibid., 74.

³⁴¹ Ibid., 75.

³⁴² Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York, NY: Colombia University Press, 1982), 2. She distinguishes abjection from uncanniness (p. 5), but conflates them elsewhere (pp.1-2).

³⁴³ Kristeva, 3. A point made more forcefully in *Strangers to Ourselves*.

scapegoat theory. Like Girard, Kearney recognizes scapegoating as a universal human reality. "Strange" or "monstrous" creatures in art, mythology, and religion are reflections of the scapegoating mechanism. The scapegoat in Hebrew law performs the function of the "demarcation of pure from impure" and the expulsion of the impure from the community.³⁴⁴ Judeo-Christian usage of the animal as an object of expulsion rather than human sacrifices, as well as the singularity of the sacrifice of Christ, designates Christianity (in its purest form) as a religion that undercuts the scapegoating mechanism.³⁴⁵ Kearney recognizes, however, that history is certainly not so clean. The demon in the history of Western Christianity, Kearney insinuates, is like the Levitical scapegoat in that it is used to identify some sinful, deficient, "other," which needs to be expelled (exorcised) for the sake of purity and social cohesion.

In Western Christian art, Kearney points out, the demon is often a juxtaposition of animal (specifically, goat) and human.³⁴⁶ Upon the image of the demon has been written various human enemies, or aliens, of the Western psyche: Jews, heretics, colonized indigenous persons, women, LGBTQ persons, and many more.³⁴⁷ The depiction and imagination of the demon in Christian history reflects the subconscious alienation of various strangers as enemies.³⁴⁸ Because of Augustine's insistence on the non-being of evil, the image of the demon "would continue to blur" distinctions between Being and non-being.³⁴⁹ The demon is a boundary-figure, and as such, is a site for creating and reinforcing anxieties about other entities believed to be deficient or closer in degree to non-being.

³⁴⁴ Kearney, 27.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 28.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 31.

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 29ff.

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 31.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

The emerging field of “monster studies” corroborates some of these observations, drawing from some of the same literature as Kearney, including Kristeva. As an interdisciplinary locus of study, monster studies weaves together critical, historical, literary, and other approaches to defining and analyzing “the monstrous” as an element of human culture. While Freud’s category of the uncanny is one important inspiration for the field, monster studies does not *necessarily* reduce the monstrous to psychoanalysis.³⁵⁰ There is, however, a general tendency to posit monsters (however defined) as the means by which culture signifies “the other.”³⁵¹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen’s foundational 1996 essay “Monster Culture (Seven Theses)” establishes that “the monster is difference made flesh,” and serves as “dialectical Other” from the perspective of some dominating positionality.³⁵² “The monster,” Cohen summarizes, is that which “must be exiled or destroyed.”³⁵³

As it emerges out of Cohen’s work, monster studies tends to emphasize monstrosity as a trans-cultural phenomenon.³⁵⁴ As monster studies intersects with various streams of historiography and critical theory, however, there is more attention to particular and historical discourses around the monstrous and the ways these manifest diverse social and cultural realities. Notably, John Block Friedman’s *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* traces the relationship between medieval Christian categories of monstrosity and ethnicity and makes observations particularly relevant to the study of demonology. Friedman points out that medieval

³⁵⁰ See Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” in *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 16-20.

³⁵¹ Asa Simon Mittman, “The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2017), 1.

³⁵² Cohen, 7.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 16.

³⁵⁴ Cohen, whose training is in cultural studies, begins his foundational *Monster Theory*, with the stark rejection of what he sees as cultural studies’ eschewal of the universal and insistence on historical and cultural particularity. He proposes “monster theory” as a universal theory for “reading cultures from the monsters they engender.” See 3ff.

writers, drawing from Greco-Roman categories, designated various peoples as “monstrous” on account of noted physical differences.³⁵⁵ In fact, the lines between the fantastic monsters of literature or religion and European Christian perceptions of other peoples are quite blurry. In medieval Christianity the notion of monstrous was attached to Cain as the origin of physically, morally, aberrant and non-Christian peoples, and even more forcefully to Ham as the origin of what were deemed monstrous dark-skinned bodies.³⁵⁶ Some, inspired by midrash literature, even claim that Satan impregnated Eve with Cain, drawing an explicit line from the diabolical to particular ethnicities.³⁵⁷

Monstrosity is also a theme taken up by scholars who identify as or prioritize Queer,³⁵⁸ disabled,³⁵⁹ feminist,³⁶⁰ Black,³⁶¹ and others who come to terms with their identity in the context of relegation to monstrosity by heteronormative, capitalist, white supremacist systems. These scholars center subjectivities that problematize and decenter (particularly) Western designations of “normal” and “human,” and reclaim identities deemed monstrous.

There are, of course, debates within monster studies over the best way to define the monstrous. Some scholars seek objectivist definitions—i.e., imagined entities with the features of distinct creatures juxtaposed into one body (*centaurs have features of two “real” and distinct*

³⁵⁵ John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007), 1, 5ff. See also 31

³⁵⁶ Friedman, 100-101. Ham, often written as *Cham* in Latin script, was in fact often confused with Cain. See also Friedman’s treatment of Cain in Augustine’s *City of God*, 31ff.

³⁵⁷ Friedman, 95.

³⁵⁸ Shaka McGlotten, *Virtual Intimacies: Media, Affect, and Queer Sociality* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014); Camilla Fojas, *Zombies, Migrants and Queers Race and Crisis Capitalism in Pop Culture* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

³⁵⁹ Rosemarie Garland Thomson, seen as a pioneer of disability studies, reflects on the monstrous and the category of “freak” in *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Colombia University Press, 1997).

³⁶⁰ Nicholas Chare, Jeanette Hoorn, and Audrey Yue, eds., *Re-Reading the Monstrous-Feminine: Art, Film, Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

³⁶¹ Bernadette Marie Calafell, *Monstrosity, Performance, and Race in Contemporary Culture* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2015); Sarah Alison Miller, *Medieval Monstrosity and the Female Body* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

species), or extrapolated characteristics in a particular type of being (*a giant is a large human*), as two common examples.³⁶² However, definitions that ground monstrosity in subjective affectivity are arguably more influential, and are certainly more convincing. Art historian Asa Simon Mittman maintains that the best way to understand the monstrous is in terms of “impact” on subjects who possess the definition of a particular monster. Monstrosity is, therefore, an affective disorientation in response to some perceived bending of normalcy or reality.³⁶³

This perspective reflects also Cohen’s foundational work, and the influence of both Freud and Kristeva regarding the uncanny and the abject, respectively, as affective moments of delirium or disgust when encountering something that is perceived as existing just beyond the edges of reality. Cohen argues that this experience of encountering “ontological liminality,” or the monstrous, is universal to humankind.³⁶⁴ While monster studies, with its universalist tendencies, is not necessarily invested in critiques of Western ontology, Cohen’s reference to the category makes for suggestive connections to Fanon in particular. Fanon relates the imperializing framework of Western ontology to the consequent association between Blackness and mythical objects of terror (witches, demons, etc) and spaces of abjection and liminality (hell) that signify the edges of Being in white, colonist, imaginations.

Kearney and monster studies add meaningful frameworks for comprehending demonology as a means of articulating and conceptualizing alterity. Demonology (like other symbols of “the monstrous”) is related to racism and colonialism in that it is a site for representing and continuing social abjection. In the Western Christian tradition, the demonic serves as a particularly significant symbol that clarifies and rejects perceived degeneracy and

³⁶² See Mittman.

³⁶³ Mittman, 8.

³⁶⁴ Cohen, 6.

monstrosity. However, there are limitations to these approaches as it pertains to a decolonial account of the demonic.

Namely, psychoanalytic and phenomenological approaches to the monstrous, as present in Kearney and some iterations of monster theory, lack a thorough analysis of power and oppression. Are all designations of monstrosity equal in their potential damage and psychological maladaptation? As Fanon and others attest with stark lucidity, colonized peoples themselves experience the oppressive systems of colonialism as monstrous. Does this experience of the monstrosity of anti-Black colonialism merely reflect repression and prejudice on the part of the oppressed, or something truly monstrous (or, demonic) about the nature of colonial power? Is Fanon at risk of scapegoating the white colonist? Such an interpretation contributes to a duplicitous egalitarianism that vilifies the liberating techniques of the oppressed as if they are synonymous with or exist on the same moral level as the violence of the oppressor: “Reverse racism” or “reverse demonization.” Future chapters will center the witness of colonized and Black perspectives on this very question, particularly in womanist theology and the thought and writings of James Baldwin, who recognizes demonological language as a technique of liberation. The political demonologies of Tillich and Wink, in particular, also strongly make the case that demonological discourses in the context of power and oppression reflect something true about the nature of things, and authentically embody the witness of Divine revelation. Rather than a rejection of monstrous discourses, an adequate mode of discernment is preferable for navigating between monsters that are projections of repressed self-loathing, and those that are truly monstrous.³⁶⁵

³⁶⁵ This assessment warrants some caveats. Kearney’s *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters* critiques other modern and contemporary approaches to strangeness and abjection along similar lines (see p. 10), maintaining that post-ontological reflection on alterity lacks an adequate mode of discerning between monsters that are truly monsters, and those which appear so only on account of scapegoating objectifications. This is a salient question from the angle of

In general, it is important not to reduce the relationship between demonology, colonialism, and anti-Blackness to any of these theoretical models (including those more adept at analyzing power, including decolonial theory), as helpful as these perspectives are and remain for the following arguments of this chapter. A few observations suggest this caution. For one, various symbols for alterity, such as ghosts and monsters, are not interchangeable. Kearney's psychoanalytic framework often insinuates as much, and monster studies is explicitly founded upon a quest to define the monstrous as a universal and trans-cultural concept. Fanon outlines some of the particular links between anti-Blackness and specific symbols of abjection, suggesting the need for more sustained historical analysis of anti-Blackness, monstrosity, and demonology in the West.

Every particular symbol of monstrosity carries with it specific affects, histories, practices, and grammars. As some scholars of monstrosity rightfully point out, especially those who engage from the perspective of historical or religious studies methodologies, the monstrous is not always merely a projection. Cultural beliefs about the monstrous, which may have sources beyond the subject's psychological needs or maladies, creates and reconstructs said imaginative frameworks.³⁶⁶ *Othering* and conceptions of the monstrous are bilateral. It is true that these various symbols can overlap and exchange in complex and counterintuitive ways³⁶⁷ suggesting that underlying political or psychological realities drive a quest for variegated and sometimes contradictory symbols of abnegation. However, it is necessary to flesh out in greater detail the

incorporating the experience of the colonized, who experience the monstrosity of colonialism and its representatives, although this is not Kearney's emphasis. I will analyze the adequacy of Kearney's hermeneutical approach to discernment in a subsequent chapter. It is also important to note that where monster theory is taken up in closer conversation with critical theory, as in aforementioned Black, Queer, feminist, and dis/differently-abled examples—it engages in a much more thorough analysis of power.

³⁶⁶ Calafell, citing W. Scott Poole, 4.

³⁶⁷ Consider the fact that “the damned” and the demonic are distinct entities in Christian theology, yet Fanon recognizes their intersection and subsequent prevarication in anti-Black colonialism.

relationship between these particular symbols. The demonic, as the rest of this chapter argues, is a particularly significant and singularly operative symbol in the milieu of Western colonialism and anti-Blackness. It is therefore necessary to outline the exact relationship between these symbols.

From a theological perspective, it is also important to avoid anachronism and reductionism that excludes the theological. Amy Hollywood wisely warns that the field of religious studies consider that "what others encounter as real" might be more than "acts of the human imagination."³⁶⁸ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, despite insisting on monstrosity as a grand theory, maintains that the monstrous ultimately escapes systemization and scientific rationality.³⁶⁹ Michel de Certeau's regarded study of the possession of the sisters of Loudun adeptly incorporates several lenses of analysis, noting historical, political, and psychological factors that contribute to an increase in accounts of possession in early modern France. Yet, de Certeau acknowledges, possession is an "event" which cannot be reduced to any particular antecedent causes. The historian "is never sure."³⁷⁰ Even for the scholar who might assume a de facto agnosticism when engaging in the key of a historian or critical theorist, the possibility of *more* and *mystery* must govern the reading of such traditions, texts, and persons. A theologian, furthermore, has particular commitments to revelation and therefore finds it necessary to leave open the category of the demonic as external and revealed. This is one of the shared insights of political demonology as surveyed in the previous chapter. These theologians, despite differing views on language and interpretation, share commitments to the irreducibility of Divine

³⁶⁸ Amy Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia and Other Essays: Mysticism, History, and the Study of Religion* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), 4.

³⁶⁹ Cohen, 7.

³⁷⁰ Michel de Certeau, *The Possession at Loudun*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 7, 22.

revelation. A desire to avoid reduction remains constant in the present analysis, even if relegated to the background to highlight the contributions of critical theoretical perspectives. Later chapters will consider positive resources in the history of Christian demonology for a theologically-driven and decolonizing approach to the demonic that is not merely reduced to these theoretical models.

Somewhat more helpful than Kearney, Kristeva, or monster theory (at least in the tradition of Cohen) is Sylvia Wynter's foundational identification of the overrepresentation of Man as the defining framework that emerges in modern colonialism, and the linkages she draws between this and the notion of the demonic. This perspective, along with the insights introduced by Fanon and Dussel, provide further meaningful tools for analyzing the specific role of the demonic as a symbol and theological concept.

Wynter understands colonialism in terms of the modern white, bourgeois, European "conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself."³⁷¹ She considers the reconfiguration of notions of humanness on account of encounters with the "New World."³⁷² Katherine McKittrick, expanding on Wynter's reflections, relates this configuration to spatiality and geography. Under the auspices of colonialism, the world has "incorrectly deemed black populations and their attendant geographies as 'ungeographic' and/or philosophically undeveloped."³⁷³ Colonialism relegates Black and indigenous persons to the barely-existent, as well as their own conceptions of space and geography. The colonizing framework searches for "a transparent and knowable world"³⁷⁴ and is shocked and even terrified by strange discoveries.³⁷⁵

³⁷¹ Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 260.

³⁷² Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 125

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, xiii.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, xiii.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 128ff.

Colonizing geography imagines hierarchies of "difference" that distinguish the human from the less-than-human or non-human and works out those differences in concrete spatial ways—the slave ship or the prison.³⁷⁶ As she interprets Wynter, McKittrick applies this to the notion of the demonic, though not necessarily in its traditional religious or Christian definition. For McKittrick (and, it seems, Wynter), "the demonic. . . is a non-deterministic schema; it is a process that is hinged on uncertainty and non-linearity." In this respect, the colonizing framework *requires* demons in that the possibility of chaos is "integral" to the colonizing subject's self-conception.

For Wynter and McKittrick, the demonic also constitutes the perpetual "absented presence of black womanhood."³⁷⁷ "The demonic," in this context, "connotes a geographical, ontological, and historical lack."³⁷⁸ She relates this to the paradoxical but inevitable juxtaposition of "black subjects hidden and on display."³⁷⁹ The colonized object is ambiguous; at times useful in absence, at other times useful in its presence or as a particular sort of appearance. Spectrality is constitutive of its identity as demonic. This resonates with traditional Christian ontology, as intimated by Kearney above. The demonic symbol is the preeminent symbol for the line between reality and unreality, actuality and appearance. The demonic is a symbol of ontological lack, which corresponds to the way colonizing anti-Blackness imagines and re-imagines bodies and space. For this reason, the symbol of the demonic relates closely to anti-Blackness and colonization.

However, it is necessary to expand upon this set of observations by Wynter and McKittrick to understand the concrete historical, grammatical links between the Christian notion of the demonic and colonialism. These symbols share in common a variety of affects that inform

³⁷⁶ Ibid., xv

³⁷⁷ McKittrick, xxv

³⁷⁸ Ibid., xxv.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., xxx.

one another—such as fear, bravado, or even (forbidden) desire. Particular practices, namely those of exorcism and spiritual combat, surround both symbols. These grammatical and symbolic parallels are demonstrated and reified by Western Christian aesthetic categories and their bodily connotations—the pernicious depiction of demons in dark colors and often as Black, Jewish, and indigenous bodies. In these respects, Christian demonology provides some of the language and conceptual frameworks for anti-Black colonialism. The following section analyzes these connections by zeroing in on two particular demonological traditions in the Christian West: Ascetic spirituality and Augustinian political theology.

The (Dem)Ontologies of St. Antony and St. Augustine

Christian demonology has pluriform roots. Its earliest iterations draw from Second Temple Jewish religious belief, and accounts of personal experience, sifted through the lens of particular exegetical strategies. The Christian tradition typically systematizes these within the project of ontology. Granting the Greek philosophical framework that has been the backbone of classical Western Christian thought, the demonic is often explained in terms of its existence along the tenuous space between Being and non-being.³⁸⁰ As such, demons are a boundary marker for that which is *almost* non-being. The demonic therefore has a special significance in the story of Western ontology's anti-Black and colonizing tendencies. Two strains of Christian demonological interpretation demonstrate and elaborate on this relationship: One that is ascetic and experiential, another that is more explicitly philosophical and political. The former is

³⁸⁰ While monastic spirituality lacks some of the sustained systematic engagement on the nature of evil as might be found in Augustine, the framework of ontology lurks in the background. Neo-Platonism, and the cosmology of Origen, are particularly operative. For Origen, demons are those creatures which “fell the farthest from contemplation of God” of any being that possesses intellect. David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of the Monk: Spiritual Combat in Early Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 12.

represented by Saint Antony and specific streams of the monastic milieu, the latter by Augustine and Western political theology.

St. Athanasius and Colonial Demonologies

David Brakke considers the psychological contours of the meaning of the demonic in Athanasius's biography of Antony and contemporaneous ascetic literature. Namely, Brakke describes the demonic as a source of terror, a source of sexual temptation and risk, and even an object of utility. These discourses closely parallel and perhaps even in some respects provide conceptual frameworks, as Brakke himself suggests, for modern colonialism and racism. Athanasius's narrative and subsequent monastic literature are specifically identify Black persons with the demonic, reflecting and establishing a long Western Christian tradition of coordinating the symbol of the demonic with the Black body.³⁸¹ The relationship between the monastic and colonial milieus are therefore twofold.

In his hagiography of St. Antony, Athanasius associates demons with their function as symbols of terror.³⁸² Demons are entities of which humans are, understandably, afraid.³⁸³ The terror centers around two loci—the body and identity. The terror regarding the body is surprisingly physical. The demonic represents a fear of quite literal violence. The possibility of death is a palpable aspect of this dimension of ascetic demonology. In one scene, Antony retreats to a tomb where demons physically assault him, scourging his body and leaving him in significant physical pain—pain more tremendous than any human can inflict.³⁸⁴ When Antony survives the attacks, Christ's resurrection is implicated in the victory. If Antony's body failed, it

³⁸¹ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, trans. Philip Schaff, vol. II.4 (New York, NY: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 577.

³⁸² Brakke, 29, 32.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 45. Although fear should ultimately be conquered by faith, terror is regularly affirmed as natural and appropriate basic response to the demonic and is important for discerning the presence of the demonic as opposed to Divine or angelic encounter.

³⁸⁴ Athanasius, 8.

would be a strike against the power of his faith or of Christ's resurrection over death in the body. This risk of bodily death intersects with notions of spiritual pollution. Antony describes demons as thieves that attempt larceny of "the body" by tempting it from virtue and preventing it from achieving a resurrected embodiment.³⁸⁵ This terror, argues Brakke, signals anxiety regarding the constitution of identity as a monk, successful ascetic, and imitator of Christ.³⁸⁶ The possibility of the body failing to overcome demonic assault or the monk succumbing to temptation calls into question the monk's identity as a successful Christian ascetic.

The function of demons as purveyors of terror constitutes the first fundamental connection between demonology and colonialism. As Mbembe reflects, racism conceives "the Other. . . as a menacing object from which one must be protected or escape, or which must simply be destroyed if it cannot be subdued."³⁸⁷ Notably, colonial terror relates to bodily liminality and death. Mbembe considers both the slavemaster's fear of being murdered, as well as his fear of being "confused for the debased race and. . . resembling his former slave."³⁸⁸ Mbembe relates this to Western ontology, which designate the constitution of Being and humanity in terms of the "absence" of Being on the part of the colonized.³⁸⁹ Demons and Blackness both emerge as symbols of a deficiency that threatens self-definition and even the physical (temporal and/or eternal) body of the othering subject.

Narratives of victory over demonic powers similarly evoke Patterson's thesis that the slave is a symbol of social death—as a symbol of otherness which has been conquered. The menace of Blackness, like that of the demonic, is a coordination of fear regarding bodily death

³⁸⁵ Brakke, 20.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 23.

³⁸⁷ Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 10.

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 85.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 85-86.

and personal identity. The continued need to relate the triumphalist stories of monastic encounters (and depict these in iconography) represent an analogy to modern anti-Black slavery in terms of a continued enslavement of demons in the imagination. It is not enough to abolish (exorcise) the demon but it is also necessary to memorialize its defeat. These stories of spiritual warfare and conquest remind audiences that the threat exists, but has been suppressed. As such, these stories and icons remain an enduring symbol of death—that which is a “sign of immi/a/nent death,” as Christina Sharpe explains of the Black body in the afterlives of slavery.³⁹⁰ Stories and icons of demonic defeat soothe fears regarding the threats of alterity, and remind the audience that even though the threat to life and Being remain present, the threat is kept at bay.

Along with the body, the land plays a vital function in the narrative of Antony’s life. For Athanasius, adopting the language of warfare, Antony is a conqueror who cleanses the desert of demonic forces so that ascetics can further settle it.³⁹¹ Through his dispassionate resolve provided via the power of Christ, the monk suppresses the demonic forces that threaten body, soul, land, and community. As Brakke points out, “Antony’s. . . combats with the demons” represent “the triumph of Christianity itself over traditional religions.”³⁹² Monastic demonology and colonialism are both, in these respects, discourses wherein the subject that seeks to extend itself over its enemies. Maldonado-Torres notes the function of colonialism as perpetual warfare and its suspension of ethics. Maldonado-Torres distinguishes between colonial modernity and pre-modern European civilizations, arguing that the former witnesses a growing ubiquity of warfare and conflictual social relations. However, he notes Dussel’s insistence that there are

³⁹⁰ Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: on Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 55.

³⁹¹ Brakke, 34-35

³⁹² Ibid., 36.

Western precedents for fetishizing “the warrior and the conqueror,”³⁹³ and it is arguable that the motif of the warrior monk embodies this lineage. Some scholars point to early Christian asceticism as a prolonging of early Christian pacifism, with its subversive spiritualization of Biblical warfare motifs and its social ethic of radical hospitality.³⁹⁴ As several thinkers engaged previously (political demonology) and later (Kotsko, below, and James Baldwin in subsequent chapters) attest—there are potentially liberating ways of inhabiting anti-demonic warfare motifs. However, it is worth considering the ways in which these spiritual warfare motifs make possible later expansions of “the paradigm of war” in colonial modernity.³⁹⁵ Brakke’s fundamental insinuation is compelling that there is some sort of thematic resonance and possibly genealogical link between the conqueror motifs of desert monasticism and modern colonialism, which both seek to displace “demonic” practices and peoples from conquered lands. The decision is not between spiritual warfare language and a more consistently pacifistic spirituality. Instead, these entanglements beg a more nuanced mode of discernment between rhetoric of spiritual warfare that perpetuates the ubiquity of war, or rhetoric that appropriately conjures antagonism against radical evil.

In monastic literature, the demonic primarily represents the risk of temptation. For example, Evagrius conceives of demons as the invisible and immaterial sources of evil thoughts and desires that claw at the soul.³⁹⁶ In this sense, the demonic constitutes a fear of reduction or slippage into the (un)form of the demonic—away from human nature and toward non-being. Any human person perceived to be possessed or somehow in league with the demonic similarly

³⁹³ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 3-4;

³⁹⁴ See P. R. Kolbet, "Torture and Origen's Hermeneutics of Nonviolence," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76, no. 3 (2008), 558ff.

³⁹⁵ Maldonado-Torres, 3-4.

³⁹⁶ Evagrius of Pontus, *The Praktikos*, in *The Praktikos & Chapters On Prayer* translated by John Eudes Bamberger (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2009), 16.

becomes a symbol of this same risk and temptation. Throughout much of the monastic tradition, sexuality has been a particularly significant aspect of such temptation. The trope of the demonic or the devil taking the form of a *seductress*, appearing to male monks “in the form of a dangerously beautiful woman,” is common.³⁹⁷

There is also, then, a strong connection between monastic demonology and the reification of patriarchy. Ascetic encounters with demons “reworded traditional markers of masculinity into new forms of Christian manliness,” argues Brakke.³⁹⁸ Specifically, it portends masculinity, which “transcends the porous flux of feminized materiality.”³⁹⁹ Throughout much of the history of the Christian West and with particular ferocity in early modernity, the demonic is acutely related to femininity and women’s bodies. This association works on several imaginative and conceptual levels. Bodies of women are at times identified as ontologically one step closer toward, and more susceptible to, the demonic. The demonic is also a means of projecting anxieties about female purity. Consider, for example, the marked obsession with women engaged in sexual acts with demons as an aspect of occultism during the witch-hunt era of the late medieval and early modern era.⁴⁰⁰ There is also the familiar trope of the female ascetic who becomes, spiritually, “male” because of their victory over demons and their passions.⁴⁰¹

The function of male identity is similarly a significant theme in decolonial and Black thought. Fanon particularly understands colonialism through the lens of “sexual anxiety” or a complex of “sexual inferiority.” Racism is how the white male subject reifies his sexual superiority by suppressing Black masculinity and protecting the purity of (or, more accurately,

³⁹⁷ Brakke, 206.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 182.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 183.

⁴⁰⁰ See Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁴⁰¹ Brakke, 188-189, 195.

rights of access to) the white female body.⁴⁰² It is well known that the lynching of Black men in the United States centered around anxieties regarding white feminine purity.⁴⁰³ While witch hunts sought to protect female purity from their purported susceptibility to the demonic by punishing women deemed complicit, the lynching of Black men served the similar function of exorcising the threat to white female purity and white masculinity.

The transcendence of passion is the primary narrative trope that the demonic plays in early monasticism to construct the masculine self. The demon, sharing with humans an original “intellectual” nature, yet having fallen into complete “irascibility,”⁴⁰⁴ represents a conceptual foil for both the nature of Being and the human. “Human beings,” Brakke summarizes of Evagrian spirituality, “are dominated by desire. But the demons’ souls, if we can call them that, are veritable machines of irascible energy, producing a seemingly endless supply of malice aimed at the monk.”⁴⁰⁵ To be sure, the monastic approach to emotion and embodiment is more complicated than how it is sometimes stereotyped.⁴⁰⁶ However, striking parallels remain between these gendered, anthropological binaries between male/female, controlled/emotional, and white/Black.

There is a possible divergence between these monastic examples and colonialism in the function of pleasure. Mbembe considers the colony to be a space of unbridled pleasure and self-indulgence on the part of the colonizer. “The colonizer’s phallus can hardly hold back its spasms,” Mbembe records, “with the characteristic feature of making horror and pleasure

⁴⁰² Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 112.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁴ Brakke, 54. Describing the Origenist background of Evagrian spirituality.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁰⁶ Paul M. Blowers, “Gentiles of the Soul: Maximus the Confessor on the Substructure and Transformation of Human Passions,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4, no. 1 (1996): pp. 57-85, <https://doi.org/10.1353/earl.1996.0008>.

coincide.”⁴⁰⁷ By contrast, the ascetic landscape presumes chastity and, imitating Mbembe’s stark visuality, ostensible aridity and flaccidity. However, as Mbembe points out, colonizing logics obscure the real dynamics of pleasure; things are not as colonist rhetoric attempt to exhibit. Colonizing powers attempt to identify Black and indigenous peoples with passionate animality, while the colonizing subject is heralded for its masculine rationality and apathy. The colonizer (as he conceives of himself) can resist temptation, “the Negro” on the other hand, perpetually succumbs to temptation, which leads to economic instability for example.⁴⁰⁸ This portrayal, however, is deceptive in obscuring the reality of opulent hedonism which is actually practiced by the colonizer in his exertion of power, control, sexual exploitation, and gluttony. One wonders, then, what a decolonizing reading of ascetic spaces might reveal about comparably covert operations of pleasure, perhaps in the exercise of sadomasochism and the expansion of power over those subject to the ascetic regime. Indeed, many feminist scholars and theologians have critiqued the paradoxically unbridled operation of male power in ascetic spirituality despite its similar attempt to construct a façade of sparsity and self-control.⁴⁰⁹

Demons also serve as a symbol of utility in the monastic imagination. As Brakke deftly illustrates, the demonic is not merely a source of evil or temptation, but in both conscious and subconscious ways, operates as a means of the monk’s spiritual formation and honor. “Demons paradoxically facilitated. . . progress by providing the resistance” that monks “had to overcome” in order to grow in virtue.⁴¹⁰ Demons, in this way, become necessary to ascetic spirituality and the surrounding narratives.

⁴⁰⁷ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 175.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 176, 180

⁴⁰⁹ For a survey of contemporary positions on feminist appraisals of Christian spirituality see Amy Hollywood, “Feminist Studies in Christian Spirituality,” in *Acute Melancholia and Other Essays* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 93-116.

⁴¹⁰ Brakke, 13.

Some scholarship has thematized asceticism as a subject's active participation in inculturation. Ascetics are those in the process of imbibing the particular contours of a cultural subject.⁴¹¹ A recognition of agency, however, does not take away from the dynamics of domination in ascetic subject-formation. Foucault similarly recognizes the significant role of the subject's agency in his analysis of asceticism. However, he (characteristically) resists a naïve reading of power that ignores the various operations of coercion that leads a subject to submit to the regime in the first place.⁴¹² Despite the complex dynamics of agency, asceticism remains a means of identity formation. The demonic demarcates identity as a crucial boundary-marker.

According to Mbembe, the colonized object has overlapping identities as thing and nothing. This conjunction denotes utilitarian value: "the native is thus that *thing that is, but only insofar as it is nothing*."⁴¹³ The nothingness of the demon and the colonized is precisely what makes them useful for forming the self. "The colonized belongs to the *universe of immediate things*—useful things when needed, things that can be molded and are mortal, futile and superfluous things, if need be."⁴¹⁴ To alienate is to transform the alienated other into a source of "fruit," or more recently, capital.⁴¹⁵ The use of the colonized as an economic tool is not separate from the use of the colonized as the other to define the self. These are comparable and

⁴¹¹ Richard Valantasis, *The Making of the Self: Ancient and Modern Asceticism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 7ff.

⁴¹² While Foucault's seminal "Technologies of the Self" acknowledges that his previous work had possibly underemphasized individual agency, he never separates this from technologies of power. In Foucault's reading, asceticism is a technology of the self which can and does coordinate with other technologies, and still relates to his overarching concern with domination. We might think of the asceticism as a colonial enterprise, in the Foucauldian framework, as the means by which colonized objects become subjects within the colonizing matrix, through self-discipline to become the sort of subjects that are necessary for the colonizing regime. See Michel Foucault (October 1982), "Technologies of the Self," Lecture at the University of Vermont, <https://foucault.info/documents/foucault.technologiesOfSelf.en/>.

⁴¹³ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 187.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., 187.

⁴¹⁵ Dussel, 53.

intertwined operations, and therefore share commonality to demonic discourses even if it might seem strange to think of the demon as a source of profit.

Besides these thematic parallels between monastic and colonial milieus, early Christian monasticism establishes a specific relationship between the symbol of the demonic to the symbol of Blackness—both as an abstract aesthetic category and as darkly-colored bodies. The most infamous of this application is found in *The Life of Antony*, and is repeated elsewhere in the monastic milieu. This association has ramifications in spirituality, literature, and art throughout the history of Western (and much of Eastern) Christianity. Brakke, in his critical analysis of these initial narratives, makes the point that designating these instances “racist” is anachronistic.⁴¹⁶ However, Brakke is in some moments too quick to subsume these instances under the category of general Greco-Roman prejudices against “foreignness” or to historical political and imperial animosities between the Egyptian and Ethiopian kingdoms.⁴¹⁷ The coordination of Blackness as an aesthetic category (including Black human bodies) and the demonic is of unique quality in the ontological framework of early Christian spirituality. The modern sociopolitical framework of white supremacy is the totalizing, racializing application of these “polarized aesthetics of light and dark” that function in Christian theological aesthetics from very early on.⁴¹⁸ This aesthetic is applied in the monastic milieu to coordinate dark bodies, demons, and ontological lack. Brakke is most helpful by contributing a psychoanalytic analysis of the coordination of anti-Blackness, colonialism, and monastic demonology, which intersects with the psychoanalytic categories relied upon in some of the theoretical frameworks considered previously—especially Kearney, monster theory and, to some extent, Fanon.

⁴¹⁶ Brakke, 157-158.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid., 158, 163.

⁴¹⁸ Prevot, “Divine Opacity,” 166.

The *Epistle of Barnabas* calls Satan “the black one,” marking one of the earliest associations between the category of blackness and the devil.⁴¹⁹ The Christian West, through the medieval era, “represented the Devil and his minions in dark colors ranging from dark brown to purple.”⁴²⁰ This attribution appears throughout the (predominantly) Egyptian monastic milieu to bodies and skin color, with the understanding that Ethiopians are an apt symbol for the devil and the demons.⁴²¹ There are stories of monks mysteriously struck with darkened skin as a marker of their sin (usually fornication)⁴²² and musings on whether one should consider Ethiopians the “image of God,” presuming that their bodily appearance represents a religious, moral, and genealogical defect.⁴²³ Some early witnesses attest to a notion of a “demonic provenance” of dark skin.⁴²⁴ These reflections regurgitate classical attributions of the world beyond the Mediterranean as strange and monstrous, beyond the human.⁴²⁵ Nevertheless, particular ancient prejudices about Africa and the emerging Christian cosmology built upon light-dark aesthetics intensify these attributions. The most infamous instance of relating the demonic with the Ethiopian body appears in *The Life of Antony*. Saint Anthony encounters the devil, in Athanasius’s telling, taking the form of a Black, Ethiopian child: “A visible shape in accordance with the colour of his mind,” Athanasius writes.⁴²⁶

Brakke identifies this particular encounter as bound up in desire, sexuality, and power.⁴²⁷ The demon is associated with the temptation to fornication, which relates to the pre-existing

⁴¹⁹ Ibid., 159.

⁴²⁰ *Image of the Black*, 2.1, 55.

⁴²¹ Brakke, 159.

⁴²² Ibid., 166.

⁴²³ Ibid., 166.

⁴²⁴ Cohen, 10.

⁴²⁵ Jean Devise, “Christians and Black,” in *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, ed. David Bindman and Henry Louis Gates (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2010), 49.

⁴²⁶ Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, trans. Philip Schaff, vol. II.4 (New York, NY: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 577.

⁴²⁷ Brakke, 160.

“stereotypical hypersexuality” attributed to Ethiopians.⁴²⁸ In much of monastic literature, the Ethiopian symbolized “not just. . . evil, but. . . specifically sexual evil.”⁴²⁹ The Ethiopian demon also symbolizes bodiliness, whereas “the monk is transformable into spirit, able to renounce eroticism that sticks to the Ethiopian as closely as his or her skin.”⁴³⁰ Citing Kristeva, Brakke identifies such appearances of the demonic as that of an “alien *double*.”⁴³¹ The demon represents the monk’s sexual desires as deficient, evil, and external and thereby something to resist, exorcise, or even physically assault. Compare this to Sharon Patricia Holland’s analysis of the erotic characteristics of modern racism, where she understands white supremacy as a “limitation” of eros, a practice by which whites “circumscribe” the “potential attachments” of desire.⁴³² Holland speaks in this case of the way white supremacy privileges whiteness (and other aesthetic qualities thus associated) and rejects desire toward that which is regarded as Black. Brakke considers a more fundamental reduction of desire *qua* desire. Blackness becomes a symbol for untoward erotic desire itself.⁴³³

In all cases, the relegation of the demonic and Blackness constitutes a particular formation of identity and is bound up in all the aforementioned grammars of the demonic regarding terror, sexuality, and utility. Brakke explicitly relates the language surrounding the Ethiopian in ascetic discourse and modern colonialism, noting the comparable need to identify the colonized or demonized “other” as *an* other who is in one instance redeemable and simultaneously beyond redemption. In some cases, Ethiopians (literal or symbolic) can transform

⁴²⁸ Ibid., 162-163.

⁴²⁹ Ibid., 167.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 175.

⁴³¹ Kristeva, as quoted in Brakke, 170.

⁴³² Sharon Patricia Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 43.

⁴³³ Compare this to Cohen’s observation that the monstrous commonly “embodies those sexual practices that must not be committed, or that may be committed only through the body of the monsters,” 14.

into something “white” by their repentance and submission to the ascetic regime. Otherwise, they must be exorcised.⁴³⁴

Demons may be permanently irredeemable, at least in orthodox cosmologies, but they serve the formation of the monk’s identity by defeat and expulsion. Drawing from the work of postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha, Brakke relates this to the notion of “mimicry” in colonialism, which seeks to construct an “Other who is almost the same but not quite.” Bhaba and Brakke also consider the “civilizing mission” of colonialism in its quest to extend a reflection of the self upon the other.⁴³⁵ Brakke acknowledges that this discourse is indeed identical to that of colonialism and its quest for an ambiguous other that can reinscribe sameness while also remaining a symbol of otherness.⁴³⁶ The demonic and the Black conjoin as means of clarifying identity by way of abjection.

Explicit identifications of the demonic with Blackness continue throughout the ascetic and mystical traditions, including their respective iconographic and aesthetic representations, in both the East and the West.⁴³⁷ Take, for example, the legends and iconography related to the life of St. Marina (or Saint Margaret of Antioch in the West). According to the various narratives of her life,⁴³⁸ Marina was imprisoned and tortured by the Roman prefect, Olibrius, who sought her renunciation of faith, an obstacle to taking her virginity. After enduring two days of torture, Marina faced two demonic attacks while imprisoned. The first involved her being swallowed by a demon that appears in the form of a dragon. She escapes by making the sign of the cross from within its belly. The second demon appears to her as a black man.⁴³⁹ The Antony narrative

⁴³⁴ Brakke, 176.

⁴³⁵ Ibid., 177.

⁴³⁶ Ibid., 179.

⁴³⁷ See Jean Devisse, pp. 31-72.

⁴³⁸ Drawing on the summary given in Mary Clayton and Hugh Magennis, *The Old English Lives of St Margaret* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3-6.

⁴³⁹ Ibid., 4-5.



Figure 3

undoubtedly influences both encounters.⁴⁴⁰

Antony and Margaret each encounter a Black male at the climax of their encounter with the demonic. In each case, the Black demon “emerges to confront the saint in a gesture of contrition or subjection (in Anthony’s case, falling to his knees, in Margaret’s case, by appearing seated with hands wrapped around his knees in something of an upright fetal position or position of child-like worry).”⁴⁴¹

In both instances, then, the Black figure represents the devil’s apparent or imminent defeat. The saint is situated in a position of power and spiritual victory. Marina engages the man in a violent and humiliating way: She takes him by his hair and commands the demon to stop challenging her virginity.⁴⁴²

Marina then is permitted to interrogate the demon, who surrenders information about demonic tactics. The demon admits that he is uniquely charged with sexual temptation.⁴⁴³ Marina assaults

⁴⁴⁰ Michael E. Heyes, *Margaret's Monsters Women, Identity, and the Life of St. Margaret in Medieval England* (London: Routledge, 2020), 15-16.

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁴² Ibid., 20.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 20-21.

the man with a hammer in some narratives, which much of the Eastern iconographic tradition depicts.

The *Life of Antony* is well known for its portrayal of demons that take the form of animals. This trope also helps forge the link between Blackness and bestiality, and exists in a mode of reflection upon the edges of Anthropos. Similar to how the devil's appearance as a



Figure 4.

Black boy is a revealing analogy of the devil's nature, the appearance of demons in the "likeness" of beasts reveals something about the nature of the demonic as irrational and terrifying. Origen writes in some detail about the relationship between animals and demons, maintaining that demons often appear in the form of animals or possess such creatures outright. Certain demons incline toward certain animals, which match their particular personality and specialty. Furthermore, certain animals are more evil than others

and more likely to be used or imitated by demons.⁴⁴⁴ The symbol of the demonic as beast evokes again these themes of non-being and ahumanity cited by contemporary theorists. Consider, for

⁴⁴⁴ Brakke, 31.

example, Fanon's observation that "Negro" is subconsciously associated with passion and biology in the European psyche, or Mbembe on the same theme: "hysterical masses. . . bloated bodies with nothing human about them. . . of the vegetative rhythm of life, the bush, the mosquitoes, the fever, the native hordes who stink and spawn and gesticulate."⁴⁴⁵ Blackness and the bestial are closely related and, at times, interchangeable symbols.

This ontological hierarchy is applied liberally in the rhetoric surrounding heretics. For Shenouda, heretics (in particular) are like snakes in that, like the serpent of Genesis, are a "dwelling place for Satan."⁴⁴⁶ Compare to Mbembe's phenomenology of colony space as experienced by the colonizer—marked by animality, monstrosity, and the tattering edges of Being: "Lions and leopards come down to the plain and lurk near the houses." This is part of a distorting language that evokes "a disparate tangle of random happenings that encourage the dispersal of language and its collapse into the silence of the void."⁴⁴⁷

Therefore, the demonic serves various functions in the monastic milieu, which is both suggestive of and quite baldly associated with more contemporary anti-Blackness and colonialism. The demon symbolizes that which lives at or beyond the borders of Being and humanity and serves as a means of identity formation. The symbol is a site of bodily terror and risk, and a site of sexual temptation and potential violation. It is furthermore a symbol, though less consciously, of something with potential transformation into utility. With Fanon, Dussel, Mbembe, et al., it is easy to recognize the parallels between this symbol of alterity and the symbols that make up the frameworks of colonialism and anti-Blackness. When Fanon recognizes that, for the West, "Satan is black," it suggests no hyperbole, but the recognition that

⁴⁴⁵ Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 181.

⁴⁴⁶ Brakke, 110.

⁴⁴⁷ Mbembe, 179.

these symbols have served comparable functions in the history of Western Christianity. This connection goes beyond parallel. Assisted by overarching Christian (and pre-Christian) xenophobic and aesthetic categories, the symbol of the demonic was historically, explicitly, associated with Blackness and an imperial enemy, suggesting a concrete historical genealogy between the demonic and these more contemporary categories of alterity. The demonic, along with the Black and colonized “other,” are indelibly tangled up together. To speak or think of the demonic, the Black or the colonized is often to think of all of these at once, whether consciously or not. To speak of the demonic is to evoke anti-Blackness. To participate in anti-Blackness is to engage in the same imaginative framework and practices of Christian demonology. There is, of course, more to be said about asceticism and the earliest iterations of Christian demonology besides what has been identified in this critical lens. Later chapters will consider resources within the monastic and ascetic traditions for a decolonizing demonology.

Augustinian Political Demonologies

Adam Kotsko’s *The Prince of This World* argues that historic Christian doctrines about Satan has left lingering political consequences in modern political thought. His reflections on Augustine’s *Civitas Dei* are particularly significant, in many ways corroborating the insights of decolonial theorists, discussed earlier in the chapter, who point out the demonizing structures of the colonial imagination. Kotsko opens the book with reference to Darren Wilson’s testimony that Michael Brown appeared, to him, like a demon. This one stark and explicit example of demonization is merely representative, Kotsko argues, of a broader tendency in Western political systems to identify and demonize particular enemies.

Kotsko makes the claim that theological reflection on demons and the devil is, in Christianity, an inherently political discourse. On the one hand it has been the language of the

oppressed and marginalized. This first sort of political demonology Kotsko associates with the Hebrew Exodus motifs, where Pharaoh is an early prototype of the intertestamental development of God's cosmic enemy, Satan. Early Christianity embodies this political demonology of liberation in its Christus Victor traditions. However, there is another tradition of political demonology that associates the demonic with scapegoated enemies, and looks to God to justify violence. It is the latter political demonology, emerging in the medieval period, that has materially assisted in the production the modern political order.⁴⁴⁸

Kotsko's argument is relatively straightforward: The devil and the demonic are concepts in Hebrew and Christian religion that have served several competing political and theological functions. Initially, these symbols represented "the political-theological rhetoric of the oppressed."⁴⁴⁹ Intellectually, these cosmic figures have also been used to absolve God of responsibility for evil but, Kotsko thinks, have often struggled to do so convincingly.⁴⁵⁰ Early Christianity initially followed much of the Hebrew apocalyptic tradition by conflating the demonic with the political rulers of the Roman empire. Nevertheless, as Christianity settled into a more socially comfortable position, it began "*displacing* the demonic apocalyptic role of earthly rulers onto some other group—usually a religiously defined group such as Jews or heretics, representing a displacement from the political-theological to the theological as such."⁴⁵¹

Kotsko's historical division is suggestive but questionable. The demonization of Jews and heretics appears relatively early in Christianity, and Paul espouses a positive appraisal of political power. However, Kotsko is right in the sense that decisive shifts take place through the

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 11-12.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 74.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 56.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 71. It is unclear what exactly Kotsko means by this distinction. It seems that anti-Jewish and antisemitic demonization is just as "political" as the demonization of imperial powers.

emergence of Christendom. It becomes a fundamental dimension of Christendom to relate the demonic to certain cultural-ethnic groups and with particular beliefs and practices (heresies) rather than with political power writ large. This change is better understood as cultural and social positionality occasioning a transition to different theological emphases and dominating narratives, rather than a complete transformation.

Particularly helpful about Kotsko's argument is his analysis of Augustine's foundational treatment of the devil and the demonic in the context of a Neo-Platonic ontology. Augustine's theology is instructive of the way that demonology can serve a political bifurcation between Same/Other, or Self/Enemy. In fact, to take Kotsko's argument further, Augustine's binaries depend upon both ontology and a light-dark aesthetic, revealing the ways Augustine corroborates decolonial analysis.

While discussing the phenomenon of evil wills among both humans and angels, for example, Augustine chastises the search for a cause of evil volition. He determines that there is no efficient cause for evil wills. An evil will is simply a deficient will. Augustine draws upon a metaphor about human vision to illustrate the point. Darkness, technically speaking, is not *seen*. To "see" the dark is to *not* see. The same, Augustine maintains, is true of beings: "Thus, too, our mind perceives intelligible forms by understanding them; but when they are deficient, it knows them by not knowing them."⁴⁵² More than a play on words, Augustine links the aesthetic categories of light and darkness to relationships between beings. Some beings suffer lack and are therefore both dark and invisible.

This aesthetic binary is clarified as Augustine associates the City of God and the City of Man with angels and demons, respectively. Those who make up the City of God align their will

⁴⁵² Augustine, *The City of God in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 2 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), 12.7

more closely with the angelic and are thereby virtuous and “light,” while deficiency, darkness, animality, and the demonic define the City of Man. Augustine argues that when God creates “light” on the first day, it implies angels' creation. For “certainly they were created partakers of the eternal light.”⁴⁵³ God separates the angels and demons along with light and darkness: “If an angel turn away, he becomes impure, as are all those who are called unclean spirits, and are no longer light in the Lord, but darkness in themselves.”⁴⁵⁴ Reflecting a comparable anthropology as that of the monastic context, Augustine considers members of the City of Man as those who have risen “above those lower parts he has with the beasts.”⁴⁵⁵ Therefore, those belonging to the City of God are closer in form to the angelic, while those belonging to the City of Man are closer to the animal and the demonic. As Kotsko observes in his apt analysis of Augustine, “the earthly city is founded almost simultaneously with the heavenly, albeit as its shadow and negation.”⁴⁵⁶ Augustine’s account of the two cities lays the foundation for an inscribed demonological political vision, where those peoples and civilizations relegated to the negation of Being are bestial, demonic, and dark.

The historic association between the demonic and Jewish persons palpably manifests this political outlook. According to the influential work by Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jew*, Christianity had from its origins posited two basic, albeit initially distinct, enemies—the devil and Judaism: “The two inexorable enemies of Jesus, then, in Christian legend, were the devil and the Jew, and it was inevitable that the legend should establish a causal relation between them.”⁴⁵⁷ The linkage rests upon a parallel between cosmic and material conflict.⁴⁵⁸

⁴⁵³ Ibid., 11.9

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., 11.2

⁴⁵⁶ Kotsko, *The Prince of This World*, 124.

⁴⁵⁷ Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: the Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (Skokie, IL: Varda Books, 2001), 20.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., 21.

Trachtenberg sees the crux of this association in the City of God/City of Satan motif, whereby “all men belonged to one or the other,” and Jews were decisively made paradigmatic of the latter.⁴⁵⁹

The association between the Jew and the devil, at times, was quite literal. There is, for example, the infamous line in *The Merchant of Venice*: “The Jew is the very devil incarnal!”⁴⁶⁰ Trachtenberg points out that such rhetoric was typically polemical; however, “the charge could not have been so frequently and insistently iterated, even in mockery or as abuse, without leaving its impression upon the suggestible mind of the masses.”⁴⁶¹ David Brakke corroborates: “the devil” became “the representative of all that is oppressed and marginalized in medieval culture: primarily social groups like Jews, heretics, pagans, Muslims, and women but also the increasingly repressed and reviled demands of the physical body itself.”⁴⁶² As Wynter observes, the advent of modernity led to the identification of “Negroes” and “Indians” as the supreme “irrational/subrational Human Other.”⁴⁶³

According to Kotsko, the function of the demonic in medieval Christendom forms a striking parallel to the function of the Black slave in early modern Europe. Just as the devil served as a source of glory for God (as God’s defeated enemy), the slave was a source of glory for the slavemaster.⁴⁶⁴ Drawing on Orlando Patterson, Kotsko points out that demons function as a “subspecies” of angels, identifying another striking parallel between demonology and racial logics. “Like subordinate races under modern white hegemony,” Kotsko explains, “the demons are associated—despite the apparent incongruity—with the body or the animal rather than the

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 41.

⁴⁶⁰ As quoted by Trachtenberg, 31.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁶² Kotsko, 105.

⁴⁶³ Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom,” 266.

⁴⁶⁴ Kotsko, 126-127

rational.”⁴⁶⁵ Kotsko deftly traces the continued significance of Augustine’s cosmological political theology through to the modern era. Social contract theory reflects the demarcation between the City of God and City of Man. This differentiation presumes that “there are plenty of individuals and populations that cannot or will not accede to the order of reason, plenty of classes of the not-quite-human.”⁴⁶⁶ A hierarchy of Being suffused social contract theory with categories for certain persons or groups as deficient of Being and humanity, closer in form to the demonic.

A striking uptick in obsession with the devil and the demonic marks the early modern era.⁴⁶⁷ It is no coincidence that this coincides with the emergence of colonialism. However, very few scholars trace the relationships between this phenomenon and the rise of colonialism and white supremacy. Kotsko does draw out the correlation between growing anti-Judaism and interest in the demonic in the era, and to colonialism as a demonizing discourse built upon the dualistic political theology of the Medieval West.⁴⁶⁸ Michel de Certeau also makes the suggestion that the crumbling of medieval cosmology in early modernity inspired a quest for more materially accessible angels and demons—hence witch-hunts.⁴⁶⁹ This theory supplements Karl Barth’s notion, mentioned in the previous chapter, that an increased obsession with the demonic contributed to the femicide of the anti-witch era. Are the demonological obsessions of early continental European modernity also related to the emergence of colonialism and its quest for human demons to enslave and destroy? This seems possible.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 128.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 137.

⁴⁶⁷ See Brian Levack, *The Devil Within: Possession & Exorcism in the Christian West* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 1ff; 214-215; 254.

⁴⁶⁸ Kotsko connects the increase in emphasis on the demonic to growing anti-Judaism, particularly the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, 157. And to colonialism, 166-167.

⁴⁶⁹ De Certeau, 112.

The symbol of the demon and the symbol of the colonized other certainly coincided in new and striking ways in the early modern era. Both Spanish and Puritan colonists, for example, were convinced that the colonization of the “New World” represented a cosmic conflict against the Devil, who had a unique and palpable relationship with the indigenous peoples the Europeans encountered. “Colonization was perceived,” explains Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, “as an ongoing epic struggle against a stubbornly resistant Satan; and that the New World was imagined either as a false paradise or as a wilderness that needed to be transformed into a garden by Christian heroes.”⁴⁷⁰ Spanish historian José Acosta constructs an influential and representative cosmology that assumes that the devil has engaged in concentrated activity among the indigenous peoples of North America, concluding that “the devil reigned in that other part of the world.”⁴⁷¹ Acosta’s understanding of providence, with (European) Christianity as the “new Israel,” supported a reading of Indian existence as one enslaved to idolatry by the Devil.⁴⁷² Demonology thus became a central locus for the justification of both colonialism and anti-Black racism, drawing on a long Christian tradition of coordinating the symbols of the demonic and the alienated Other. The next chapter will consider some of these justifications in greater detail as they relate to unearthing the blindspots of political demonology.

Conclusion

This chapter introduces another side of Christian demonology than the one put forward by 20th century Euro-American political demonology. As a symbol, the demonic has often functioned as a means of reifying the Same by negation. It symbolizes a something which is

⁴⁷⁰ Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, *Puritan Conquistadors: Iberianizing the Atlantic, 1550-1700* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 5.

⁴⁷¹ José Acosta, *Natural and Moral History of the Indies*, Book V, translated by Frances López-Morillas (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002).

⁴⁷² Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 98.

almost-nothing. As many Black and decolonial thinkers attest, this is the same function of the Black, colonized, Other in the frameworks of Western colonialism. As such, the symbol of the demon and the symbol of the colonized Other, as they exist in the Western psyche, owe a great deal to one another. In fact, especially in light of Christian light-dark aesthetics, there are specific points of connection and genealogical lineages between these symbols. What sort of demonology, then, can exist free of the symbols of ontological domination and alienation? How might we discern an appropriate symbolization of the demonic that is effectively exorcised of colonizing and anti-Black tendencies? Do the demythologized political demonologies that emerged in Euro-American theology in the 20th century succeed in their broadly progressive political projects, or are they also in need of exorcism and decolonization? These are the questions of the next chapter.

Chapter 3:

Decolonizing the Demonic

Demonology is a dialectical force in the spiritual and theological legacies of Christianity. In its multiple functions as doctrine, practice, and symbol demonology represents both danger and possibility. It provides, on the one hand, a robust language for the uncanny, dynamic, and haunting nature of evil. In this way, demonology captivated the imaginations of people caught up in worlds blown apart by violence, or dominated by maleficent figures of uninhibited cruelty. At the same time, demonology represents a sinister and noxious precarity. It is one of the primary means by which Western Christianity has worked out its anxieties and antipathies about various relations of alterity. The history of Christian demonology is, in fact, one of countless bodies wounded and destroyed on account of a Christian imagination that weaves them into the symbolization of demons.

There is, therefore, a seemingly implacable tension that underscores one of the foundational questions raised in the introduction: What is theology to make of demonology in the 21st century? The contextual situation for 21st century theology is one of persistent anti-Blackness and the complex afterlives of coloniality. This fact implicates demonology as a fundamental problem raised by the given context—both the fact of anti-Black colonialism as a reality that could be called “demonic,” as well as the role of Christian demonology in creating anti-Black colonialism as a social imaginary in the first place. The previous chapters have illustrated this dilemma of demonology by asserting several historical and theological claims.

First, I have made the historical assessment that demonology is a significant aspect of 20th-century Western theology, despite the fact that many scholars today generally fail to

recognize the contributions to demonology made by several major theological figures. This suggests the need to further engage demonology along with questions of hermeneutics, Christology, and political responsibility, which were foundational problems for many 20th century theologians and remain relevant today.

The project of Euro-American “political demonology,” represented by the likes of Bultmann, Barth, Tillich, Wink, and Girard therefore presents persuasive constructive arguments for contemporary theologians. Advancements in Biblical exegesis, the tradition of modern Christocentric and Kingdom-centric soteriologies, and theological engagement with mimetic theory are among the most significant theological foundations for this Euro-American tradition of political demonology. These themes remain salient for contemporary theology, therefore building a potential bridge between Euro-American political demonology and contemporary thought. Furthermore, in light of theology’s current need to reckon with the legacies of colonialism and anti-Black racism, this tradition of political demonology might have some helpful tools to offer, inasmuch as it has served to bolster broadly progressive political-theological frameworks of praxis against the powers and principalities. For these reasons, the first chapter made the case that political demonology might be instructive for contemporary theology.

However, the second chapter demonstrates the significant role of Christian beliefs and practices about demons in constructing the anti-Black colonial systems that persist into the 21st century. Today, many theologians are rightly reckoning with Christian notions such as anthropology (“the doctrine of Man”), the emergence of the doctrine of discovery, and supersessionist logics as significant ways theology has contributed to this contemporary political reality. The history of Christian demonology deserves a central place in this analytic task.

Western colonialism, I have argued, is predicated upon the demonization of bodies relegated to the colonial periphery. The very imagination of centralized subjectivities vis-à-vis peripheral objects, is itself a reflection of the dualistic imagination of Christian (dem)ontology.

However, despite the aim of Euro-American political demonology to name and resist demonic social and political systems, anti-Black colonialism is not a central concern of this sort of political demonological project. This failure is scandalous in that anti-Black colonialism is one of the defining contexts that modern and contemporary theology should address. The silence is further inhibiting because anti-Black colonialism implicates the construct of itself demonology. While these theologians carefully wrestled with epistemological, exegetical, and ethical objections to demonology, they did not reckon with the voice and witness of the colonized peoples of the world; peoples whose flesh has been scapegoated as a living symbol of the demonic. Is it possible to have a demonology that does not participate in this historical project of demonizing Black, queer, women's and indigenous bodies? Is it possible to have a demonology that does not produce new, yet unimagined, modes of demonization?

This third chapter integrates each set of respective historical and constructive theological arguments. It directly considers whether political demonology is a worthwhile theological project in the face of anti-Black colonialism. To answer this question, I will sift the thinkers and ideas associated with Euro-American political demonology through three critical rubrics: Liberation theology, postcolonial theology, and decolonial approaches to theology. Each of these frameworks offers particular questions and challenges to Western theology in its entirety, as well as to the particular theological projects of Barth, Tillich, Wink, and Girard. Ultimately, I suggest that decoloniality is the appropriate critical and theological framework for demonology.

While the vision of Euro-American political demonology shares much in common with liberation theology in particular, as well as postcolonial and decolonial theologies to some degree, these theological traditions challenge political demonology's exegetical frameworks regarding the person and message of Christ (specifically, the Kingdom of God). They also challenge Euro-American political demonology's inconsistent approach to contextuality, namely the failure on the part of these European and American theologians to place the oppressed and *demonized* peoples of the world at the center of their theological vision.

The question of discernment is a recurring concern throughout the chapter. Discernment, in the context of political demonology, is a problem with two interrelated dimensions: First, is it appropriate to speak of the demonic at all? And if so—when, how, or why? This is a theoretical problem raised by political demonology itself—as Karl Barth and René Girard both assert, demonic evil is itself implicated in the very articulation and symbolization of the demonic. Demonologies are often allied with the diabolical projects of violence and scapegoating. More concretely, given the fact that demonology has participated in the various demonizations of the colonial project, how does theology distinguish useful and liberating deployments of demonology from those that participate in oppression? How can theology know when to speak of the demonic, or when to remain silent?

Furthermore, the second dimension to the problem of discernment relates to the traditional Christian practice of discerning the spirits. What, truly, *is* demonic? In the context of a political demonology, this implies the means of discerning the political situation from a spiritual and theological perspective. Paul Tillich, for example, proposes an aesthetic theory—the juxtaposition of formlessness and form—as the guide to identifying social and political realities that represent a social demonry. But how exactly are these judgments to be made? By whom?

And how does one adjudicate between competing claims? This question lurks in the background of Euro-American political demonology, especially given the demonization of Jewish people under the Nazi regime. How did so many theologians uncritically accept the demonization of the innocent, all the while failing to recognize the demonic powers of National Socialism?

In this chapter, I consider how liberation, postcolonial, and decolonial approaches to theology might offer tools for thinking about these problems of discernment. Liberation and postcolonial theologies both suggest the need to prioritize the oppressed victims of history. To substantiate these possibilities, I pay particular attention to liberation theologian Jon Sobrino's theology of the anti-Kingdom. Sobrino's theology of evil, which bears important similarities to Euro-American political demonology, bears the unique mark of his Ignatian spiritual milieu. For Sobrino, the vantage point of the oppressed becomes the foundational perspective for the imperative for spiritual discernment. I put him in conversation, briefly, with Marcella Althaus-Reid as a potential source of further postcolonial and queer critique as a counterbalance to Sobrino's theology of evil. I argue that these liberationist and postcolonial insights provide foundational possibilities for a praxis of discernment in the 21st century.

In light of the decolonial analysis in the previous chapter, however, political demonology must also wrestle with the particular questions and criticisms of a decolonial approach. Decolonial theory, particularly where it intersects with Black studies, recognizes the anti-Black and colonizing history of Christian theology. Through an attention to decoloniality, I argue that the previously discussed representatives of political demonology each, in their own ways, represent the epistemological frameworks of coloniality. Despite their broadly leftist political aims, these theologians fail to recognize the subtle and often deceptive workings of coloniality in their assumptions. Decolonial theory specifically questions theological reliance on ontological-

thinking, as well as Eurocentrism. I argue that, from this perspective, Euro-American political demonology is mired in the very powers and principalities it seeks to oppose. This observation underscores the need for discernment in the context of colonial projects that seek to confuse good with evil, and evil with good.

Along with its unique challenges to Euro-American political demonology, decolonial thought also offers particular criticisms of liberation theology. Decolonial thinkers question liberation theology's reliance on Euro-centric sources, and its penchant for strictly normative theological discourses. It is for this reason that a traditional liberationist approach to demonology, while an instructive corrective, is ultimately insufficient. I finally, then, turn to theologian Joseph Drexler-Dreis, who attempts to reframe and defend liberation theology as a decolonial project.

Importantly, a decolonial approach does not require siding with the demythologizing impulses of modern theology which would suppress or erase demonology altogether. A decolonial approach underscores the salience of the symbol of the demonic, despite and in some respects *because* of its history of death. A decolonial approach emphasizes that the Christian symbol of the demonic remains a vital tool for many colonized peoples. It is a language, in fact, by which many articulate and oppose the tremendous evil of colonizing and anti-Black powers and principalities. Decoloniality furthermore resists the colonialist constructions of "religion" and "secular" that undergird relegations of such so-called "superstitious" beliefs to a primitive and unevolved humanity, or which reduce demonology to questions of epistemology and the binary of real/not real.

Coloniality is a project of epistemological deception. Theologically, this represents the confusion of good with evil and the Divine dignity of human beings with the demonic.

Therefore, discernment is inherent to the praxis of decolonial theology. Decolonial theology turns to sources beyond the Eurocentric milieu and fulfills the commitments of liberation theology by more decisively centering the oppressed and demonized peoples of the earth. Decoloniality advocates discernment as receiving, highlighting, and sifting authoritative voices in naming what is either of God or the devil. It centers those who bear witness to the lies and deceptions of empire and have learned (as a matter of survival) to discern God from the devil. Drawing on Jon Sobrino's prioritization of the crucified peoples, I offer an initial understanding of decolonial discernment as a prioritization of the demonized peoples of history.

Demonology, Liberation, and Postcoloniality

Contemporary theological reflection on colonialism and racism has taken place primarily in the context of liberation and postcolonial theologies. The former establishes an imperative to reflect on Christian theology and praxis in light of its impact on the poor and marginalized. The latter, integrating liberation theology, other contextual/critical theologies, and social scientific postcolonial theories, reflects broadly and critically on the theme of "empire."⁴⁷³ Marcella Althaus-Reid, whose work stands at the intersections of liberation, postcolonial, and decolonial thought, provides a representative definition of "empire as a single politico-economical enterprise of monochromatic characteristics gravitating around a handful of central ideas."⁴⁷⁴ In this light, postcolonial theology is an intersectional critique of dominating and homogenizing powers. The particular streams of postcolonial theory which emerge from feminist and queer commitments critique focus on hermeneutical patriarchy and heteronormativity as projects of domination through interpretive control. In the following section, I put the construct of Euro-

⁴⁷³ Stephen Moore and Mayra Rivera, "Tentative Topography," in *Planetary Loves: Spivak, Postcoloniality, and Theology*, eds. Stephen Moore and Mayra Rivera (New York, New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 3-14., 4, 6ff.

⁴⁷⁴ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology* (London: Routledge, 2001), 91

American political demonology, described in the first chapter, in conversation with liberationist and (especially, feminist and queer) postcolonial theological perspectives. This requires tracing the specific intersections between 20th-century Western theology with liberation and postcolonial theologies, which has been an important dimension of theological reflection over the past several decades.

Latin American liberation theology is often traced back to the work of Gustavo Gutiérrez. His *A Theology of Liberation* gave voice to a growing theological conviction among many Latin American priests, pastors, and theologians. Liberation theology introduces a critical commitment to Christian praxis from the perspective of the victims of violence throughout history. Liberation theology insists that Christian theology must support the foundational Gospel imperative to liberate the oppressed. “The oppressed” are often, traditionally, defined as “the poor,” but the influence of feminist, queer, and postcolonial thinkers has expanded this definition to a broader sense of intersecting identities. As a parallel movement, Black liberation theology considers what Christian theology might and should mean from the perspective of oppressed Black person. Growing from the work of James Cone, it prioritizes the Gospel imperative to seek liberation from white supremacy. My assessment of Euro-American political demonology interacts with both streams of liberation.

Scholars have attempted to reflect on the linkages and disjunctions between liberation/postcolonial theology and the most influential 20th-century theologians in the West. A political demonology must at least pass muster with liberation and postcolonial theology to be a viable theological option in the 21st century. I will begin with Barth and then consider in turn Tillich, Girard, and Wink in conversation with liberation and postcolonial theologies. In addition to surveying the preceding conversations about such connections, I will point out what I believe

are missteps in many such comparative attempts. I argue that the primary difference between these Euro-American theologies and liberation/postcolonial theology relates to different understandings of Christology and of what theological contextuality means and requires. Namely, liberation and postcolonial theology emphasize the humanity of Jesus and the need for a consistent dialectic between Word and context, prioritizing the theological situation of the poor and oppressed. Liberation and postcolonial theologies interrogate the failure of political demonology to ground itself in a historical and material understanding of the Kingdom of God and for failing to attend to the voices of the oppressed as authoritative witnesses to the realities of evil.

Karl Barth

George Hunsinger promotes the image of Karl Barth as a theologian whose thought mandates a radical political praxis, and as such, has much in common with liberation theology. Hunsinger argues that Barth and Latin American liberation theology share much of the same political vision, particularly a shared concern about the evils of capitalism. They both warn against the temptation of many Christian theologians to explicitly or tacitly endorse economic systems that privilege the rich. Hunsinger also points out that Barth agrees with liberation theologians that oppressive political realities can reflect theological errors. Theologians should attend to praxis as a gauge for the validity of one's theology.⁴⁷⁵

However, Hunsinger argues that despite much that is shared in their practical aims, Barth and liberation theologians have divergent theological starting points. "Two very different controlling passions,"⁴⁷⁶ Hunsinger explains, accounts for these differences. Barth's controlling passion is "the Word of God," where liberation theology centers historical contextuality and the

⁴⁷⁵ George Hunsinger, "Karl Barth and Liberation Theology," *The Journal of Religion* 63, no. 3 (1983). 255-253

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 253.

praxiological insistence on the liberation of the oppressed.⁴⁷⁷ By this, Hunsinger does not mean that either system entirely lacks the theological strengths of the other—e.g., both preach fidelity to the Word of God.⁴⁷⁸ However, although acknowledging that liberation theology exhibits more consistent and authentic praxis, Hunsinger expresses his preference for Barth's theological framework. Maintaining that Barth correctly privileges the revelation of the Word of God, Hunsinger approves of Barth's sense that the commandment to love God is somewhat distinct from, and supersedes, love of neighbor. Barth, according to Hunsinger, concurrently emphasizes the initiative of Divine grace rather than human action.⁴⁷⁹ On the other hand, says Hunsinger, liberation theology emphasizes the command to love the neighbor through human action, almost to the detriment of the preeminence of Divine initiative. Liberation largely ignores the surplus demands of loving God beyond loving neighbor.⁴⁸⁰ In other words, Hunsinger thinks Barth has his theological priorities straight, even if the result is similar.

Hunsinger's assessment, however, unfortunately relies on tired caricatures of liberation theology that are relatively easy to debunk. For Gutiérrez, it is clear that "the Word" is by no means secondary to politics or contextuality. In *A Theology of Liberation* he frames liberation as a Divine reality actualized "in light of the Word."⁴⁸¹ He reiterates this elsewhere, more strongly: "The theology of liberation, like any theology is about God. God and God's love are, ultimately, its only theme."⁴⁸² Some of this confusion could be cleared up if Hunsinger paid attention to the way that some liberation theologians explicitly cite dependence on, or at least resonance with, Barth's theology, which I will discuss below. A more fruitful way to compare Barth and

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., 253-254.

⁴⁷⁸ Ibid., 254.

⁴⁷⁹ Ibid., 260.

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 261.

⁴⁸¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 12th ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988).83.

⁴⁸² Gustavo Gutiérrez, "The Task and Content of Liberation Theology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. Christopher Rowland, trans. Judith Condor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 19.

liberation theology is by assessing their distinct approaches to Christology and soteriology, which relate to somewhat distinct approaches to Scripture and hermeneutics. These differences provide a better foundation by which to consider whether Barth's approach to the demonic coheres in any way with liberation theology.

For Barth, as is well known, the centering paradigm of Christian theology is "the Word of God." The Word has three manifestations: the proclamation of the Church, the authoritative record of Scripture, and "the Jesus Christ who has come." Properly speaking, says Barth, the first two are revelation only in their relation to Jesus Christ.⁴⁸³ This is among the reasons that some take from Barth a Christocentrism (even a Christomonism) that looks to the person of Jesus Christ—including his life and teaching—as the central paradigm for theology. Barth is sometimes criticized (and even seems to have been somewhat self-aware regarding this tendency⁴⁸⁴) for allowing creedal formulas and the Divinity of Christ to overshadow the humanity of Jesus.⁴⁸⁵ Liberation theology explicitly corrects Barth on this question, while also resonating profoundly with Barth's insistence on the centrality of Christ.

The closest association between liberation and Barthian theologies certainly appears in the thought of James Cone. Although Cone quotes from Barth approvingly, and with some regularity, Cone also insists that his theology reflects the distinct witness of Black people in America and is therefore not simply bound to the confines of white theology. Cone does not

⁴⁸³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. Geoffrey William Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, vol. III/3 (London: T & T Clark, 2010), I/4, 113. Barth clarifies, however, that any language of subordination of the former to the latter would be incorrect. To that point, Barth later compares the unity of threefold revelation to the unity of the Trinity, See p. 121.

⁴⁸⁴ Robert B. Price, "Barth on the Incarnation," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth*, eds. George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson, Vol. I (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 144.

⁴⁸⁵ Importantly, this is one of James Cone's criticisms in *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 107. For context on Barth, also see Andy Alexis-Baker, "Theology is Ethics: How Karl Barth Sees the Good Life," in *The Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 64 (4), 2011, on the conciliar nature of Barth's understanding of Jesus.

want to be labeled a Barthian, rather a faithfully and authentically *Black* theologian.

Nevertheless, it is impossible to ignore some crucial points of coherence, and even reliance, when it comes to some core insights that have resonated throughout Black liberation theology.

In *Black Theology & Black Power*, Cone agrees with Barth (and other modern Protestant theologians) that “Christ is the essence of Christianity.”⁴⁸⁶ Elsewhere, Cone relies upon his Barthian sensibilities when responding to critics who argue that Black liberation theology is simply a “reduction to current black politics.” Against this, Cone insists, “Christian theology begins and ends with divine revelation,” citing his agreement with Barth on the need to retain the mystery and alien nature of the Word of God.⁴⁸⁷ Cone says that Black theology prioritizes Scripture, as Black women and men understand it.⁴⁸⁸ More foundationally, “Jesus Christ is the subject of black theology.”⁴⁸⁹ Cone does not always make these declarations in reference to Barth, tending to argue instead that these are the authentic and independent features of the faith of Black persons in the United States. Indeed, I am not arguing that Cone is a strict Barthian.⁴⁹⁰ Nonetheless Cone, at the very least, resonates with Barth’s Christocentrism.

Latin American liberation theology also has a relationship to Barth, finding parallel with, and at times relying heavily, on Barth and related 20th-century European Protestant themes. Gustavo Gutiérrez, in the early pages of *A Theology of Liberation*, expands on his foundational definition of liberation theology as “critical reflection on Christian praxis in light of the word of God.” Both “praxis” and “word of God” are terms he relates to Karl Barth’s insistence on the Christian duty to practice the commands of God. The aforementioned critical reflection on praxis

⁴⁸⁶ James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 44.

⁴⁸⁷ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 93.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 29.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁹⁰ For more on the relationship between Cone and Barth, see Raymond Cordell Carr, “Barth and Cone in Dialogue on Revelation and Freedom: An Analysis of James Cone’s Critical Appropriation of “Barthian” Theology” Graduate Theological Union, 2011), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/909934328>.

is then, for Gutiérrez, merely an expression of fidelity to “the traditional datum of revelation.”⁴⁹¹ Against caricatures of liberation theology as neither theological nor traditional, Gutiérrez insists instead on a commitment to context and situation both *alongside* and as the necessary *consequence of* fidelity to “scripture, tradition, and the magisterium.”⁴⁹² He also consciously draws on developments in modern Protestant theology, with its interest in eschatology, particularly in Barth.⁴⁹³ Gutiérrez calls the Church *back* to the Gospel as it pertains to the content of the “Reign of God” as a message of hope and justice for the oppressed.⁴⁹⁴ This hope is, again echoing Barth, an “event” that is nothing less than a “gift.”⁴⁹⁵ Hunsinger’s impulse is correct that there are important methodological and theological differences between these two theologians, but their approach to the foundational role of Word of God is not a significant one.

While Barth and liberation theology (per Cone and Gutiérrez) share a fidelity to “the Word,” a crucial difference comes by recognizing what are, frankly, improvements in Biblical exegesis that allow liberation theology a more rigorous appreciation for the Hebraic and apocalyptic context of the message of Jesus in light of the prophetic promises.⁴⁹⁶ Liberation theology thus points to and appropriates the evidence, underemphasized or flatly contradicted in Western theology, that Jesus embodied a politically radical message of redemption which should have palpable manifestation in this world. Cone, Gutiérrez, and other liberation theologians can prioritize this aspect of exegesis by making the conscious choice to more thoroughly attend to the humanity of Jesus.⁴⁹⁷ Liberation theologians, particularly James Cone, also correct Barth by

⁴⁹¹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* xxix.

⁴⁹² Ibid., xlv.

⁴⁹³ Ibid., 93. However, Gutiérrez ends up drawing more heavily from Moltmann and Pannenberg in reference to the theme of hope. See 123ff.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., *A Theology of Liberation*, 98ff

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 104.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., 130ff.

⁴⁹⁷ Cone explicitly criticizes Barth’s failure to attend to the humanity of Christ. See Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 107.

positing a more historical and dynamic understanding of the Word. He insists that Christians should understand the Word of God as a particular force in history. It is “the liberating Subject in the lives of the oppressed struggling for freedom.”⁴⁹⁸ This requires careful attention to the context of disempowerment and struggle as the place from which the Word of God announces itself and makes demands.⁴⁹⁹ This speaks to liberation theology’s emphasis on context in relation to the Word of God.

This distinctive emphasis of liberation theology can be more clearly expressed by comparing Barth and Jon Sobrino on the relationship between context and theology. Barth and Sobrino share, to some degree, an emphasis on Jesus’s message of the Kingdom as a social and political reality. Jane Barter, in harmony with Hunsinger’s general arguments, rightly argues that “For Barth, the Kingdom of God is not abstract and other-worldly, but is material and already becoming present.”⁵⁰⁰ Positioning his reflections on the nature of the Kingdom of God as a dimension of Jesus’s teaching and the content of the Gospel witness, Sobrino situates himself positively in the “back to Jesus” spirit of 19th and 20th century Protestant theology. Sobrino focuses on analyzing the liberal tradition, however, curiously skipping over Barth.⁵⁰¹ Yet his

⁴⁹⁸ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 93.

⁴⁹⁹ Another common “straw man” of liberation theology that appears in comparisons with Barth, is the notion that Barth is reticent to identify the Kingdom of God with any particular political movement, while liberation theology (purportedly) does so. Nathan Hieb makes this argument, referencing Barth’s declaration that Jesus “did not represent or defend or champion any programme — whether political, economic, moral or religious, whether conservative or progressive.” Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV.2, 171. Nathan Hieb, “Barth and Liberation Theologies,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth*, eds. George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson, Vol. II (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 809-820. Hieb ignores the fact that Gutiérrez makes almost exactly the same statement, based upon his commitment to critical reflection that is always criticizing all political forms and movements in light of the Gospel: Gustavo Gutiérrez (so does Sobrino in chapter on Kingdom) makes nearly the exact same statement: “The eschatological promises are being fulfilled throughout history, but this does not mean that they can be identified clearly and completely with one or another social reality.” Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 97.

⁵⁰⁰ Jane A. Barter, “A Theology of Liberation in Barth’s Church Dogmatics IV/3,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 53, no. 2 (May, 2000) 175. 174.

⁵⁰¹ Except for a brief mention of Barth’s transcendentalist take on the Kingdom, depicting it as a reaction to Bultmann’s existentialist interpretation. See Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993) 112.

assessments of this trajectory are nonetheless applicable. Sobrino advances the criticism against modern Protestant theology that, while this renewed emphasis on Jesus and the Kingdom is welcome, there is a lack of political precision, historical contextualization, and, most importantly, a failure to incorporate the vision of the poor and their understanding of the content of Jesus's message regarding the Kingdom.⁵⁰²

The context for Sobrino's sense of contrast involves two specific methodological distinctions that differ significantly from Barth. First, Sobrino consciously distinguishes liberation theology from liberal, kerygmatic (e.g., Barthian), and conciliar Christologies by unapologetically privileging the historical Jesus as the starting point of Christology, citing both Karl Rahner and the lived faith of the poor to support this choice.⁵⁰³ Despite lip-service to the centrality of Scripture, Barth relies on both conciliar and traditional Protestant soteriological reductionisms, underemphasizing the teachings and context of Jesus of Nazareth. Second, Sobrino also possesses an explicit and unapologetic emphasis on context, attempting to articulate what he sees as the unique and authoritative perspective of the oppressed peoples of Latin America. As Sobrino articulates it, liberation theology posits a dialectic between experience and revelation⁵⁰⁴ that is more coherent and consistent than Barth's attempt to do the same while, in practice, privileging the "Word" in a relatively static and ahistorical way.⁵⁰⁵

What does this have to do with demonology? For one, liberation theology's emphasis on contextuality, particularly the context of the oppressed, suggests possible corrections to Barth's

⁵⁰² Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 115.

⁵⁰³ Ibid., 44-45.

⁵⁰⁴ Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001). 3-4. Sobrino relates the New Testament and history by relating both to the actual faith of persons, moving between "situations of then and now" from the perspective of the subjects living in faith in either case. He also speaks about the movement between the "from where" and the "universal. . . object," which is Christ, received by the subject. He prioritizes the former (context) in terms of epistemological chronology.

⁵⁰⁵ I am largely parroting, here, Paul Tillich's criticism of Barth which is in this respect the same criticism liberation theology might make.

political demonology. Barth is cognizant of the victims of history, in the abstract, expressing his concerns that demonology lends itself to scapegoating the innocent. However, the poor are not a central locus for Barth's theology. Such an emphasis might give Barth more tools to analyze the particular dynamics of demonization in history, rather than relying on more detached and abstract constructions whereby he forms universal rules for theology regarding whether or not to speak of the demonic. As discussed in the first chapter, Barth's demonology rests heavily on a condemnation of theological and pastoral attention to the topic. While he exhibited a more expressive demonology at other points in his career,⁵⁰⁶ he never comprehensively synthesizes these two impulses. He presents the former more systematically and decisively. Barth relies on theological rules regarding the demonic rather than a sharp sense of discernment that considers context and power.

Furthermore, while it is true that Barth does emphasize a material and political understanding of the Kingdom of God, Sobrino's concern that 20th century Protestant theology does not articulate a more historically specific Kingdom theology has consequences for his demonology. By silencing demonology, Barth hinders the pastor or theologian in naming the concrete manifestations of the demonic in history, thereby making it difficult to also explicate the historical presence of the Kingdom as anti-demonic reality.⁵⁰⁷ To the disappointment of many, Barth later criticized other theologians for becoming too involved in activist movements. This exhibits, perhaps, a failure to engage in history against the demonic enemies of the Kingdom.⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁶ See Karl Barth, "The Struggle for Human Righteousness," translated by Geoffrey William Brommiley in *The Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981).

⁵⁰⁷ That being said, Barth seems to think that political conversation about evil and injustice, without the demonological rhetorical accoutrement, is the manifestation of an anti-demonic praxis. See Karl Barth, "Interview by Marie-Claire Lescaze," in *Barth in Conversation 1959-1962* ed. Eberhard Busch, trans. Geoffrey William Brommiley (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), 113-114.

⁵⁰⁸ See Gary Dorrien, *Social Democracy in the Making*, 269.

Postcolonial theology offers slightly different questions and critiques that make it possible to further assess Barth's demonology. Postcolonial theology emerged primarily around hermeneutical questions, in conversation with both liberation theology and postcolonial theory in the social sciences. Postcolonial theologians often cite their coherence and reliance on liberation theology: "No political theology could 'supersede' and in some fundamental way transcend the historic work of liberation theology."⁵⁰⁹ As with liberation theology, there is a sense of fidelity to Scripture, sustained through the belief that there are anti-colonial themes in the Bible that theologians should uncover and prioritize.⁵¹⁰ Mark Lewis Taylor, for example, reflects much of the ethos of liberation theology when he points to the exegetical witness to an anti-imperial praxis of Jesus.⁵¹¹ Yet, postcolonial theology also attends to questions of context and hermeneutics, moving beyond the tendency of some liberation theologians to give lip service to contextuality while also maintaining the singularity of revelation. Postcolonial theology, especially inasmuch as it is informed by feminist and womanist hermeneutics, looks for the polyvalence of interpretation from different perspectives. Kwok Pui-Lan describes "postcolonial feminist criticism" as an approach that highlights "the vantage point of women multiply oppressed because of race, class, conquest, and colonialism."⁵¹² Postcolonial theology is therefore distinctively intersectional. Rather than making "the poor" its locus, the emphasis on

⁵⁰⁹ Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner and Mayra Rivera, "Introduction: Alien/Nation, Liberation, and the Postcolonial Underground," in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, eds. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis, Missouri: , 2004), 1-19. 6.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵¹¹ Mark Lewis Taylor, "Spirit and Liberation: Achieving Postcolonial Theology in the United States," in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, eds. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner and Mayra Rivera (Saint Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004)49.

⁵¹² Pui-lan Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Pr, 2005), 64.

“empire” reflects on concentrations of power that construe, construct, and subject various identities in complex and intersecting ways.⁵¹³

Notably, while the title “postcolonial” has sometimes led to the accusation of presuming that colonization is a bygone reality, postcolonial theologians decidedly resist this designation by positing “empire” as a complex and persistent human (and in many ways peculiarly Western) phenomenon.⁵¹⁴ Therefore, “empire” is a theme one can trace through Scripture and tradition and is an ongoing political and social reality beyond the decolonial movements of the 20th century. Postcolonial theory does not restrict the reality of empire to the European colonial powers of the modern era.

There are many elements to Barth’s theology that commend a postcolonial reading, and certainly, many have appropriated him in that way. In addition to some of the points of harmony, mentioned above, between Barth and various aspects of liberation theology, there are two main themes that theologians point to as suggesting a Barthian postcolonial theology: Barth’s theological critique of power, coinciding with his resistance to the identification of Christianity with German/European culture. Some also commend specific comments Barth made against colonialism and Euro-centric approaches to theology.

Barth’s emphasis on the preeminence on the Word of God over and against the hubris of “man” suggests, for some theologians, an imperative to resist all hegemonic amalgamations of power. Cynthia Rigby, building on the work of George Hunsinger and other politically-left Barthians, cites Barth’s critiques of concentrations of human power, proposing the preeminence of the liberating command of God over any human person or institution. The command of God, centered in the person of Jesus Christ, stands as a judgment against any system of power that

⁵¹³ See Kwok Pui-Lan’s critique of the category of “the poor” in liberation theology on p. 146.

⁵¹⁴ See Keller, Nausner, and Rivera, xi.

creates hierarchies of domination and oppresses human beings.⁵¹⁵ Barth's theology is potentially anti-imperial since "empire" is a title for systems of hegemony.⁵¹⁶

Tim Hartman makes the somewhat brazen claim that Barth's theology was "not dependent on the colonial-Christendom complex."⁵¹⁷ For Hartman, Barth's critique of the liberal Protestant identification of Christianity and German/European civilization is particularly instructive.⁵¹⁸ It is true, There *is* a rather palpable shift in Barth's political perspective on colonialism when his theology transitions to dialectic, which leads him to reject German liberal theology decisively. In this decidedly antagonistic phase in his thought, Barth condemns the hubris of the civilizing and colonizing mission of the European powers, particularly in light of the ironic chaos and destruction of these so-called Christian empires at the start of World War I.⁵¹⁹ For Barth, this represented the dangerous and dehumanizing identification of God with a particular civilization.⁵²⁰ Notably, he condemns the use of demonizing rhetoric that casts the world beyond Europe as a land "of devils."⁵²¹

Later in his life, Barth makes several comments about the global future of the Church and the need to reject Eurocentric approaches to theology. Notably, he relates these specifically to the demonic. In 1962, Barth had occasion to meet William Stringfellow, whose spiritual and political

⁵¹⁵ Cynthia L. Rigby, "Empire and the Christian Tradition," in *Empire and the Christian Tradition*, eds. Don H. Compier, Kwok Pui-Lan and Joerg Rieger (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007)344.

⁵¹⁶ See also Michael Gorringer, *Barth Against Hegemony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁵¹⁷ Tim Hartman, *Theology After Colonization* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019)xvii. Despite attempts to defend postcoloniality against the accusation that it assumes colonialism has ended, Hartman makes the perplexing choice to speak of colonialism in the past tense.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., 6 See also Hannah Reichel, "Barth on the Church in Mission," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Karl Barth*, eds. George Hunsinger and Keith L. Johnson, Vol. I (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), 327-339. Reichel writes: "Barth passionately struggled against political appropriations of the gospel. . . and against its confusion with "modern" or "European" culture."

⁵¹⁹ David W. Congdon, "Dialectical Theology as Theology of Mission: Investigating the Origins of Karl Barth's Break with Liberalism," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16, no. 4 (Oct, 2014)406-407. doi:10.1111/ijst.12075.

⁵²⁰ Ibid., 408-409.

⁵²¹ Ibid., 404.

writings on “the principalities and the powers” would profoundly influence Walter Wink. After being asked by Stringfellow, at an event at the University of Chicago, to comment on the notion of “the powers,” Barth elaborates on the powers and principalities of consumerism, hedonism, and both “Communist and anti-Communist ideology.” Later, in some closing remarks, Barth returned to the theme by offering: “If I myself were an American. . . I would try to elaborate a theology of freedom.” American theologians should liberate themselves, he pressed, of any sense of inferiority beneath the self-aggrandizement of European theologians. However, Americans should also resist the temptation of a “superiority complex” over the rest of the globe, namely against “Asia and Africa.” If American theology is able to articulate freedom from both a sense of inferiority and hubris, it would represent freedom from and victory over “the powers.”⁵²² In this way, Barth attributes some sense of the demonic to the realities of Eurocentrism, and American superiority, in Christian theology. A theology that rejects these hegemonies is, thus, one that has claimed victory and freedom over demonic influences.

Kwok Pui-Lan, while acknowledging some Barthian resources for a postcolonial theology, rejects the image of a postcolonial Barth. She argues, for one, that Barth’s emphasis on the transcendence of the Word of God over human culture leaves little room for recognizing the agency of human beings, such as “Third World nations struggling for independence.”⁵²³ Kwok further points out the masculine/feminine binaries at work in Barth that present God as active and human beings as passive recipients of God’s revelation. Not only does this reify gender hierarchies, but it also champions a glorification of passivity, which is a technique of many hegemonic systems to maintain power.⁵²⁴ Among many salient criticisms of Barth’s patriarchal

⁵²² See “Podium Discussion in Chicago,” in *Barth in Conversation 1959-1962* ed. Eberhard Busch (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), 187-191.

⁵²³ Kwok Pui-Lan, *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology*, 196.

⁵²⁴ *Ibid.*

hierarchies in his account of gender is the connection Mayra Rivera and Stephen Moore make to Barth's construal of God as "Wholly Other," and feminist rejection of "the absolutely distant [i.e., "male"] God most often implied by allusions to the wholly Other."⁵²⁵ Many theologians also reject Barth's usefulness as an anti-colonial thinker because his theology is often somewhat "otherworldly" and lacks a solid attention to context.⁵²⁶ Barth thereby reifies male and Western presumptions of neutrality and universality, thus embedding himself in and repeating Eurocentric concentration of power.

In an attempt to portray Barth as an ally to postcolonial sensibilities, Hannah Reichel exhibits these paradoxes. She heralds Barth's detachment of the Gospel from culture, thus suggesting that "mission" should not be confused with the imposition of a particular cultural form. There is not one "specific historical form of the gospel," Barth maintains.⁵²⁷ However, this very assertion is somewhat self-defeating. As Reichel lauds, Barth sees the proclamation of the Gospel as existing concretely and primarily, and exclusively, in Scripture. Barth maintains that culture must become subservient to (and he even insists *conquered* by) the Gospel.⁵²⁸

As with Barth's relationship to liberation theology, his relationship to postcolonial theology is something of a paradox. On the one hand, Barth prophetically rejects what he sees as theological frameworks that produce concentrations of human power, including those frameworks that arrogantly centralize Europe and the West as the harbingers of Christianity and civilization. He makes the salient and prophetic equation of "the powers and principalities" with that which we might call "empire." However, he also reifies specific hierarchal ontologies,

⁵²⁵ Moore and Rivera, "Tentative Topography," 13

⁵²⁶ Hartman, 49.

⁵²⁷ As quoted in Reichel, "Barth on the Church in Mission," 335.

⁵²⁸ Reichel, 335.

especially as they pertain to patriarchy, and perpetuates many theological themes associated with the consolidation of colonial power (i.e., passivity).

When it comes to the question of the demonic explicitly, then, one might ask whether or not Barth sufficiently considers the complex interplay between power and “the powers.” While he helpfully recognizes the slippage of demonology, Barth does not leave much room for people of various contexts to name the demonic in ways that make sense in their given positionalities. He subsumes this possibility under a restrictive and idiosyncratic emphasis on “the Gospel” (as arbitrated by the white male European subject—Barth himself). His proclivity to reject any talk of the demonic subverts the possibility of a contextual revelation or practice within which such language might be salient or even liberating. To place such a rigid rule (albeit a rule he elsewhere nuances and sometimes breaks himself) is to perform an authoritative, hegemonic role in declaring authentic revelation and witness. Barth demonizes and thereby colonizes demonology. What is expressly lacking in Barth’s theology is an account of discernment, opening up possibilities for the language and practices that might fit a particular situation.

Paul Tillich

Drawing some initial connections between Paul Tillich’s demonology and liberating/anti-colonial political commitments is relatively straightforward. As I discuss in the first chapter, Tillich committed himself to “religious socialism” and possessed a particular interest in putting Marx in conversation with theology.⁵²⁹ Tillich also insisted that the macabre and terrible aspects of existence deserve a central place in theology.⁵³⁰ While this is still several steps from a radical emphasis on contextuality, or a preferential option for the poor, Tillich does at least acknowledge

⁵²⁹ Gary J. Dorrien, *Social Democracy in the Making: Political and Religious Roots of European Socialism* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2019) 269-270.

⁵³⁰ Gary Dorrien, "Religious Socialism, Paul Tillich, and the Abyss of Estrangement," *Social Research* 85, no. 2 (2018) 428. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/700743>.

that theology should not be sanguine or separate from the realities of the world or human suffering. These themes are central to his articulation of a political demonology that recognizes the uncanny, paradoxical, and even mystical powers of evil present in human systems, such as fascism and capitalism.

Tillich shares with Protestant neo-orthodox theology a desire to return to the kerygma of the Gospel. Tillich expresses his take on the kerygmatic framework by emphasizing the “new being” afforded to human beings, in Christ, as the centering logic of his systematic theology.⁵³¹ He has, in significant respects, this disposition in common with both Barth and liberation theology. However, Tillich comes closer to liberation theology by clearly insisting on a navigation between context and revelation that does justice to each. Despite the fact that Tillich agrees with much of Barth’s critique of the relativization of Divine revelation, Tillich and liberation theologians agree that Barth repeatedly limits himself to a static and idealistic notion of revelation. For Tillich, as Gary Dorrien vocalizes: “Revelation is revelation to me in my conscious situation, in my historical reality.”⁵³² Notably, Tillich’s implicit sense that there are specific contexts that come closer to the world of the New Testament (e.g., “the world” in the 20th century) is an interesting parallel to Sobrino’s claim that the experience of the poor in Latin America bears a powerful connection to the world of the New Testament.⁵³³

Tillich’s commitment to contextuality makes it significantly easier for him to locate the Kingdom of God with somewhat more historical specificity. He identifies socialist movements and the fomenting discontent of the proletariat with a Divine anti-demonic reality, instances of the emergence of the Kingdom of God.⁵³⁴ This is similar to the stark thesis of Cone’s *Black*

⁵³¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1967) 50.

⁵³² As quoted in Dorrien, “Abyss of Estrangement,” 438

⁵³³ Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator*, 4.

⁵³⁴ Dorrien, *Social Democracy in the Making*, 286-288.

Theology and Black Power, that the Black power movement is “Christ's central message to twentieth-century America.”⁵³⁵ Indeed, some argue that there is an explicit Tillichian inspiration for this line of thinking in Cone.⁵³⁶ Tillich’s commitment to contextuality certainly allows for more historical and concrete specificity in naming the Kingdom and the demonic as existing forces in history.

Another significant resonance is the interest that Tillich and liberation theologians share in practicing critique as a function of theology. Latin American liberation theology insists on “critical reflection” as theological task. This relates, in part, to ideological critique as a feature of Marxist and (especially) neo-Marxist thought. As a self-critical exercise attentive to consequence and praxis, liberation theology asks whether a particular theology or practice is liberating or oppressive. For Tillich, on the other hand, criticism is an overarching theological principle that he associates with Protestantism. Tillich’s monograph, *The Dynamics of Faith*, offers a particularly lucid description of this “Protestant principle.”⁵³⁷ Tillich insists that authentic faith includes, even requires, perpetual criticism of belief and institutions. This is an anti-idolatrous posture that rejects any idea or institution that purports to make itself absolute.⁵³⁸ As with much of liberation theology, such criticism has explicitly Christian referents. For Gutiérrez, criticism takes place in “light of the Word of God.”⁵³⁹ For Tillich, it takes place “under the Cross” which “is understood as the divine judgment over man’s religious life.”⁵⁴⁰

Tillich posits critique as a broad category—a regular activity necessitated by a healthy faith. It is a practice that resists the absolutization of any finite thing (i.e., idolatry) and therefore

⁵³⁵ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 1.

⁵³⁶ Robison B. James, “A Tillichian Analysis of James Cone's Black Theology,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 1 (1974), 16-30.

⁵³⁷ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2007) 33.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, 28-29, 82.

⁵³⁹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 9.

⁵⁴⁰ Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, 33.

can (and often should be) directed against religious institutions, political entities, and philosophical or theological systems. In this regard, critique is an anti-demonic activity. Tillichian critique reveals the demonic workings of systems that have positioned themselves as false replacements for the Absolute. Tillich applies such critique in anti-capitalist and anti-nationalist ways, both of which also inspire his condemnation of religious institutions for their participation in violence and oppression. He saw, in Germany, how conservative Protestantism and capitalism aligned in propping up idols of bourgeois religious institutions and oppressive economic systems.⁵⁴¹ Daniel Weidner traces the inspiration for Tillich's interest in prophetic critique through the tradition of "Weimar messianism" and especially Max Weber's category of "charismatic leadership" evinced by the prophets of the Hebrew Bible.⁵⁴²

By way of comparison, Gutiérrez elucidates the task "of *prophetic denunciation*." He identifies this tradition among Latin American bishops in light of the extreme injustices of their context.⁵⁴³ His notion, mentioned above, of "critical reflection on praxis" provides the substance of this sort of denunciation, identifying it as a central task of theology. Theology is, for Gutiérrez, a critical enterprise—in that it should reflect critically on lived practice under the guidance of "the Word of the Lord."⁵⁴⁴ He cites the need for criticism against "fetishism and idolatry."⁵⁴⁵ There is a decided Marxist influence on this concept; however, this is clearer in the original edition of *A Theology of Liberation*. Gutiérrez toned down some explicit Marxist concepts in later editions after infamous condemnations from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.⁵⁴⁶

⁵⁴¹ Daniel Weidner, "Prophetic Criticism and the Rhetoric of Temporality: Paul Tillich's Kairos Texts and Weimar Intellectual Politics," *Political Theology* 21, no. 1-2 (2020) 71. doi:10.1080/1462317X.2020.1730558..

⁵⁴² Ibid., 76.

⁵⁴³ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 68.

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid., 10

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁶ Sarah Lynn Kleeb, "Gustavo Gutiérrez's Notion of "Liberation" and Marx's Legacy of "Ruthless Criticism"" University of Toronto, 2015), 5,9.

Nonetheless, Gutiérrez's concept retains a focused political edge, which is somewhat less clear in Tillich. For Gutiérrez, criticism is mainly targeted against the "religious alienation" that distracts from the creation and reification of systems of "domination and oppression by . . . nations, classes, and peoples" against others.⁵⁴⁷ Similar to the correction liberation theology might make to Barth's theologically (rather than exegetically)-bound Christocentrism, Gutiérrez articulates this criticism with attention to the message of Jesus in its historical context. Jesus critiques and resists systems of power and domination in light of an "eschatological" vision of the imminent Kingdom of God, which represents liberation and justice for the oppressed.⁵⁴⁸ While political critique is central to Tillich's understanding of this particular anti-demonic praxis, liberation theology focuses criticism on the eschatological hope of the Kingdom, as victims experience and hope for it. While Gutiérrez does not articulate critique as an aspect of a demonology, as Tillich does, Gutiérrez might press that Tillich's foundation for critique lies in applying the abstract principles of "Absolute" and "finite," rather than in the particular, contextual, experiences of the oppressed.

The contrast is made more apparent by comparing Gutiérrez and Tillich on the concepts of Word, Christ, and Gospel. For Tillich, there is little sense of Jesus as an example of political protest and action. Despite Tillich's own leftist political commitments, which have relatively robust theological grounding, he often understands Christ and the Gospel in individualist, existentialist terms. He presents Christ as a solution to the "anxiety" that plagues humans in light of nonbeing, the abyss, and human finitude.⁵⁴⁹ What is absent is a more robust and exegetically grounded sense of Christ's enacted message of the Kingdom, which is (for Gutiérrez) decidedly

⁵⁴⁷ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 10.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid., 132-132.

⁵⁴⁹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, p. 201.

material and political. Gutiérrez maintains that such critique takes place in light of the “not-yet” of this Kingdom of justice, naming the systems that contradict and prevent the emergence of this kingdom. For Tillich, injustice does have a decided, significant, and even (some might say) central role in his understanding of critique. However, it lacks a concrete grounding in the realities of suffering rather than in abstract notions of the absolutization of the finite. The takeaway for Tillich’s political demonology, then, is that it lacks a concrete basis for clearly naming and identifying the demonic in history. It relies upon the abstract (and, arguably, arbitrary) standard of applying his ontological and systematic principles to concrete situations.

When it comes to a postcolonial perspective, Tillich again has a few advantages over Barth. Tillich, for one, explicitly criticizes Barth for failing to truly take situation and positionality into account in his theology. Tillich argues that theology requires “a courageous participation in the ‘situation.’”⁵⁵⁰ Hoping to fulfill and correct the legacy of kerygmatic theology, Tillich speaks in terms of the need to balance between “Gospel” and interpretation, claiming that a theological “system is supposed to satisfy two basic needs”: proclamation of the (purportedly unchanging) Gospel, and the interpretation of this message “for every new generation.”⁵⁵¹ As I mention before, this more closely parallels liberation theology in recognizing a dialectic between Gospel and context, which can mutually interpret one another. In some regards, this also coheres well with postcolonial theology’s emphasis on contextuality in hermeneutics.

However, the problem with Tillich’s approach to contextuality, from the perspective of postcolonial theology, is that despite his consciousness of capitalism and fascism as crucial modern problems, he tends to collapse his sense of the “situation” into idiosyncratic and

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid., 3.

Eurocentric framing. His sense of the world situation is of an era of anxiety rather than colonizing and racist violence, at least when writing his *Systematic Theology* or *The Courage to Be*. Tillich furthermore seems to presume that every age or generation has a single situation, rather than considering the plurality of voices and contexts that approach revelation from a variety of distinct vantage points. Tillich purports to assess the “situation” of the mid-20th century without reference to the reality of the poor peoples of the world striving for survival. Instead, Tillich emphasizes the psychological angst of the West.

Postcolonial theology would add another criticism regarding Tillich’s continued insistence on a singular meaning to the Gospel, or kerygma. While postcolonial theology often maintains a relatively traditional fidelity to Scripture as an authoritative revelation, it tends not to reduce Scripture to a quest to find or articulate a singular meaning, particularly critical of the quest for “objectivity” as a duplicitous mask for white male subjectivity.⁵⁵² On the other hand, Tillich still presumes an essential and “eternal” meaning in revelation, which is merely interpreted anew in each new situation.⁵⁵³

As W. Hart Curtis aptly puts it: “It is hard to see [Tillich] as anything but a Euro-centrist of the first order.”⁵⁵⁴ Tillich has little to say about theology or Christianity outside of Europe or the need for theology to account for the struggles for justice taking place worldwide—including those taking place in his own context, in the United States. Tillich, not unlike Reinhold Niebuhr, gave somewhat surprising theological defenses of American imperialism and interventionism. He “defended the American empire whenever it had an interest at stake in the so-called third

⁵⁵² Kwok Pui-Lan, *Postcolonial Imagination & Feminist Theology*, 121.

⁵⁵³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, 4-5.

⁵⁵⁴ Curtis Hart, "Paul Tillich and Psychoanalysis," *Journal of Religion and Health* 50, no. 3 (Sep 1, 2011) 654. doi:10.1007/s10943-009-9302-6.

world,” Gary Dorrien observes mournfully.⁵⁵⁵ While Tillich heralds the need for contextual theology, his sense of “context” is detrimentally limited and ethically compromised.

The cache for demonology is the question of whether or not Tillich guides his readers in rightly naming the powers and principalities. While Tillich (in his early works, especially) prophetically names capitalism and nationalism as demonic forces, he failed to name or take seriously many others. This calls into question Tillich’s quest for an intellectual theological category for the demonic, which he then attempts to apply to his situation. Tillich might have been better served by attending to the voices of the demonized rather than looking for a seemingly objective principle for naming the demonic, which seemed to occlude many principalities and powers that propped up his power and position. Political demonology thus fails to do the work it sets out to do. It does not effectively discern the spirits.

The Political Demonologies of Non-Violence: Girard and Wink

When it comes to the nonviolent political demonologies that I relate to René Girard, and which Walter Wink explicitly exhibits, Christology is again an appropriate starting point of comparison. George Hunsinger, in an interesting article that compares Girard and Barth, zeroes in on Girard’s reading of Jesus. For Girard, the Bible presents Christ as one “who refuses to enter into the spiral of violence” and therefore unmasks scapegoating mechanisms for what they are.⁵⁵⁶ Girard reads the cross and the atonement “horizontally” (as it relates to human action and history) rather than with the “vertical” dimension, which is common in much of traditional Christian thought.⁵⁵⁷ Girard presents a God who does not participate in systems of scapegoating,

⁵⁵⁵ Gary Dorrien, “Religious Socialism, Paul Tillich, and the Abyss of Estrangement,” 445.

⁵⁵⁶ George Hunsinger, “The Politics of the Nonviolent God: Reflections on René Girard and Karl Barth,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51, no. 1 (Feb, 1998) 65-66. doi:10.1017/S0036930600050018.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid., 61. Nathan Hieb uses a similar rubric distinguishing between “atonement” and “liberation,” by comparing Thomas F. Torrance as representative of the traditionalist former, and Jon Sobrino of the latter, with Karl Barth offered as a mediation. See Hieb, *Christ Crucified in a Suffering World: The Unity of Atonement and Liberation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 22ff.

demonizing, or “the violent contagion.”⁵⁵⁸ The death of Christ has utility in revealing the scapegoating mechanism for what it is, but the cross is not salvific in the more traditional Anselmian sense of reconciling sinners to God.⁵⁵⁹ Hunsinger’s application of a horizontal/vertical taxonomy suggests a Christological approach that conjoins with liberation, as many political and liberation theologies reflect on the death of Christ as an act of rather banal political violence against a poor prophet. Girard and liberation theologians both recognize a singularity in Christ’s death while also stressing that his death represents common patterns and practices of human violence and oppression. “History,” Sobrino says, “goes on producing crosses.”⁵⁶⁰

When it comes to Girard’s account of the demonic itself, he delineates the traditional Christian symbols for evil in a way that provides an intriguing connection point to liberation theology’s emphasis on critique. For Girard, it is “the devil” (as a name for the human scapegoating mechanism *writ large*) who instigates violence. As Cowdell explains: Religion, for Girard, participates in the scapegoating mechanism by creating symbols that reify and perpetuate founding myths that occlude foundational violence. In this respect, religion is often, if not always, Satanic.⁵⁶¹ In step with some of the core impulses of liberation theology, Girard raises the question of the relationship between religious symbols of violence (e.g., symbols and practices related to sacrifice) and the historical violence that originally occasioned these symbols and is subsequently justified or occluded by them.⁵⁶² Religion participates in these demonic

⁵⁵⁸ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. William James (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001) 131.

⁵⁵⁹ Girard, *I See Satan*, 138. As Scott Cowdell points out, Girard’s sense of sacrifice evolves over time, allowing for more possibility of coherence between Girard’s theory of the cross and traditional Christian soteriology. Scott Cowdell, *René Girard and the Non-Violent God* (South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018) 66ff.

⁵⁶⁰ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 234.

⁵⁶¹ Cowdell, 28, 60-61. Girard explicitly denies that he thinks pre-Judeo-Christian religions should be called “Satanic,” but only by a technicality. They were participants in the demonic scapegoating mechanism out of ignorance.

⁵⁶² Michael Kirwan, *Girard and Theology* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009) 94-95.

scapegoating activities, and this fact demands unmasking and demythologization—which, in its Girardian sense, means the revelation of the true victims for who they are, as victims. This demythologization is what Christianity makes possible. However, Girard has been criticized⁵⁶³ for expressing this idea along with a rather crass Western and Christian chauvinism, which proclaims Christianity (and, ostensibly, the West) as unique for its demythologized and demythologizing character, and subsequently relegating “religion” to other traditions that justify and occlude the demonic scapegoating mechanism.

Some theologians have pointed out a practical resonance between liberation theology and Girardian mimetic theory, especially by way of James Alison’s use of Girard in his account of Christian discipleship as requiring solidarity with victims. Alison coins the concept of “the intelligence of the victim,” which Joel D. Aguilar Ramírez and Stephan de Beer subsequently describe as Jesus’s ministry, which teaches his followers “a new way of seeing the world, a way that brings to the front the stories of those who have been victimized by society.”⁵⁶⁴ However, one wonders if this is sufficient for a rigorous liberationist approach. For liberation theology, a preferential option is all-encompassing and makes an unequivocal practical demand. In other words, liberation theology goes beyond centering victims as a locus of analysis to constructing a particular political and social ethic based upon that fact. Girard is an analyst of victimhood and victimology but is not so much interested in constructing a Christian politics.

Despite some attempts to find coherence, or at least mutual enrichment, between Girardian mimetic theory and liberation theology, there are limitations to the relationship. As

⁵⁶³ See Cowdell, 32.

⁵⁶⁴ James Alison, *The Joy of being Wrong* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1998), 80ff.; Joel D. Aguilar Ramírez and Stephan de Beer, “Joel D. Aguilar Ramírez and Stephan de Beer, 'A Practical Theology of Liberation : Mimetic Theory, Liberation Theology and Practical Theology,'” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76, no. 2 (2020), 3

Michael Kirwan points out, for instance, Girard's apocalypticism amounts to a sort of political quietism. Girard has expressed that politics is pointless in the apocalyptic era in which the scapegoating mechanism is revealed and therefore no longer effective, as the scapegoated victim is the foundation of civilization and politics. While this situation brings about more significant attention to justice for victims, it removes certain safeguards that have kept societies intact.⁵⁶⁵ This pessimism is inconsistent with liberation theology's insistence that the emergence of the Kingdom demands practical action on behalf of victims.

It is essential, furthermore, to consider the complex ways Girard thinks about modern political discourses about "victimhood." As Girard points out in *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, "our society is the most preoccupied with victims of any that ever was."⁵⁶⁶ At times, Girard approvingly identifies this fact with an actual and literal emergence of the Kingdom of God in history.⁵⁶⁷ Against those who claim that the modern West is a uniquely cruel and "indifferent" society, Girard retorts that "the idea of social justice, as imperfectly realized as it may be. . . is quite a recent invention" that the West uniquely takes seriously. This concern is the invention of Christ and Christianity and has come to fruition in the modern "secular" reality. Girard is careful to point out that he refers to rhetoric and ideology rather than reality *per se*: "I think we have excellent reasons to feel guilty."⁵⁶⁸ In other words, there remains many victims for whom social justice-minded Westerners should feel sympathy and perhaps responsibility. However, there remains a disjuncture between this and a liberationist sensibility that sees a modern world dominated by countless crucified peoples who remain unseen, unacknowledged, and left to die. Liberation theology, in the broadest terms, would maintain that the project of identifying and

⁵⁶⁵ Kirwan, 101-102.

⁵⁶⁶ Girard, *I See Satan*, 161.

⁵⁶⁷ Cowdell, 75.

⁵⁶⁸ Girard, *I See Satan*, 162.

liberating victims is just begun, and that many of the pro-victim democratic ideals of Western Christendom occlude persistent violence.

There is a salient question, however, that Girard might pose to liberation theology—how does one discern between actual and faux victims? Recently, Americans have been confronted with the victimhood and grievance language of neo-populism, white nationalism, and explicit white supremacy. This is not a new phenomenon—the most violent ideologies of the modern era are grounded in such narratives: Hitler’s politics of post-WW1 grievance, the “Lost Cause” of the Confederacy (which formed the backdrop for Jim Crow). Many would like to think that distinguishing between authentic and manipulative claims to victimhood should be obvious, but history suggests that this is not often the case, especially not for those in power.

That being the case, Girard offers an apocalyptic framework that creates a pessimistic and reactionary mood that too readily dismisses claims of victimhood. If the Evil One intends to create victims and deceive humans about this process, is it not possible that such cynicism is itself an acquiescence to the demonic schemes? Does Girard, then, not *also* fail to propose a nuanced sense of discerning victimhood claims?⁵⁶⁹

When it comes to questions of postcoloniality, Girard offers some unique perspectives. As just mentioned, he is aware of the way that “religion” can and often does protect, support, and inspire violence and demonization of despised others. It is, then, relatively easy to name colonialism, or the broader phenomenon of imperialism, as instances of scapegoating *writ large*. Ken Derry, however, in an article about mimetic rivalry in the literature of Margaret Atwood, makes the argument that Girard’s mimetic theory has difficulty explaining the mimetic dynamics of colonialism, where a self-proclaimed “model” of imitation (the colonizer) presents and

⁵⁶⁹ In fact, Girard relates the obsession with victimhood in the modern West to Satan using the tools and language of Christ. See Cowdell, 79.

imposes oneself on others (the colonized)—in hopes to make another into one's own likeness.⁵⁷⁰ Furthermore, it is worth interrogating whether Girard's understanding of the relationships between Christianity, Europe, and religion, betray several colonizing impulses (irrespective of how he or others might apply these in concrete political ways). Girard posits that Western concern for victims is a morally positive imprint of the Judeo-Christian heritage,⁵⁷¹ a suggestion that certainly smacks of Eurocentric and colonizing visions of the civilizing mission.

But what, finally, about violence itself? If Girard suggests a nonviolent theology, how does that cohere with a liberationist and postcolonial approach to political praxis? This is salient for the question of demonology since Girard seems to identify violence exclusively with the demonic. Is every instantiation of "violence" the craft of the devil? Is armed resistance to oppression, or even rhetorical condemnation, a succumbing to scandalous demonic forces? To answer this question, it will be easiest to turn finally to Walter Wink, who offers a more explicit demonology related to a theology of nonviolence, in part dependent upon Girard.

Walter Wink resides comfortably in the exegetical and theological backdrop of 20th-century theological developments. Drawing influence from kerygmatic theology, in particular, Wink is interested in preserving the apocalyptic context of the New Testament as a message for our time. Rather than focusing on Jesus in the Gospels, however, Wink turns his attention to the Pauline image of "the powers and principalities." In Wink's reading, "the powers" are in and of themselves neutral forces or principles of human existence. They have, however, fallen into demonic and idolatrous forms. Central to this fallenness is their participation in violence. For Wink, violence is an ungodly but ubiquitous reality. The New Testament uses terms like "the

⁵⁷⁰ Ken Derry, "Blood on the Wall: Christianity, Colonialism, and Mimetic Conflict in Margaret Atwood's "Cat's Eye"," *Religion & Literature* 48, no. 3 (Oct 1, 2016) 94.

⁵⁷¹ Cowdell, 75.

world” or “the flesh” to describe this reality, which Wink calls “The Domination System.” This System produces the gross inequality between the powerful and the powerless and reproduces itself through “the myth of redemptive violence.”⁵⁷² The diabolical powers dominate the dialectic between oppressor and oppressed, both of whom become victims to the myth and ensuing cycles of violence.

It is in this context that Wink discusses liberation theology explicitly. He chastises the notion of “redemptive violence” that he sees “in much of liberation theology” and which also exists in “much of conservative theology.”⁵⁷³ Wink is influenced to some degree by Anabaptist convictions about the Kingdom as a reality that presents a stark alternative to the ways of “the world” and thereby does not participate in the exercises of power that pervade society. Wink subsequently associates “the world” with redemptive violence and argues that the Kingdom is built on an entirely distinct vision and praxis—“nonviolence is a characteristic of the coming reign of God.”⁵⁷⁴ Referencing John Howard Yoder, Wink argues that enacting the Kingdom requires becoming expendable, relinquishing violence in the cause of justice. The church is (or should be) just such an institution, which substantiates “another reality.”⁵⁷⁵ Therefore, Wink relegates liberation theology to a movement that succumbs to the (demonic) myth of violence.

However, this does not mean that Wink is apolitical. Influenced by traditions of nonviolent resistance, he supports intentional political action against violence and oppression. He lived a life of significant activist involvement himself—arrested several times in war protests and

⁵⁷² Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*, Vol. 1 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1984) 63.

⁵⁷³ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 264.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 164.

marching with Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma.⁵⁷⁶ In harmony with both liberation theology and other North American activist theologies, Wink articulates the Gospel as a primarily liberating message—with a palpable, even preeminent, material, and political dimension.⁵⁷⁷ Wink explicitly applies his theology of the powers to a critique of American imperialism, arguing that “the biblical understanding of the ‘principalities and powers’ offers us striking insight into globalization and empire.”⁵⁷⁸ However, he defines liberation in a way that rejects violence in all forms, including the violence to which liberation theology purportedly succumbs. When activism becomes violent in word or deed, it is compromised by the Domination System, regardless of the justice of its cause.

Liberation theology approaches violence in a somewhat more nuanced way, avoiding a designation of all violence as necessarily demonic. Jon Sobrino, at times, slips into a problematic glorification of sacrifice by identifying the suffering of the poor as a representation of Christ, such that the “crucified peoples” of history can be said to “bring salvation.”⁵⁷⁹ However, Sobrino also prioritizes the imperative to take people “down from their cross”⁵⁸⁰ and similarly identifies with Christ those who engage (thoughtfully and with restraint) in violence to defend their people against injustice.⁵⁸¹ James Cone leaves open the possibility of violence, criticizing the Western obsession (and often, hypocrisy) in debating the ethics of violence from the armchair, while all sorts of violence is tacitly or explicitly endorsed, both of self-defense and in exploitation, on

⁵⁷⁶ Bill Wylie-Kellermann, *Principalities in Particular: A Practical Theology of the Powers that Be* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017)30ff.

⁵⁷⁷ Wink, *Engaging*, 115. Wink writes: “we can speak of God’s reign as a domination-free order characterized by partnership, interdependence, equality of opportunity, and mutual respect.”

⁵⁷⁸ Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*, 296 296

⁵⁷⁹ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 262.

⁵⁸⁰ Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy : Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994).

⁵⁸¹ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 270.

behalf of white Americans and the West at large.⁵⁸² Wink, however, is adamant. He looks to the Civil Rights Movement as a paradigmatic example of non-violent protestors successfully challenging the demonic systems of violence: “a few people” refusing to repay racism with evil, even being willing “to absorb its impact in their own bodies and allow it to spread no farther.”⁵⁸³ He contrasts this to certain (unnamed) theologians “in Latin America and South Africa” who justify violent resistance.⁵⁸⁴ Wink warns against equivocations that insinuate that one’s oppressors are less than human: “The moment we argue that the South African defenders of apartheid are morally inferior beings, we reduce ourselves to their moral level.”⁵⁸⁵

Wink does not have the textual reductionism sometimes identified with Barth. He engages in conversation with social theory as mutually illuminating alongside Scripture. Nevertheless, like Barth, he speaks as an authoritative interpreter of Biblical revelation. Wink offers no sense that the oppressed have any authoritative role in identifying or responding to the demonic powers, relying on his exegetical dexterity and his ability to relate Scripture to contemporary philosophical and cultural concepts. While Wink paints with a brushstroke that associates violence with the demonic, liberation theology points out that it is difficult to discern what exactly constitutes violence in the practical experience of the poor and oppressed. There is difficulty in judging the necessary techniques of liberation from a detached and privileged position.

This lack of a critical prioritization of the oppressed leads to another problem, which was noted of Tillich in the first chapter—a difficulty delineating between systems, categories of systems, and “the powers.” Tillich, for example, points out that every idolatrous and destructive

⁵⁸² James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 110.

⁵⁸³ Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 67.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid., 68.

system has some creative qualities. A demonic system *is such* inasmuch as it is *not* pure negation, but that it also has constructive qualities. Capitalism has assisted in the proliferation of individual liberties and autonomy, he points out, despite coming at the expense of exploitation and the commodification of all aspects of human life. Tillich does not seem to be saying, exactly, that capitalism “has a silver lining.” Instead, he is pointing to the power of evil in its manipulative ability to produce and provide something positive as a constitutive element of its destructive power. This also speaks to the complex dynamics of evil—its ability to adapt, hide, and reinvent itself. However, Tillich makes it difficult to discern precisely *what* is “positive” and what is “negative” in a demonic system, and for whom. For workers of the colonized peoples of the world, who receive disproportionately less (if any) of the “benefits” of capitalism vis-a-vis Western middle class consumers and global owners of capital, is there any perception of capitalism’s “creativity”?

Wink makes this issue even more complicated by insisting that the powers are God’s good creation that have fallen and are in the process of being redeemed. There is a subsequent difficulty in understanding what exactly constitutes “a power” in Wink’s mind. At one point, he speaks of corporations as “powers,” which become demonic when they make profit their chief aim, rather than “the general welfare.”⁵⁸⁶ The suggestion, then, is that corporations or the system of capitalism itself are “powers,” which can each be redeemed. It is not clear what prevents Wink from saying, instead, that capitalism or corporations are demonic distortions of something more fundamental, like “economics,” which need to be exorcised in order for this otherwise neutral power of economic systems to be redeemed. Again, this raises the question of discernment—how exactly does one know what is demonic and what is part of God’s created order when it comes to

⁵⁸⁶ Wink, “Globalization and Empire,” 298.

reckoning with a particular power? Wink provides a vague system, rather than a practice of discernment, based upon his exegesis. Instead of introducing the perspective of the oppressed—the victims of “the powers”—as a central locus for making such judgments, Wink relies on his own, uninterrogated, hermeneutics.

To summarize, then, Euro-American political demonology is a framework that shares with liberation theology an interest in reading the kerygma of the Gospels as a declaration of Divine antagonism against evil in history. Political demonology attends explicitly to the language of demonology as an aspect of revelation, relating this language to the uncanny and terrifying nature of destructive powers. Liberation and postcolonial theologies, in distinct but related ways, raise the failure of such a political demonology to articulate a notion of discernment that approaches evil in a way that does not reproduce the wiles of the “anti-Kingdom.” Euro-American political demonology relies on presumably universal ontological or hermeneutical frameworks, and abstract categories or rules, for identifying the demonic in history. In doing so, it ignores or underemphasizes many of the demonic systems of the world, not to mention (although Barth and Girard have some awareness) the fact that the demonic itself is a symbol that has been employed, paradoxically, by systems that could be themselves labeled “demonic.” Euro-American political demonology largely fails to discern this fact.

Discerning the Anti-Kingdom

Having assessed Euro-American political demonology in conversation with liberation and postcolonial theology, I want to further illustrate these distinctions by giving focused attention to liberation theologian Jon Sobrino’s theology of the Kingdom and the Anti-Kingdom. Sobrino’s apocalyptic and dualistic theology of liberation shares many of the core features of Euro-American political demonology. Particularly, Sobrino recognizes the salience of the Gospel

framework of cosmic warfare to a theology that proclaims liberation against evil powers. However, Sobrino maintains a radical commitment to contextuality that prioritizes the victims of history as the hermeneutical ground for knowing the meaning and nature of both the Kingdom and the anti-Kingdom. This leads Sobrino to stress somewhat different nuances when it comes to his understanding of the forces of evil, compared to Euro-American political demonology. Namely, Sobrino identifies the cosmic enemies of God, in Scripture, exclusively with the deadly social and political forces of destruction in history. This represents an even more radical politicization of demonology than exists in Euro-American political demonology.

I want to suggest, furthermore, that the delta between Sobrino and Euro-American political demonology emerges from Sobrino's implicit commitment to discernment as a necessary dimension of any theology (in general), but especially a theology of evil and the demonic. In conversation with Jesuit theologian Dean Brackley, I show how a tradition of discernment undergirds Sobrino's particular approach to his notion of the anti-Kingdom. These commitments suggest discernment as a praxis of liberationist political demonology, recognizing the need to prioritize the victims of evil powers as authorities in knowing the nature of evil, how to talk about it, and how to respond to it.

Demonology is not generally an explicit topic of conversation in liberation or postcolonial theology. Nevertheless, some notion of the demonic lurks in the background. With its connections to 20th-century apocalyptic theology and its situating itself in contexts of extreme suffering and oppression, liberation theology reflects a palpable sense of the complex, terrifying, and extraordinary reality of evil. "It is the task of theology," declares Cone, "...to know where God is at work so that we can join him in this fight against evil."⁵⁸⁷ Jon Sobrino comes close to

⁵⁸⁷ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 70.

expressing a liberationist demonology by means of his theology of the Kingdom and the anti-Kingdom. This relatively underappreciated aspect of Sobrino's thought bears some notable similarities and offers crucial correctives to the political demonologies I have examined previously.

In fact, it is somewhat surprising that Sobrino does not entertain the demonologies of either Barth or Tillich when he bemoans that most modern Christologies do not take seriously the fact of the cosmic and spiritual enemies of God that the New Testament describes. In most European theologies, Sobrino observes, "the Kingdom of God is usually analyzed without" any consideration of "its essential relationship to the anti-Kingdom."⁵⁸⁸ For Sobrino, conversely, the methods and goals of liberation theology means that this dimension of revelation cannot be ignored. Liberation theology must recognize "the *reality of the anti-Kingdom*." Sobrino's dual commitment to revelation and context are methodological undercurrents which predicate this insistence. First is his centering of poor Latin American persons who experience the Kingdom of God as "a certainly-not," rather than the typical "not-yet" of modern Western eschatological theology.⁵⁸⁹ The substance and context of God's revelation further indicates the reality and significance of the anti-Kingdom. The revelation of God in Christ is a revelation of and amid conflict, Sobrino points out. Christ appears in the Gospels oriented against the present world reality of death and destruction wrought upon the poor.⁵⁹⁰ Therefore, Sobrino stresses that the anti-Kingdom is both a given of revelation and a theme of particular salience because of his contextual framing.

⁵⁸⁸ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 116.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid. 125.

⁵⁹⁰ Ibid., 72.

In contrast to theologies of the Kingdom that function as an otherworldly soteriology or eschatology, even if they might have sociological or political components or connotations,⁵⁹¹ Sobrino's sense of the Kingdom is decisively material and particular—in that it represents hope for the liberation of the poor. Sobrino defines the Kingdom in terms of “utopia.” It is the hope of the victims of history for a consummate reality that represents the opposite of the historical forces of death. The anti-Kingdom is nothing less than the systems of violence and oppression that exist throughout history. By contrast, the Kingdom of God is “a Kingdom of life” and “is for the poor.”⁵⁹² The poor do not primarily hope for the forgiveness of their sins but for the defeat of the powers that sap them of life, safety, and dignity.

In a passage that closely echoes Barth's assessment of *Das Nichtige*, Sobrino maintains that “the anti-Kingdom is not just the absence or the not-yet of the Kingdom, but its formal contradiction.”⁵⁹³ The anti-Kingdom is, therefore, something more than the nonbeing of classical ontology. It is better understood in palpable, substantive, and existential terms. Yet, Sobrino presses this insight further into a sharper dualism. Wink, on the other hand, insists that “the gospel is not a dualistic myth of good and evil vying for ascendancy.”⁵⁹⁴ This differs dramatically from Sobrino, who maintains a sharp and unbridgeable contrast between the Kingdom and the anti-Kingdom. Of course, Sobrino is not necessarily giving a comprehensive systematic or exegetical theology of “the powers,” as Barth and Wink both do, so the comparison may not be entirely salient. Nevertheless, there does seem to be a real distinction. From the perspective of the poor, Sobrino seems to maintain, there is little room for ambiguity or equivocation on just how *evil* evil truly is, nor is it a helpful question.

⁵⁹¹ Ibid., 126.

⁵⁹² Ibid., 162.

⁵⁹³ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁴ Wink, “Globalization and Empire,” 297.

Similar to the way Tillich relates the demonic and the idolatrous, Sobrino discusses idolatry as a feature of the anti-Kingdom. Tracing the theme of idolatry in recent Latin American theological statements, as well as the thought of both Oscar Romero and Ignacio Ellacuría, Sobrino argues that “idolatry” names a human tendency “to absolutize what we have made.”⁵⁹⁵ Despite Sobrino’s (largely justified) concern that “first world theology” does not consider the issue of idolatry, Sobrino’s language parallels Tillich’s identification of idolatry with the absolutization of something finite. However, Sobrino differs from Tillich by identifying idolatry with political and social oppression. Sobrino introduces a hierarchical assessment, naming “the absolutization of inbuilt wealth/private property” as the arch-idolatry that begets all other forms.⁵⁹⁶ Sobrino also speaks, briefly, of the need to *deidolize* Christ as a symbol that is used to justify oppression,⁵⁹⁷ again adding to a socio-political sense of idolatry as symbols or systems that represent and engender physical death. Once again, Sobrino’s emphasis on the context of the poor requires casting the notion of idolatry in a different light—prioritizing the experienced death and destructiveness of idolatrous powers as the primary way of identifying what constitutes a false god.

Sobrino and Barth share a substantial fundamental similarity in their emphasis on the mystery of evil. Barth, it will be remembered, so stresses the mystery and deceptiveness of evil that it is futile and often dangerous to speak of the demonic. Sobrino similarly stresses the complex nature of evil, especially as the victims of history experience it. Reflecting on the coining of the term *mysterium liberationis* by liberation theologians, Sobrino advocates that liberation theology also take up the historic concept of *mysterium iniquitatis*: “Liberation is

⁵⁹⁵ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 183-184.

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid., 184-185.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid., 50.

brought about in the midst of and in the teeth of the presence of an evil so omnipresent, aberrant and enslaving, that it has to be called by its traditional name, “‘*mysterium*’ *iniquitatis*.”⁵⁹⁸

Ultimately, there are several substantial points of comparison, and contrast, when relating Sobrino to the Euro-American project of political demonology. Most fundamentally, Sobrino implicitly underscores and extrapolates a point also made by Euro-American political demonology, that demonology is a proper locus for political theology. In fact, for Sobrino, there is no other way to understand demonology than as a political discourse. The goal of the anti-Kingdom is to wreak death and destruction on human beings in history. While Sobrino does not focus on the specific language and symbolization of “the demonic,” he shares with political demonology an emphasis on the conflictual and apocalyptic picture given in the Gospel.

Sobrino rejects and critiques, however, some of the basic premises behind Euro-American political demonology by undermining the demythologization tradition associated with Bultmann. For Sobrino, the questions of language, interpretation, epistemology, and existential anxiety that dominate 20th-century European theology are of tertiary importance to liberation in Latin America. In this context, Sobrino maintains, the most critical questions regarding Christ are those of discipleship and conversion—how shall we respond to the authentic Jesus who invites human beings into conflict with the anti-Kingdom?⁵⁹⁹

One of the most fundamental differences between Sobrino and the Euro-American political demonology, which I think is partly explanatory for the differences mentioned above, is Sobrino’s implicit commitment to discernment as a necessary practice for theology, and especially for a theology of evil. I believe this commitment emerges in part from the Ignatian influence on Sobrino’s theology. I am informed by Dean Brackley, a Jesuit theologian who

⁵⁹⁸ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 2.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

worked in community organizing in North America as well as pastoral service in El Salvador. Influenced by liberation theology, Brackley wrote *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times* as a reflection on Ignatian spirituality in light of the gross economic injustices of contemporary society. Brackley commends the Ignatian tradition of discernment as a spiritual foundation for liberating work.

Brackley develops several concepts that closely parallel Sobrino's theology of the anti-Kingdom. Namely, Brackley delineates "idolatry" as the false gods that lead to death. The "anti-reign," by contrast, are the forces opposed to the reign of God.⁶⁰⁰ Brackley references Sobrino's notion of money as a fundamental idolatrous factor, suggesting Sobrino's influence on Brackley's understanding of these concepts.⁶⁰¹ More to the point, their shared Ignatian and liberationist theological heritages explains connections. Sobrino certainly relies on Juan Luis Segundo for his understanding of idolatry,⁶⁰² and Brackley depends on Ignacio Ellacuría's commendation of self-reflection on one's complicity or solidarity in light of the cross as an example of a discerning spirituality.⁶⁰³ Brackley credits Ignatius with the idea of the anti-reign, albeit granting it lacks the political connotations Brackley intends.⁶⁰⁴

Andrew Prevot summarizes Brackley's understanding of discernment in this way: "True theology requires some method of discernment. . . . one must be able to distinguish between thoughts and actions that glorify the real God of liberation and those thoughts and actions that only serve false 'gods' who oppress and destroy."⁶⁰⁵ This insight is parallel to Sobrino, who

⁶⁰⁰ Dean Brackley, *Discernment in Troubled Times* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 2004), 26-27.

⁶⁰¹ Brackley, 26-27.

⁶⁰² Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 181.

⁶⁰³ Brackley, 40.

⁶⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁶⁰⁵ Andrew Prevot, "Ignatian Spirituality, Political Effectiveness, and Spiritual Discernment: Dean Brackley's Account of Liberation Theology," in *Political Theology* 4.18 (2017), 310.

maintains that idolatry is fundamentally a “praxic” theological category.⁶⁰⁶ One discerns whether or not something is an idol by observing whether it produces victims.⁶⁰⁷ Therefore, I believe that Sobrino’s account of idolatry is also an account of discernment, as Brackley understands it. Sobrino’s rules for discernment are grounded in his commitment to the spiritual and theological witness of the poor of Latin America. Therefore, Sobrino’s understanding for discerning the nature and presence of the anti-Kingdom vis-à-vis the Kingdom of God is the prerogative of the oppressed.

Importantly, Sobrino would undoubtedly stress that this praxiological understanding of discerning idolatry is not meant to be reductive in such a way that ignores that discernment is oriented toward truth. In *Political Holiness*, Sobrino insists that the primary end of a spirituality of liberation is be faithful to “the truth of reality.”⁶⁰⁸ This involves a particular attention to telling the truth about the lived reality of human beings, in history. This has a “noetic” dimension. However, knowing and praxis are related. Knowing “the real” is not only an act of acquiring knowledge. To ascertain the real is to respond with integrity to the imperatives it suggests. To ascertain human beings in their reality as human, given dignity by God, is to respond with “love” in their particular condition and circumstances.⁶⁰⁹ Pursuing the real is therefore a praxiological commitment that also engages and involves knowledge of the truth as a noetic event, in an integral understanding of thinking, being, and acting. Notably, Sobrino’s preference for the spiritual witness of the poor of Latin America appears here as well, since “the truth of things is better known from below and from the periphery than from above and from the center.”⁶¹⁰ It

⁶⁰⁶ Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator*, 181.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁸ Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 24.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid., 25-26.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid., *Political Holiness*, 27.

seems fair to extrapolate that Sobrino's discerning approach to idolatry would be informed by these spiritual principles—where idolatry represents a failure to ascertain and respond with integrity to the truth of the real, which is known through a preferential perspective from the oppressed.

This dimension of discernment, which we might call *veritological*, suggests that discerning idolatry involves the difficult task of parsing the truth from lies, or the real from the ideological. However, while Sobrino posits that ascertaining the real can be difficult, he does not sufficiently emphasize this difficulty.⁶¹¹ I believe that part of Sobrino's underemphasis in this realm comes from not putting his theology of the anti-Kingdom into more direct confrontation with his spirituality. In his acknowledgement that the anti-Kingdom is a tremendous force of destruction, and is inherently mysterious, he does not translate this into an inherent difficulty in knowing the truth of reality. For this, it would be helpful to posit Barth's insistence on the demonic as prevarication and deception, or Girard's concern that victims are not always easy and obvious to identify, even though both figures have limitations in terms of a practical spirituality of discernment. To think further about this problem, I want to put Sobrino in conversation with what could represent a postcolonial critique of his account of the anti-Kingdom and of discernment, which provides a more radical assessment of what "truth" and "real" mean practically, especially in the context of demonology.

In *The Queer God*,⁶¹² Marcella Althaus-Reid articulates a queer postcolonial demonology. This work is queer in that it questions theology's participation in heteronormativity, and looks to the possibilities present in thinking about God from the

⁶¹¹The most he acknowledges in *Political Holiness* is that "honesty about the real" is "sometimes. . . 'hit-and-miss'" when it becomes a concrete exercise, 27.

⁶¹² Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2003).

perspective of the diverse, boundary-defying, sexual lives of (all) human beings.⁶¹³ It is postcolonial in that Althaus-Reid resists the theological acquiescence to empire, as impositions of “the Same” over against the diversity, novelty, and possibility of human life in its actual existence. These commitments lead Althaus-Reid to a somewhat different, though I believe ultimately complementary, account of evil relative to Sobrino’s account of the anti-Kingdom.

In her chapter, “Demonology,” Althaus-Reid observes the ways that ecclesial and theological control over the notion of sanctity produce icons of holiness as representations that occlude reality. Saints mediate the power of the Church to impose codes of decency, which are actually both “concealment and dissimulation,” in that they alienate humans from the real substance of human life as diverse, other, and queer. Real human life is not tidy, nor does it conform to the standards rigidly imposed upon it. Saints become agents of Sameness and an alienation from the real. Elsewhere, Althaus-Reid calls for a doing of theology in one’s underwear—that is, theology that begins with a stark honesty and realism about our bodily, boundary-defying, “Queer” existences as human beings of dynamic relations and desires.⁶¹⁴

Theology in one’s underwear means harkening to the end of what Althaus-Reid calls “Colonial Theology” or “T-Theology.” These are her names for systematic theological projects that participate in empire as a dominating practice of coordinating powers. Putting an end to the theologies of the empire represents, however, “the birth of a demonology.”⁶¹⁵ Althaus-Reid thereby relates two seemingly opposed theological categories—those of holiness and demonology.

⁶¹³ That is, for Althaus-Reid, all humans are (in a sense) queer—all people are coerced into conforming into sexual mores that restrict the actual fluidity, irreducibility, and creativity of all human existence.

⁶¹⁴ See Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology* (London: Routledge, 2005).

⁶¹⁵ Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 134.

Rather than support holiness as repetition of sameness, Althaus-Reid calls for the sanctification of difference and rebellion: “We claim the right of demonologies, that is, the right to listen to rebellious spirits which have rejected the light for the darkness.”⁶¹⁶ Cognizant of the demonizing colonial projects that have sought to either incorporate (convert) or condemn (exorcise) alterity, Althaus-Reid looks to those who have defiantly embodied their roles as the demons of the system. This parallels Enrique Dussel’s notion of the “apocalyptic epiphany of the other,” where the irruption of alterity disrupts and terrorizes the colonial center.⁶¹⁷

For Althaus-Reid, to embrace rebellious spirits is to embrace the possibility of redemption that incorporates queer people, and queerness itself. Masturbation, as an example, is a rebellious/redemptive act in that “it de-territorializes sexuality from procreation, complicating the easy identificatory sexual colonial patterns” of defining personhood, sexuality, sex acts, etc. “Masturbation,” therefore “is. . . part of theological demonologies when it shows solidarity with the rebellious supplement. . . a loving solidarity with ambiguity and a sacrament of ambiguity and the inconceivable in itself.”⁶¹⁸ Holiness, involves an element of “queerness” through embodying redemption as rebellion and disruption of colonial Sameness and reproduction.⁶¹⁹

In the next section, I will detail Althaus-Reid’s criticisms of liberation theology. Althaus-Reid hopes to preserve and more consistently apply a liberationist theological method so that it accounts for the oppressed in all their complex intersectional existence, focusing on sexual minorities in particular. The comparison I want to draw at the moment is between Sobrino’s reliance on the dualism of Kingdom/Anti-Kingdom, and Althaus-Reid’s embrace of demonology as a discourse of redemption. Althaus-Reid would not reject Sobrino’s contention that God is on

⁶¹⁶ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 135.

⁶¹⁷ Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, 59.

⁶¹⁸ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 138.

⁶¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 143.

the side of justice, or that there are evil powers of domination. That being the case, Althaus-Reid's embrace of demonology represents two features lacking in Sobrino's theology: A hermeneutics of suspicion, and a sanctified recalcitrance.

Althaus-Reid is, first of all, suspicious of claims theologians or others might make to be on God's side. Such a naïve confidence can limit circumspection regarding the temptation (particularly in the context of empire) to reduce God to the similitudes that enforce a particular economic and sexual order. This categorization sequence participates in colonial projects of "retention" by which redemption becomes the process of protecting, extending, and retaining "the imperial meme."⁶²⁰ A commitment to Divine transcendence, for Althaus-Reid, includes an openness to alterity, strangeness, and queerness.⁶²¹ Such porosity requires self-interrogation of discomfort, disdain, and disgust that can emerge from a dualistic theology. What revelations of God are we (inadvertently) suppressing and demonizing?

She further endorses a spirit of rebellious recalcitrance, even bravado, as the task of embracing and exploring those dimensions of life which have been suppressed and shamed as demonic. In the context of empire, difference, alterity, ambiguity, and polyvalence have all been relegated to the realm of the pejorative demonological. To embrace demonology—to explore rebellion—is to choose to embrace that which colonial theology has sought to suppress, as a rebellious act of collapsing the center/periphery binary. Rather than mere self-reflection or critique, then, demonology requires an existential entrance into a dangerous and perhaps terrifying spirit of rebellion.

⁶²⁰ Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 138.

⁶²¹ Ibid., 140.

For Althaus-Reid, theology must place as its “starting point. . . Queer lives and Queer relationships.”⁶²² With this prioritization, her queer postcolonial theology coheres with Sobrino in the recognition that the demonized bear a unique witness to evil, holiness, and Divine redemption. However, Althaus-Reid presses further into this problem of discernment by questioning the processes that produce distinctions such as Kingdom/anti-Kingdom and the dimensions of the Divine that are suppressed as a consequence. Discernment, consequently, is an active embrace of the spirit of rebellion as the risky project of entering into that which appears, from the purview of the colonial center, to be demonic. There is a sense, then, in which discernment is necessarily an existential and praxiological act of bravery in situations of unease and unclarity, where the real is occluded by the colonial powers.

Since “the real” is also an important category for Althaus-Reid, there is a sense in which she might share with Sobrino (as I read him) an understanding of truth as the goal of discernment in determining what is truly demonic. Althaus-Reid, however, leaves open certain risks on the other side, with an epistemological and ethical indeterminacy that embraces rebellion as an end in itself—as a (paradoxically) anti-demonic act of embodying that which has been demonized in order to break past the obscurantist posturing of empire. What is left, then, of a prophetic demonology of spiritual warfare and moral conviction that names evil unequivocally? Indeed, an account of discernment must somehow navigate between both approaches as they are appropriate to a given moment and situation. To think better about how to do this, I now turn to decolonial perspectives on theology and eventually, ultimately, to Black and womanist perspectives.

⁶²² Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God*, 146.

To Decolonize

Decolonial approaches to theology offer yet another rubric by which to judge demonology. Turning to decolonial theory affords several advantages. First, this approach is closer to the particular experience and analytical frameworks explored in the second chapter. Decolonial theory offers a robust critique of the theological backdrop for demonization in history, specifically the role that demonology has played in anti-Blackness and colonialism. What does it mean to decolonize historical Christian discourses about evil, and how might this relate to the critiques already considered from liberationist and postcolonial perspectives? In other words, what are we finally “to do” with demonology if we want to speak of the demonic in a way that resists colonialism? Second, decolonial theory offers a more radical critique of 20th-century theology, including liberation and postcolonial theology, requiring a further departure from these milieus in order to articulate a demonology that is truly decolonial and anti-racist.

Decolonial theory offers four challenges to political demonology, as well as to liberation and postcolonial theology. The following section will consider these in turn as challenges theologians must face if demonology is to be a language that serves decolonization: First, much of decolonial theory centers and emerges among thinkers from the African/African diaspora and Latin American worlds. Therefore, anti-Blackness, transatlantic slavery, and Western neo-imperialism are important emphases in many decolonial thinkers (at least, the decolonial traditions I opt to draw upon). In this way, decolonial theory serves as a guide for reckoning with the anti-Black and colonizing legacy of the Christian symbol of the demonic. Second, decolonial theory is critical of all systemic constructions, calling into question the ontological framework that grounds much Christian demonology in the first place. Therefore, decolonization challenges theology to confront its ontological tradition and its demonizing consequences. Thirdly,

decolonial theory is cognizant and critical of the epistemological presumptiveness that gives birth to Western colonialist categories like “religion,” “secular,” “superstition,” and “myth.” These form the background of political demonology, as well as voices that dismiss having a demonology at all as outdated, superstitious, and mythological. Decolonial theory does not necessarily advocate that theology erase or forget demonology as a solution to (dem)ontotheology. Fourth, decolonial theory offers a robust critique of Eurocentrism, thus occasioning a turn to other sources for reflection on spirits, evil, and spirituality.

For the following section, I will walk closely with Joseph Drexler-Dreis, who offers a thoughtful methodological reflection on working at the intersection of systematic theology, liberation theology, and decolonial theory, particularly in light of the latter’s critique of the former discourses. Drexler-Dreis builds upon several vital insights of liberation theology and transposes them in an explicitly decolonial way, attempting to overcome and integrate the decolonial critiques of Christian theology. Specifically, Drexler-Dreis argues for an epistemological preferential option for the poor that challenges Eurocentrism by centering voices beyond the colonial center. Drexler-Dreis also maintains liberation theology’s insistence on “Jesus as norm for Christian theology, but also turned outward, such that the wisdom of Christ is located in historical reality, and particularly among the crucified people.”⁶²³ Seeing as the crucified peoples are also the demonized peoples, Drexler-Dreis’s approach to liberation and decoloniality suggests the privileged witness of the demonized in naming the contours of the conflict between the Reign of God and the demonic.

Political demonology lacks the essential critical function for discernment, particularly a mode of discernment that includes and prioritizes the victims of evil in history. It, therefore,

⁶²³ Joseph Drexler-Dreis, *Decolonial Love: Salvation in Colonial Modernity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 68.

lacks a mode of discernment that can reflect on the ambiguity and duplicitousness often contained in demonological discourses themselves. The liberation and postcolonial emphasis on centering victims is an essential framework to maintain such a mode of discernment. However, decolonization takes this call for discernment further by demanding theology unlink itself decisively from ontology and “zero-point” epistemology as theological starting points and instead turn to concrete, embodied practices of discerning the spirits. To privilege the crucified people is to take the risk of abandoning preconceived models. It is to instead open the (colonizing theological self) to the danger, ambiguity, and wisdom of alterity as a site of discernment. Discernment, in this respect, supplants ontology.

The first challenge that decolonial theory poses is the demand to attend to particular ways that Western philosophical and theological constructions have demonized “the other.” To reflect on this fact, it is necessary to recall the evidence put forward in the second chapter. Several thinkers associated with the decolonial tradition point to the sordid and largely unexamined (by the Western consciousness) role of the Christian symbol of the demonic in anti-Blackness and colonialism. Demonology has served as a place for reifying and inspiring anti-Black aesthetics, paranoia, and violence. At specific points, it becomes difficult to know whether or not “demon” is simply a proxy for “Blackness” (including Black bodies), suggesting that Christian demonology has often been little more than anti-Blackness. Or, it has been little more than a manifestation empire itself when also considering the multitude of identities that the Western consciousness has relegated to “other”—Jewish, female, queer, indigenous, and much more. This legacy, therefore, calls into question whether or not the demonic is a symbol that ought to remain in Christian discourse at all.

While Barth and Girard each, in their own way, point to the nefarious uses that language about the demonic often plays in history, no one associated with political demonology considers this anti-Black colonizing history and legacy. This speaks to the irony, pointed out by several theorists in the decolonial tradition, that 20th-century European political consciousness in philosophy (and theology) developed in response to the horrors of the Holocaust, but not to the colonial systems within which eugenics and authoritarianism were primarily and previously employed.⁶²⁴ Political demonology is not shy about the fact that the demonic is an unpopular doctrine to maintain, and does not hesitate in taking on what is a taboo and controversial topic. However, instead of reflecting on colonialism as evidence that casts a judgment upon the notion of the demonic, it fixates on Western epistemological questions regarding the “reality” of demons and the salience of Divine revelation in the modern world, which it articulates by reckoning with categories like “myth,” “interpretation,” and “kerygma.” While it focuses on these questions, a more significant challenge to the Christian category of the demonic goes undetected and unquestioned. Political demonology thereby rushes too quickly to resuscitate the Christian category of the demonic.

At the same time, liberation and postcolonial theologies do not do much to examine the function of the demonic in the history of Christian violence, oppression, and colonization. While Sobrino offers a compelling picture of the anti-Kingdom, which serves to correct many aspects of political demonology, he similarly fails to think about the dangerous legacy of these categories, although it can be deduced from his commitment to the crucified peoples, who are also the demonized peoples. Speaking to Barth and Girard’s respective points, as well as the

⁶²⁴ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 140. See Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 36.

postcolonial critique I exemplified in the work of Althaus-Reid, it is important to ask: How does one authentically parse between the Kingdom and the anti-Kingdom, especially when the latter often presents itself as the former, and the former is often perceived as the latter? While liberation theology rightly prioritizes, at least in theory, the victims of history as a way of recognizing and understanding the demonic systems of history, it stops short of articulating a more explicit and practical sense of discernment. Certain postcolonial theories, inasmuch as they represent a penchant for ambiguity and polyvocality, conversely struggle to ground the possibility of concrete foundations for discerning good and evil. A decolonial approach to theology demands the decolonization of the symbol of the demonic in a way that can reflect on the slipperiness and entanglements of the category.

The second challenge is a radical one, posed to theology as an enterprise. Although I have introduced Marcella Althaus-Reid as representative of postcolonial thought, her radical critique of both systematic and liberation theology is in line with many of the sensibilities of decolonial theory. In her *Indecent Theology*, Althaus-Reid argues that the theological quest for coherence is inherently imperialistic. She relates this to the construction of both economic and sexual mores, which seek to define “coherent” sexuality and therefore proscribe certain activities as indecent:

Theology is. . . a sexual act participating in the ideological construction of God from the idealist discourse of what it is supposed to be going to bed with God, and the regulations and control discourses based on some heterosexual falsifications or alienations of what is due to reality, and to the people who live under the threats of the naturalization of sexuality or decency codes in theology.

She goes on to express that “imperialisms are, by definition, criminal activities of expansion, possession and control; theology’s permanent search for coherence is only an expression of its hegemonizing objectives, a taxonomy.”⁶²⁵

She applies this critique to liberation theology itself, which not only failed to follow its own premises (with a definition of “the poor” that neglected women and ignored any struggle for justice that did not fit the confines of strict, “decent,” heteronormativity),⁶²⁶ but also repeated the theological quest for coherence on account of its attempt to justify itself to the Catholic Church and the Western theological academy: “Years of trying to present Liberation Theology as a ‘proper theology’ damaged the creative movement of what started as a break with the Grand Narrative.”⁶²⁷ Subsequently, it failed to liberate “the poor” but simply created new ideologies for their subjugation. She announces the way that liberation theology served as “the beginning of church tourism and theological voyeurism, and a theological performative role was developing, dangerously repeating the colonial understandings of Christianity and the natives.”⁶²⁸

Althaus-Reid applies her assessment of systematic theology to Tillich in an illuminating way. She reflects on the alienation his theology represented from his sexual proclivities—namely, his penchant for sadomasochism. Althaus-Reid (citing Mary Daly) maintains that Tillich suppressed and occluded his lived reality “by theo-ideological abstractions.”⁶²⁹ For Althaus-Reid, this represents one of the most central failures of systematic theology as a project—it seeks intellectual coherence in abstractions disconnected from the realities of one’s (sexual) life. In its

⁶²⁵ Marcella Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology*, 24.

⁶²⁶ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

⁶²⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁶²⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁶²⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

quest for coherence, the irony is that theology fails to be coherent with the theologian's life, which is to say, it fails to be coherent with reality.

Walter Mignolo makes an explicitly decolonial critique of theology, which he also applies specifically to liberation theology by relating it to the ontological framework. Mignolo makes heavy use of philosopher Santiago Castro Gómez's notion of the "hubris of the zero point."⁶³⁰ Mignolo demonstrates this hubris of the European penchant to speak "from a detached and neutral point of observation," by which "the knowing subject maps the world and its problems, classifies people, and projects what is good for them."⁶³¹ Mignolo believes that Christian theology and "secular" western rationality possess a shared zero-point epistemology.⁶³² In the context of Christian theology, zero-point epistemology produced group distinctions that formed the basis of colonialism: "Christian theology . . . located the distinction between Christians, Moors, and Jews in the 'blood.'"⁶³³ I have already shown how demonology functioned in this discourse by relating each these identities to lower rungs on the hierarchy of being—closer to, and in some senses identified absolutely with, the demonic.⁶³⁴

Enrique Dussel lays out some hints of what theology might look like beyond the ontological framework. It would occlude a restrictive and singular starting point that defines the line between Being and non-being by recognizing that "the divine is other than all systems."⁶³⁵ In some respects, this parallels an impulse in Tillich, with his concern that idolatry reduces the Absolute to any sort of institutional, philosophical, or even theological confines. Tillich largely

⁶³⁰ Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 188. Quoting Gómez.

⁶³¹ Ibid., 118.

⁶³² Ibid., 142.

⁶³³ Ibid., 8.

⁶³⁴ As a reminder—there were some theories or musings about demonic genealogies, such as Ethiopians being the half-children of demons. Demonology intersects with the later emergence of this blood-logic.

⁶³⁵ Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. Aquilina Martinez and Christine Morkovsky (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1985), 98. 98.

fails to follow this through, however, falling into the habit of prioritizing a particular vision of Being. Drexler-Dreis sets out several more specific criteria to judge the possibility of a decolonial and decolonizing theology. Such an approach to theology must consciously disassociate itself from “a single reference point of meaning.”⁶³⁶

It is important to clarify that this resistance to the “zero-point,” or of the ontological project, does not necessarily entail the rejection of meta-narrative discussed in postmodern and postontological thought, and sometimes evoked in postcolonial theory. Drexler-Dreis helpfully outlines Enrique Dussel’s alternative meta-narrative of “transmodernity,” that looks to comprehend the history of the world but names and resists the parochiality of the Western ontological and colonial project. Transmodernity posits a world of multiple centers.⁶³⁷ Such a project aims to reject false Eurocentric metanarratives and engage in conversations that allow movement behind and beyond Western presumptions to epistemological authority. Drexler-Dreis, therefore, outlines the possibilities for a decolonial theology that engages in such “border thinking,” as Mignolo puts it, despite Mignolo’s sense that theology cannot move beyond its entanglement in the colonial matrix of power.⁶³⁸ In this sense, decoloniality is neither an embrace nor a rejection of metanarrative but a call to enact discernment at the borders.

Euro-American political demonology fails to follow such border-thinking, mainly by failing to question a presumed authority to define the demonic. Rather than questioning the nefarious workings of this impulse, Barth, Tillich, Girard, and Wink all rely on their respective philosophical, theological, and exegetical prowess. This is not to say that any attempt to articulate some claims or even doctrines about the demonic is impossible from a decolonial

⁶³⁶ Drexler-Dreis, *Decolonial Love*, 38-39.

⁶³⁷ Ibid., 40

⁶³⁸ Ibid., 39-40.

angle. Instead, the problem is that these Euro-American demonologists do so without conscious awareness of the victims of such constructions or openness to polyvocality. This is the failure of discernment—rather than openness to conversation, nuance, or a recognition of the need to respond to the complex and dynamic nature of evil that appears in one moment, to the next, in a new form. Each figure relies upon singular rules of interpretation and discourse. In this way, they behold themselves to ontological thinking about the demonic rather than the polyvocality suggested by a prioritization of discernment. Barth comes close to this realization by recognizing the fact that evil rarely appears the same way twice, requiring discernment rather than preconceived categories, but he fails to flesh out a sense of discernment, relying instead on a singular commandment: *Nein*. When theology takes seriously the complexity of evil (not to mention the mystery of the Divine), it is called beyond a rigid ontology.

Such a movement beyond the ontological project and of the presumptiveness of the zero-point positioning might lead to a seemingly obvious solution: Erase the demonic from Christian theological discourse. The demonic, it seems, is a symbol that collects and represents some of the most violent tendencies of the ontological framework. It becomes a receptacle for all that is rejected, repressed, violated, and subjugated in the Western framework. Would it not be better to continue to reject demonology as an artifact of ontology, continuing in a more thorough demythologization?

However, several points should give the decolonizing theologian pause. Despite their entanglements in the colonial matrix of power, Barth, Tillich, et al. represent *some* possibility of resistance to the colonial matrix. They embody this resistance largely through their articulation of a political demonology. They point to the possibility of a decolonizing account of the demonic, even if they do not follow it through all the way. Similarly, while Sobrino does not put

much emphasis on the language of “the demonic,” his commitment to the perspective of the poor stresses in an even more radical way the fact that the perspective of the victims of history substantiates and intensifies the apocalyptic and conflictual images of Christian revelation. Are these images *too* polluted by the colonial matrix to be of any decolonial use, despite the intentions (admittedly, of varying sincerity and conscientiousness) of theologians who might offer resources for putting them to such use? Furthermore, for theologians (like many of the ones considered thus far) who place a high priority on revelation as a locus for theology, how does one escape the demonological language and frameworks of the New Testament, in particular? The mere erasure of the demonic is yet another failure of discernment by drowning out the possibility of other voices and experiences. As I consider the third and fourth challenges to a decolonial theology, I hope to show further why rejecting and erasing the language altogether is insufficient and is, in fact, another manifestation of an *undiscerning* colonial impulse.

The third challenge specifically questions the intuition to delete demonology. It is the decolonial critique of the categories that underpin both political demonology and the “anti-mythological” and “secular” frameworks that those thinkers each, in their own way, oppose. For Euro-American political demonology, a primary problem to overcome was Enlightenment and late modern categories about “myth,” “superstition,” and the substance of authentic “religion.” These demonologists questioned the tendency of “the modern world” (defined by the confines of the Western academy) to reject and erase this dimension of Christianity and religion. At the same time, they reject what they saw as archaic and fundamentalist errors that modernity had, somewhat helpfully, sought to correct. However, decolonial theory makes several crucial observations about how these categories and premises of modern Western debates about religion and secularity prop up the colonial matrix.

While Talal Asad and Gil Anidjar are associated more with the postcolonial tradition, their influential reflections on the category of “religion” and the “secular” provide a starting point for making sense of the colonial entanglements of this language. Decolonial thinkers like Frantz Fanon largely corroborate the same points and articulate them in reference to a detailed analysis of the epistemological and philosophical frameworks of the Western colonial matrix.

Asad’s reflections on “the genealogy of religion”⁶³⁹ relate the way that the category of religion works to define otherness in *both* Western Christianity and Western secularity. Specifically, “religion” is initially placed in an evolutionary framework out of which, it is posited, modern Europe emerged all the wiser. Furthermore, much of this hierarchical thinking left its mark in many fields, including theology and the social sciences.⁶⁴⁰ Specifically, categories such as “the mythic” cast a long shadow across several disciplines, including much of modern theology.⁶⁴¹ Even though 20th-century anthropologists largely rejected this strict evolutionary framework, they maintained an essentialism that sought a universal definition of religion as “an autonomous essence,”⁶⁴² reflecting in many ways the zero-point thinking that Mignolo delineates.

Gil Anidjar radicalizes these claims by pointing to the continuities between Christian theology and secularism, with the latter as a manifestation of the former’s production of Western colonialism. Anidjar warns against the colonizing impulse latent in some anticolonial literature which accepts concepts like “religion” and “secular” uncritically, namely Edward Said’s pejorative constructions of religion.⁶⁴³ This demonstrates how various Western frameworks for

⁶³⁹ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 1.

⁶⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶⁴² *Ibid.*, 20-21, 28.

⁶⁴³ Gil Anidjar, “Secularism,” *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 1 (Sep, 2006), 53.

the categories of “religion” and “the secular” are used to construct alterity. Anidjar writes: “The two terms, *religious* and *secular*, are therefore not masks *for* one another. Rather, they function together as covers, strategic devices and mechanisms of obfuscation and self-blinding, doing so in such a way that it remains difficult, if not impossible, to extricate them from each other—or us from either of them.” Anidjar compels us to see this complex dance in terms of power.⁶⁴⁴

Ultimately, Anidjar maintains that Christianity “invented religion” in order to designate (pejoratively) its “other or others as religions,” or at other times (I take Anidjar to imply) as lacking religion.⁶⁴⁵ Anidjar looks, for example, to the way Christianity and secularism have both labeled “the Jew, the Arab, or, to be perfectly historical about it, the Semites—as religions and, more precisely, as being at once *the least and the most religious of religions*.”⁶⁴⁶ In other words, “religion” has served both in Christendom and secularity to define the colonial other as, at intervening moments, either religious (*irrational, premodern*) or irreligious in the sense of not (yet) attaining the qualities of the essence of religion, associated with (modern, Western) Christianity, such as monotheism, individualism, and demythologization. This, for Anidjar, means that rightly understanding Said’s “orientalism” (despite Said’s failures) requires acknowledging that “religion *is* the Orient, the imperial realm to be governed and dominated, bombed, reformed, and civilized.”⁶⁴⁷

This analysis coheres well with the decolonial concepts of “zero-point” epistemology and that of the “colonial matrix” by adding specific content to the ways these operate in delineating categories of beliefs and practices. Corroboration of this point abounds in the somewhat more existential and historically concrete analyses of decolonial thought. Drexler-Dreis considers, for

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid., 62.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid., 63.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid., 66.

example, Nelson Maldonado-Torres's observation that Christopher Columbus associated idolatry with a lack of religion, an early example of Christianity deploying the category of "religion" as a standard of familiarity (proximity to "religion" as associated with Europe).⁶⁴⁸ Fanon relates the way the colonial framework perceives Black people *as* the devil (on account of a projected degeneracy and maleficence), while at the same time categorizing Blackness with "primitive" religiosity: "Black magic, primitive mentality, animism and animal eroticism. . . .this typifies people who have not kept pace with the evolution of humanity," Fanon says, reflecting on the white categories projected in its construction of Blackness.⁶⁴⁹ What this suggests, then, is that the explicit demonization of Black and colonized peoples (often on account of their "pagan" practices) is secularized as disdain and objectification of so-called primitive cosmologies. In this respect, the impulse to erase the demonic as intellectually obsolete is itself a manifestation of the colonizing impulse.

The further point of this analysis is to highlight the compromised position of political demonology regarding the construction of "religion" in the colonial matrix. Along with the emergence of terms like "religion" and "secular" came a host of categories related to either articulating an explicit hierarchy of religiosity or an implicit value judgment framed by universal definitions which tend to "load the dice" in favor of particular forms of belief, spirituality, and practice. These categories include "superstition" and "myth," which factor heavily in the thought of 20th century European and American thinkers. From Bultmann to Wink, the legacy of Euro-American political demonology is engrossed in debates about these categories. To be sure, these

⁶⁴⁸ Drexler-Dreis, 25. Maldonado-Torres disagrees that "religion" serves comparable functions in premodern and modern Western discourse, arguing that the colonial context occasioned a new definition and discourse regarding "religion" that bears little to no comparison to the medieval origins of the concept. See Maldonado-Torres, "Race, Religion, and Ethics in the Modern/Colonial World," in *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, 42.4 (2014), 692-693.

⁶⁴⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2008), 221. See also Curtis L. Evans on the multiple uses of the idea of "Black religion," in *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195328189.001.0001.

thinkers do not use such categories uncritically, nor are they always *entirely* unaware of the Eurocentric connotations. However, they continue to purport to define these categories in ways that privilege modern, European Christianity or to create criteria of interpretation for translating “myths” into (purportedly superior) Western philosophical language. The consequence of this posture is the reinscription of the colonial matrix by judging particular spiritualities and cosmologies on a hierarchy of “religion.”

A revealing example is Tillich’s early discursive essay on the category of the demonic, which he introduces with a distressing reflection on “primitive” art. What exactly Tillich means by “primitive” art is a bit unclear—it is, for Tillich, an apparently monolithic category since he does not specify a particular example, much less a region or period. Tillich does not mean to be pejorative per se, indicating instead a rather romanticizing notion that ancient artistic and religious artifacts present “depths of reality” lost to modern peoples.⁶⁵⁰ Nonetheless, this conveys an evolutionary framework that places “myth” behind the superior rationalization possible in Protestant Christianity. Elsewhere, Tillich evinces these assumptions when he argues that all religions have an “ultimate concern,” thereby reading other religions in the idiosyncratic terms of his theology, and furthermore by arguing that all religions tend to evolve toward a personalist and monotheist understanding of the Divine.⁶⁵¹

To restate: For Tillich, the symbol of the demonic is salient for making sense of universal human experiences. It is therefore necessary, he thinks, in articulating a sense of “history” to take “the demonic” into account. However, this should not be done by portraying the demonic “in the mythological symbols of the past.” Tillich suggests replacing these with more rational symbols,

⁶⁵⁰ Paul Tillich, *The Interpretation of History*, trans. Nicholas Alfred Rasetzki and Elsa L. Talmey (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1936), 77.

⁶⁵¹ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, 220ff.

namely his notion of the juxtaposition of form and formlessness.⁶⁵² Tillich proceeds in this foundational essay to offer a universal theory of “the demonic” within his emerging ontology of courage. It fits within a soteriology regarding the ultimate redemption of all that is demonic.

Later, Tillich takes up the specific debates that Bultmann instigates regarding the nature of myth. Against particular interpretations of demythologization, Tillich maintains that myths cannot be entirely replaced. They communicate in a unique and somewhat irreducible way. However, they can and should be translated into “theology.”⁶⁵³ He thus advocates a “halfway demythologization,” which requires a theological-rational translation of myth without supplanting their unique and mysterious nature.⁶⁵⁴ Tillich translates the myths of Christian revelation and tradition into existentialist terms. While his foundational commitment to situational theology means that he implicitly recognizes, on the one hand, the contingency and contextuality of any such translation, he also privileges existentialist categories as the universal best way to understand such material.

Standing largely uncritically in his Eurocentric philosophical presumptions, Tillich purports to describe *what is going on* when human beings speak mythologically about the demonic. This, of course, also depends upon Tillich’s construction of a definition of “the demonic” that he thinks can be applied to cultural artifacts and practices even if their subjects would use remarkably different categories. Tillich, therefore, exhibits a “zero-point” epistemology for ranking and categorizing human beliefs, practices, and behaviors. A decolonial approach to the demonic requires, instead, an “epistemic disobedience” that breaks away from Eurocentric and colonialist frameworks.⁶⁵⁵ This is not to cast a final judgment on what might or

⁶⁵² Tillich, *The Interpretation of History*, 97-98.

⁶⁵³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol 2, 16.

⁶⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶⁵⁵ Mignolo, 122-123.

might not be helpful about Tillich's insights, but to point out the Eurocentric positionality that subsumes broad human experiences and practices into categories that speak for and impose meaning upon those experiences and practices. Tillich, despite his concern to let myths speak (at least to some degree) for themselves, does not incorporate or introduce any space for the people of the world to speak on their own terms. The rush to analyze and categorize, without any room for dialogical engagement or "border thinking" that might cast a critical eye back upon one's assessments, is a manifestation of the colonial matrix.

The fourth and final challenge, suggested in all the others so far, is the problem of Eurocentrism. Mignolo and Althaus-Reid's critiques of liberation theology for failing to delink itself from Eurocentric models. Drexler-Dreis, on the other hand, makes a compelling case for liberation theology as a decolonial theology inasmuch as it consistently follows out its commitment to having as "dialogue partners" those peoples who are relegated to non-being.⁶⁵⁶ For this reason, Drexler-Dreis argues that theology can follow the tradition of liberation while also being decolonial. However, it requires "expanding the sources of theological thought."⁶⁵⁷ Drexler-Dreis subsequently turns to Fanon and Baldwin in order to think about soteriology and love at the borders and in a mode of epistemic disobedience.

Conclusion

Decolonizing the demonic requires discernment with and among those residing at the borders of coloniality—namely, colonialism's victims. This means that even if there are helpful resources and inspiration from Euro-American political demonology, a decolonial and decolonizing account of demonology requires a prioritization of other sources. For this reason, I set Euro-American political demonology in the background and attempt to engage in a similar

⁶⁵⁶ Drexler-Dreis, 47.

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid., 69.

act of epistemic disobedience by centering Black American reflections on evil, demons, and discernment. A decolonial approach to demonology necessarily centers the demonized peoples of history.

The next chapter introduces womanist theology as another discourse that, cohering with a decolonial project, reflects explicitly and carefully about the workings of evil in the auspices of empires of white patriarchy. Womanist theology, recognizing the tremendous power of evil as well as the usefulness of Black traditions of discernment, exorcism, spiritual warfare, and demonology in naming and resisting such evil, considers the demonizing nature of Christian coloniality through the lens of the demonization of Black women's bodies. This analysis leads to a particular and more substantive practice of discerning the spirits. A Christian womanist theological account of discernment predicates upon a Christologically-framed love of one's own flesh as a practice of discerning the truth about oneself and others despite the obfuscation of demonization.

Chapter Four

Discernment in the Flesh: Womanism and the Black Grammar of the Demonic

Following the theological “border thinking” advocated by Joseph Drexler-Dreis, this chapter reflects *on* and *with* peoples who live at the peripheries of the colonial matrix. This represents a shift in favor of the demonized peoples of history and the witness they bear to the possibilities for a demonology. To engage in this way is to perform what decolonial thinkers describe as “epistemic disobedience”⁶⁵⁸ by circumventing the colonial hierarchies of knowledge. This act of epistemic disobedience is governed by commitments to liberation and decolonization. This methodological emphasis occasions a turn to Black traditions of demonology and discernment. In my reading of these traditions, I draw attention to projects of resistance. Demonology, in Black American religious and spiritual traditions, is a language that emerges as Black women and men discern and tell the truth about their flesh in all its scars, traumas, beauties, and revelations. Demonology is a confrontation with the lies of a mendacious, demonic, empire.

As I discuss previously, the Euro-American tradition of political demonology does not adequately treat the problem of discernment. Discernment, in this case, relates to the dual problem of whether or when to speak demonologically, and how one determines what is truly evil (or “demonic”) about a particular social situation. Karl Barth exhibits laudable theological sensitivity to the dangers that inhere in any demonological discourse, recognizing that it can produce paranoia, superstition, and violence. This insight would imply the need for careful

⁶⁵⁸ Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity*, 122-123.

discernment about the appropriateness of demonological language. However, Barth ultimately relies upon a reductive rule, maintaining that theology should say as little as possible that is demonological. With this dictum, Barth represents the failure of Euro-American political demonology to think through the problem of discernment.

This shortcoming is acutely enfeebling for Euro-American political demonology's possibility as a theology of resistance to anti-Black colonialism. At a broad level, Euro-American political demonology does not sufficiently reckon with the problems of anti-Blackness and empire. These thinkers fail to identify anti-Black colonialism as a fundamental demonic social reality, and do not interrogate the ways that their own demonologies participate in Euro-centric modes of thinking, a point I elaborate upon in the previous chapter. These shortcomings reflect a failure of discernment *as* a failure to step beyond the epistemological parameters of the colonial matrix. Liberation, postcolonial, and decolonial theologies, conversely, suggest the need to practice discernment as attention to the peripheries of the colonial imagination. This chapter embodies this conviction by enacting discernment as an attention to the demonized peoples of history. I also, however, expand the argument by considering the particular ways Black and womanist approaches reframe the conversation about demonology and discernment. Black and womanist traditions reflect on discernment as an embodied practice of people pressing up against and resisting the categories of the anti-Black Western Christian demonological-imperial imagination.

In this chapter I make particular constructive use of womanist theology, namely the works of Emilie M. Townes and Delores Williams. I contextualize womanist contributions to demonology in relation to Black traditions related to spirits, discernment, and exorcism. Together, these traditions express an approach to demonology *and* discernment as fundamental

spiritual and theological concerns in the context of anti-Black colonialism. These traditions recognize, on the one hand, the coordination of demonology with colonality, observing the ways that Western Christian theology and the broader colonial project have demonized the bodies of Black women in particular. At the same time, they attest to the relevance of practices and symbols related to cosmologies of evil spirits for understanding and reckoning with such complex, duplicitous, evils as white patriarchy and colonality.

This womanist approach to demonology necessarily prioritizes discernment as untangling the reality and nature of evil amidst the deceptive demonizations of empire. The colonial project, built upon demonological traditions, project confusion about the nature of good and evil and about which bodies should or should not be loved. Empire is an aesthetic and affective project of vilifying bodies relegated to the edges of Being. It engenders disdain on the part of those associated with the center, against those deemed to dwell at the borders of Being. It further projects self-loathing and alienation among demonized peoples. Womanism proposes a rebellious practice of Black women loving and attending to their own flesh. Recognition of the Divine dignity of one's own body and desires is an act of ascertaining and telling the truth amidst the alienations and vilifications of empire. This womanist ethic, I maintain, embody theological sensibilities related related to discernment and demonology. of Prioritizing flesh that has been demonized as a living witness to the powers and principalities of empire frames the love of one's own flesh and the flesh of others as a truth-telling enterprise of discernment.

As I mention above, these womanist theological insights emerge out of particular Black religious traditions. Therefore, the majority of this chapter outlines several distinct demonological paradigms that appear in the Black and womanist theological and literary traditions. I build upon Anthony Pinn's notion of the "grammar of the demonic" as a defining

feature of Black American religion and theology.⁶⁵⁹ As Pinn's category suggests—African slaves in the Americas, carrying with them a myriad of African traditions that relate to the nature of good and evil and the spiritual realm, endured the tremendous violence of trans-Atlantic slavery, Jim Crow, and persisting forms of anti-Blackness in North America, as well as multiple efforts to suppress Black religious expressions and practices. The white colonial matrix has at various times met Black culture and religion with fetishization, appropriation, conversion, or erasure. Black women and men have responded with creativity, cunning, and spiritual insight—preserving the wisdom of their diverse heritages while also exhibiting agency in developing their own interpretations of Christianity. Central to much of this project has been traditions of wisdom about the nature of evil, and the need to discern good from evil as a practice of liberation.

The first section of this chapter features Black theologian James Cone and womanist theologian Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, as foundational thinkers for a Black and womanist demonology, respectively. While Cone rarely speaks about the demonic, he and Cheryl Kirk-Duggan both ascertain a particular theology of evil in the Black musical tradition. This tradition centers a praxis of prophetic resistance as spiritual warfare against the tremendous powers of white supremacy. Kirk-Duggan makes this demonological theme the most explicit, but does so as a development of many of Cone's observations. Kirk-Duggan sees the Black musical tradition as exorcism against the evils of white supremacy. This first section of the chapter, then, explores these foundational attempts to explicate Black practice into a constructive demonology. Their contribution especially emphasizes a theology of spiritual warfare, where the struggle against white supremacy and white patriarchy is a struggle against the powers and principalities. This

⁶⁵⁹ Anthony B. Pinn, *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought*, Religion, Race, and Ethnicity (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 101–2.

tradition parallels Jon Sobrino's spiritual warfare motif in his theology of the Kingdom and the anti-Kingdom, discussed in the previous chapter.

The Black grammar of the demonic, however, is not simply a straightforward language of spiritual warfare. Black grammars of the demonic do not always exhibit sharp and hardened lines between a good and liberating God and an evil devil who oversees white supremacy. Rather, some dimensions of the Black musical tradition (namely the blues and hip-hop) suggest other cosmological framings. Some of these traditions even portray the devil as an ally to Black people in their struggle against oppression. The recent controversial music video by musician Lil Nas X is a telling example. Sparking a renewed eruption of culture wars around queer sexuality and witchcraft and the occult, Lil Nas X's music video for his 2021 song "Montero (Call Me By Your Name)" depicts Lil Nas X descending into hell, giving the Devil a lap dance, and subsequently seeming to take the Devil's place as ruler of hell. This motif draws upon two demonological traditions that differ from the straightforward demonologies of spiritual warfare. On the one hand, the song is a defiant parody of conservative religious condemnation of queer sexuality, serving as a mockery of white heteronormative demonologies. It also evokes a tradition in blues and rap music of artists depicting the Devil as a potential ally against oppressive political and social powers. In both dimensions, the song acts as a prophetic device of forcing the viewer to reckon with their preconceived categories about what, exactly, is evil.

In light of these traditions of cosmological ambiguity I turn to recent work in the study of Black religion. By moving beyond Euro-centric reductionisms, scholars are now thinking more carefully about Black religion as a diverse, complex, and creative phenomenon. In particular, scholars are exhibiting a clearer awareness of Black religious and spiritual traditions that extend beyond the purview of mainline Protestantism. A penchant for Protestant reductionism has

traditionally read Black religion in terms of doctrinal loci and ecclesial affiliation, while also underemphasizing Black traditions like Hoodoo, conjure, Catholic, or charismatic Black religious traditions.

In conversation with more contemporary scholarship in Black religion, such as the works of Anthony Pinn and Patricia Schroder, as well as the older but still insightfully disruptive work of Albert Raboteau, I argue that Black religion addresses evil and spirituality with several distinct emphases. These include a sense of integralism between nature, society, and the spiritual, which recognizes the close relationship between the spiritual and the political. This integralism is certainly on display in the prophetic spiritual warfare demonologies articulated by Cone and Kirk-Duggan. Another distinctive feature is an emphasis on discernment as a practice of embodied communal wisdom amidst the complexities of an ambiguous spiritual realm that intersects with similarly complex human relationships and social systems. These African traditions refract foundational ethic of loving the flesh, and healing, as driving commitments that shape discernment as a practice of parsing through ambiguous social and political realities to pursue spiritual and social relationships that prioritize embodied wholeness. This latter dimension is expressed more clearly in the womanist demonologies of Emilie Townes and Delores Williams.

Finally, then, to womanist theology. I turn to Townes and Williams, who articulate a particular understanding of evil that speaks to the setting of anti-Black coloniality and the lived experience of Black persons, particularly women. Out of this attention to embodied Black life, defying some of the limitations of rationalistic and Protestant reductionisms, womanism expresses a demonology that evokes the diverse spiritualities of Black communities.

Townes develops her category of “the cultural production of evil” as the tendency of social evil to create structures that plague the imagination by producing demonizing stereotypes that justify vilification and obscure the truth about the Divine dignification of all bodies. In doing so, Townes reveals her own dependence upon a demonological grammar—describing the seemingly-sentient, tremendous, excessive, and fantastic powers of evil. I put this in conversation with Delores Williams’ notion of the demonarchy as the proper name for the powers of subjugation that intersect upon the bodies of Black women. Womanist theology approaches evil as the imperative to practice discernment *in* the flesh. Discernment in the flesh is a praxis of self-love that cuts through the vilification of one, and another’s, flesh amidst the wiles of the colonial matrix.

Evil and the Black Musical Tradition

Demonology is an important thread within several instantiations of Black theology. It is revealing that James Cone at times uses the moniker “demonic” to describe the powers of white supremacy. In *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone goes so far as to say that “the white structure of this society. . . must be at least part of what the New Testament meant by the demonic forces.” Cone claims further that Malcolm X’s description of the white man as “the devil” is “not far wrong.”⁶⁶⁰ Even though it is rarely explicit, a demonological framework guides Cone’s understanding of racism in North America. This framework is more in his analysis of Black musical traditions. Womanist theologian Cheryl-Kirk Duggan has similarly turned to the Black musical corpus and finds it to be a profound foundation for thinking about evil, seeming to give voice to underlying impulses that also inform Cone.

Grammars of Spiritual Warfare

⁶⁶⁰ James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 49.

According to both James Cone and Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, the Black musical tradition reflects a framework of spiritual warfare that recognizes the excessive, tremendous, and radical nature of evil. They both point out the presence of a Black demonological framework in the Black spirituals tradition, as well as the blues, and present these as alternatives to Western frameworks of theodicy. Drawing from African cultural traditions, the spirituals represent an embodied, aesthetic, and social responsiveness to evil as a reality to challenge, rather than a philosophical problem to solve. This Black grammar of the demonic connects itself to concrete practices of resistance and an implied emphasis on the problem of discernment. In the Black musical tradition, *telling the truth* is the foundation of exorcising evil. In the context of demonic powers of racism and colonialism, the Black musical tradition reflects an awareness that the duplicity of empire belies any straightforward attempt to account for and respond to evil. Confronting evil requires both careful discernment and truth-telling as prophetic denunciation.

Cone and Kirk-Duggan consider Black approaches to the theological problem of evil, or *theodicy*. Theodicy typically refers to the philosophical project of accounting for the reality and goodness of God amidst the fact of evil, which presents an apparent contradiction. Cone and Kirk-Duggan argue that Black religious expressions wrestle with some of the same questions as the Western tradition of reckoning with this apparent problem. A Black theology, they argue, confronts these questions in a way that fundamentally contrasts with theodicy in white theology.

For Cone, Western theology tends to approach the problem of evil as a cerebral exercise detached from the lived realities of suffering and injustice. Cone criticizes the “rational” and “classical Greek” Western approach to evil, “with its emphasis on abstract and universal distinctions.”⁶⁶¹ Kirk-Duggan similarly characterizes Western forms of theodicy as “abstract”

⁶⁶¹ James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 54.

and “ideological.”⁶⁶² Attempts to answer the apparent disjuncture between the realities of suffering and God typically, in Western thought, resort to “mind games”⁶⁶³ which avoid the existential realities of suffering.⁶⁶⁴ For Black communities, Cone and Kirk-Duggan argue, evil is not an abstract problem but a fundamental and pressing question of survival.

Cone explains that unlike Western theodicy, formulated within the comfort of academia, Black attempts to reckon with the realities of evil emerge in direct relationship to a shared history of suffering.⁶⁶⁵ Black theodicy involves “a response to Blacks’ total environment, siphoned through the complex human mind.” This environment includes “the reality of evil (slavery, oppression) and paradox,” as well as a “daily life filled with lynching, rape, and dehumanization.”⁶⁶⁶ Cone does not, I think, mean that existential questions do not plague white Christian theologies of evil. Questions emerging from experiences of illness, war, and loneliness certainly haunt white theologians—rather, the problem is that those experiences are occluded by what presents as an abstract, cold, detached inquiry. For Black persons, the problem of evil is a question of existence, related to the everyday realities of Black communities experiencing tremendous evil.

Cone emphasizes that Black American theodicy centers around relational, spiritual engagement with God.⁶⁶⁷ Fidelity to and relationship with the Divine is the presumed reality for Black theodicy, which does not (even for theoretical or performative reasons) bracket belief in the reality and nature of God. There is, in Black theodicy, no significant challenge to “the justice

⁶⁶² Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, *Exorcizing Evil: A Womanist Perspective on the Spirituals* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 47.

⁶⁶³ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶⁵ Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, 53-54.

⁶⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, xvi.

⁶⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

and goodness of God.”⁶⁶⁸ This is why Cone portrays Black theodicy as a spirituality rather than simply a discursive theology. It emerges in and through an embodied relationship with God. Nevertheless, Cone maintains, the spirituals ask similar questions as white theodicy: If God is a liberator, “why then are black slaves subject to the rule of white masters?”⁶⁶⁹

According to Cone and Kirk-Duggan, the other important and unique quality of Black theodicy is the fact that its medium is musical. For both theologians, the tradition of Black spirituals is a foundational theological source. The function of Black theodicy through music Kirk-Duggan posits the notion of “musicking” as a cultural practice endemic to African and Black American religion. Rather than simply the production of detached musical artifacts, musicking is a “social activity” that is “a vehicle for praise and protest toward change and healing.”⁶⁷⁰ Cone similarly explains that, in the African cultural backdrop to Black American religion, music is “an expression of the community’s view of the world and its existence in it.”⁶⁷¹

As musicking, the spirituals represent a social setting of injustice and the quest for holistic healing for self, family, community, and nation. The function of the spirituals as manifestations of the pursuit of healing constitutes their primary difference from Western theodicies. An “urgency for wholeness and justice” gives the spirituals “vitality,” and is even the primary impetus for making music.⁶⁷² In their later use in 20th-century protest movements, the spirituals serve not simply as a soundtrack but represent embodied participation in the quest for justice and healing.⁶⁷³ Therefore, the spirituals differ from Western theodicies in that they elicit and represent a *response* to evil. The spirituals do not purport to understand evil as a

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid., 53.

⁶⁷⁰ Kirk-Duggan, 100-101

⁶⁷¹ Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, 30.

⁶⁷² Kirk-Duggan, xvii.

⁶⁷³ Ibid., 100.

philosophical problem but are themselves the embodiment of liberation against evil. Cone particularly illustrates the role of the spirituals in encouraging Black participation in the liberation enacted by God, which the songs often describe or implicitly support through metaphor, code, or theological statements.⁶⁷⁴

Although much of their analysis focuses upon the lyrical content, and communal function of the spirituals, Kirk-Duggan and Cone are also careful to also note their aesthetic and musical qualities. Their “choral song style” involves a distinct “set of aesthetics and principles” that govern the sort of spiritual power that the music makes possible. Kirk-Duggan describes this as the “freedom” aesthetic of the spirituals.⁶⁷⁵ In their use in public protest, for example, particular affects were evoked by “specific tunes,” transforming concrete moments into transformative instances.⁶⁷⁶ Similarly, Cone argues that the spirituals allowed slaves to affirm “their freedom through the rhythm, the passion, and the motion of their language.”⁶⁷⁷ A spiritual “is a joyful experience, a vibrant affirmation of life and its possibilities in an appropriate esthetic form.”⁶⁷⁸ The musical substantiation of the longing for freedom was, says Cone, Christocentric in that the community directly encounters the “historical presence” of Jesus in the spirituals.⁶⁷⁹

Both theologians relate Black theodicy to themes of liberation, spiritual warfare, and exorcism. The spirituals posit a God who takes sides against evil, often personified as diabolical or demonic. Cone only explicitly discusses these personifications briefly while recounting the history of interpretation of the Black spirituals tradition—noting the identification of the devil with white racists, or hell with slavery.⁶⁸⁰ However, he emphasizes the liberating presumption of

⁶⁷⁴ Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues*, 36.

⁶⁷⁵ Kirk-Duggan, 106.

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid., 104.

⁶⁷⁷ Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues*, 44.

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid., 31.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid., 44.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid., 14-15.

the spirituals, proclaiming faith in a God who antagonizes against oppression and punishes the wrongdoer.⁶⁸¹ The spirituals are “a ritualization of God in song.”⁶⁸² Indeed, “because the faithful can experience the reality of divine presence, they can endure suffering and transform it into an event of redemption.”⁶⁸³ Similarly, in their depictions of *heaven*, the spirituals provide a “transcendent element of hope. . . which elevated black people above the limitations of the slave experience, and enabled them to view black humanity independently of their oppressors. . . . [I]t became a real force in history.”⁶⁸⁴ There is, therefore, a consistent theme of the “divine *liberation* of the oppressed from slavery” in the lyrical content of the spirituals.⁶⁸⁵

Cone’s emphasis on the liberation thematic coheres with Kirk-Duggan’s more focused treatment of the demonological themes central to the spirituals. She explicitly describes the spirituals in terms of “exorcism.” She comprehensively thematizes the spirituals as the “ritual components of a collective exorcism,” particularly in the way the abolitionist and civil rights movements used them as protest songs.⁶⁸⁶ Notably, Kirk-Duggan interacts with Paul Tillich’s understanding of the demonic, as interpreted by Albert L. Truesdale, Jr in his dissertation “A Tillichian Analysis of White Racism in the South.”⁶⁸⁷

Truesdale, analyzing the roots of Tillich’s concept of the demonic, applies it to the systems and realities of slavery and Jim Crow. Truesdale initially focuses on how racism is demonic *for white people*. This presumptive starting-point is, in some sense, natural from a Tillichian perspective. As described earlier, Tillich’s demonology presents a definition of the

⁶⁸¹ Ibid., 36.

⁶⁸² Ibid., 66.

⁶⁸³ Ibid., 56.

⁶⁸⁴ Ibid., 90.

⁶⁸⁵ Ibid., 32.

⁶⁸⁶ Kirk-Duggan, 132.

⁶⁸⁷ Albert L. Truesdale, Jr., “A Tillichian Analysis of White Racism in the South” (Emory University, 1976). Unpublished Dissertation.

demonic as the juxtaposition of form and formlessness, creativity and destruction. This juxtaposition implies that knowledge of the demonic *as demonic* is most accessible for those who benefit from the “social demonry” (Tillich’s name for a demonic political order) or at least by holding this population in a central place of analysis, as they are the unique witnesses of the positive side of the demonry.

Truesdale surmises, using Tillich’s existentialist theology, that “racism provides strength” for whites. That is, it provides both social power and a seemingly positive existential benefit.⁶⁸⁸ This seeming gain for whites, Truesdale certainly acknowledges, has evident and fundamental destructive consequences for Black existence. It also, however, occasions the descent of white persons’ existence into idolatry and destruction. By trading the Absolute for whiteness, white persons create a hollow and ultimately self-defeating identity: “In claiming ultimacy for itself and thereby refusing to allow other legitimate creative urges to come to expression, a dissolution of individual and corporate life is evidenced in whites and the social order dominated by the racist philosophy.”⁶⁸⁹ Notably, doing so cuts whites off from the “creativity” that is a defining feature of Being.⁶⁹⁰ This latter insight is important and insightful. Truesdale maintains that racism severely and holistically damages white society. This resists seemingly enlightened but ultimately romantic and Eurocentric notions that despite the unfortunate error of racism, one can still appreciate white American society for the intellectual, artistic, familial, political, and religious triumphs of Western civilization. According to Truesdale’s appropriation of Tillich, white society, instead, is uniquely sick at all levels. It has

⁶⁸⁸ Truesdale, 33.

⁶⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁰ Ibid.

become an idolatrous and demon-possessed civilization, cutting itself off from Being—necessitating aesthetic, intellectual, and cultural poverty.

Truesdale reveals important ways a Tillichian demonology might apply to an understanding of racism. However, Truesdale follows in Tillich's footsteps by not putting the victims of history, the "demonized peoples," at the center of his reflection. For Black communities, there is no redeeming quality or benefit to the experience of racism. Therefore, Truesdale's emphasis on the (albeit hollow and self-defeating) existential benefits of racism for whites perceives racism from only a white vantage point. Certainly, many Black intellectuals have thought about the purported existential, social, and economic benefits of whiteness *for* white persons. For those who live on the other side of whiteness, however, racism is not simply a juxtaposition of form and formlessness. On the one hand, it has no redemptive or useful quality. On the other, it is dramatic and tremendous in its power and scope. It is both more absurd, and more coherent, than Tillichian definitions seem to capture. Further, peoples at the periphery see clearly that the apparent benefits for white folk is grossly embellished. W.E.B. DuBois describes "the rags of facts and fancies" that white people produce "to hide their nakedness."⁶⁹¹ In this sense, whiteness is farcical.⁶⁹² Those committed to whiteness are not simply slightly confused, albeit ultimately rational, persons grasping to narratives that give them a (sadly destructive) but ultimately conscionable benefit. Rather, DuBois seems to say, those beholden to whiteness are seriously deluded to the point of insanity.

⁶⁹¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Souls of White Folk," in *W.E.B. Du Bois: Writings*, ed. Nathan Irvin Huggins, The Library of America (New York, N.Y: Library of America, 1987), 923.

⁶⁹² I do not want to reject the important point that I think Tillich is making, or undercut the salient ways his insights could be applied. Tillich is, in part, emphasizing that evil is not simply pure chaos or non-being. It works in and through rational systems, and becomes irresistible to rational beings, in light of the legitimate needs it offers to resolve. From the vantage point of the oppressed, the social demonry takes on substantive form—it is vast, tremendous, and cunning—and therefore cannot simply be captured with the language of non-being or formlessness. My concern with Truesdale's use of Tillich's definition is the way it privileges the vantage point of white persons—this sense of juxtaposition does not seem to match the phenomenology of the victims of the social demonry.

Kirk-Duggan does not ultimately rely too heavily on Truesdale's Tillichian analysis. It serves to corroborate and illustrate, for her, what Black women and men have already known and expressed in their own language. Rather than take a bird's eye view, or define the demonic from the vantage point of the oppressor, Kirk-Duggan refers to the demonic in terms of the subjective recognition of "structural malevolence."⁶⁹³ It is the existential insight that there is "some irreducible power" that "cannot be humanized, integrated, or cured."⁶⁹⁴ Kirk-Duggan does also emphasize the nature of racist society as a whole, as demonic, not just as a subjective symbolization on the part of the oppressed—for the demonic is "a culture withdrawn from God" and "the surrender of persons to oppressive power structures and the results of breakdowns in personal development." She continues: "Racism and slavery, as collective possessions, occur where the demonic becomes a psychosis or insanity."⁶⁹⁵

One of the primary functions of the spirituals as rituals of exorcism involves their function in truth-telling. Truth-telling in the spirituals has two forms: "suspicion" and "remembrance."⁶⁹⁶ The first is a critical activity calling into question the myths of white racist society. The latter speaks to the recollection of the struggle of Black women and men. The spirituals and their protest-song descendants "named the evildoers and the suffering that institutionalized racism and its racist followers caused."⁶⁹⁷ The Spirituals engage in an "unmasking process," which identifies Satanic powers in society: "The Spirituals, ritual components of a collective exorcism, enabled slaves and 1960s activists to fight evil with the power constructs of freedom and justice through song."⁶⁹⁸ She explains,

⁶⁹³ Kirk-Duggan, 35.

⁶⁹⁴ Ibid., 132.

⁶⁹⁵ Ibid.,

⁶⁹⁶ Ibid., 133.

⁶⁹⁷ Ibid., 111.

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid., 132.

The Spirituals tell the African-American liberation story through the exodus as they wear the mask of authentic, audacious confrontation, conflict, and revelation. The liberating dimensions of the Hebrew Bible, linked with real, communal experiences of African Americans, shape many Spirituals and freedom songs. In these chants of collective exorcism, all meet Jesus face to face in each other.⁶⁹⁹

In this way, the Spirituals reflect the African tradition of unveiling cosmic powers and seeking transformation in light of spiritual realities,⁷⁰⁰ which includes the possibility of exorcism. The spirituals respond to evil by directly naming it and unraveling its lies.

Part of the aesthetic of the spirituals (and the broader Black musical tradition) is the free-form style of communal singing, which further illustrates its distinct approach to theodicy. This tradition of singing is marked by “spontaneity,”⁷⁰¹ as well as “ornamentation,” “fluctuation,” and free improvisation.⁷⁰² Cone, commenting on the blues as secular forms of the spiritual, states that “the blues express a black perspective on the incongruity of life and the attempt to achieve meaning in a situation fraught with contradictions.”⁷⁰³ Cone describes the spirituals, similarly, as depicting the “agony of faith” alongside the realities of “pain.”⁷⁰⁴ This lack of resolution to both the verbal and musical content of the spirituals constitutes the spirituals’ function as theodicy. They represent a response to evil and suffering that does not provide exact answers, instead recognizing its incongruity. This expression of ambiguity and inconclusiveness does not take away the role of Black musicking as a device of “truth-telling.”⁷⁰⁵ It is, in fact, a constitutive element. The blues speak the truth about the incongruities and complexities of life. Cone highlights this as he makes the case that the blues do not represent an anti-religious foil to the

⁶⁹⁹ Ibid., 133.

⁷⁰⁰ See Hayes, above.

⁷⁰¹ Ibid., 107.

⁷⁰² Ibid., 105.

⁷⁰³ Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues*, 102.

⁷⁰⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁰⁵ Kirk-Duggan, 37.

spirituals—instead, they “flow from the same bedrock of experience.”⁷⁰⁶ They serve as a parallel tradition to that of the Black preacher, whose job was to discuss and reveal “the problems of black experience.” Blues singers, “like the preacher in the church. . . proclaimed the Word of black existence, depicting its joy and sorrow, love and hate, and the awesome burden of being ‘free’ in a racist society when one is black.”⁷⁰⁷

For Cone, the blues are truth-telling in that they represent a form of realism and draw from experience and intuition. The blues emerge from “that peculiar feeling that makes you know that there is something seriously wrong.”⁷⁰⁸ This, again, reflects the Black grammar of the demonic—as an intuition of nefarious presence. The blues are “fortitude in the face of a broken existence.”⁷⁰⁹ As Cone further explains, “the blues are true because they combine art and life, poetry and experience, the symbolic and the real.”⁷¹⁰

In sum, Cone and Kirk-Duggan highlight the demonological imagination underlying much of the Black musical tradition—namely, the role of the spirituals and the blues as devices of spiritual warfare. Their demonology reflects such a motif of spiritual warfare, not unlike Jon Sobrino’s binary of the Kingdom/anti-Kingdom, by associating the powers of white supremacy with the demonic powers and principalities which are resisted through active antagonization. The Black musical tradition, according to Cone and Kirk-Duggan, represents the embodiment of spiritual warfare as a communal practice of naming and expressing the existence, reality, and presence of evil and galvanizing communal spiritual power to combat these powers through political action.

⁷⁰⁶ Cone, 100.

⁷⁰⁷ Ibid., 102.

⁷⁰⁸ Ibid., 103.

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid., 104.

⁷¹⁰ Ibid., 103.

There is a question, however, about how to reflect on Black musical traditions that exhibit something other than a spiritual warfare motif, such as songs that appear to embrace evil and question or reject the God of Christianity. Cone reflects on the fact that the blues were often dismissed by Black and other Christians as “devil songs” with their apparent sacrilege and glorification of sin.⁷¹¹ Cone maintains, however, that a simplistic reading of the blues as atheistic and anti-Christian is misguided. It is true, he concedes, that the blues lack the rich religious language of the spirituals. However, “this is not atheism,” Cone argues, “rather it is believing that *transcendence* will only be meaningful when it is made real in and through the limits of historical experience.”⁷¹² In other words, the aspects of the blues that are critical or dismissive of religion and Christianity is simply another iteration of a similar prophetic witness as the spirituals, in this case by naming the failures of otherworldly faith to manifest actual liberation in history. Nonetheless, there is more to say about the surprising ways that God and the devil, and their relationship, is portrayed in Black musical traditions.

The Devil at the Crossroads: Other Musical Grammars of the Demonic

Other scholars have noted that much of the Black musical tradition exhibits demonological motifs that cannot be reduced to a paradigm of spiritual warfare. That is, much of blues and hip hop music seems to reject the framework of a good and liberating God who fights against an evil, white supremacist devil. In Pinn’s explication of the Black “grammar of the demonic,” for example, he reflects on what he sees as the essentially ambiguous role that both God and the devil play in blues music.⁷¹³ Pinn holds up the music of Robert Johnson as an important example.⁷¹⁴ Johnson’s paradigmatic song, “Crossroads Blues,” is (apparently) about

⁷¹¹ Ibid., 98.

⁷¹² Ibid., 113.

⁷¹³ Pinn, *Embodiment*, 106ff.

⁷¹⁴ Ibid., 112.

reaching out to the devil for help with survival, as well as material success, when God fails to answer his pleas. Johnson initially calls out to God: “Have mercy, now save poor Bob, if you please.” There is no reply. Instead, Johnson begins “sinkin’ down.” This might suggest a resignation to perdition whereby Johnson sees himself as a sinful man, beyond salvation, perhaps an implicit criticism of the mercy of God. However, the song has been interpreted as reflecting, by innuendo, a legendary “deal with the devil,” where Johnson exchanges his soul for musical powers. The song itself does not explicitly describe this encounter, but it relies on tropes familiar to Black audiences in the south that evoke this well-known literary device.⁷¹⁵ The song and the legend of the deal with the devil, for Pinn, exhibit the inherently ambiguous nature of the devil in Black music. The devil *is*, at times, associated with white supremacy. However, the devil also appears as a potential source of strength vis-à-vis a God who seems to have left Black people without recourse.⁷¹⁶

Some interpretations have understood Robert Johnson’s life and music in a way that closer matches the more explicit spiritual warfare themes of the spirituals. Bill Harris’s play about the life of Robert Johnson, *Trick the Devil*, suggestively reinterprets the legend of Johnson’s encounter with the devil in light of the Black musical tradition of identifying the devil with white supremacy or even with white persons directly.⁷¹⁷ Johnson does not make a deal with the devil, but instead defeats the devil by playing the blues, which tells the truth about the evils of a white racist society.⁷¹⁸ Patricia R. Schroeder, comparing different literary portrayal of Johnson’s life and music, helpfully points out that vestiges of Hoodoo culture feature in the

⁷¹⁵ Patricia R. Schroeder, “Neo-Hoodoo Dramaturgy: Robert Johnson on Stage,” *African American Review* 48, no. 1/2 (2015): 83–96.

⁷¹⁶ Pinn, *Embodiment*, 106.

⁷¹⁷ Ibid.

⁷¹⁸ Ibid.

background. Namely, Johnson's music reflects both Christian and African traditions, exhibiting the role of the spiritual authority in interacting with a complex spiritual realm.⁷¹⁹ In this sense, Schroeder corroborates Pinn's point that even the plurality of interpretations regarding Johnson's cosmology reflects a spiritual tradition of ambiguous cosmologies.

The blues also wrestle with the ways that demonological language and theology can be put to nefarious ends, exhibiting an awareness of the demonizing legacy of white colonialism. The blues sometimes wrestles with demonic evil as misdirection and projection which necessitates the art of discernment: How does one rightly discern the spirits and exorcise the demonic in a society that maintains that Black flesh is itself demonic? This motif is present in another Robert Johnson song, "Me and the Devil Blues." In this piece, Johnson confesses, "me and the devil, was walkin' side by side," and uses this to explain why he is prone to "beat my woman." This song is not, however, simply a wanton embrace of evil, nor is it revealing a predilection to cooperate with the devil (as suggested in the legend of the deal of the devil). Rather, Johnson seems to announce the temptation produced by a demonizing white racist society that he is, in fact, the devil. Johnson wrestles with the demonization of his flesh, and resigns to act in accordance with the nature that white demonologies ascribe to him. "Me and the Devil Blues" is a revelation of the demonizing frameworks of white supremacy and the existential crises it creates for Black persons who fear that they may, in fact, be demonic.

A more recent example of this same theme appears in Lil Nas X's controversial music video for "Montero (Call Me By Your Name)," mentioned previously. Lil Nas X defiantly and satirically embraces his identity as a demonized queer Black body. As Anthea Butler pointed out after the song's release, Lil Nas X pokes at the damnation of queer bodies proclaimed by

⁷¹⁹ Ibid.

evangelicals and other religious conservatives.⁷²⁰ Just as in Johnson's "Me and the Devil Blues," Lil Nas X dramatizes the demonization of particular bodies in the demonologically-driven colonial matrix. Lil Nas X frames his response to this demonization differently, embracing his role as the devil as, at the very least, a sort of satire. In both cases, however, this version of the Black grammar of the demonic highlights the deceptions of the demonizing colonial framework.

In the previous chapter, I highlighted Marcella Althaus-Reid's approach to demonology and the ways it might implicitly critique any demonology that relies solely on a dualistic spiritual warfare motif. Similarly, these alternative Black grammars of the demonic in blues and hip hop move beyond straightforward cosmologies and wrestle with the crises of faith and identity inherent in a colonial system that deploys explicit and implicit cosmologies to demonize particular bodies. The blues and hip hop, namely, reflect upon the difficulties of knowing, understanding, and resisting evil in a social, theological, and cosmological reality where good and evil are obscured and confused. In light of these alternative demonological grammars, it is necessary to think about Black demonology in the broader context of the study of Black religion, particularly recent attempts to highlight diasporic religious traditions that exist within and alongside, or exist outside of, Black Protestantism.

Contextualizing Black Demonology

Historically, many scholars of religion have categorized Black American religion through a reductive Euro-Protestant lens.⁷²¹ This reduction reads Black American Christianity through categories of doctrine or institutions and uses limiting constructs like "conversion" or "syncretism" to describe the relationship between Black Christianity in the Americas and its

⁷²⁰"Lil Nas X Music Video Sparks Outrage," *MSNBC.Com*, accessed November 7, 2021, <https://www.msnbc.com/the-week/watch/lil-nas-x-s-music-video-sparks-outrage-109655621856>.

⁷²¹ See Yvonne Patricia Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 1–2; 4–5.

African religious heritage. Such frameworks undervalue the particular and creative practices of Black Christianity that elude European religious patterns and methods of analysis. Theology, too often relying on the reductive categories of Euro-American religious scholarship, has not often reckoned with the creative adaptations of African indigenous and European-Christian religiosity by Black Americans.

Black Christianity in North America includes numerous beliefs and practices that seek to comprehend and resist evil as a dynamic, excessive, and tremendous power that dwells in, through, and around human bodies and in social structures. There is a distinct Black Christian tradition of demonology that relates to coloniality and racism differently than the colonizing demonologies of Western Christianity, in both its traditional and 20th century “political” forms. Womanist theology, I will argue subsequently, represents a more robust constructive theology of the demonic that interacts with the lived realities of Black religion and spirituality. In this section, however, I introduce developments in the study of Black religion to contextualize my engagement with womanist theology.

Contemporary scholarship on Black religion seeks to rectify dehumanizing and inaccurate depictions that reduce Black religion to coerced acceptance of European religiosity or reactivity to the conditions of white supremacy. Pinn zeroes in on claims that the historical religious expressions of enslaved Black women and men represent an attempt “to ‘rescue’ enslaved Africans and their descendants from the terror/dread” of slavery and violence.⁷²² Pinn, instead, reads Black religion as a multidimensional practice of liberation and agency through institutions, rituals, and religious thought.⁷²³ In other words, Pinn rejects the idea that Black religiosity is simply reactive to white supremacy; rather, it represents a tradition of creative

⁷²² Anthony B. Pinn, *What Is African American Religion?* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 19.

⁷²³ *Ibid.*, 24.

interpretation and reinterpretation based upon diverse African religious heritages, the encounter with various strands of European and American Christianities, and the experiences of diaspora, subjugation, and resistance. From a theological perspective, Eboni Marshall Turman makes a similar point by using Chalcedonian Christology as a methodological foundation that accounts for an “*a priori*” significance of “the flesh” distinct from the markings of the powers of white supremacy upon Black bodies.⁷²⁴ Turman thereby construes womanist theology as a project that imagines embodied Black life suffused with the presence of God, before and beyond the imagination of whiteness.⁷²⁵ These arguments underscore that Black religion is not simply restricted to the theological projects of colonial white supremacy but is the result of active agency among people working out their humanity and their relationship to the Divine in the complex historical circumstances of empire and resistance.

For Pinn, exorcism is a salient overarching symbol for Black religiosity as a spirituality of agency and resistance. Pinn points to exorcism both to categorize a series of concrete practices that relate to a cosmology that includes belief in demons as well as a metaphor for the characteristics of Black American religion as a whole. “Black churches,” Pinn surmises, “respond to terror by seeking to establish blacks as agents of will, and Christian gatherings orchestrated by churches served as a ritual of ‘exorcism’ in that they fostered a break with status as will-less objects and encouraged new forms of relationship.”⁷²⁶ Pinn relates this to the well-known practice of the “ring shout” in Black American religion, “a rhythmic movement of the body that must have resembled the sway and jerk of bodies associated with trances and ‘ecstatic’

⁷²⁴ Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 57, 80–83, 154ff. 57, 80–83, 154ff.

⁷²⁵ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁷²⁶ Pinn, *What Is African American Religion?*, 25.

behavior in many traditional African religions.”⁷²⁷ For Pinn, it is the willful gestures of the body, the ecstatic expression, and the sense that there is evil to be resisted through such movement and gesticulation, which function as a way that Black religion resists white supremacy as something uncannily evil.

Pinn’s analysis supports the appropriateness of thinking about Black Christianity and Black theology in terms of a demonological imagination. But what sort of imagination is this? What is its provenance? How does it relate to the demonological imagination of white Christianity and subsequent colonialism? To answer these questions, it is necessary to consider critical insights in the study of Black religion, going back to Albert Raboteau’s *Slave Religion*. Raboteau’s classic work, still foundational in the field, focuses on the exchange between and integration of African traditional religions (particularly of West Africa) with the experience of slavery, attempted cultural genocide, and various complex relationships with European Christianity in North America. His analysis sets the stage for an understanding of the patterns of Black American religion, particularly Christianity, through the lens of these encounters. That is, Raboteau resists tendencies to read Black Christianity in North America as a passive acceptance of white Christianity, nor as a mere syncretism of African traditional religions with Christianity. Through this lens, we can understand particular practices and theological motifs in Black Christianity that relate to the demonic as a distinct and creative tradition of reflection on evil.

According to Raboteau, the African religious heritage provided a sense of embodied life as regular interaction with “lesser gods and ancestor-spirits.”⁷²⁸ In addition, several West African religious traditions reflected a belief in a complex milieu of good and evil spirits, understood in a

⁷²⁷ Ibid.

⁷²⁸ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 8.

framework of healing—spirits who could either “harm or cure” human beings.⁷²⁹ Spirits interacted with human beings in all aspects of life, including physical and biological reality (spirits related to natural objects, like rocks or animals) and social relations.⁷³⁰

The fact that spirits can have complex and sometimes unclear motives (to harm or heal) supports interpretations that African religion has a unique comprehension of ambiguity.⁷³¹ This does not make it devoid of ethics. On the contrary, central to many African religions is an emphasis on healing and harmony as overarching ethical principles. This theme is particularly significant to many womanist theological projects, namely womanist ethics, which I will engage below. Critical theoretical analyses similarly note the potential for healing as empowerment and resistance, as a feature of particular African diaspora practices. Eziaku Nwokocha, for example, explores the ways that rituals of spirit possession in Haitian religion, practiced disproportionately by women, present “healing and agency,” as well as a subversive queerness “offering subaltern expressions of sexuality and gender.”⁷³²

In this interpretation, African traditions lack a strict delineation between good and evil entities, but instead believes that the spiritual realm is complex, mysterious, and ambiguous. It, therefore, requires a particular cunning agency on the part of humans to relate to this world in a way that occasions healing. Suggestively, this compares favorably to Pinn’s observation of the role of the Devil in American blues and rap music, which sometimes step away from the dualism of Christianity, present both in white Christianity and the Black churches. Instead of portraying the devil or the demonic as an inherently evil figure, these entities become characters that can be

⁷²⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁷³⁰ Ibid.,

⁷³¹ Raboteau mentions the influential argument of anthropologist Melville Herskovitz, that that African religion, as a mark of its “sophistication,” exists beyond “the simplistic dichotomy of good and evil.” See Raboteau, 50.

⁷³² Eziaku Nwokocha, “The ‘Queerness’ of Ceremony: Possession and Sacred Space in Haitian Religion,” *Journal of Haitian Studies*, 25.2 (2019), 72.

useful to Black persons as they struggle to appropriate spiritual powers against their domination.⁷³³ Neither Pinn nor Raboteau uses the word, but these traditions point to practices of *discernment* as a vital dimension of Black religiosity as a set of traditions reflecting the ambiguity of the spiritual realm. Raboteau points, for example, to the ways that practices of possession (generally relating to the positive experience of possession by a god or ancestor in a discreet “ecstatic” event) required careful reading of subsequent movements, namely dance, to discern *which* god has possessed the individual.⁷³⁴ One could make a similar analysis of practices of divination.⁷³⁵

Womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas says that African religious traditions feature a unique integralism that collapses binaries associated with the Western religious tradition. For Douglas, a flesh-spirit dualism suffuses Western Christianity. This dualism sets the foundation for the secular-sacred division of modernity.⁷³⁶ Raboteau makes a similar point, arguing that African religious integralism suggests the lack of any “secular” and “sacred” distinction.⁷³⁷ This idea coheres with the understanding that the spirit world interacts with human beings at all levels of physical and material existence, including the social and the political. In this respect, when African traditions engage the spiritual realm, they also engage the embodied, relational, social, and political realms of everyday human existence.

Raboteau has made significant contributions to debates surrounding the degree to which African traditional religions have survived in North America. The difficulty of answering this question stems, in part, from the fact that traditional African religious practices have retained

⁷³³ Pinn, *Embodiment*, 106-119.

⁷³⁴ Raboteau, 10-11.

⁷³⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷³⁶ Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It? Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2005), 122.

⁷³⁷ Raboteau, 15.

more of their explicit characteristics in other diasporic traditions—namely those of Latin America and the Caribbean. These practices do not simply persist as distinct religious traditions but mingle with Christianity in intriguing complex, but identifiable ways. Specific pre-Christian traditions of possession, for example, appear in the integration of Haitian Vodou with European Catholic piety.⁷³⁸ In Vodou, possession rituals initiate the possession of a person by *loa* (a spirit).⁷³⁹ Raboteau observes a stark consistency between several African and diaspora practices of possession, including Christian traditions involving possession by the Holy Spirit.⁷⁴⁰ Raboteau suggests that similar connections can be made to North American pneumatology and practices of possession by the Holy Spirit, particularly in the centrality of dance in both African and Black American Pentecostal traditions.⁷⁴¹

Ultimately, Raboteau takes a mediating position on the question of the *Africanness* of Black North American religion. Rather than stand in a binary that either sees Black religion as simply the object of white Christian colonialism, erasing all trace of its African heritage, or Black religion as the acquisition of a white Christian superstructure over African religious traditions, Raboteau highlights the agency and creativity of Black Americans: “Even as the gods of Africa gave way to the God of Christianity, the African heritage of singing, dancing, spirit possession, and magic continued to influence Afro-American spirituals, ring shouts, and folk beliefs. That this was so is evidence of the slaves’ ability not only to adapt to new contexts but to do so creatively.”⁷⁴²

⁷³⁸ Raboteau, 28-29.

⁷³⁹ Ibid., 27.

⁷⁴⁰ Ibid., 36.

⁷⁴¹ Ibid., 65-66.

⁷⁴² Ibid., 92.

Yvonne Patricia Chireau adds further nuance to this debate by pointing to the way that scholarly distinctions between “religion” and “magic” (with the latter often pejorative) have made it difficult to understand the practices of African American Christianity that embody the “magical” traditions of African religion.⁷⁴³ As discussed in previous chapters, the secularization of European demonology through the social sciences has all but erased such traditions from scholarly analysis, not to mention theological or cultural recognition. The demonization of those associated with “magic,” “superstition,” or “myth” as representing a primitive religiosity, emerging out of theological constructions of myth and superstition as pagan and idolatry, is the “secular” continuation of (dem)ontology in the social sciences. Chireau looks to practices of conjure, namely as a tradition that ascribes certain personalities as having “special powers” to enlist spirits and magical powers.⁷⁴⁴ She points to the continuation of these themes and practices in mainstream Black culture, rather than the smaller pockets of explicit magical practice (such as Hoodoo in the American South).⁷⁴⁵ In this analysis, Chireau reveals how Western anthropological (and latently, theological) categories fail to grasp the way practices like conjure persist as independent traditions and are weaved in along with mainstream American Christian and post-Christian cultures.

Womanist theologian, and scholar of Black spirituality, Barbara A. Holmes makes the case that particular traditions of “mysticism” have survived in Black American religion on account of their potential for resistance—harkening back to Pinn’s contention that particular Black spiritual practices embody the possibility of the exorcism of white supremacy, rooted in a predominant ethic of survival and wholeness. Holmes maintains that “historically oppressed

⁷⁴³ Chireau, 5-6.

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid., 14-15.

⁷⁴⁵ Ibid., 151-152.

communities” necessarily wonder, “why not embrace the gifts of discernment and second sight, affinity to nature and the secrets of the night skies that came to the Americas with captured Africans?” For Holmes, this category of discernment refers to the capability of achieving “knowledge beyond the limits of ordinary human perception.”⁷⁴⁶

Notably, Holmes does not oppose Christianity to Africana religiosity, maintaining that Christianity too is a mystical religion suffused with “wonder working power” and an investment in that which is unseen and mysterious. Christianity democratizes these powers, made available to all through the Holy Spirit.⁷⁴⁷ Christianity in North America, however, including in much of its Black expressions, continually suppresses and forgets these dimensions. This forgetting is a function of the colonizing enterprise that sought to erase all powers that might threaten its own.⁷⁴⁸ To put a Tillichian spin on this observation, white colonialism is an idol that presents itself as the Absolute. In the name of the Christian God, it blasphemes and suppresses the powers of the Spirit that would seek to undermine it.

Holmes believes that these mystical traditions persist at the margins, “in the fringe gatherings of marginal religious communities. . . and even the rituals of the mainline churches.”⁷⁴⁹ This cognizance coheres with recent constructive work by Ashon Crawley, maintaining that Black Pentecostalism bears witness to anti-colonial and anti-racist traditions that reflect an “aesthetics of possibility.” It is a “production of otherwise, shows the sending forth of otherwise possibilities already enacted, already here.”⁷⁵⁰

⁷⁴⁶ Barbara A. Holmes, “Wonder Working Power: Reclaiming Mystical and Cosmological Aspects of Africana Spiritual Practices,” in *Esotericism in African American Religious Experience: “There Is a Mystery,”* ed. Stephen C. Finley, Margarita Simon Guillory, and Hugh R. Page, Jr. (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 333.

⁷⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 335.

⁷⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 335.

⁷⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 338.

⁷⁵⁰ Crawley, 34.

In short, renewed impulses to account for the diversity and complexity of Black religion and spirituality, beyond the gaze of white theology and its secular descendants, make it possible to appreciate a broader world of practice worthy of theological reflection. Specifically, multiple Black spiritual traditions reflect a creative agency, grounded in an understanding that human existence can be ambiguous. It is, arguably, this sense of ambiguity that makes possible the survival and reinterpretation of these practices along with the acceptance, critique, reinterpretation, and appropriation of Western Christianity. The ambiguity of life requires an agency that carefully discerns good from evil and seeks survival of the body without hardened cosmological categories that defy the need for discernment.

Love in the Demonarchy: On Loving Demonized Flesh

The womanist theologies of Emilie Townes and Delores Williams present a compelling theology of the demonic. The demonological imagination of womanist theology reflects the creative intersections and integrations of African religions, European Christianity, and diasporic innovations in an anti-racist and decolonial praxis of discernment and exorcism. In short, the uniquely womanist grammar presents the demonic as an integral spiritual-material reality that operates at the level of imagination, desire, and the body. Particularly in the context of empire, the demonic is a dynamic and deceptive reality that vilifies certain sorts of flesh in an attempt to confuse good with evil. Womanist demonology still privileges resistance, spiritual warfare, and exorcism—but understands these as complex and liminal processes that require wisdom and discernment.

The flesh and the body are at the heart of the womanist theological tradition. M. Shawn Copeland explains this prioritization in her articulation of a womanist theological anthropology. In response to Western Enlightenment understandings of the human, Copeland expresses a

twofold womanist anthropology: First, she centers embodiment and the flesh as theological loci, contrasting the immateriality and duplicitous universality of the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum*. As an anthropological methodology, the latter purports to speak for universal human nature, identified with subjective (but universal) cerebral existence. This faux-universality, however, ultimately centers the European white male subject as normative and universal. It is a partner to, rather than a disjuncture from, the emergence of the racial imagination that related reason and human dignity to white flesh. Rather than remaining in the world of disingenuous disembodied theological abstractions, Copeland maintains that theology must attend to understanding faith in the context of the particularities of embodied life. This means considering the unique and particular experiences of certain bodies and putting these at the center of theology.⁷⁵¹

Womanist theology also pays particular attention to the bodies of Black women as sites of theological reflection. Copeland calls this “turning the subject.” Instead of a quest for a universal human starting-point for theology and theological anthropology, Copeland calls for a womanist methodology that consciously centers the “experience of poor women of color.”⁷⁵² Townes similarly speaks of womanist theology as prioritizing “the perspective of women” and following an imperative to reflect the “wisdom” that “springs out of the experience of African American women.”⁷⁵³ In other words, womanist theology prioritizes theology that begins with the particularities of bodies in time and space, namely the particular witness of Black women as suppressed subjects in a white patriarchal empire. Notably, Townes’s emphasis on wisdom reflects the understanding that Black women carry with them particular deposits of wisdom on account of their particular position in the empire.

⁷⁵¹ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 7-11, 85ff.

⁷⁵² *Ibid.*, 91.

⁷⁵³ Emilie M. Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 10.

According to Eboni Marshall Turman, womanist theology emerges in the mire of theological constructions practiced by white and Black churches that have vilified “the flesh.” The flesh stands as a particular, sometimes vague and dynamic, category for aspects of human existence. At the same time, it is a language (sometimes coded) for certain types of bodies. In the latter case, vilification of the flesh operates to stereotype and dominate Black women, perceived as having bodies particularly prone to sinful fleshiness: “designation as lascivious Jezebels, castrating Sapphires, and black Matriarchs.”⁷⁵⁴ Such constructions lead to self-loathing and suppression of desire, or so-called desires of the flesh.

Some scholars have identified this disdain of the flesh in Platonist influenced works in early Christianity, including the writings of the Apostle Paul. In Romans 8, Paul makes a firm division between those “who live according to the flesh” and “those who live in accordance with the spirit.” Those who are “in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.”⁷⁵⁵ Kelly Brown Douglas argues that through this binary, Paul justifies derisive sensibilities toward embodiment, sexuality and “passion.” She contrasts this with Jesus’s more affirming stance toward the body, substantiated in Christian incarnational Christology that affirms the humanity of Christ.⁷⁵⁶ Alternative interpretations of Paul notwithstanding,⁷⁵⁷ Douglas makes the compelling case that this dualistic anthropology takes hold in early Christianity, particularly in the West.⁷⁵⁸ Douglas points out that this dualistic narrative both leads to a universal “demonization” of “the body and sexuality,”⁷⁵⁹ as well as a penchant for “dualistic relationality” that identifies some persons with

⁷⁵⁴ Eboni Marshall Turman, 154.

⁷⁵⁵ Romans 8:5, 8.

⁷⁵⁶ Kelly Brown Douglas, *What’s Faith Got to Do With It?*, 30-31.

⁷⁵⁷ See James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing), 70-73. Dunn maintains that Paul distinguishes between “flesh” (*sarx*) and “body” (*soma*).

⁷⁵⁸ Douglas, *What’s Faith Got to Do With It?*, 34ff.

⁷⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

the Divine, and others with the flesh.⁷⁶⁰ This dualistic relationality is explicitly sexualized in the context of white supremacy and white patriarchy—she points out the ways that white supremacy ascribes a particular sexual irrationality and extremity to the bodies of Black men and women.⁷⁶¹ Instructively, Douglas relates this process of vilification to the theological process of demonization, which associates flesh, women, and Blackness with the devil.

Against the self-loathing implied by the disdain of the flesh in general, and of the embodiment of Black women in particular, womanist thinking advocates for the theological and ethical value of self-love, prioritizing the flesh.⁷⁶² This prioritization resists white demonization of certain types of flesh (i.e., the flesh of Black women) as well as an embrace of body, desire, and flesh *qua* body, desire, and flesh. Townes reflects this commitment in her exposition of the text that is foundational for much womanist thinking, Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, particularly the sermon in the clearing where the character Baby Suggs admonishes love of flesh.⁷⁶³ Townes explains that “a womanist spirituality represents a “concern for life” and the quest “for a coherent and unified relationship between body, soul and creation.”⁷⁶⁴ Alice Walker’s foundational definition of womanism highlights the particularities of this love of flesh: Womanism “Loves music. Loves Dance. Loves the moon. Loves the spirit. Loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless.”⁷⁶⁵

Brown Douglas centers the incarnation of Christ in her womanist theological account of embodiment. She posits the category of “passion” (which she relates to the passion of Christ) that is a “divine energy” that is also “within human beings.” This passion is “the love of God,

⁷⁶⁰ Douglas, *What’s Faith Got to Do With It*, 87, 102-103.

⁷⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 113ff.

⁷⁶² Copeland, 50.

⁷⁶³ Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory*, 48

⁷⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁷⁶⁵ Alice Walker, *In Search of our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Inc., 2003), xi.

that compels. . . toward life-giving, life-producing, and life-affirming activity and relationships in regard to all of God's creation." This understanding of passion is a holistic approach to human existence in its entirety as erotic.⁷⁶⁶ While this category of passion applies to all of embodied life, there are significant ramifications for sexuality as a unique realm in which flesh and its desires have been historically suppressed and demonized. Instead of relying on Puritanical restrictions on sex, Douglas defines "sacred" sexuality as that which "nurtures harmonious relationships" as "loving, just, and equal."⁷⁶⁷

Womanist theology seeks to reflect the lived religious traditions of Black women. An important feature of womanist theological anthropology and ethics, therefore, is the relationship between African traditional religions and womanist theological insights. Brown Douglas makes the case that African traditional religion lacks the flesh/spirit distinction that she sees to be endemic to much of Western Christianity. This African heritage suggests a different way of understanding human embodiment and existence in the world. From a Black and womanist religious vantage point, "every dimension of the world and humanity. . . is spiritual, is of God, and communicates God's presence."⁷⁶⁸ Townes similarly relates the womanist ethic of love of one's flesh to "African cosmology that understands all of life as sacred."⁷⁶⁹

Womanist theology has also found it necessary to articulate a thorough theology of evil. One of the primary purposes of such an account is to untangle the ways that embodiment writ large, and the bodies of Black women in particular, are vilified in history and society. This task has led some womanist theologians to engage demonology. Townes's work, *The Cultural*

⁷⁶⁶ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1999), 120.

⁷⁶⁷ Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It?*, 215.

⁷⁶⁸ Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 122.

⁷⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

Production of Evil, focuses on the social dynamics of demonization but with language that also invokes demonological motifs as a theological framing for how the social fact of demonization takes place. Williams writes about demonology in ways that more explicitly evoke the Black grammar of the demonic in her coining of the term “demonarchy” as the name for demonic systems of power against the bodies of Black women. Put together, Townes and Williams are mutually illuminating about the existence of a particular womanist demonology which evokes the diverse traditions of the Black grammar of the demonic. This approach to demonology suggests a prioritization of discernment as a necessary task of untangling the integrated cosmological and social ambiguities of Black existence in an empire built upon a colonizing demonology.

In *The Cultural Production of Evil*, Townes explores evil as a material practice that employs cultural artifacts and traditions—namely, the production of stereotypes that vilify the bodies of Black women. These stereotypes, Townes argues, “support and perpetuate structural inequities and forms of social oppression.” She therefore initiates an analysis of “the interior material life of evil.”⁷⁷⁰ By this, Townes means to draw attention to the way evil operates in the realms of aesthetics and affect, rather than as an object of mere scientific, economic, or political observation. While much “analysis and critique of structural evil tends to focus on the rational mechanisms that hold forms of oppression and misery in place,” Townes considers structural evil as it operates through “the imagination” by means of “emotion, intuition, and yearning.”⁷⁷¹ Social evil, Townes concludes, is a multidimensional project of demonizing particular bodies. The strategy of such a project necessitates influencing how bodies in a social imaginary are

⁷⁷⁰ Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 4.

⁷⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

perceived, represented, and how bodies relate to each other affectively, in order to produce and maintain systems of inequality.

In order to substantiate the function that imagination, affect, and aesthetic play in the cultural production of evil, Townes develops Michel Foucault's notion of "the fantastic." For Foucault, the fantastic is the name for a subjective human experience "of uncertainty" as it pertains to "the senses." It is the feeling of disorientation when the lines between "the real and the imaginary" bend.⁷⁷² These are moments when "we detect" the possibility that "laws unknown to us control reality."⁷⁷³ For Townes, the fantastic is a useful category for understanding the way that evil is produced culturally. The fantastic is the way that Black women become the imagined, demonized, entities that haunt the white patriarchal world. Hegemonic powers seek to "control the world in its own image" through the deployment of a "fantastic hegemonic imagination."⁷⁷⁴ This imagination does not so much deploy "supernatural events and phantasms" but rather "images" and stereotypes that "hold systematic, structural evil in place."⁷⁷⁵ Analyzing various images of Black women in a white supremacist and patriarchal imagination, Townes perceives how power manipulates perception of reality, creating fantastical and monstrous images that stand as a barrier to recognizing the reality of Black women's bodies as human and dignified by God. Townes makes the addition that "the fantastic may be everyday for those who *live in it*." Therefore, the fantastic need not necessarily cause dramatic disorientation or shock. There is, for some, a certain familiarity with the strange—the stereotypes that the fantastic hegemonic imagination produces and reifies become mundane and the feeling of disorientation is suppressed. The demonizing project of the fantastic hegemonic imagination is therefore a

⁷⁷² Ibid., 19.

⁷⁷³ Townes, *Cultural Production of Evil*, 19.

⁷⁷⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁷⁷⁵ Ibid.

quotidian hauntology. It produces a perpetual, but culturally accepted, sense of a world haunted by these demonic images.

To flesh out the demonological underpinnings of Townes's project, it is necessary to reflect on Williams's concept of the *demonarchy*. In her essay "The Color of Feminism: On Speaking with the Black Woman's Tongue," Delores Williams introduces the term *demonarchy* to describe "white-rule. . . [which] controls black women's lives." She continues:

Demonarchy can be understood as the demonic governance of black women's lives by white male and white female ruled systems using racism, violence, violation. . . and death as instruments of social control. Distinguished from individual violent acts stemming from psychological abnormalities on the part of the perpetrator, demonarchy is a traditional and collective expression of white government in relation to black women. It belongs to the realm of normalcy. It is informed by a state of consciousness that believes white women are superior to and more valuable than any woman of color. . . . While sexism is a kind of women's oppression issuing from patriarchy, racist-gender oppression of black women issues from demonarchy.⁷⁷⁶

For Williams, demonarchy is the unique coordination of racism and sexism as a system of power against Black women. There is a sense in which patriarchy and anti-Black racism are themselves demonic systems, but their intersection warrants the unique term "demonarchy." Demonarchy is the conflation of evil systems in ways that "defile" Black women's bodies.⁷⁷⁷

There are several points worth considering about Williams's definition of the demonarchy, above. A demonarchy, first of all, is a function of material power (hence the *arche* suffix). It is the proper name given to a particular arrangement of power that coordinates two systems of oppression fixed upon a particular sort of body. Furthermore, a demonarchy speaks with univocal force—it is coordinated and consistent. Third, Williams contrasts patriarchy with

⁷⁷⁶ Delores Williams, "The Color of Feminism: On Speaking with the Black Woman's Tongue," *The Journal of Religious* 43, no. 1 (1986): 52.

⁷⁷⁷ Delores Williams, "A Womanist Perspective on Sin," in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. Emilie Maureen Townes (Mayknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1993), 144.

demonarchy. While patriarchy is evil, the particular oppression of Black women is uniquely understood by Black women as demonic in its all-encompassing, coordinated, and intersectional displays of cruelty. While the struggle against patriarchy includes the, necessary, struggle against sexual violence and sexist language and symbology, the struggle of Black women against the demonarchy is a widesweeping quest for liberation for the Black family and Black community, and the economic reorganization of society toward racial *and* gender justice.⁷⁷⁸

Williams draws this idea of demonarchy from the demonological traditions of Black worship and spirituality. She points out that slave spirituals and autobiographical literary traditions of persons freed from slavery⁷⁷⁹ often “associate Satan and the Devil with white oppressors.”⁷⁸⁰ This forms an element of a Black tradition for thinking about sin in systemic and communal terms—rather than focusing on individual actions. Language of the demonic, it seems, is also worthwhile for her in the way it captures the phenomenological experience of evil as excessive, monstrous, seemingly-sentient, and dramatic.

Therefore, we might put together Townes and Williams to articulate a womanist theology of the demonic as a function of the fantastic. In many respects, Townes’s analysis of evil as a production of and through culture analyzes the dynamic of demonization. The stereotypes of Black women that she dissects in *The Cultural Production of Evil* reflect the ways that Black women are “banished into a demonic image that represents pathology and moral depravity.”⁷⁸¹ At the same time, Townes relies on excessive, suggestive language to describe the evil systems that perpetuate such demonization, presenting the largesse, monstrosity, and even sentience of

⁷⁷⁸ Williams, “The Color of Feminism,” 55.

⁷⁷⁹ Williams engages interviews conducted by Fisk University Social Science Foundation and the Federal Writers’ Project, see p. 131.

⁷⁸⁰ Ibid., 137.

⁷⁸¹ Townes, *Cultural Production of Evil*, 117.

demonizing powers. Such evil is “nasty,” and “vindictive,” and “preys on people.” It is “deceptive” and possesses a “carnivorous lust” to destroy its victims.⁷⁸² In other words, although Townes does not use the concept explicitly I believe her assessment of the cultural production of evil is similar to that of Williams. Townes is similarly animated by the Black grammar of the demonic; describing systems that *demonize* and which are also themselves understood *as* demonic.

Townes’s understanding of the cultural production of evil helps to flesh out Williams’s notion of a demonarchy, and vice versa. A demonarchy is a collection of intersectional social powers that demonize, vilify, and destroy through complex systemic and material means. However, demonarchies are duplicitous in their ability to confuse good with evil. The demonarchy of anti-Black patriarchy is a fantastic imagination in that it turns people, namely Black women, into fantastic objects of monstrosity. The images and stereotypes of the fantastic imagination attempt to project nefarious lies about other bodies and alienate oppressed and oppressor alike from reality.

In other words, Townes and Williams bear witness to a Black grammar of the demonic that recognizes the demonic deceptions and misdirection which take place in the context of white domination. Reflecting insights similar to those of Karl Barth, Townes and Williams profess a demonology of an inherently mendacious order of evil powers. This womanist perspective recognizes the way that such evil powers are identical with human powers of governance and culture, therefore reflecting an integral understanding of the social and spiritual order. They further reflect vestiges of the cosmological ambiguity of the Black grammar of the demonic. While maintaining a Christian commitment to a good God and evil devil, the experience of Black

⁷⁸² Ibid.

women in the context of a cultural imagination that vilifies their flesh recognizes the difficulty of knowing what truly is of God, and what is truly of the demonic, in the context of a spiritual-political regime built upon demonizing demonologies that associate Black women's flesh with the demonic.

To underscore the presence of the Black grammar of the demonic in Williams and Townes, it is important to clarify a possible misconception about Townes's use of the fantastic. With her primary use of the concept to understand the fantastic hegemonic imagination, it is tempting to conclude that Townes thinks of the fantastic in purely pejorative terms, as merely the mythical or semi-mythical cultural scripts that function as demonizing ideologies. Such an interpretation might suggest a resonance between Townes and the argument of Marxist thinkers Karen A. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, who maintain that racialized thinking is akin to witchcraft, in that both represent an unscientific disjuncture from reality that are reinforced by dubious, but widely accepted, epistemological framings that categorize all of social reality according to race.⁷⁸³ However, this would be a misguided reading what Townes means by "fantastic."

Townes considers the fantastic a fundamentally neutral category. It is not correct, for example, to think of the fantastic as only a project of mythology that alienates human perception from a superior empirical reality. Grounding her understanding of the fantastic, before Foucault, in Toni Morrison, Townes points out that imaginative literature can embody truth in a way that factual history cannot. Morrison's literature is particularly effective, Townes says, as a means of revealing the "truth about the interior life of people."⁷⁸⁴ This function as truth-telling may at first seem incongruous in light of the fact that Morrison's work is often categorized as "fantastic,"

⁷⁸³ See Karen A. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London: Verso Books, 2014).

⁷⁸⁴ Townes, *Cultural Production of Evil*, 12.

ostensibly for its use of ghosts, spirits, and demons.⁷⁸⁵ However, Townes seems to embrace the truth-telling capabilities of such fantastical language. Townes goes on to defend the power of memory as revelatory, even when seen as a “subjective” exercise. This implies that imaginative literature, including its fantastical dimensions, can be a means of telling the truth as it is known through memory.⁷⁸⁶ The fantastic, therefore, can also be “subversive” against hegemony as a means of “countermemory” as a practice of remembering what is suppressed by the hegemony and the world it creates.⁷⁸⁷ Townes, however, does not elaborate on the role of the fantastic itself as a form of countermemory.

Townes references Morrison’s description of the fantastical dimensions of her own literary language as *excessive*. This notion of excess is helpful for understanding yet another dimension of the significance of the womanist grammar of the demonic as embodying resistance to the rationalist epistemologies of modern Western thought. Ashon Crawley, in his reflections on the contributions of Black Pentecostalism to Black studies and the philosophy of religion, emphasizes the significance of Black Pentecostalism as an expression that is “deemed excessive” by Western epistemology.⁷⁸⁸ This sense of excess refers to the “aesthetic practices of Blackpentecostalism—whooping, shouting, noise-making, and tongues speech” that Western theological and anthropological categories perceive as wild and irrational.⁷⁸⁹ Western epistemologies restrict themselves to the cerebral and disembodied understanding of religion, and it can only perceive Black Pentecostalism as beyond the pale of worthwhile conversation or

⁷⁸⁵ Townes, *Cultural Production of Evil*, 12. See also Melanie Anderson, *Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2013).

⁷⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁷⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁷⁸⁸ Crawley, 23.

⁷⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

analysis. Black Pentecostalism, therefore, is a practice that performs that which is unknown to the categories of Western epistemology.

I believe this is similar to what Morrison, and Townes, mean in reference to the excessive nature of Morrison's literature. In the previous chapter, I make the case that a decolonial analysis of demonology recognizes the colonial operations in modern and contemporary theology and religious studies as it pertains to languages that engage categories like "superstition," "myth," and "religion." This is the perfidiousness of a demonic social regime built upon a Christian demonology which not only identifies particular types of flesh with the demonic, but also occludes its nature by restricting language for evil to the rational and calculated.

I have criticized Barth's failure to think through the problem of discernment. It is this thought process regarding the excessive language of the demonological that makes it possible to further bemoan this missed opportunity of Barth's demonology. Despite Barth's recognition that the demonic is inherently deceptive, he fails to take seriously both sides of the demonological dialectic: While it is true that demonology can be *demonic* in its presence—given its tendency to produce paranoia and contribute to scapegoating mechanisms—demonology is also demonic in its absence. It produces demons and haunts the social imaginary with stereotypical objects of fear and derision, such as the bodies of Black women, expertly hidden within a social system that does not allow for the possibility of demons. When demonized peoples perform their excessive language to name the demonic, they stand beyond the confines of what Western epistemologies can comprehend—left to the pejorative realm of the fantastic, the imaginative, and the literary.

The irony, then, is that the hegemonic power creates a particular "fantastic imagination" while also questioning and ultimately denying the fantastic, including language that suggests evil powers that are both invisible and visible, beyond the confines of everyday experience. This

erasure of the fantastic compounds its evil: Obscuring practices that deal in so-called excesses, reducing them to superstition and myth. It thereby eviscerates the language that can name evil as such. The demonology of Townes and Williams, as a language for the excessive and dramatic interior life of evil as its victims experience it, therefore employs the fantastic as a form of resistance and countermemory against these regimes that seek to strip and forget the excessive language of its victims—the language of their experiences.

In this regard, womanist demonology intervenes in the dual problem of discernment regarding whether to speak demonologically, and how to ascertain and resist a demonic social system. For the former, womanism defends demonology as an excessive language that embodies the subjective counter memories of those who live within and experience the cultural production of evil. For the latter, womanism raises the problem of discernment as the question of how a demonized body can learn to recognize that the alienation it experiences towards itself is the deception of a demonic regime. To discern the spirits is, therefore, to learn to love one's own demonized flesh. It is also the task, for those under the spell of the demonarchy of whiteness and patriarchy, to identify and reject the many temptations to demonize other bodies.

For Townes, love of self is a complex enterprise in the context of structural, demonic, evil. It requires a “call to question the radical nature of oppression and devaluation of the self and the community.”⁷⁹⁰ Townes, therefore, calls attention to the way evil *feels*.⁷⁹¹ How does evil play upon affect or relativize and demonize feelings themselves (such as by stereotyping women as “emotional” and praising enlightened stoicism)?⁷⁹² Evil primarily operates upon and through the flesh in ways that lead to self-loathing and disgust. It becomes challenging to liberate oneself

⁷⁹⁰ Townes, *Blaze of Glory*, 48.

⁷⁹¹ Townes, *Cultural Production of Evil* 18.

⁷⁹² See Copeland -14.

from and resist the hegemonic fantastic imagination because of the many temptations to despise one's own, and other's, flesh.

Townes's assessment of the role of literature as countermemory echoes the insight of Katie Cannon, who maintains that the Black women's literary tradition is a "folk treasury of the Black community." It reflects the "continual struggle and interplay of paradoxes" endemic to the lives of Black women.⁷⁹³ Like the blues and the African spiritual heritage of cosmological ambiguity, Black women's literature provides a means of sifting through the ambiguities of embodied life in a spiritual-political regime of demonic and demonizing evil. Therefore, the Black women's literary and theological tradition can be read as a practice of discerning the spirits—seeking goodness, joy, love, and God amidst the confusing and ambiguous complexities of life within the fantastic hegemonic imagination of the demonarchy.

Cannon particularly engages the literary works of Zora Neale Hurston. Cannon emphasizes particular characters in Hurston's novels who come to embody the wisdom of their community, which makes it possible for them to navigate "the enigmas and elusive mysteries of social structures."⁷⁹⁴ A compelling example is Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which recounts the life of Janie Crawford. According to Cannon, the novel narrates Crawford's "search for self-fulfillment" as she parses between the wisdom of the Black community to determine what is useful, relevant, and life-giving in a given context and moment, and what is not. Influenced by her grandmother, who viewed an advantageous marriage as the key to survival in a world where white men dominate over the bodies of Black women, Janie journeys through several unfulfilling and abusive relationships. However, her grandmother's more fundamental

⁷⁹³ Katie Geneva Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2021), 36–39.

⁷⁹⁴ Katie Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1988), 128.

and impactful legacy is training Janie in a “discerning deliberation,” which is the means by which Black women have sought either survival amidst destructive environments (i.e., demonarchies), liberation “against limits that deny their beingness,” or a “balance” between the two.⁷⁹⁵ The discernment that Janie learns from her grandmother eventually makes it possible to abandon certain dimensions of her grandmother’s moral convictions, and pursue her own needs and desires through more satisfying relationships, rather than only pursuing survival at all costs. In this way, asserts Cannon, Janie becomes a figure who embodies discernment as the practice of learning to navigate complex social dynamics, varying wisdom traditions, and assert her own embodied integrity and “wholeness.”⁷⁹⁶

Conclusion

Womanist theology reflects a compelling demonology built upon the particular experiences of Black women, drawn from the diverse religious and theological resources of Black diasporic traditions. The womanist demonological projects of Emilie Townes and Delores Williams possess an intimate relationship to the diversity of Black religious life, particularly in the practices and sensibilities that dwell beyond the purview of Eurocentric and Protestant-centric approaches to Black theology.

In this way, the Black grammar of the demonic is theologically rich in its comprehension of the dynamics of evil in the context of empire as a deceptive practice of imagination and affect. It is a project that breeds loathing of one’s flesh for those who are demonized. It creates fantastical images that breed fear and derision among the privileged subjects of white colonialism. A fantastic imagination, such as that evoked by womanist demonology, understands the need for practices and traditions of discernment to parse through powers that play with

⁷⁹⁵ Katie Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 133-134.

⁷⁹⁶ Ibid., 134-136.

vision, imagination, and perception at the borders of the visible and invisible. Womanist demonology, therefore, understands anti-Black colonialism *as* demonic and gives witness to the imperative to discern love of flesh and exorcise this demonarchy.

The literature and religious thought of James Baldwin adds a new vantage point for this understanding of the Black grammar of the demonic. His works bear witness to the difficulty of discerning love in the demonarchy, related to a Black Pentecostal imagination that values a demonological framing for contextualizing this practice. My reading of Baldwin in the next chapter will make it possible to articulate a more concrete spirituality, ethics, and politics of discernment as a decolonial practice of love.

Chapter Five:

“Tell the Truth and Shame the Devil.”

In a scene filmed for a 1970 documentary, the American writer James Baldwin offers what he acknowledged to be a “terrible” confession. Sitting in a small art studio with a few friends and acquaintances, gathered in Paris, he confides that despite all the hardships of being Black and gay in the United States, he would not trade his life for that of a white American: “Not for all the tea in China, not for all the oil in Texas.” The reason? “I don’t know how I could live with *all those lies*.”⁷⁹⁷

This scene appears through a camera lens. A lens, and everything behind it, is not generally supposed to be recognized—it must be invisible. A lens frames the picture, chooses the subjects, selects which memories are worth preserving. Possibly to his credit, the director of this short documentary, *Meeting the Man: James Baldwin in Paris*, chose to include some “behind the scenes” footage. He provides a glance behind the invisible lens. The scenes reveal very palpable tension. Throughout the filming, Baldwin and the white British director, Terence “Terry” Dixon, are at odds. The scenes show a director exasperated and confused with his subject. Dixon cannot understand Baldwin’s reluctance to speak candidly, remarking in his later-added voiceover that “Baldwin became less cooperative” and later, “hostile.” Less to his credit, it is plausible that Dixon included these scenes in hopes it would vindicate his frustration and reveal Baldwin’s impertinence—a tortured, aggrieved, petulant artist. Instead, the scenes indicate the distance that whiteness creates.

The viewer witnesses Baldwin attempting to clue the director into the breakdown in trust. The origin of the so-called hostility lies, at first glance, in Dixon’s insistence on portraying

⁷⁹⁷ Terence Dixon, *Meeting the Man: James Baldwin in Paris*, Documentary, 1970.

Baldwin as a “writer” and decidedly *not* as a “political figure,” a binary that Dixon posits in the introductory voiceover and insists upon throughout the film. The deeper apprehension (Baldwin explains to Dixon’s incomprehension) lies in the fact that Dixon wants to engage Baldwin as a quaint literary figure. This rendering would show Baldwin as a purveyor of beauty, or perhaps tragedy, but not a person whose message might suggest something that might make ethical, spiritual, or “political” demands. An argument breaks out between Dixon and Baldwin, and Baldwin remarks: “I think you think I am an exotic survivor.” Referring to a Black American student that Baldwin had asked to accompany them during the filming, “Because he looks the way he looks, and for no other reason. . . he could be dead in the morning. That isn’t true of you. . . It’s true of him. That is what your civilization means, and it’s what you don’t want to find out.” This, claims Baldwin, is the truth that Terry Dixon cannot face.

In several places throughout his writing, Baldwin speaks of white supremacy as a collection of lies. Whiteness is a pyramid of myths white people tell to and amongst themselves, often without realizing—these stories purport to whitewash a bloody history and aggrandize white bodies as deities. So, then, gathered in the Parisian art studio of Beauford Delaney, Baldwin seems to direct his comments to Terry—who is now inconspicuously hidden, invisible, behind the lens. *I really don’t know how I could live with all those lies!* While traditional accouterments like holy water and incense are lacking, Baldwin—armed instead with whiskey and a cigarette—performs with his declaration against *all those lies*, something akin to an exorcism. The lies that form the barrier between him and Terry manifest an uncanny power that obfuscates the possibility of truth and communion. As one of Baldwin’s literary character remarks, colloquially—to “tell the truth” is to “shame the devil.”

This final chapter reflects on the contributions that the life, thought, and literary vision of James Baldwin make to a political demonology grounded in the contextual realities of anti-Black colonialism. Reflecting both the Black grammar of the demonic, discussed in the previous chapter, and the particular contours of his Pentecostal roots, James Baldwin offers a decolonial vision of discerning the spirits of anti-Black coloniality, manifesting salvation for the demonized. Baldwin bears witness to the discernment of human beings living at the periphery of a demonic social existence.

I have argued that the Achilles heel of political demonology is the problem of discernment. When is it appropriate to think and speak *demonologically*? Moreover, how, exactly, is it possible to know the difference between the liberating salvation of God amidst the deceptive lies of the powers and principalities? These questions relate to one another since anti-Black coloniality is a social and political regime that rests upon anti-Black demonology. How does one discern one's way through the theological lies of such an existence? This is the problem for which Baldwin, I believe, offers some decolonial options. Discernment, for Baldwin, is the practice of the demonized peoples of the world, embracing and embodying their collected wisdom as they try to manifest their divine dignity amidst the affective and aesthetic wiles of an evil empire.

My reading of Baldwin is governed by my previous engagement with womanist traditions of demonology. Womanist theology recognizes the demonizing systems of coloniality built upon the Christian demonologies of anti-Blackness. In this perspective, discernment is a practice of demonized peoples—Black women and queer persons in particular—learning to recognize and reject the alienation they experience from their flesh, existence, form, and desires. For Emilie Townes and Delores Williams, discernment engages the truth-telling power of story, myth, and

religious expressions that stretch beyond the epistemological confines of Western thought.

Baldwin embodies this call to discernment, presenting the way demonized peoples have discerned the love and salvation of God. Baldwin's language is steeped in his Black Pentecostal upbringing, reflecting the practices and imaginations of a people seeking the truth and power of the Spirit in the political-spiritual porosity of the Pentecostal imagination.

Despite some who might approach Baldwin as an agnostic or even anti-Christian thinker, Baldwin presents a distinctly theological vision. He bears witness to a God defined by an intense, passionate, loving communion. Baldwin also inhabits a grammar of the demonic, recognizing the power of human systems to produce idolatrous realities that take on lives of their own, making it difficult to discern good from evil, God from lesser gods. Therefore, Baldwin's grammar of the demonic bears some significant parallels to instantiations of political demonology that I have discussed previously. However, Baldwin reflects the particular problems and practices of discernment required of those who live at the peripheries of the colonial matrix. Baldwin's theological vision is both political and decolonial in that his praxis of discernment is an ongoing and complex process of identifying and embracing sites of divine salvation on the underside of empire. Discernment represents a politics of the disruption of coloniality, as the demonized recognize and resist the forces of evil that have relegated them to perdition.

The first section of this chapter surveys the theological conversation regarding Baldwin, focusing on unresolved interpretive questions that have a particular bearing on reading Baldwin in service of a decolonial political demonology. Namely, I consider the relationship between desire, embodiment, God, and politics in Baldwin's thought, rejecting interpretations that construe Baldwin as representing an apolitical emotivism of minimal political or theological value. Instead, I maintain, Baldwin prioritizes flesh as the site through which empire enforces its

hold on its subjects. Flesh is also the place from which divine and decolonial salvation emerges among those boldly loving their and one another's flesh.

The second section lays the further theological groundwork for my own particular interpretation of Baldwin. To do this, I first put Baldwin in conversation with Pentecostal studies and theologies. Specifically, I engage the work of Ashon Crawley and Nimi Wariboko on Black Pentecostalism, as well as Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong. I draw attention to Yong's engagement with Tillich, which makes it possible to highlight parallels between Baldwin's particular Pentecostal imagination and Euro-American political demonology. I also compare Baldwin to other Christian traditions of discerning the spirits, namely the Evagrian and Ignatian. The Evagrian tradition stresses questioning of the aesthetics of demonological imaginations. I will point out that Baldwin contributes to this tradition of discernment by troubling the demonizing anti-Black aesthetics of Western Christianity. The Ignatian practice emphasizes affect and emotion, presenting discernment as the pursuit of divine consolation and rejecting demonic desolation. Baldwin's understanding of discernment is parallel to the Ignatian approach insofar as he analyzes the particular difficulty, but necessity, of the demonized peoples of the earth seeking the consolation of God in and through their flesh.

Finally, I focus on two of Baldwin's literary works: *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and *Just Above My Head*. These novels, written at the beginning and end of Baldwin's career, respectively, portray Black American characters wrestling with the demonization of flesh, their own flesh, and the flesh of others. Reflecting a similar intersectional sensibility as womanist theology, several of Baldwin's characters are women and queer men. The novels also explore the complicity of particular religious communities in perpetuating and enforcing these demonizing frameworks. The novels, focusing on embodiment, desire, affectivity, and imagination, feature

individuals attempting to discern a way beyond the influences that tempt them to demonize their own and others' flesh. The characters that embody the salvation of God are the ones who tell the truth about themselves. They tell the truth about the demonic empire in which they live. They tell the truth about the God who loves and dignifies all the flesh that God has made.

James Baldwin and Theology

Many religious thinkers, including several theologians, have expressed a particular reverence for Baldwin as an essential American public intellectual and writer. Some of this admiration was described during his lifetime. Still, it is only recently that a significant number of Christian theologians have paid serious attention to Baldwin as a religious thinker. In this section, I make a case for reading him as a resource for political theology. To do so, I will also provide a selective orientation to significant developments in the theological conversation about Baldwin. Echoing Joseph Drexler-Dreis, my primary contention is that Baldwin embodies a decolonial political theology that witnesses to the salvation of God against anti-Black coloniality. Adding to Drexler-Dreis's argument, I highlight the way Baldwin approaches theology and politics as a decolonial practice of discernment. This connects Baldwin to womanist theology, as discussed in the previous chapter. Baldwin's political theology involves discerning how to love one's own flesh amidst the *demonic* and *demonizing* regimes of anti-Black coloniality.

There are three primary, often overlapping, rubrics through which theologians approach Baldwin:⁷⁹⁸ incisive critic, post-Christian "theologian," and prophet. In the first place, Baldwin is certainly a pointed critic of Christianity, owing to his disaffection and frustration with American Christianity in both its Black and white iterations. Baldwin excoriates American Christianity for

⁷⁹⁸ These differ from the way Baldwin is received in other fields, where Baldwin's religious background is typically underemphasized, with some prominent exceptions. See Douglas Field, "Pentecostalism and all that Jazz: Tracing James Baldwin's Religion," in *Literature & Theology* vol. 22.4 (2008), 436-457. See also Michael Lynch, "Just Above My Head: James Baldwin's Quest for Belief," *Literature & Theology* 11, no. 3 (1997): 284-98.

its role in supporting both white supremacy and a hypocritical and dehumanizing puritanical sexual ethic.⁷⁹⁹ At the same time, several theologians maintain that Baldwin exhibits a tacit commitment to Christian sensibilities, including a sense of “love” as a tremendous spiritual force in the world.⁸⁰⁰ Some also approach Baldwin as a sort of secular prophet—possessing at the very least a rich intuition, if not an uncanny spiritual power—as an observer of American psychology, history, and future.⁸⁰¹

These three ways of approaching Baldwin often overlap, and each has played a role in the ongoing theological conversation about Baldwin, much of which begins with James Cone. My approach to Baldwin represents a combination of these elements, undergirded by the conviction that Baldwin represents a fundamentally theological voice.

However, what exactly does it mean to say that Baldwin represents a theological voice? Before delving into particular theological interpretations of Baldwin, let me clarify the foundations for approaching Baldwin as a theological voice. Scholars who engage his religious thought have generally been reticent to say that he believed in God in any traditional or straightforward way. Theologian Josiah Ulysses Young III argues that Baldwin did believe in some sort of power, a “love,” guiding the universe, which Young compares favorably to a traditional notion of God. Young, however, opts to put “God” in quotation marks whenever speaking of this object of Baldwin’s sensibilities.⁸⁰² I am more inclined to simply say, God. As a theologian, I am personally convinced that the loving power that Baldwin speaks about represents the same God of which I attempt to speak. I believe this is consistent with Baldwin’s

⁷⁹⁹ See my engagement with Kelly Brown Douglas, below.

⁸⁰⁰ See my engagement with James Cone, below.

⁸⁰¹ This is, I believe, the way Thomas Merton approaches Baldwin. Thomas Merton, “Letters to a White Liberal,” in *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964), 66-69.

⁸⁰² Josiah Ulysses Young III, *James Baldwin’s Understanding of God: Overwhelming Desire and Joy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 2.

own perspective, in fact, as I do not think he understood Love as something entirely distinct from the God he worshiped and palpably experienced as a young man in the Black Pentecostal churches. In other words, I believe Baldwin was convinced he had encountered something real, significant, and divine in the Pentecostal churches and that he continued to seek this same God “in the world.”

The closest Baldwin comes to a comprehensive theological statement is an essay published in the last year of his life, “To Crush a Serpent.” For the last of several⁸⁰³ times, Baldwin recounts both his ascendance and departure from the pulpit in the Black Pentecostal churches of Harlem as a teenager. The essay is fundamentally a critical assessment of American Christianity, especially the Moral Majority, which emerged as a political force in the 1980s. Baldwin’s criticisms reveal a serious spiritual and theological conviction. He mourns that the white “fundamentalists” had “taken the man from Galilee as hostage. He does not know them and they do not know him.”⁸⁰⁴ In the final paragraphs, Baldwin the preacher emerges in force. He declares that true “salvation,” rather than a project of fearing a wrathful God, involves “accepting and reciprocating the love of God. It is the beginning of union with all that is or has been or will ever be.”⁸⁰⁵ In a speech published in *Nobody Knows My Name*, Baldwin makes a similar declarative theological statement, expressing that

to be with God is really to be involved with some enormous, overwhelming desire, and joy, and power which you cannot control, which controls you. I conceive of my own life as a journey toward something I do not understand. . . . I conceive of God, in fact, as a means of liberation and not a means to control over others.⁸⁰⁶

⁸⁰³ Compare to his retelling in *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 23ff.

⁸⁰⁴ James Baldwin, *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan, (New York: Vintage International, 2011), 198.

⁸⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 203.

⁸⁰⁶ James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 239-240.

Where, exactly, did this theological conviction originate? In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin gives another retelling of his journey in and out of the pulpit. Here, Baldwin recounts the then-unacknowledged psychological mechanisms that, he thinks, drove him to embrace faith and the call to preach. “Every Negro boy. . . realizes, at once, profoundly, because he wants to live, that he stands in great peril and must find, with speed, a ‘thing,’ a gimmick,” to survive a white supremacist order. The pulpit, Baldwin surmises, became his gimmick.⁸⁰⁷ It was, he further concludes, his search to replace the stilted love of his abusive stepfather, triggered by a preacher who asked Baldwin, “Whose little boy are you?”⁸⁰⁸ A few weeks after receiving that question, Baldwin found himself on “the ground before the altar” in what “was the strangest sensation I have ever had in my life—up to that time, or since.” The ensuing moments were largely filled with “anguish” as he beseeched God, “love,” to resolve some sense of guilt, which Baldwin does not describe in detail. He does not say much about the ensuing spiritual experience, only recalling that he eventually emerged “released, for the first time, from all the guilty torment.” Despite this seemingly positive result, Baldwin primarily expresses cynicism about his experience as a spiritual baptism into a community built upon “Blindness, Loneliness, and Terror.”⁸⁰⁹ It was the beginning of a period of self-deception, using the pulpit to defer his alienation as a Black young man in a country of white supremacy, the son looking for the love of a stepfather, and as a man coming to terms with his bodily existence.

It would be wrong to conclude, however, that Baldwin ultimately denied any positive significance to his conversion or preaching career. He always acknowledged a mysterious power in the Church: “There is still, for me, no pathos quite like the pathos of those multicolored, worn,

⁸⁰⁷ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 24.

⁸⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 29-31.

somehow triumphant and transfigured faces, speaking from the depths of a visible, tangible, continuing despair of the goodness of the Lord.” He recalls how “I sometimes felt when, in the middle of a sermon, I knew that I was somehow, by some miracle, really carrying, as they said, ‘the Word’—when the church and I were one.”⁸¹⁰ The impetus for Baldwin’s eventual departure from the pulpit was not a diametric rejection of Pentecostal Christianity, rather a growing sense of divergence between his own spiritual experience and conviction vis-a-vis the actual practice of the church: “The transfiguring power of the Holy Ghost ended when the service ended. . . . When we were told to love everybody, I had thought that that meant *everybody*. But no.”⁸¹¹

Literary scholar Michael F. Lynch thinks of Baldwin as a “dialectical” thinker in the spirit of Dostoevsky or Kierkegaard. Baldwin abandoned and blasphemed “the ‘white’ God,” who not only rules over white supremacy but over the twisted deferral of emotion and sexuality present in the Puritanical character of both the Black and white American churches. At the same time, however, Baldwin maintained a “fidelity to essential Christian precepts” and a “faith in an elusive, undefined God” and an “evolving theology of self-examination and love.”⁸¹² Remembering his prayer practice during his time as a minister, Baldwin confessed striking a deal with God, hoping that the One “who knew all the secrets of my heart. . . . would never let me find out.” Afraid to confront realities about himself (especially, but not exclusively, his sexuality), Baldwin asked God to keep them a secret. However, Baldwin says, God failed to keep the deal, as his journey out of the church meant a confrontation with the realities of his person. God, says Baldwin, “was a much better Man than I took him for.”⁸¹³ Baldwin left the church to

⁸¹⁰ Ibid., 33.

⁸¹¹ Ibid., 41.

⁸¹² Michael F. Lynch, “Just Above My Head: James Baldwin’s Quest for Belief,” 284-285, 287.

⁸¹³ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 34.

find himself, and God. It is this implicit and lifelong theological quest that, I believe, has drawn several theologians to James Baldwin.

The beginning point of serious theological engagement with Baldwin lies with James Cone. In his final theological memoir, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody*, Cone recalls the influence of Baldwin on the development of *Black Theology and Black Power*. Cone remembers revisiting Baldwin's "sermon," *The Fire Next Time*, amidst racialized political unrest and riots in 1967. Believing that this particular moment in American society occasioned the need for a theology that could speak with both the realism of Malcolm X and the Christian love of Martin Luther King, Jr., Cone discovered a harmonization of those voices in Baldwin.⁸¹⁴ For Cone, Baldwin is the quintessence of the blues in that he represents the perfect marriage of disjuncture and possibility.⁸¹⁵ Like the blues, Cone finds that Baldwin reflects an honest pessimism about evil and the incoherence of Black existence and the hope of resolution and redemption. Cone says that he determined to "embrace Baldwin as my theological mentor" as he began to pen the book that inaugurated his project of Black liberation theology.

Cone sees no need to justify his reliance on Baldwin as a theological inspiration, positing that Baldwin's words are "profoundly theological" and even insisting that "God must write like" James Baldwin.⁸¹⁶ Defining theology as "probing deep down into the paradoxical dimension of the human spirit," Cone suggests that Baldwin practices the traditional theological task of the Black preacher. This involves the exploration of "the inscrutable and the mysterious" aspects of existence in search of the truth. Like the blues, theology is an engagement with incongruence and the quest for coherence. A *Black* theology, per Cone, searches for truth regarding the existential

⁸¹⁴ James H. Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theologian*. (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2020), 146-147.

⁸¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁸¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 160.

questions that emerge from the Black American experience—namely, discerning one’s own dignity as a human being and the possibility of hope in dehumanizing circumstances. Notably, Cone places particular emphasis on affective dimensions to these itineraries of theological knowledge, noting that “truth” is something “one feels.” This feeling is an intuition “deep inside yourself that God created worth in all human beings that nobody can destroy no matter what they do.”⁸¹⁷ Cone receives Baldwin as a theological voice for the way he speaks from a deep feeling and intuition about his own human worth, as he plumbs the depths of the human, particularly Black, experience.

Kelly Brown Douglas similarly looks to Baldwin as she considers what it is to know that one’s flesh is dignified by God and worthy of love. She uses Baldwin to reckon with questions of Black embodiment and sexuality in *What’s Faith Got to Do With It? Black Bodies/Christian Souls*. For Brown Douglas, Baldwin is an incisive observer of how white Christianity devalues and tortures Black bodies, as well as how the Black church acquiesces to a Platonizing theology that devalues sexuality and the body *writ large*. As I discuss in the previous chapter, Brown Douglas believes that the Platonizing impulse is a root cause for each of these dimensions of Christianity in the West—not only does its hierarchical anthropology posit the superiority of the soul to the body, it also demonizes Black bodies in particular ways.⁸¹⁸ Baldwin, for Brown Douglas, is an essential authority in naming these interconnections. Baldwin, she points out, observes the way that America is simultaneously an anti-Black and “antisexual country” and recognizes the interdependence of these designations.⁸¹⁹ White Christians, who are ashamed, ambivalent, and hostile concerning their own bodily desires, project hypersexuality upon Black

⁸¹⁷ Ibid., 164.

⁸¹⁸ Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 122.

⁸¹⁹ Baldwin, quoted by Kelly Brown Douglas, *What’s Faith Got to Do with It? Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2005), 152.

bodies as a way of dealing with their own anxiety and self-loathing. Baldwin argues that “in this country the Negro pays for that guilt which white people have about flesh.”⁸²⁰

For Brown Douglas, the racialized consequences of the Platonist theological anthropology raises the problem of “black people’s disdain for their own flesh.”⁸²¹ This disdain, Brown Douglas emphasizes, is nothing less than imbibing the demonizations of the anti-Black empire. The Platonizing legacy also produces a sort of Black politics of sexual respectability as a matter of survival, which she terms “the adoption of a *hyper-proper-sexuality*.” Because of a commitment to defying white stereotypes, Black persons have lived under tremendous pressure to engage in draconian policing of all desire and sexual expression.⁸²² According to Brown Douglas, this problem animates Baldwin’s first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Dramatizing the various ways Black persons wrestle with white sexual violence against women, as well as tremendous mechanisms of suppression of all sexual desire, Baldwin’s novel makes the argument “that to safeguard one’s spirituality/soul by denying the fullness of one’s sexuality is to forfeit personal and intimate relationality, and hence happiness and well-being.”⁸²³ Therefore, while Brown Douglas relies on Baldwin as a critic of particular theological traditions, she also looks to him as a potential resource for an ethic of relational and sexual wholeness.

While Brown Douglas approaches Baldwin with somewhat different questions, the parallels between her reading and Cone’s are noteworthy. Both look to Baldwin as a resource for thinking about how white theology alienates Black bodies from their own flesh. While Cone’s engagement with Baldwin does not explicitly engage the language of embodiment nor deal with sexuality, Cone heralds Baldwin as performing theology as an intuitive and emotional act that

⁸²⁰ Ibid.

⁸²¹ Ibid., 152.

⁸²² Ibid., 178.

⁸²³ Ibid., 175.

requires a rejection of anything that alienates oneself from an embodied knowledge of Divine love. Brown Douglas, similarly, recognizes Baldwin's concern about the wedge that white Christianity inserts between Black persons and their own bodies and desires and sees him as a resource for a self-affirming integralism. These interpretations suggest comparisons between Baldwin and the womanist theological project, as I described previously. Womanist theology, positing a theological commitment to loving one's flesh as Divinely beloved, heralds the flesh as a place of revelation. In the context of demonarchy—which we can think of as colonial forces that, depending upon an anti-Black demonological imagination, demonizes Black flesh (with that of Black women and queer persons in targeted ways)—self-love requires the difficult work of navigating the existential realities of demonization to resist the deceptive and demonic forces of empire.

The function of desire and emotion has been a significant dimension of theological ethicist Vincent Lloyd's engagements with Baldwin. Lloyd has a partially critical take on Baldwin. He believes that Baldwin's religious and political sensibilities often reflect a naïve commitment to an ambiguous spirituality of love without norms, ethics, or politics. This criticism is especially pointed in Lloyd's *Black Natural Law*. In a more recent book, *Religion of the Field Negro*, Lloyd reiterates a version of this same criticism. Still, in the latter, he adds a positive assessment of what he describes as Baldwin's prophetic apophatic political theology of rejecting idolatry. In both cases, however, Lloyd concludes that Baldwin provides little more than an apolitical and amorphous account of love, which is of limited use for political theology.

In *Black Natural Law*, Lloyd argues for the political and theological value of a distinct strand of Black thought on natural law. Beginning by looking at 19th and 20th-century Black intellectuals and the moral witness of enslaved Black persons, Lloyd argues for a unique Black

tradition of moral law that could discern the obvious evils of slavery when white intellectuals could not. Unlike stringently “rationalist” approaches to natural law, prevalent in American politics and the various subcultures that prioritize natural law tradition today, the Black natural law tradition reflects an integrative understanding of persons that recognizes affective and other embodied ways of knowing and enacting the natural law.⁸²⁴ Notably, part of the particular value of the Black natural law tradition is that it reflects the wisdom of a population who, on account of suffering and struggle, have a privileged vantage point to deducing the liberating law of God.⁸²⁵

According to Lloyd, the apex of Black natural law tradition harmonizes intellectual, affective, and practical dimensions. Knowledge of God’s moral law is both a noetic and emotional project applied in a pragmatic, nuanced way. The Black natural law tradition, however, has devolved on account of each of these dimensions becoming divorced from one another.⁸²⁶ Lloyd argues that Baldwin stands at the beginning of a tradition of exclusively emotional approaches to natural law, for which “the deepest part of our humanity is our feelings, including both emotions and senses.” Sensuality and feeling become “Baldwin’s substitute for God.”⁸²⁷

To make this case, Lloyd draws attention to the vital role of particular emotions in Baldwin’s retellings of his religious autobiography. Baldwin recounts the role that fear and “anguish” played in his initial conversion to Christianity as a teenager. According to Lloyd, Baldwin initially associated religion with “a set of feelings.”⁸²⁸ Yet, as Baldwin grew

⁸²⁴ Vincent Lloyd, *Black Natural Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), ix.

⁸²⁵ Ibid.

⁸²⁶ Ibid., 118ff.

⁸²⁷ Ibid., 124.

⁸²⁸ Ibid., 123.

disillusioned with Christianity, he realized that many of the emotions experienced and displayed in the church were duplicitous. For Baldwin, “the church was rich in emotion, but it was emotion distorted, superficial love masking deep hatred.”⁸²⁹ This, says Lloyd, became the primary personal and spiritual problem Baldwin tried to solve through much of his thought and writing—how to *feel* with honesty and integrity. Lloyd argues that Baldwin’s quest for authentic emotion became a “new religion” that is essentially “a New Age spirituality” of sensuality and immanence.⁸³⁰ Baldwin cannot articulate a clear ethics or politics, unlike earlier exemplars of the Black natural law tradition. Baldwin lacks “any concrete sense of what this love entails,” Lloyd surmises. When it comes to white supremacy, this entails little more than a strategy “of encouraging readers to feel their way out of racism.”⁸³¹

In *Religion of the Field Negro*, Lloyd revisits Baldwin and casts him in a slightly different light, highlighting some meaningful contributions Baldwin might make to political theology. Lloyd argues here that “a specifically Christian set of ideas. . . frame Baldwin’s political vision.”⁸³² Similar to Cone and Brown Douglas, Lloyd distinguishes this assertion from those who merely see Baldwin as someone who uses religious language ironically or incidentally or as a secular prophet.⁸³³ Instead, Lloyd looks to the content of Baldwin’s political arguments and concludes that they represent a distinct, if only partially, Christian politics.

According to Lloyd, Baldwin inhabits an apophatic tradition of prophetic utterance against idolatrous conceptions of God.⁸³⁴ For Baldwin, humans possess an inherent quest for authority, meaning, safety, and “innocence.” Related to Baldwin’s own fraught relationship with

⁸²⁹ Ibid., 124.

⁸³⁰ Ibid., 124.

⁸³¹ Ibid., 126.

⁸³² Vincent Lloyd, *Religion of the Field Negro: On Black Secularism and Black Theology* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2018), 40.

⁸³³ Ibid.

⁸³⁴ Ibid.

his abusive stepfather, Baldwin saw the problem of fatherhood as central to the problem of idolatry: Human beings “long for a father, or for a god; for an authority in absolute control.” This longing, Lloyd points out, leads to the production of idols.⁸³⁵ Idolatry represents the human quest to avoid the complexities of life, namely the fact of death. This is a foolish enterprise since life is fundamentally “impossible to systematize, and always morally ambiguous.” Idolatry necessarily leads to violence, owing to the need to excise anything that raises awareness of the indeterminacy or fragility of life.⁸³⁶ Religion is often idolatrous because it alienates human beings from the inherent ambiguity of existence.

Baldwin’s project of anti-idolatry focuses on whiteness as “the quintessential form of idolatry.” Whiteness is an idolatrous religion, even when not expressed in explicitly religious garb. It involves an assumed theology of a “white god” and a “black devil.” This religion transfers sin to “blacks, allowing whites to ignore their own misdeeds and the complications of their own lives.”⁸³⁷ Baldwin’s anti-idolatry, therefore, represents a politics against whiteness as a prophetic denunciation of the self-assuring lies that whiteness offers.

Along with this negative theology of idolatry, Lloyd identifies Baldwin’s understanding of salvation, which he says is also substantively Christian. Lloyd quotes a lesser-known, late essay by Baldwin, “This Far and No Further,” where Baldwin writes: “Salvation is not precipitated by the terror of being consumed in hell: this terror itself places one in hell. Salvation is preceded by the recognition of sin, by conviction, by repentance.”⁸³⁸ Lloyd, from this essay, deduces that Baldwin understands salvation as a rejection of idolatry, which includes redemption from *sin* (which is left somewhat ambiguously defined). In what does seem like a noteworthy

⁸³⁵ Ibid., 45-46.

⁸³⁶ Ibid., 46.

⁸³⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁸³⁸ Ibid.; Baldwin, “This Far and No Further” in *The Cross of Redemption*, 164.

departure from his analysis in *Black Natural Law*, Lloyd admits that Baldwin here expresses not a mere sentimental spirituality but a robust (albeit apophatic) theology of the Christian God, professing salvation as a free gift for those who abandon the lies of their idols and accept life as it is, in love, rather than in fear.⁸³⁹

Resonating with *Black Natural Law*, and comparable to Cone and Brown Douglas, Lloyd frames Baldwin's rejection of idolatry as the problem of knowing both God and oneself. However, Lloyd stresses that Baldwin's paradoxical quest for self-knowledge constitutes a quest toward the ambiguity and opacity of God and self. For Baldwin, to grasp the mystery of life and of one's own personhood makes it possible to know God. Lloyd explains, "*knowing that deep down I am opaque is how I can know God.*"⁸⁴⁰ In this sense, Black persons are closer to God than whites—not because of some essential spiritual or religious quality, but because of what history (and whiteness) have demanded of them. Black Americans must perpetually question their existence as they question the material and spiritual violence of their existence under the weight of white idolatry.⁸⁴¹ This is similar to a point made in *Black Natural Law*, where Lloyd thinks of natural law traditions as traditions of "judgment," or we might even say *discernment*: The "richness" of natural law traditions in general "comes from the process rather than the product: from the careful examination of human nature."⁸⁴² This is the careful examination that Black women and men have had to engage to discern and profess their human dignity in a world where it is constantly denied. Whites continue to gravitate toward idols to suppress and deny death, the limits of their power, the fact of their sin. At the same time, Black persons have learned to live with the opacity that constitutes authentic knowledge of God and self.

⁸³⁹ Lloyd, *Religion of the Field Negro*, 46-48.

⁸⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁸⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁸⁴² Lloyd, *Black Natural Law*, viii

Lloyd observes a shift in Baldwin's later work to more explicitly prioritize love as the answer to idolatry and the general human condition. For Baldwin, the fundamental danger of idolatry is that it makes love impossible since true love entails encountering the reality of other human beings as they are—in all their mystery and complexity. "Love," therefore, "functions to expose and critique idolatry," since it is love that makes it possible to encounter the mystery of the other and of ourselves, achieving "perfect communion," Lloyd explains.⁸⁴³ White Americans struggle to love since they "systematically deceive themselves in all areas of their lives."⁸⁴⁴ Baldwin subsequently expresses a sense of Black vocation to teach white people to confront reality: "we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality."⁸⁴⁵

Lloyd criticizes the ethical indeterminacy and consequent political impotence of Baldwin's understanding of love. Lloyd surmises that "love," for Baldwin, "precisely names that which is without norms, that which remains when worldly concepts recede." Love is absent any sense of order or adjudication.⁸⁴⁶ To substantiate this assessment, Lloyd observes the theme of sensuality in Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, namely the homoerotic desire that the teenager John Grimes struggles to acknowledge. In this novel, "sensuality seems as if it is not subject to worldly norms." Instead, sensuality is placed in the realm of human mystery—as something which cannot be fully understood or circumscribed. It is "evidence of the self's sacred remainder." To restrict sensuality is to perform a sort of idolatry. Believing that Baldwin ultimately collapses sensuality into love, Lloyd continues: "I worry that the political potency of love, which comes about when love is connected with justice, is lost when love is placed in a

⁸⁴³ Lloyd, *Religion of the Field Negro*, 52.

⁸⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁸⁴⁵ As quoted by Lloyd, *Religion of the Field Negro*, 53.

⁸⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 55.

realm free of norms.”⁸⁴⁷ Lloyd equates Baldwin’s understanding of “redemption” with an existence where “distinctions are eliminated between familial and sexual love, between love and sensuality.”⁸⁴⁸ Love, and redemption, become an irreducible sensual and sexual openness.

A thoroughly Christian ethical and political vision, Lloyd counters, involves decisive adjudications between right and wrong, “embracing the good and the beautiful while using power to correct the bad and the ugly.”⁸⁴⁹ This is impossible for Baldwin, who resists any order to love, or any expression of love into norming power. Therefore, Lloyd concludes, Baldwin lacks a substantive account of politics. Or, at least, Baldwin lacks a fully Christian politics. Lloyd finally determines that while Baldwin’s prophetic political theology of rejecting idolatry “is of lasting import,” Baldwin’s “constructive account of love, is apolitical” and ultimately unhelpful.⁸⁵⁰

Theologian Joseph Drexler-Dreis, like Lloyd, heralds Baldwin’s political theology of anti-idolatry. However, Drexler-Dreis sees a more substantive political vision of love in Baldwin than Lloyd does. Commending Baldwin as a resource for decolonial theological thinking, Drexler-Dreis believes that Baldwin’s account of idolatry constitutes a meaningful Christian political theology of heralding salvation against the idols of coloniality. Explicitly responding to Lloyd’s assertion that Baldwin’s understanding of love is apolitical, Drexler-Dreis defines Baldwin’s decolonial account of love as the liberating, Divine, salvation manifest “in places where the idols of colonial modernity are destroyed.”⁸⁵¹

⁸⁴⁷ Ibid., 56.

⁸⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁵⁰ Ibid., 59.

⁸⁵¹ Drexler-Dreis, *Decolonial Love*, 41, 122-124.

Drexler-Dreis recognizes, like Lloyd, the Christian theological contours that frame Baldwin's thought, including notions of "revelation," "eschatology," and "salvation."⁸⁵² Drexler-Dreis further agrees with Lloyd that Baldwin's abandonment of the church did not necessarily signify a total rejection of Christianity or religion. As Drexler-Dreis asserts, Baldwin's departure from institutional Christianity did "not mean an opposition between the religious and the secular, or the church and the city; rather. . . [he] blurs the boundaries of what is religious, or even theological, and what is nonreligious or nontheological."⁸⁵³ Baldwin, therefore, is salient for theology in general and political theology in particular.

In direct response to Lloyd, Drexler-Dreis maintains that, for Baldwin, "encountering reality" is a norm and is political. Reality, for Baldwin, is undoubtedly mysterious and indeterminate. To name reality as such, however, is a political act. It disrupts the idolatries that produce violent and dominating systems that attempt to impose some control and authority on the mystery of reality. A fidelity to reality "involves forcing historical movements against social and political structures, and imaginaries that seek historical stasis."⁸⁵⁴ Therefore, paradoxically, Baldwin's is a politics that resists norms *about* reality: "Baldwin's normative claim, therefore, rests in the need to encounter reality" *in* reality's existence beyond norms.⁸⁵⁵ While Lloyd recognizes the significance of Baldwin's resistance to idolatry, the apparent lack of any normativity is a problem for Lloyd, who politics primarily as "figuring out how to live together in a fallen world," which requires norming judgments.⁸⁵⁶

⁸⁵² Ibid., 101.

⁸⁵³ Ibid., 102.

⁸⁵⁴ Ibid., 124.

⁸⁵⁵ Ibid., 123.

⁸⁵⁶ Lloyd, *Religion of the Field Negro*, 58.

Drexler-Dreis observes, however, that Baldwin's love is predicated on eschatology. Baldwin, he says, describes an alternative "reality" which is "ultimately a new world"⁸⁵⁷ that frames any critical rebuke of the current idolatries. Therefore, love as anti-idolatry is an act of judgment against the present world, under some awareness of an alternative coming into existence. True, Drexler-Dreis recognizes, while Baldwin is not terribly interested in the particular structuring of a new political order this does not represent an absence of a positive political vision. To engage in the prophetic task of rejecting idolatry is to be governed by a picture of another social and political reality.

Notably, per Drexler-Dreis, Baldwin's sense of eschatological reality is of something which *already* exists in history. It appears in the "creativity" of those who live on the bottom of the American matrix. This eschatological vision is necessarily opaque since it exists *in* history amidst the idols of the white world. It "is fundamentally mystery."⁸⁵⁸ It involves the creative and liminal practices of marginalized communities creating a life and world for themselves, partially carved out of the contours of the white world. For Baldwin, then, "reality" is not only the idolatrous reality that needs to be condemned, but it is also the eschatological reality that already exists; "an active praxis of love. . . brings reality [in both senses] forth."⁸⁵⁹ Therefore, if one can speak of Baldwin's politics, it involves a careful discernment between idolatry and the eschatological world that already exists on the underside, recognizing that the difference between them can be challenging to ascertain.

Other than Drexler-Dreis's emphasis on eschatology, the other significant difference between Lloyd and Drexler-Dreis involves the latter's use of the framing of decoloniality. For

⁸⁵⁷ Drexler-Dreis, 103.

⁸⁵⁸ Ibid., 128.

⁸⁵⁹ Ibid., 103.

Drexler-Dreis, decoloniality should be motivated by love⁸⁶⁰ and is political in that it dismantles systems of power that embed themselves in every facet of life, attempting nothing less than a recreation of the whole world in its image. Coloniality is an all-encompassing “apparatus of social, political, economic, and historical structures.”⁸⁶¹ Decoloniality occurs through myriad forms of resistance to such powers, which seep into even the most intimate minutia of life. Decoloniality even involves decentering “politics” as a fixation on laws, procedures, and institutions. Therefore, in Drexler-Dreis’s reading of Baldwin, “the mundane quality of life” is the site of “salvation” before and beyond forming “a new political system.”⁸⁶² Lloyd is, then, right when he says that Baldwin privileges the love between the characters Fonny and Tish as an “alternative world” to the unjust world of a racist criminal justice system in the novel *If Beale Street Could Talk*. But this does not mean that, as Lloyd surmises, “the two worlds, of love and of justice, have nothing to do with each other.”⁸⁶³ Instead, the drama of love is the site of salvation and decolonial disruption.

This being said, I do not believe Drexler-Dreis provides an altogether satisfying resolution. Lloyd is legitimately and understandably concerned about the actual practice of politics—how are racist criminal justice systems to be dismantled and reimagined, for example? Baldwin indeed offers little assistance for such practical matters. However, as I believe Drexler-Dreis helpfully shows, the norm-defying nature of decoloniality does not represent the complete absence of judgment, ethics, or politics.⁸⁶⁴ It is true, furthermore, that decoloniality privileges creativity, which includes the emergence of unforeseen possibilities. Decoloniality is often

⁸⁶⁰ Ibid., 42ff.

⁸⁶¹ Ibid., 37.

⁸⁶² Ibid., 116.

⁸⁶³ Lloyd, *Religion of the Field Negro*, 58.

⁸⁶⁴ Drexler-Dreis makes this point, albeit without much in the way of explanation, in his response to Lloyd’s assessment of Baldwin, 123.

disruptive and even chaotic, as “the zone of nonbeing irrupts” in the destruction of the idols of the colonial center.⁸⁶⁵ But I do not believe that any of this is meant to take away from the importance of questions of deliberation, governance, and political action.

This problem lurks behind the scenes in the documentary mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, *Meeting the Man*. Baldwin, seemingly wrestling with director Terry Dixon’s attempt to depoliticize Baldwin’s literature, admits to his gathered friends the limitations of his abilities: “I can’t lead a movement.” After a pause, Baldwin playfully adds: “But I can *fuck with your mind*.”⁸⁶⁶ *Fucking* with minds is no less a decolonial political act than leading a movement. It suggests the disruption of the epistemic center, which exerts power over all it can draw into its purview. Importantly, the scene in Beauford Delaney’s art studio ends with a prophetic declaration—“sooner or later, all the wretched of the earth, in one way or another, Next Tuesday or next Wednesday, will destroy the cobblestones on which London, Rome, and Paris are built. The world will change, because it has to change. . . . The party is over.”⁸⁶⁷ Baldwin attests to a new world coming into being, which *fucks with the minds* and topographies of the colonial center.

Lloyd’s other concern is that Baldwin’s account of love in itself is indeterminate. This not only makes politics impossible but is also an ethical and theological problem in its own right. In Lloyd’s view, the only distinction Baldwin makes is between “genuine love and distorted love.” It is better, perhaps, to frame this as a distinction between love and something which is not, at all, love. The latter is something else, maybe some form of idolatry masquerading as love. Nonetheless, Lloyd remarks, “beyond this distinction, Baldwin offers no help in picking out what

⁸⁶⁵ Drexler-Dreis, 120.

⁸⁶⁶ Dixon, *Meeting the Man*

⁸⁶⁷ Ibid.

we might call, following Augustine, ‘rightly ordered love.’” Love for Baldwin is, by definition, “without norms.”⁸⁶⁸ In *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, then, sensual desire is a universal given that “moves above the complexity of the world” and is therefore “not subject to worldly norms.”⁸⁶⁹

A queer theological reading of Baldwin helps approach this objection from a different angle. Namely, E.L. Kornegay’s *A Queering of Black Theology: James Baldwin’s Blues Project and Gospel Prose* represents one of the most comprehensive engagements with Baldwin from the purview of a theology of sexuality and embodiment. Kornegay, refracting some of the womanist themes discussed in the previous chapter, reckons with the necessary political disruption of loving one’s own flesh. Therefore, complementing Drexler-Dreis, Kornegay opens up ways of reading Baldwin’s queer account of love as a political and decolonial praxis.

In Kornegay’s interpretation, *contra* Lloyd, Baldwin does not reject all forms of authority nor relate the desire for “safety” as merely a negative precursor to idolatry.⁸⁷⁰ In fact, argues Kornegay, much of Baldwin’s understanding of these terms relate to a positive understanding of ideal religion as “safety” and an “exercise of power” that is “moral.” True religion, for Baldwin, represents the manifestation of a “safety” that allows one “to love, be loved, and belong to God and community as you are.”⁸⁷¹ Unfortunately, Christianity in America (both in white and Black contexts) is defined by the puritanical sexual tradition of condemnation and lacks safety for bodies and desires that defy puritanical definitions.⁸⁷² Like Kelly Brown Douglas, Kornegay sees sexual Puritanism and white supremacy as closely related dimensions of a demonizing religious

⁸⁶⁸ Lloyd, *Religion of the Field Negro*, 55.

⁸⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁷⁰ E. L. Kornegay, *A Queering of Black Theology: James Baldwin’s Blues Project and Gospel Prose* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 14-15. See also Lloyd’s interpretation of Baldwin that “safety” is a driving force that leads to idolatry, *Religion of the Field Negro*, 45.

⁸⁷¹ Ibid., 15-16.

⁸⁷² Ibid., 20-21.

framework—“sophisticated and damning puritan restraints/captivities between black/white, sinner/saved, and male/female, heterosexual/homosexual.”⁸⁷³

Kornegay maintains that Baldwin possessed a firm belief in “a loving God,” rejecting the “theological terror” of Puritanical religion.⁸⁷⁴ As Ulysses Young III similarly observes, “Baldwin rejects any ‘God’ that would cause him, or anybody else, to put down the flesh and lift up the spirit, thus tearing the two asunder.”⁸⁷⁵ Baldwin does not believe that this loving God is simply his individual invention. Instead, the “inheritance” of an all-but-hidden Black religious tradition exists beyond, within, above, and below the Black church, which Kornegay thematizes as Baldwin’s emphasis on the blues. “The blues,” explains Kornegay, “is expressive of the secret to black survival in the American context: to not ‘despise’ yourself and have ‘joy’ in the midst of a ‘hostile and brutally alienating [puritan] white world.’”⁸⁷⁶

Kornegay interacts with Michael F. Lynch’s interpretation of Baldwin, mentioned above. Importantly, Lynch takes up the question of whether Baldwin’s account of love amounts to sexual libertinism. Baldwin’s reticence to judgment of other human beings, says Lynch, is more appropriately a sort of “asceticism” that professes a profound humility that requires “respecting and loving the other as oneself.”⁸⁷⁷ Field further points out that Baldwin distinguishes between “meaningless” sex and sexuality suffused with authentic love, which also has a spiritual quality—“a soul you are striving to meet,” as the character Hall recounts in *Just Above My Head*.⁸⁷⁸ In other words, Baldwin’s quest for an ethic and praxis of desire is not a love devoid of

⁸⁷³ Ibid., 34.

⁸⁷⁴ Ibid., 16, 19.

⁸⁷⁵ Young III, 14.

⁸⁷⁶ Kornegay, 46.

⁸⁷⁷ Lynch, 292.

⁸⁷⁸ Field, 453

norms. Instead, Baldwin intends a spiritual intimacy that rejects unbridled sensuality for its own sake.

For Kornegay, Baldwin's quest for safety is also a search "for sexual honesty."⁸⁷⁹ Rejecting the "twoness" and alienation required of the Puritanical tradition, which makes honesty and "self-actualization" impossible,⁸⁸⁰ Baldwin's theology includes the notion of God *as* truth. Here, one begins to see the positive theological outline that Baldwin's anti-idolatry implies. While Baldwin understands truth as ambiguous, human reality is complex, it is wrong to say that this notion of truth is devoid of any critical or judgmental dimension. To exist in a reciprocal loving relationship with self, God, and community, is to know and tell the truth about oneself and others. Living with sexual and emotional integrity is a form of protest against the political-religious order of white supremacy and its Puritanical apparatus.⁸⁸¹ For Baldwin, then, embracing sexual desire and one's identity with honesty is a political act, making the self-possessed Black queer body, in particular, a political protest. This, again, points to the way that *love* is, for Baldwin, political.

Throughout each of the theological approaches to Baldwin that I have considered above is an underlying and recurring question that is not fully resolved between them: How does one discern the love of God for oneself and others, thereby emerging as an honest and loving *political* subject, under the mendacious character of a Puritanical-racial regime? How does one render the judgments necessary to embrace the emerging salvation of God in oneself, one's body, and in the community? Baldwin wrestles with the fact that deceptive emotions, named as love, can dominate the church. These misleading emotions masquerade as love but are in actuality

⁸⁷⁹ Kornegay, 121.

⁸⁸⁰ Ibid., 20.

⁸⁸¹ Ibid., 37ff.

deferred guilt and hatred. This practice of misidentified love supports the racist and anti-sexual order of the state.⁸⁸² Embedded with these deceptive emotions are aesthetic judgments involving the perdition of Blackness, the body, and sexuality. On the other hand, to honestly know God is to experience a love that tells the truth such that one embodies the reality of their Divinely-dignified existence. In these complex affective regimes, how is salvation possible?

Specifically, I do not believe theologians have yet done enough work to understand Baldwin's demonology, a dimension of his also under-emphasized Pentecostal upbringing, which is woven together with these questions of judgment and discernment. Baldwin, in fact, is a thoughtful interpreter and representative of the Black grammar of the demonic. Similarly, I do not think enough has been done to contextualize Baldwin in the particularities of his Pentecostal theological background. These both serve as crucial background for understanding how Baldwin approaches the problem of salvation as a problem of discernment.

Discerning Anti-Black Spirits

For there to be further progress in the theological conversation about Baldwin, I believe it is necessary to understand how demonology and practices of discerning the spirits frame Baldwin's theological and literary outlook. I attempt to contextualize Baldwin more firmly in his Black Pentecostalism to do this. I also point out how Baldwin's demonology, and practices of discernment, relate to broader and older Christian traditions of the same. This framing will inform my reading of two of Baldwin's novels at the end of this chapter, *Just Above My Head* and *Go Tell it On the Mountain*. Baldwin's understanding of discernment embodies the Pentecostal spirit of perceiving and embracing the creative possibilities of God in the world and rejecting the forces that suppress potential and transform it into the impetus for abjection.

⁸⁸² In "To Crush a Serpent," Baldwin compares white Southern preacher to police officers, *The Cross of Redemption*, 199.

Baldwin further parallels Evagrian and Ignatian traditions of discernment with his attention to imagination and emotion, respectively. This comparison makes it possible to contextualize Baldwin in the broader Christian conversation about discernment.

A rare exception, literary scholar Douglas Field reads James Baldwin as a Black *Pentecostal* writer. Field astutely observes how Baldwin's writing reflects some of the same thematic traditions of Holiness and Pentecostal churches, "particularly the theme of exile."⁸⁸³ The motif of exile relates in part to the animosity held against Pentecostalism by mainstream Protestant American culture—suspicious of Pentecostalism's purportedly cultish or "pagan" practices of healing and prophecy, as well as its anti-institutional ethos, egalitarianism, and diffuse leadership structure.⁸⁸⁴ Field makes the case that Baldwin repeats and radicalizes the Pentecostal theme of exile *out* of the institutions of mainstream American Christianity and toward an authentic and direct experience of God. This leads Baldwin toward a *further* exile out of the Pentecostal churches to pursue God and salvation in a world beyond the hypocritical confines of institutional religion.⁸⁸⁵

Unfortunately, Field relies on an unhelpful distinction between religion and spirituality, associating the latter with Baldwin's journey in search of a spirituality that did not exist in the churches. While it is true that Baldwin left the church to seek spiritual integrity, it is not the case that Baldwin believed, as Field claims, that "transcendence" or "ecstasy" existed only outside the church, in an extra-ecclesial "communion of friends and lovers."⁸⁸⁶ Instead, Baldwin believed that the salvation achieved in communion with other human beings was merely the fulfillment of the church's promise, which was partially, and tragically, unrealized in the church itself. Baldwin

⁸⁸³ Field, 440.

⁸⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 441.

⁸⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 442.

⁸⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 439.

would write about the power and potential contained within Pentecostal churches, including its practices of worship: “There is no music like that music, no drama like the drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners moaning, the tambourines racing.”⁸⁸⁷ Elsewhere, Baldwin assesses that the Black Church (in its ideal and positive manifestations) restores the “original energy” of Christianity, “it is through the creation of the black church that an unwritten, dispersed, and violated inheritance has been handed down.”⁸⁸⁸ Instead, it is better to speak of Baldwin’s commitment to an “invisible” Church, which exists alongside, as well as, outside and beyond the visible confines of the institutional churches. This relates to E.L. Kornegay’s representation of Baldwin’s account of the “blues,” described above, as the partially-occluded Black witness to the love and salvation of God.

However, this delineation between a visible and invisible Church raises the problem of discernment again. For Baldwin, the churches in America, both Black and white, are compromised by an order that demonizes Black flesh, love, desire, and authentically embodied communion between human beings. An escape from Christianity, furthermore, does not necessarily mean an escape from this political-religious order. Indeed, Baldwin believed that idolatry could take many forms, not just in a distorted Christianity.⁸⁸⁹ Therefore, the pursuit of salvation requires a discerning praxis that parses the difference between genuine salvation as communion and false salvation as idolatry. In this way, Baldwin can be related to Pentecostal and broader Christian traditions of discerning the spirits.

⁸⁸⁷ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 33-34.

⁸⁸⁸ Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, as quoted by Young, 27.

⁸⁸⁹ In *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin mourns that humans “will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, crosses, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death which is the only fact we have,” 91.

Ashon Crawley has written about “Blackpentecostalism,” which he thematizes through the lens of “Blackpentecostal breath.” Blackpentecostal breath is, for Crawley, the aesthetic and sensibility of the Black Pentecostal tradition (interwoven with other iterations of Black American religiosity). Blackpentecostal breath exists at the periphery of theology and religious studies, either ignored or grossly mistranslated into Western epistemological categories. Black Pentecostalism is a religiosity that is “deemed excessive.”⁸⁹⁰ This sense of excess refers to the “aesthetic practices of Blackpentecostalism—whooping, shouting, noise-making, and tongues speech.”⁸⁹¹ Black Pentecostalism performs that which is unknown to the typologies of the white European purview. For Crawley, Blackpentecostal breath is a way of thinking about Blackness as “possibility” and “creative potentialities.”⁸⁹² Crawley, therefore, defines Blackpentecostalism as “the performance of plural possibilities for otherwise” and as “the enactment of irreducible openness, the experience of displacement as common, the performance of displacement as a critique of the violent modernity that produced violent possession, colonialism, and enslavement.”⁸⁹³

Importantly, Crawley points out that one’s experience of possibility is mediated by one’s positionality. As an encounter with possibility, Blackpentecostalism is also an encounter with “the unfamiliar,” which “is often a cause for anxiety.”⁸⁹⁴ Crawley ascertains anti-Black colonialism is an affective regime that is a response to “anxiety” experienced by “white bodies” and which “then becomes the ground of violence against air, breath, breathing while black and within blackness.”⁸⁹⁵ In other words, anti-Black colonialism is anxious about anything that

⁸⁹⁰ Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 23.

⁸⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸⁹² *Ibid.*, 34.

⁸⁹³ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁸⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁸⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

would disrupt its impositions of the Same. It is a particular response to possibility as something strange to be dominated and suppressed. This evokes the demonologies of coloniality, which identify irruptions of difference—the periphery—with the demonic, rather than discerning possibility and difference as Divine revelation. Baldwin is similarly sensitive to this dynamic in how he receives the Black grammar of the demonic.

In “To Crush a Serpent,” Baldwin evaluates American theologies that he believes have subordinated love of God, others, and oneself to a religion that ultimately serves whiteness:

Race and religion, it has been remarked, are fearfully entangled in the guts of this nation, so profoundly that to speak of the one is to conjure up the other. One cannot speak of sin without referring to blackness, and blackness stalks our history and our streets. . . . Again and again, the Republic is convulsed with the need for exorcism.⁸⁹⁶
For Baldwin, to embrace salvation in its truest and fullest sense is to replace a demonizing theology with a theology of communion, which would disrupt the nation's very social and political fabric.

Baldwin's most didactic engagement with the demonological appears in his extended essay *The Devil Finds Work*. One of the most prevalent themes in *The Devil Finds Work* is the relationship between race, violence, and identity in American culture, reflected primarily through film, as well as literary examples. In one passage, Baldwin brings up the novel *The Childkeeper* by Sol Stein. In the narrative, a white man named Roger Maxwell impulsively and (somewhat) accidentally kills a Black boy, known as El Greco, who has recently entered his community. The young man triggers some profound psychological reaction in Roger Maxwell, an unresolved terror that latches onto the Black body. As Baldwin puts it, the presentation of the stranger “drags to the surface the buried terrors of [this white man's] life, and, helplessly, he kills the

⁸⁹⁶ Baldwin, *The Cross of Redemption*, 200. See also Josiah Ulysses Young III's description of Baldwin's understanding of the demonizing frameworks of white supremacy, pp. 13-18.

boy.”⁸⁹⁷ Maxwell’s failure is, in large part, a failure of discernment. He cannot deal honestly and therapeutically with the anxiety and terror evoked by the unfamiliar in his life and world and resorts to demonization and violence.

For Baldwin, Stein’s is a story about identity. The white character’s inability to deal with his own internal strangeness, ambiguity, liminality, and imperfection makes him unable to deal with strangeness and difference in his external environment. Baldwin explains, “the question of identity is a question involving the most profound panic. . . . An identity is questioned only when it is menaced. . . [such as] when the stranger enters the gates, never, thereafter, to be a stranger: the stranger’s presence making you the stranger, less to the stranger than to yourself.”⁸⁹⁸

The idea of the demonic enters as a category to help Baldwin explain practices and traditions that allow one to transcend internal strangeness and explain the dynamic of what happens when one fails to do so. At the end of *The Devil Finds Work*, Baldwin reflects on a spiritual tradition in the Pentecostal churches, “pleading the blood.”⁸⁹⁹ He explains: “When the sinner fell on his face before the altar. . . . all of the forces of Hell rushed to claim the soul which had just been astonished by the light of the love of God.”⁹⁰⁰ Baldwin is convinced that this rite possesses an authentic spiritual power. Such a religious practice fosters a quality lacking in Roger Maxwell: It fosters an identity reconciled with terror. He explains that because of such practices, “frightened as one may be, and no matter how limited, or how lonely, and no matter how the deal, at last, goes down, no man can ever frighten you.”⁹⁰¹ For Baldwin, then, this

⁸⁹⁷ James Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work: An Essay* (New York: Vintage International, 2011), 79.

⁸⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 79-80

⁸⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 119.

practice of pleading the blood and the whole tradition of engaging in regular combat with demonic forces prepares one for hospitality toward the stranger. It is a practice that provides an ability to confront strangeness, fear, liminality and overcome it: “To encounter oneself is to encounter the other: and this is love. If I know that my soul trembles, I know that yours does, too: and, if I can respect this, both of us can live.”⁹⁰² In this respect, Baldwin’s demonology parallels Crawley’s understanding of the white colonial reaction to alterity and the notion of Black Pentecostalism as an alternative way of approaching irruptions of the strange as, yes, terrifying—but also an opportunity to encounter the possibility of God.

Crawley intentionally thinks of possibility as a sort of rebellion, which is a good-in-itself and is also a protest against “the institutionalization of function and form—bordering—that exists *in the service of coherence with the state*.”⁹⁰³ In one sense, this represents a compelling binary between the Sameness of the colonial center and the possibilities for otherwise inherent in communities that represent the emergence of decolonial love. This framework coheres with much of Baldwin’s understanding of demonology as a project of demonizing difference and possibility. However, I also would stress that Baldwin insists that there are such things as “demons” (bracketing, for now, the question of any specific metaphysical connotation)—there are irruptions of possibility that deserve to be demonized. Or, from another vantage point, the very act of demonizing Divine potential is itself a demonic act.

Soon after describing Pentecostal practice vis-à-vis the demonic, Baldwin then critiques the film, *The Exorcist*. Baldwin maintains that *The Exorcist* fails to say anything profound about evil because it possesses a grossly misapplied and misinterpreted demonology. He writes: “The mindless and hysterical banality of the evil presented in *The Exorcist* is the most terrifying thing

⁹⁰² Ibid., 125.

⁹⁰³ Crawley, 62.

about the film. The Americans should certainly know more about evil than that; if they pretend otherwise, they are lying, and any black man, and not only blacks—many, many others, including white children—can call them on this lie; he who has been treated as the devil recognizes the devil when they meet.”⁹⁰⁴

While it is difficult to say what Baldwin precisely means, metaphysically, when talking about the demonic, I do not believe he is being tongue-in-cheek. In his experience as a queer Black American, he recognizes a certain quality of evil that deserves to be thought of as demonic and diabolical. In fact, the Black grammar of the demonic features throughout much of his writing. One striking manifestation appears in *If Beale Street Could Talk*, which deals with the difficult possibility of Black love amidst a racist criminal justice system. One character, reflecting on his experience being abused and terrorized by the criminal justice system, says: “I really found out, in the slammer, what Malcolm and them cats was talking about. The white man’s *got* to be the devil. He sure ain’t a man. Some of the things I saw, baby, I’ll be dreaming about until the day I die.”⁹⁰⁵ Baldwin emphatically did not subscribe to the Nation of Islam’s identification of white persons as the devil.⁹⁰⁶ Indeed, as he goes on to express in *The Devil Finds Work*, the devil is a universal human possibility. It exists both “in you and in me.”⁹⁰⁷ Baldwin nonetheless reflects the Black grammar of the demonic in recognizing the demonic quality of the systems of white supremacy that have morally debased white Americans, suggesting why the pull to demonize in return is so tempting. Therefore, there is a need to describe certain realities as demonic. But how, exactly, does one discern between Divine possibilities and demonic ones? How does one know when they are demonizing the good or

⁹⁰⁴ Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, 127.

⁹⁰⁵ James Baldwin, *If Beale Street Could Talk* (New York: Vintage International, 2006), 103.

⁹⁰⁶ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 71.

⁹⁰⁷ Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, 126.

failing to heed the realities of evil? To answer this question, it is helpful to contextualize and compare Baldwin with Pentecostal and broader Christian practices of discernment.

Both attempting to articulate current practice and identify new horizons for Pentecostal theology, theologian Amos Yong develops the notion of the “pneumatological imagination.” The pneumatological imagination is an awareness of the world, in contrast with modernist mechanistic views of causality, recognizing that “the world is the result of various powers acting and being acted upon.”⁹⁰⁸ Importantly, Yong resonates with Walter Wink’s exegetical theology of “the powers,” as the “outer manifestation” of a particular system or institution, “driven by inner dynamics.”⁹⁰⁹ Nigerian Pentecostal theologian Nimi Wariboko makes the similar observation that Pentecostalism exhibits an “ontological spirituality.” This spirituality perceives itself to transform the subject and its relationship to truth. A constitutive element of this grasp of reality is “transfiguration of the boundaries of phenomenality and noumenality.”⁹¹⁰ In this Pentecostal “social imaginary. . . matter is enspirited and the impossible is possible.”⁹¹¹ Pentecostalism seeks to accomplish the impossibility of discerning the spiritual realities that dwell in and through everyday phenomenon.

Similarly, Baldwin understood his vocation as a writer as one who must engage and unveil the complexities of human existence to overcome the maladies that plague the human soul and human society: “It is [the] power of revelation which is the business of the novelist.”⁹¹² The artist should, like the preacher, “make a confession,” identifying “the things people like to sweep under the rug.”⁹¹³ Baldwin’s commitments to prophecy could even emerge in discrete moments

⁹⁰⁸ Amos Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community: Theological Hermeneutics in Trinitarian Perspective* (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2002), 147.

⁹⁰⁹ Ibid., For more on Wink, 88ff.

⁹¹⁰ Nimi Wariboko, *Nigerian Pentecostalism* (Rochester, N.Y: University of Rochester Press, 2014), 43.

⁹¹¹ Ibid., 44.

⁹¹² James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2012), 15-16.

⁹¹³ Ibid., 23.

that reflect the worship practices in the Pentecostal churches of his childhood. Baldwin's biographer and friend, David Leeming, recalls moments in conversation when "Baldwin would seem to be possessed." Some sort of transference would take place, which Leeming (revealing some unfortunately simplistic and racialized judgments on Leeming's part) describes as one from Baldwin "the fun-lover" to a "bully" as he channeled the "anger" of "a whole race" by exclaiming to dinner guests, "I picked your cotton. I nursed your babies, you killed my children." Leeming remarks that "Baldwin would break out of his prophetic explosions as suddenly as he had been possessed by them. The hard angry mouth would smooth out, the enraged eyes would soften, giving way to a smile so welcoming that the victims of the recent harangue would behave as if they had been caressed."⁹¹⁴

Amos Yong returns to the problem of discernment as an essential feature of Pentecostalism. He writes, "the essentially modal and dynamic nature of reality" evoked by the pneumatological imagination

requires that one exercises patience in discernment. This is important because the temporal features of spiritual manifestations often initially surprise us or leave us in the lurch.... A pneumatological imagination, then, is not only prepared to pursue the ways of the Spirit, but is also in some sense constrained or empowered to respond with discernment, over time, to the variety of shifting situations it encounters in accordance with its own position vis-à-vis the other forces and vectors that compromise each occasion.⁹¹⁵

Deeply influenced by Paul Tillich, Yong elsewhere turns to charismatic and Pentecostal thinkers who have developed their approach to discernment from Tillich's demonology and mysticism. For example, American Pentecostal theologian Stephen Parker "proposes that the Pentecostal experience of the Spirit involves" a "kind of ecstatic rationality."⁹¹⁶ The idea of

⁹¹⁴ David Adams Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2015), 48-49.

⁹¹⁵ Yong, *Spirit-Word-Community*, 147.

⁹¹⁶ Amos Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s)* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2019), 248.

ecstatic rationality comes from Tillich's understanding of "ecstasy" as a constitutive dimension of revelation, which "is the state of mind in which reason is beyond itself, that is, beyond its subject-object structure. In being beyond itself reason does not deny itself. . . . it does not receive anything irrational or antirational. . . . This is the state mystics try to reach by ascetic and meditative activities."⁹¹⁷ Tillich further associates ecstasy with disorientation, the "ontological shock," which is both the overwhelming "divine presence" that both reduces and amplifies the self. The reason that ecstasy is sometimes difficult to distinguish from "demonic possession" is that both involve a dissolution of "the ordinary subject-object structure of the mind."⁹¹⁸ For Tillich, the defining difference is that "divine ecstasy does not violate the wholeness of the rational mind, while demonic possession weakens or destroys it."⁹¹⁹ However, Tillich is vague on what discernment of this sort requires in practice.

Yong's theology of discernment takes seriously the need for demonology, recognizing that the existence of tremendous forces of evil is vital to the Christian tradition. "Pentecostals and charismatics" share particularly "strong convictions about the horror of the demonic," which is why discernment is both a necessary and fraught aspect of Pentecostal reflection. Discernment occurs in light of a cognizance of "the deceptiveness of radical evil." Yong, attempting to synthesize and contribute to Pentecostal traditions of discernment, identifies that discernment has emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic dimensions, involving a careful sifting of ideas, feelings, and perceptions of experience for revelation from God and resist temptations from the demonic.⁹²⁰

⁹¹⁷ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Volume 1, 112.

⁹¹⁸ Ibid., 114.

⁹¹⁹ Ibid.

⁹²⁰ Yong, *Discerning the Spirit(s)*, 254.

While cognition has been and should remain an important horizon for discernment in several traditions, the emphasis on aesthetic, affectivity and imagination have been particularly significant to much of the Christian tradition. Is anxiety a sign of the demonic? Is joy always Divine, or can it be deceptive? Are visions and apparent apparitions what they might appear to be? These questions are particularly relevant to political demonology in the context of anti-Black coloniality. As womanist thought asks—how do demonized peoples discern their dignity in the context of overwhelming affective and aesthetic regimes that form subjects, at the periphery, who are tempted to feel disgust toward their own and one another’s flesh?

Pentecostal theology, including its Tillichian iterations, indeed posits that imagination and affect are essential dimensions of discernment. According to Yong, “all experience of the Holy Spirit is indirectly mediated through human corporeality and affections.”⁹²¹ Tillich suggests the same, with his insistence that “ecstatic rationality” is also a highly “emotional” phenomenon.⁹²² This parallels Crawley’s understanding that in Black Pentecostalism, “breath,” as a fundamental aesthetic of Pentecostal practice, denies the “difference of flesh from mind, of mind from emotion.”⁹²³ I believe Baldwin’s contributions are primarily in these realms of imagination and affectivity. I want to briefly consider other Christian resources for thinking about discernment as conversation partners for Baldwin by looking to two traditions that also emphasize these dimensions of discernment.

Discernment and Demonic Imaginations

Early Christian monastic theology, which I have already engaged as a source for early associations between Blackness and the demonic, reflects several traditions of discerning the

⁹²¹ Ibid., 245.

⁹²² Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1, 114.

⁹²³ Crawley, 47.

truth concerning appearances of spiritual entities. These traditions reflect different ontologies of the demonic. Origen, for example, claimed that demons have bodies, though ones that are not as “solid” as human ones and which can veer in and out of visibility and take various shapes.⁹²⁴ On the other hand, John of Damascus held that demons (like God and angels) are essentially invisible. If humans are granted a vision of demons, this is because God or angelic powers author what appears to the imagination.⁹²⁵ Therefore, when one thinks they see a demon, they are actually seeing a representation that God has created for us to perceive an incorporeal entity visually. While political demonology is not necessarily focused on concrete visual instantiations of apparent demons (in mystical visions or dreams, for example), it is concerned with the way that the demonic is imaged in individuals and societies, even when “demons” are believed not to exist, therefore suggesting the significance of these theologies of demonological imagination.

The 4th century ascetic Evagrius of Pontus reflects a notable suspicion toward the way imagination perceives demons. Evagrius’s influential spiritual writings, *Praktikos* and *On Prayer*, depict the monastic life as a struggle for apatheia, or detachment. Evagrius is not against all emotion, a common misconception, for he maintains that agape, unconditional love, for God, neighbor, and all of creation, is the product of apatheia.⁹²⁶ The monastic struggle is waged against the thoughts, passions, and temptations that cloud the mind and distract it from contemplation of God. Evagrian approaches to discernment provide a helpful parallel to Karl Barth’s reticence regarding demonology. For Barth, the demonic is often involved in

⁹²⁴ Gregory A. Smith, “How Thin is a Demon?” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16.4 (2008), 486.

⁹²⁵ John of Damascus, *Three Treatises of Divine Images*, translated by Andrew Louth (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 100.

⁹²⁶ Evagrius Ponticus, “The Praktikos” in *The Praktikos & Chapters On Prayer*, translated by John Eudes Bamberger OSCO (Trappist, Kentucky: Cistercian Publications), 14.

demonological theologizing. For Evagrius, the demonic is often involved in demonological imagining.

For Evagrius, discernment is a necessary but complex practice that is critical as the ascetic grows in contemplation of God. Evagrian spirituality recognizes that there are eight “thoughts” which plague the monk: “Gluttony. . . impurity, avarice, sadness, anger, *acedia*, vainglory, and last of all, pride.” The thoughts themselves are unavoidable, but they can lead to sin if they “stir up our passions.”⁹²⁷ Evagrius associates particular thoughts with particular demons, such as “the demon of impurity” who “impels one to lust after bodies.”⁹²⁸ For Evagrius, discernment is the practice of keeping careful watch over one’s thoughts to avoid the subtle triggers to slide into passion: “Let him note well the complexity of his thoughts, their periodicity, the demons which cause them.”⁹²⁹

Another dimension of discernment, for Evagrius, involves suspicion of apparitions and visions that may seem to be from God. Demons, for Evagrius, are invisible and immaterial; however, they have significant power to manipulate the imagination. Purported appearances, therefore, should be treated with suspicion. At one point, Evagrius describes how the demon that is responsible for inspiring vanity can manipulate the brain to create a purportedly Divine vision fabricated by evil. He says:

This demon plays a light upon the spirit as he wills. . . He thus produces a train of reasoning that leads the spirit, all unawares, to give a form to the divine and essential knowledge. . . [The recipient of such an experience] draws the conclusion that the apparition is divine in origin. But in truth it is produced in him by the demon, who, as I have said, makes use of this frightful tactic of stimulating this site of the brain and provoking some change in the light phenomenon controlled by it.⁹³⁰

⁹²⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁹²⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁹²⁹ Ibid., 29-30.

⁹³⁰ Evagrius, “On Prayer,” in *The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer*, 67.

Both vainglory and pride can lead to these false visions of demons, in fact. The monk who succumbs to pride forgets “that God is his helper.” When pride is allowed to run amok, it can lead to “derangement of mind, associated with wild ravings and hallucinations of whole multitudes of demons in the sky.”⁹³¹ This passage is reminiscent of Achille Mbembe’s description of the white colonial consciousness: “White man, besieged by a mob of Negroes, drowned in alcohol and stricken with fever, wonders, ‘Have I gone mad?’ What would the colony be, if not a place where all sorts of mythical fabrications could be unleashed.”⁹³²

In fact, I believe Evagrius and Mbembe together provide a lens for understanding the way that St. Athanasius (and, purportedly, Antony) uncritically accepts the appearance of the devil as an Ethiopian child in *The Life of Antony*. While it is not possible to offer a confident spiritual diagnosis, is it not conceivable that Antony succumbed to something akin to Evagrian pride, leading him into an apparition that gave him a false sense of victory over the devil? Was, in actuality, this moment of purported triumph actually a capitulation to the demonizing tendencies of the aesthetics of whiteness, which provided him a certain sort of pride and superiority over the relative darkness of certain bodies? Reframing this question in a womanist key, is not the cultural production of evil the reproduction of apparitions that demonize Blackness and aggrandize whiteness? Therefore, the failure of discernment (from an Evagrian standpoint) is the failure to keep careful watch over one’s thoughts, observing the vainglory that a particular vision occasioned.

Therefore, political demonology might take from the Evagrian tradition an understanding that the “demons” of a particular spiritual, theological, or political order can often reflect the manipulation of evil. As Emilie M. Townes points out, the cultural production of evil involves

⁹³¹ Evagrius, “The Praktikos,” 14.

⁹³² Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 185.

the production of demonized images and symbols.⁹³³ In keeping with Evagrian sensibilities, characters in Baldwin's novels encounter theological and demonological aesthetics as potentially demonic sites of temptation, namely to the self-loathing of anti-Blackness. Specifically, unlike Athanasius, John Grimes in *Go Tell It On the Mountain* looks beyond the perdition of Blackness and discerns both the darkness/Blackness and ultimate opacity of God, leading him not to vainglory, but growing recognition of his Divine dignity.

Ignatian Discernment of the Affections

The Ignatian tradition of discerning the spirits places heavy emphasis on affections. This tradition also makes for a helpful conversation partner with Baldwin. In his second set of rules for discernment, in the *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius frames discernment as the practice of determining whether particular "motions" in the soul are of God or of the devil.⁹³⁴ He establishes the fundamental principle that "God and his angels. . . give genuine happiness and spiritual joy," while the demonic provide "sadness and turmoil."⁹³⁵ Yet this lens for discerning the spirits is not naïve to the complexities and potential deceptions of embodied emotional life. The earlier set of rules begins with the confusing mire of conflicting affections that a novice in the practice of discernment may experience. For someone in a state of mortal sin, demonic spirits suggest "apparent pleasures." Although these pleasures involve "delights and pleasures of the senses" that are indicated to the individual, Ignatius insinuates that this feeling might, for some, be difficult to distinguish from the spiritual pleasure that comes from God. Similarly, the conviction

⁹³³ Townes, *The Cultural Production of Evil*, 21.

⁹³⁴ Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, trans. George E. Ganss, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 201.

⁹³⁵ Ignatius of Loyola, 205

regarding sin, brought about by a “good spirit,” might be hard to distinguish from the “gnawing anxiety” and self-flagellation that the evil spirits cause in further stages.⁹³⁶

Timothy Gallagher encourages readers of Ignatius to notice the genre of his instructions for discernment. Ignatius provides *rules*, or “guidelines,” rather than philosophical declarations. Discerning spirits is a communal activity of collective wisdom, for which there is a limit to its discursive exposition. As Gallagher points out, this means that the rules are open to revision and nuance as the community practices discernment in concrete, complex moments of resisting evil and seeking the good. Amos Yong makes a similar point about Pentecostal discernment, noting that guidelines are always imperfect and require active discernment in concrete moments and communities, which is an ongoing process that may be filled with many missteps.⁹³⁷

In the third chapter, I engaged the theme of discernment traced through the Jesuit iterations of liberation theology. I made the case that Jon Sobrino reflects a praxis of discernment in his insistence that the crucified peoples of history have a unique comprehension of the presence and nature of the anti-Kingdom. I engaged this reading of Sobrino in light of American Jesuit theologian Dean Brackley’s development of discernment as a political, theological framework. Brackley is particularly sensitive to the affective and emotional dimensions of discernment.

Brackley frames Ignatian discernment in the context of individual formation—how does one pursue the “reform of life” necessary to “spend our lives in service”?⁹³⁸ The liberationist element comes from Brackley’s conviction that Christian service in modern times entails the

⁹³⁶ Ibid., 201.

⁹³⁷ Yong, *Discerning the Spirits*, 255.

⁹³⁸ Dean Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times: New Perspectives on the Transformative Wisdom of Ignatius of Loyola* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co, 2004), 45.

formation of “a critical mass of people who will respond to suffering.”⁹³⁹ Importantly, Brackley thinks of affectivity in systemic ways as external impulses that move the soul and which often develop and spread in groups and social networks: “Desolation is contagious.”⁹⁴⁰

In the spirit of Gallagher’s interpretation of Ignatius, Brackley approaches the rules of discernment as questions for reflection rather than firm rules that can be applied with any exact precision in all situations. Discernment is attention to “consolation” as the power of “the good Spirit” which “heals us psychologically and even physically and enlightens intellectually.” On the other hand, “desolation” is the function of evil, which “targets our moral weaknesses and our neuroses in order to dehumanize and destroy.”⁹⁴¹ Yet, consolation and desolation are not always easy and obvious to identify—an encounter with God can *feel* like desolation, while a meeting with the enemy can mimic consolation.⁹⁴²

Brackley makes the insightful observation that discerning the presence of evil is not an immediate or instant possibility. It requires a careful attentiveness to one’s own thought processes, which can take time to untangle: “We must attend closely to how our thoughts progress during and after consolation. If the beginning, middle, and end of our thought-progression is sound and leads toward what is good, that is a clear sign of the divine Spirit. But if our thoughts lead to something evil. . . that is a clear sign, too: enemy at work!”⁹⁴³ Brackley leaves “good” and “evil” somewhat loosely defined. The former represents one’s growth toward “freedom” and “love,” rather than subservience to “idols.”⁹⁴⁴

⁹³⁹ Ibid., 45.

⁹⁴⁰ Ibid., 52-53.

⁹⁴¹ Ibid., 54.

⁹⁴² Ibid., 134.

⁹⁴³ Ibid., 140.

⁹⁴⁴ Ibid., 18.

Jon Sobrino's relative concreteness is, in some respects, more practical when thinking about the context of anti-Black colonialism. Sobrino identifies good and evil with the Kingdom of life and the anti-Kingdom and its idols of death, respectively. The systems, practices, and beliefs that protect life and lead to flourishing are manifestations of the Kingdom of God. Those which lead to death and suffering represent the anti-Kingdom. Baldwin makes the similar point that the demonized have a privileged perspective for discerning the presence of the demonic "he who has been treated as the devil recognizes the devil when they meet."⁹⁴⁵ The demonized peoples of history provide a firmer vantage point for delineating between the Kingdom of life and the anti-Kingdom of death.

As mentioned above, Brackley is cognizant that consolation and desolation emerge in and through groups and social settings. Decolonial perspectives, particularly in conversation with womanist theology, expand and radicalize this point by emphasizing the tremendous and complex systems of power that make discernment difficult. The demonological framework upon which anti-Black colonialism rests is a thoroughgoing theology and cosmology that has presented impermeable, if at times latent, designations of "good" and "evil" that protect the center-periphery divide. How is it possible to know when one has ascended beyond the seemingly intractable ways these categories penetrate minds, words, imaginations, and emotions?

Baldwin's embodiment of the Black grammar of the demonic, I believe, intervenes in these questions by presenting discernment as an activity of the demonized peoples of history weighing the various affects and imaginative associations produced either by God or a veritably demonic empire. Baldwin, writing out of a Pentecostal imagination that reflects a cosmology of

⁹⁴⁵ Baldwin, *The Devil Finds Work*, 127.

good and evil spirits interacting with human bodies, reflects a Black practice of discernment that is both theological and decolonial. Echoing Sobrino, Baldwin prioritizes the demonized peoples of history as possessing a privileged vantage point regarding good and evil. In keeping with the respective insights of the Evagrian, Ignatian, and womanist traditions, Baldwin highlights the various affects and imaginative constructions that intersect with the human body amidst a deceptive, demonic empire of evil. He puts the spotlight on subjects living under anti-Black coloniality, who are also seeking the liberating revelation of the Holy Spirit in their flesh. Focusing on the characters in two of Baldwin's novels, *Just Above My Head* and *Go Tell it On the Mountain*, the next section of this chapter identifies Baldwin's decolonial practice of discerning spirits in the flesh.

The Demons of Baldwin's Literature

Two literary works by James Baldwin, *Just Above My Head* and *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, explore what it means for demonized peoples to discern good from evil in the context anti-Black colonial power. I explore these works in reverse chronological order, beginning with Baldwin's last finished novel (*Head*, 1979) and concluding with his first (*Mountain*, 1953). I choose this, perhaps confusing, ordering for a few reasons. Of the two works, *Go Tell It On the Mountain* contains the most definitive treatment of evil spirits, namely the devil, as a theme. However, the book is shorter and represents an early and more opaque exploration of ideas Baldwin would develop throughout his life. I, therefore, opt to read *Mountain* in light of the longer *Just Above My Head*.

Just Above My Head

Just Above My Head was Baldwin's last novel, published 8 years before his death in 1987. The book is, in many respects, a *magnum opus* that synthesizes practically every sort of

character profile and theme that appears throughout Baldwin's other stories. It is told from the vantage point of the character Hall Montana, who the reader encounters in his mid-40s, two years after the sudden death of his brother, Arthur. The majority of the book reads like a memoir, but more specifically, a recollection of Arthur's life.

Just Above My Head frames itself as a theological "murder"⁹⁴⁶ mystery. Who is responsible for the death of Arthur Montana? The church is implicated as a possible guilty party from the beginning of the work. Hall recounts the despair of their mother: "She feels that the people in the church, when they turned against [Arthur], became directly responsible for his death."⁹⁴⁷ Arthur was a Black Gospel singer, and he was gay. Congregations and audiences adored his tremendous spiritual and musical power. As a teenager, he performed alongside his fellow musicians (Crunch, Red, and Peanut) and sometimes with Julia, a child preacher in high demand in local churches. However, it is implied Arthur was vilified and demonized as his sexuality came to light.

The death and the events leading up to it are shrouded in innuendo. In fact, we learn very little about the last many years of Arthur's life. For Hall, as the narrator, these details do not seem to matter. Rather than so much follow his mother's tact of blaming the church, Hall dances around the possibility that *he* has failed to be his brother's keeper. While there is much reason to blame the church, as an ironic place of evil that exacerbated Arthur's self-loathing, Hall wrestles (sometimes subconsciously and ultimately dishonestly) with the failure of himself and thereby of family *writ large*, to provide the love that Arthur needed.

Much of Baldwin's writings, both story and prose, deal dramatically and repetitively with the theme of fear, or "terror." While some interpreters reduce Baldwin to identifying "good" with

⁹⁴⁶ Arthur appears to have died of natural causes, but the novel leaves the details of his death unclear.

⁹⁴⁷ James Baldwin, *Just Above My Head* (New York: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 2000), 6. (Henceforth, *JAMH*).

love or joy and “evil” with hatred and fear,⁹⁴⁸ Baldwin is particularly insightful in the way he recognizes how, as enfleshed beings, these are often intertwined and confused in life. This entanglement, similarly evoked in the Ignatian tradition, is particularly complex in the milieu of a colonial matrix that produces certain affects as means of constructing subjectivity. The colonial matrix identifies certain sorts of flesh, and even flesh itself, as demonic. Terror is a particularly substantial manifestation of the powers that seek to quell love.

Arthur, for example, experiences palpable terror as he grows in awareness of his sexuality. He wonders “what in the world is wrong with him” as he witnesses a truncated sexual curiosity, but certainly not desire, toward a young woman flirting with him. The whole exchange fills him with “terror.”⁹⁴⁹ Later, Arthur experiences this same “terror” again after making love to his male bandmate, Crunch, for the first time.⁹⁵⁰ “Perhaps love *is* a sin,” he later considers while reflecting on his subsequent relationship with Crunch.⁹⁵¹ Arthur experiences the terror which surrounds the possibility of authentic human love in a homophobic society and conservative religious setting. For this reason, he finds it difficult to fully embrace the opportunity of love. Arthur is hindered by the terror attached to the demonization of his own flesh. Although Arthur ultimately finds a long and fulfilling relationship with his longtime partner Jimmy, this temptation to self-loathing seems to plague him throughout his life.

From Hall’s perspective, his brother Arthur is a tragic example of someone who failed to deal with his own demons, which drag Arthur into an emotional and physical tailspin that eventually led to his death—which is implied to be a heart attack brought on by stress. Equally, it could have been a racist or homophobic assault or poisoning. Near the end of the book, Hall

⁹⁴⁸ See Josiah Ulysses Young III, 10-11.

⁹⁴⁹ *JAMH*, 180.

⁹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 256.

concludes that it was Arthur who, himself, could not let go of the terror and shame of his identity. According to Hall, Arthur “knows” that he “will never be released from the judgment, or the terror, in his own eyes.” Hall suspected that Arthur worried that his family might be ashamed. Hall, however, assures himself that Arthur, deep down, knew that this was not true. Arthur’s terror is self-perpetuated. Hall is thereby off the hook for any of Arthur’s sense of distance from his family.⁹⁵² As Hall expounds on this point, however, he keeps returning to a remembrance of one of Arthur’s performances. Baldwin interlaces Hall’s thoughts with bits of lyric. Specifically, this line interrupts the paragraph where Hall is concluding that Arthur is, ultimately, responsible for his own death:

*“Lord knows,
I’ve got to stop believing
In all your lies.”*⁹⁵³

Throughout the book, Baldwin presents Hall as a seemingly authoritative narrator. There is no explicit hint that Hall’s memory should, itself, be questioned. And yet, this is one of a few scenes that suggest an interrogation of Hall’s perspective. Being an avid film critic, it is possible to imagine Baldwin intentionally evoking a movie scene, with the contrast of the song playing over Hall’s thoughts, standing as an unacknowledged witness against him.

Hall is revealed, by the song, as a liar. While it would be wrong to make Hall, or his family, directly responsible for Arthur’s death or lack of self-acceptance, Hall assuredly failed to truly embrace his brother in his whole, enfleshed self. Even two years after Arthur’s death, Hall struggles to discuss Arthur’s sexuality with Hall’s son, Tony. Learning that Tony’s school friends are using homophobic slurs to ridicule the late Arthur Montana as a way to bully Tony,

⁹⁵² Ibid., 579.

⁹⁵³ Ibid.

Hall is only able to respond that he loved Arthur and that Arthur “was a great singer.”⁹⁵⁴ Hall does not deny who his brother was. Yet, Hall is unable, ashamed, and afraid to tell the complete truth. He keeps his brother’s demonized flesh at a distance, unable to tell the truth about his own demonization of that flesh. It is for this reason that love and communion were impossible between them.

Hall’s misunderstanding of his brother is a tragic irony in light of the terror that Hall experiences himself, living in an anti-Black world. Reflecting, in fact, Baldwin’s understanding that homophobia and anti-Blackness are interrelated, Hall’s is a failure to transpose his Black experience of the lies of whiteness such that he could pierce through the lies that hold him back from communion with his brother. Reflecting on the aesthetic incoherence of the white neighborhoods that he drives through, Hall reflects: “These penny-pinched lawns, the angular streets. . . it was never intended that *we* should live here.”⁹⁵⁵ The inhabitants of these white neighborhoods appear respectable and congenial and “do not seem to remember” the violence upon which their life depends. They live within the lies of whiteness, unaware that at any moment, their innocent, respectable selves would be at the mercy of “their next convulsion.”⁹⁵⁶ Whiteness creates an innocence that can, at any moment, without apparent warning, snap into a violence that is subsequently forgotten. “The streets,” Hall recounts, “frighten me. . . because nothing I am seeing is true.”⁹⁵⁷ Fear, in this sense, can *both* be stifling and revelatory. The disjuncture and incoherence keep the terrified in place through a sense of unease and detachment from reality. At the same time, terror can be a source of revelation—the sign that something is amiss. Discernment in the context of a deceptive and terrifying regime requires careful attention

⁹⁵⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁹⁵⁵ Ibid., 24.

⁹⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁵⁷ Ibid.

to the emotions one experiences as they encounter bodies, desire, and the geographies of empire. Hall can discern the lies that occlude the violence of which he is aware as a straight Black man; however, he fails to extend this same sort of discernment toward his brother by failing to receive Arthur's reality with love and honesty.

The character Julia serves in some respects as a contrast to Hall. In her youth, she is also embroiled in lies, though not of her own making, rather those laid upon and against her by an abusive father. Renowned as a young preacher of unparalleled charisma, the ego of the nine-year-old is stroked by her parents, Joel and Amy, who enjoy the reputation she establishes for them in the local churches—touring alongside Arthur and friends, who are a few years older. Julia embodies and embraces the accolades, taking on a holier-than-thou personality. This creates a complex relationship and rivalry with her younger brother, Jimmy, who possesses a clarity of vision that cuts through the pomp and circumstance. Their parents dismiss Jimmy's cynicism as him being “jealous of the Lord's anointed.”⁹⁵⁸ As the story progresses, however, it is revealed that Julia's preaching career is not only abusive in and of itself. It has been a drama of deflection that allows Joel to cover up the sexual abuse of his wife, Amy. Julia, citing the Lord's instruction, prophesies that her mother should trust in the Lord rather than seek medical assistance for some ailment that turns out to be an injury from Joel's sexual violence. Amy dies. Julia then begins to question her anointing and the church in light of the failure of her prophetic vision. It is then that Joel begins raping Julia regularly, which continues for several years.

The first time Julia is assaulted by her father, Baldwin highlights the resulting trauma and emotional confusion. Because of Julia's love for her father, she is left with lingering guilt that she had “brought about this moment”⁹⁵⁹ and the belief that there is some sort of deferred and

⁹⁵⁸ Ibid., 76.

⁹⁵⁹ Ibid., 172.

misguided reciprocation of love in her father's actions. This abuse manifests Delores Williams's notion of demonarchy, where victims are subjugated through the nefarious confusion of love and its opposite—demonizing their flesh and desires as shameful, lascivious, and culpable. By the end of the violent scene, Hall's narrating voice has faded to the background, and we encounter a voice more akin to Baldwin himself, describing the way the rape hides Julia's "life," locking it "into a place it would take her many years to find. . . deeper, almost, than the love which is salvation."⁹⁶⁰

On her deathbed, Julia's mother, Amy, begins to recognize that she had wrongly demonized Jimmy. Amy concludes that Julia was, in fact, jealous of *him*, ostensibly in his fidelity to the truth and relative freedom from the family lies.⁹⁶¹ He was the only family member with some clarity about the actual workings of evil behind the scenes. Jimmy did not know consciously about the abuse, but he knew that Julia's charade was a lie. "Don't forget you got a brother," Amy compels Julia: "That's how you'll get the Lord's forgiveness."⁹⁶² The church and her father have coordinated to keep Julia from the truth and from her brother, but the path back to her brother is the path back to the truth, family, and to God. Jimmy, in this context, is the demonized victim who had some awareness that the actual presence of evil had been ignored and projected and represents alterity which Julia needs to embrace to achieve the love of salvation.

During Julia's final sermon as a child evangelist, she "felt something entering into her and something departing, forever."⁹⁶³ The prose insinuates that although Julia and the church declare her a conduit of the Holy Ghost, some other power has been working through and upon her. In leaving the pulpit and choosing to (eventually) prioritize her relationship with Jimmy, she

⁹⁶⁰ Ibid., 172.

⁹⁶¹ Ibid., 166.

⁹⁶² Ibid., 167.

⁹⁶³ Ibid., 160.

begins to tap into a different sort of power. In some sense, she becomes a witness to the Spirit for the first time. Unlike Hall, Julia eventually develops a more coherent, loving, and honest relationship with her brother Jimmy. Jimmy himself appears to find some wholeness through this renewed relationship, which helps make it possible for him to be a loving and committed partner to Arthur.

E.L. Kornegay, discussing Baldwin's critique of Black ecclesial cooption by Puritanical white theology, makes the case that Baldwin believed that Black people, through a "black religious vernacular" have borne witness to another sort of theology, mixed up (sometimes imperceptibly) with the Puritanical arm of empire in the church.⁹⁶⁴ The Black religious vernacular, another name for "the blues," is a theological deposit that exists primarily in and through Black music and, in limited degrees, in the church. Baldwin saw it as his vocation to carry on this vernacular through his writing—to get behind and underneath the songs, practices, and wisdom of Black people as it exists alongside and behind the Black church.⁹⁶⁵ It is for this reason that, especially in *Just Above My Head*, Baldwin's characters find a religious and spiritual meaning *beyond* the church. Julia continues to take upon herself the mantle of a preacher, even as an adult.⁹⁶⁶ Arthur never loses the sense that his music, even as a "secular" singer, is a form of church.⁹⁶⁷ These characters discern the love of God existing beyond and outside the confines of the ecclesial community.

For literary critic Lynn Orilla Scott, *Just Above My Head* is particularly remarkable for the way it weaves music seamlessly throughout the narrative, often in ways that shock or

⁹⁶⁴ Ibid., 45.

⁹⁶⁵ Kornegay, 41ff.

⁹⁶⁶ *JAMH*, 280.

⁹⁶⁷ Lynn Orilla Scott, *Witness to the Journey: James Baldwin's Later Fiction* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2002), 126

surprise.⁹⁶⁸ Gospel songs, for example, become the soundtrack for Arthur and Crunch as they become lovers. They are tempted to shout “*hallelujah*” as they climax. Arthur feels that he has “never been so high and lifted up.” As they perform in a church later that day, they are individually filled with joy and reminiscence of their encounter while the church sings, “somebody touched me . . . it must have been the hand of the Lord!”⁹⁶⁹ Lynn Orilla Scott calls this a “protean” move,⁹⁷⁰ in that Baldwin gives the Gospel songs new meanings and applies them removed from their initial context. However, in light of Kornegay’s analysis, it is more accurate that Baldwin sees these moments as a revelation of the “religious vernacular” that speaks more than is always apparent. This vernacular, Baldwin particularly stresses, presents a tradition of joy and sensuality, opposed to the Puritanism of white Christianity.⁹⁷¹ In other words, Black music is a deposit of spiritual wisdom that does not deny the flesh. Salvation emerges to the degree that characters carefully embrace this tradition, as it portends God's loving and liberating salvation.

The title of *Just Above My Head* comes from a gospel song known best in its iteration, “Up Above My Head.” In many versions, the lyrics reflect a hope that there is “music in the air,” an echo of the music of heaven. This hope provides confidence enough to “believe there is a heaven somewhere.” In another version, recorded in 1958 by Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Marie Knight, and the Sam Price Trio, the confidence that there is “music in the air” is matched by a different sense in the second verse, that there is “trouble in the air.” The two refrains then become a duet, with one singer observing “music” and the other, “trouble.” This different version of the song reflects the spiritual ambiguity amidst perceived movements that could be Divine or demonic. A similar ambiguity is the aesthetic framing for Baldwin’s novel, with

⁹⁶⁸ Ibid., 122-123.

⁹⁶⁹ *JAMH*, 190-192, 201.

⁹⁷⁰ Scott, 144.

⁹⁷¹ Kornegay, 46, 50.

characters struggling—some succeeding, others failing—to discern heavenly music which effectuates communion. Julia, Jimmy, and Arthur each follow the sacred music and find some degree (albeit stilted, in at least Arthur’s case) some level of communion by confronting the lies of their church and family and embracing their own and others’ alterity.

Arthur hears and reproduces the sounds of heaven by following the tradition carried down in Black music of turning suffering into art. When a Black person “quotes the Gospel” (namely, through music), “he is not quoting: he is telling you what happened to him today.” Baldwin’s narrating voice continues, “our suffering is our bridge to one another.”⁹⁷² The Black musical tradition transforms experiences of suffering into the possibility of communion. It is the tradition of the demonized discerning and declaring their salvation amidst the ruins of the demonic anti-Black empire.

Discernment in *Just Above My Head* is not a straightforward practice. It is incomplete. It is, undoubtedly, fraught amidst social and cultural dynamics that breed various relationships and affects that alienate characters from their true selves and from one another. Yet, the characters that most effectively discern the spirits and follow the possibility of decolonial love are the ones that listen carefully to the wisdom of the demonized community and who dare to practice honesty and communion and pursue spaces where these are borne out, creating pockets of decolonial salvation, which represents an invisible church, amidst the terrors employed by an evil empire.

Go Tell It on the Mountain

Go Tell It on the Mountain remains one of Baldwin’s most revered literary works. The novel describes the fourteenth birthday of John Grimes, a Black teenager growing up in Harlem

⁹⁷² *JAMH*, 110.

in the 1930s. John, like Baldwin himself, is raised by his mother and stepfather, the latter a preacher in the Black Pentecostal tradition. John, also like Baldwin, feels some sense of calling toward the pulpit, but this is matched with a powerful attraction toward “the world” of books and movies. The majority of the novel occurs during a prayer service at the church on that evening. Between riveting scenes depicting the pulsing sensuality and excessive aesthetics of Black Pentecostal worship, extended flashbacks intersperse songs and prayers as several of the main characters recount their lineage, their faith, and their struggle to navigate between good and evil in the demonarchy.

John has a difficult relationship with his stepfather (who he simply thinks of as his father), Gabriel Grimes. Gabriel seems to despise John. He vilifies John, calling him “ugly” and saying he has “the face of Satan.”⁹⁷³ This is somewhat different from Gabriel’s treatment of his biological son, Roy. On the one hand, Gabriel is hard on Roy, but only because he resents that his flesh and blood, which he hopes to be the heir to his ministry, has seemingly no interest in faith. After Roy comes home with a knife wound, Gabriel oscillates between rage at Roy cavorting with violent sinners and desperate jealous favoritism, not allowing “anyone else touch his wounded son.”⁹⁷⁴

In part because of the demonizing rhetoric of Gabriel, John is haunted by a terror that there may be something about him that is evil. He awakes on his fourteenth birthday “with the feeling that there was menace in the air around him.”⁹⁷⁵ This awareness raises for him the lurking shame of remembering “that he had sinned.”⁹⁷⁶ As he describes it, his sin is masturbating to the thought of boys, which he had been watching urinate in the school bathroom. While watching the

⁹⁷³ James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), 23. (Henceforth, *Mountain*).

⁹⁷⁴ *Mountain*, 42.

⁹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

boys, drawing attention to their penises, “he had watched in himself a transformation of which he would never dare to speak.”⁹⁷⁷ He finds it impossible to tell the truth about this desire.

John is not sure if he wants to follow in his father’s footsteps, even though much of the church somewhat expect it of him (much more so than of Roy). He recounts, to himself, that all at once, he hates, loves, and fears the church building in which they worship. There is something about it that draws him, but also that elicits his terror and derision.⁹⁷⁸ Because of this feeling of torn allegiances and the demonization of his father, he looks in the mirror and perceives something “lustful and lewd” in his eyes. His mouth betrays a desire “to drink deep the wines of Hell.”⁹⁷⁹

Although John feels a tug away from the church, his relative youth and an inherent tenderheartedness keep him from open defiance. Roy, on the other hand, openly questions Gabriel. Not unlike Jimmy in *Just Above My Head*, Roy exhibits a spirit that better discerns the family’s lies. Earlier in the morning, after Roy expresses the tragic wish that his father would not beat him so much, Elizabeth, their mother, defends Gabriel: “Your daddy beats you. . . because he loves you.” Roy retorts, laughing: “That ain’t the kind of love I understand.” Elizabeth defends Gabriel by saying that his harshness protects Roy from “hell.”⁹⁸⁰ Like John, Roy is struggling with how a dualistic cosmology and a particular theology make it challenging to discern between love and hate. “I know the Lord ain’t as hard as Daddy,” Roy reflects.⁹⁸¹

John also has a complex tangle of emotions concerning his relationship to the church, particularly his relationship with Elisha, a revered older boy who teaches Sunday school. While

⁹⁷⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁹⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁷⁹ Ibid., 23.

⁹⁸⁰ Ibid., 19.

⁹⁸¹ Ibid., 21.

the reality is shrouded in the subtleties of Baldwin's language, reflecting the confusion of John himself, it is clear for the reader that John is physically attracted to Elisha. Although Elisha's sexuality is more of a mystery, his relationship with John may be more than a brotherly mentorship. Elisha seemingly hides his own sexuality behind his piety. The girls at Elisha's school are beautiful, Elisha admits, but Elisha is proud that he is so sanctified that they "don't tempt" him. Elisha, instead, hopes "to go all the way with *Him*."⁹⁸²

John relishes in moments of roughhousing while they are cleaning the church. As Elisha, wrestling, has him in a "deadlock," John observes the "manifestations of his power" and is "filled with a wild delight."⁹⁸³ This desire, however, is mixed with something else—something that is "almost hatred."⁹⁸⁴ This playful encounter, mixed with eroticism, becomes a symbol for John's struggle to reckon with his self-hatred, particularly as it comes to his sexuality. He both desires Elisha and despises what it represents and reveals about himself. John and Elisha wrestling, not unlike Jacob and the angel in the Genesis narrative,⁹⁸⁵ represents John's quest for a new name and identity, released from the hatred that separates him from his own flesh. In this respect, John's sexual desire is his Esau, with which he longs both for separation (from shame) and reconciliation (in love). As Josiah Ulysses Young III summarizes Baldwin's theology, "one loves therapeutically and harmlessly only if one tries daily to unravel the mystery, the *wilderness*, in one's self."⁹⁸⁶ John, mired in the Puritanical colonial arm of his religious community, struggles to practice this discerning unraveling—but the reader will see him begin the path which will take him there.

⁹⁸² Ibid., 58.

⁹⁸³ Ibid., 55.

⁹⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁸⁵ Genesis 32:22-32.

⁹⁸⁶ Young III, 23.

Later in the day, John begins to take stock of his feelings about his father. He begins to emerge from the self-loathing emotions that plague him. While Roy is bleeding on the couch from his wound, John recognizes the disproportionate attention that Roy receives. It occasions a feeling of hatred toward his father.⁹⁸⁷ Of course, for Baldwin, hate is ultimately a negative force. But, in this particular moment, it becomes a temporary but valuable emotion as John begins to separate from the narratives and demonizing cosmologies of his father. This speaks to the trouble with discernment that is reduced to pure emotive categories—in the liminalities of embodied life, hate can paradoxically be a gateway to love. While not fully conscious, John can keep a discerning “watch” over his emotions to see if a seemingly sinful feeling leads him to a point of “consolation” and liberation. John thereby begins to wonder that it may not be *he* who is evil. He witnesses, after Gabriel assaults Elizabeth in front of the family, something in his father “so wild and depthlessly malevolent” that John feels as if he has encountered “some evil beast.”⁹⁸⁸

The second and third parts of the book, which are the majority of the text, represent one of the most impressive literary expressions of charismatic spiritual experience—telling of the gestures and movement of bodies around the church sanctuary, the visions, the ebb and flow of the music, and the sounds of speaking in tongues. Interspersed between scenes of prayers are extended flashbacks, revealing the backstory of each character in turn: Florence (John’s aunt, Gabriel’s sister), Elizabeth (John’s mother), and Gabriel. Here we learn of Florence’s discerning awareness of her brother’s hypocrisy, which had led her to leave the church and her family. We also learn of Gabriel’s deceased son, Royal (who Roy, it seems, is named after), born through an affair with a woman named Esther while married to his first wife, Deborah. Gabriel refuses to acknowledge either Esther or Royal, and both meet tragic ends that plague Gabriel with guilt.

⁹⁸⁷ *Mountain*, 42-43.

⁹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

In the final part of the book, we meet John amidst a profound spiritual struggle as the prayer service continues into the early morning hours. Reckoning with his growing sense of hatred for and separation from his father and questioning his place between the church and the world, John is awash “with doubt and searching.” Wrestling with his sense of guilt and sinfulness, he searches “for a power that would bind him, forever and forever, and beyond all crying to the love of God.”⁹⁸⁹ Amid this struggling, however, John is struck by “a terror he had never felt before.”⁹⁹⁰ John begins to experience subconscious imagery that turns into a vision of “something huge, black, shapeless” at the bottom of his mind and welling up to the surface.⁹⁹¹ At this same time, the whole church begins to feel “something in the middle of the air.”⁹⁹²

Knowing much now about each character's backstory, the reader struggles to understand what to think of these spiritual happenings—complex and ambiguous visions, spontaneous movements of the body, a sense of something in the air. Is this God coming to set Gabriel straight? Is this the devil coming to affirm John's worst fears: his perdition? The reader is thrown into an ambiguous moment, where the movements of spirits are difficult to discern. Elisha begins to speak in tongues, and Gabriel thinks he sees the devil's face in John's eyes again.⁹⁹³ It is not much later that John falls down in the power of “the Lord.”⁹⁹⁴

John feels, at the outset, that he is “possessed.” Something distinct from him begins to “move” in his body.⁹⁹⁵ He hears a voice, “a malicious, ironic voice,” telling him to leave the church “and go out into the world.”⁹⁹⁶ When John hesitates, he is drawn down into a sense of

⁹⁸⁹ Ibid., 88.

⁹⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹⁹² Ibid., 102.

⁹⁹³ Ibid., 175.

⁹⁹⁴ Ibid., 224.

⁹⁹⁵ Ibid., 227.

⁹⁹⁶ Ibid., 228.

“chaos” and “a sheer void,” and unbounded darkness.⁹⁹⁷ John begins to feel the terror that he is being pulled down “into a dungeon deeper than Hell.”⁹⁹⁸ However, the voice gives John a chance to flee: “Get up, John. Get up, boy. Don’t let him keep you here. You got everything your daddy got.”⁹⁹⁹

John then remembers a sin even graver than his homoerotic masturbation: “Sometimes, he scrubbed his father’s back; and looked, as the accursed son of Noah had looked, on his father’s hideous nakedness. . . . Then he hated his father, and longed for the power to cut his father down.”¹⁰⁰⁰ Clearly, this parallels the scene in Genesis 9:20-27, where Noah’s son, Ham, looks upon Noah’s nakedness. This narrative was the basis for the notion of the Curse of Ham, used in European and ultimately American justifications for the enslavement of African persons, asserted to be descendants of Ham, in some cases believing that dark skin was the result of the curse.¹⁰⁰¹

The voice comes again and asks John if he believes himself to be cursed? Does he live under the curse of Ham? The “ironic voice” compels him to remember that all Black flesh “had been cursed.” John asks himself: “Could a curse come down so many ages? Did it live in time, or in the moment?” Seconds later, John concludes “that a curse was renewed from moment to moment, from father to son.”¹⁰⁰² John believes himself to be responsible for continuing the curse in and through him.

Inexplicably, however, John then begins to think about this memory differently. In the vision, Gabriel appears and refers to John as “the Devil’s son.” But instead of receiving this

⁹⁹⁷ Ibid., 228-227.

⁹⁹⁸ Ibid., 229.

⁹⁹⁹ Ibid., 231.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Ibid., 232.

¹⁰⁰¹ See David M. Goldenberg, *Black and Slave: The Origins and History of the Curse of Ham* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017).

¹⁰⁰² *Mountain*, 232-233.

claim as accurate, John has a new insubordinate retort: “I ain’t the Devil’s son for nothing.”¹⁰⁰³

John then speaks back to his father, declaring that “I *heard* you—all the nighttime long. I know what you do in the dark, black man, when you think the Devil’s son’s asleep. . . . I ain’t the Devil’s son for nothing.” John is either here revealing his knowledge of Gabriel’s history of infidelity and abandonment or demonstrating an awareness of continued unfaithfulness. He certainly recognizes the hypocrisies of his father and his “ministry.” John then pronounces his hatred: “And I hate you. I hate you. I don’t care about your golden crown. I don’t care about your long white robe. I seen you under the robe, I seen you!” John has seen his father naked and, perhaps, this is not a sin. It has revealed to him who the devilish person in this situation really is: his father.

John surmises, nonetheless, that this is his end. He has defied his father, accepted his position as the “Devil’s son” and shall receive his due judgment: “The darkness was full of demons crouching, waiting to worry him with their teeth again.”¹⁰⁰⁴ John is then brought to, and beneath, a graveyard. He is alone, and then suddenly he is surrounded by a multitude: “They were the despised and rejected, the wretched and the spat upon. . . and he was in their company.”¹⁰⁰⁵ A new voice is heard: “Go through.”¹⁰⁰⁶

Soon after, John hears the voices of the congregation telling him to call for the Lord. As he listens to the singing above, John can pray to God for mercy. And then, “John saw the Lord.”¹⁰⁰⁷ We are told nothing about what, precisely, he sees. But it is then that “a sweetness filled John. . . . For his drifting soul was anchored in the love of God; in the rock that endured

¹⁰⁰³ *Mountain*, 234.

¹⁰⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 235.

¹⁰⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹⁰⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹⁰⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 240.

forever.”¹⁰⁰⁸ John’s desolation has softened into consolation. John slowly emerges from his vision, with continued scenes of valleys, a river, a feast, and the congregation singing. He arises back in the church. It is morning. He knows he is saved.

What to make of these strange sights and the somewhat confounding conclusion to John’s night of prayer? The reader may have hoped that John would abandon the church and the faith that taught him to despise his flesh and desires. In confronting his father, in the vision, is John not empowered to abandon the vindictive and hypocritical religion of his father and run off into the embrace of the world that received Gabriel’s ire but welcomed John? Why is John’s apparent embrace of this faith portrayed in a positive light? The moral arc of the plot seems to lose itself.

Something decisively positive, a consolation, *has* happened in John. In the final scenes, as they depart the church, John is, for one, able to look his father in the eye,¹⁰⁰⁹ suggesting some level of liberation from the recoil he typically experienced from his father’s terrifying gaze. John also finds himself “filled with a joy, a joy unspeakable.” As Ulysses Josiah Young III argues, Baldwin identifies “joy” with an authentic experience of God.¹⁰¹⁰ These positive assessments seem to reflect Baldwin’s belief that despite its many compromises, the church contained a power to connect people with a mysterious, loving, Divine reality.¹⁰¹¹ Although this power is mired in the mechanisms of the Puritanical empire, John discovers an authentic consolation.

There is foreshadowing in these final pages. Not everything is quite as it seems. We are told that John would not truly understand the joy he experienced “on this new day of his life.” This joy is also, mysteriously, “nourished by the wellspring of a despair not yet discovered.”¹⁰¹²

¹⁰⁰⁸ Ibid., 241.

¹⁰⁰⁹ Ibid., 244-245.

¹⁰¹⁰ Young III, 101.

¹⁰¹¹ Ibid., 20-23.

¹⁰¹² *Mountain*, 257.

Along with this hunch, there is an ominous warning from Elisha, who guides John in his newfound salvation: The devil “ ‘got as many faces,’ Elisha said, ‘as you going to see between now and the time you lay your burden down. . . . ain’t nobody seen them all.’”¹⁰¹³ Finally, in the very final moments, John seems to give a prophecy that he does not himself fully understand. To Elisha, he exclaims, “no matter what happens to me, where I go, what folks say about me, no matter what *anybody* says, you remember—please remember—I was saved.”¹⁰¹⁴

Echoing Elisha’s warning that the devil has many faces, we should read John’s conversion as an ambiguous event that speaks to the incompleteness of discerning good from evil. John has learned, through this journey, that he is not the devil. Instead, it is the hatred and shame of his father that is, in fact, demonic. John’s guilt and shame are replaced with an overwhelming sense of love and joy, drawing from a different theological well than that of his father. However, the devil has many faces. As John continues throughout his life to untangle his identity, his faith, his sexuality, and his relationship to his father, he will likely discover that some things which appeared to be of God in his vision were actually of the devil and vice versa. It is perhaps the voice of God, not the devil, that told John that (like Baldwin) he would need to leave the church, go out into the world, to find salvation. Following the guidance of both Evagrian and Ignatian discernment, John is then left to attend to his own thoughts and discern which produce consolation and which desolation, as he untangles the actual provenance of each part of his vision.

Steeped as Christianity has been in a demonizing white-Black aesthetic, one might be tempted to misread the key imagery to John Grimes’s vision. As takes place in much of Christian

¹⁰¹³ Ibid., 259.

¹⁰¹⁴ Ibid., 262.

spiritual tradition, John and his religious community associate the demonic with darkness.¹⁰¹⁵

This association between darkness and the demonic coincides with John's lurking suspicion that all Black persons are cursed. As John descends into "darkness," far away from the church, his father, and any hope of salvation, he finds himself among "the despised and rejected. . . the earth's offscouring," conflating darkness and dispossession.¹⁰¹⁶

Then, however, a new voice comes to him *from* the darkness, telling John that he must "go through."¹⁰¹⁷ The text later narrates that, as John begins to enter the company of the saints, "the light and the darkness had kissed each other, and were married now, forever, in the life and the vision of John's soul."¹⁰¹⁸ The suggestion, here, is that the conflation of darkness, the wretched of the earth, and evil is not all that it seems. It is the darkness that calls John into the company of the saints. Darkness and light begin to collapse as categories. While not entirely conscious, John questions the association between Blackness and the demonic and encounters God in the union of darkness and light. It is the fact that he has begun to see beyond his father's demonizing categories, embracing a consolation that allows him to love his flesh in spite, that enables him to question the demonizations of anti-Black empire.

John's reconfiguration of the curse of Ham, where he recognizes that his father is the one who has engaged in evil, and not he, should be read as symbolic for Black people as a whole—they know the truth about where the devil lies at night. Echoing an insight of W.E.B DuBois, Baldwin would elsewhere make the declaration that Black Americans know much more about white America than white Americans know about themselves: "The American Negro has the great advantage of having never believed that collection of myths to which white people cling:

¹⁰¹⁵ For example, *Mountain*, 235.

¹⁰¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 237.

¹⁰¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 238.

¹⁰¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 241.

that their ancestors were all freedom-loving heroes.” Black persons in America “know far more about white Americans than that.”¹⁰¹⁹ They have seen white America’s nakedness.

In Baldwin’s critique of *The Exorcist*, he observes that the possessed girl in the film awakens from the exorcism remembering nothing about her possession. But the true oppressed of the world “have forgotten nothing” of the evil they have known.¹⁰²⁰ Baldwin powerfully illustrates what his own knowledge reveals: “I have seen the devil, by day and by night, and have seen him in you and in me: in the eyes of the cop and the sheriff and the deputy, the landlord, the housewife, the football player: in the eyes of some junkies, the eyes of some preachers. . . . in the eyes of my father, and in my mirror. . . . This devil has no need of any dogma. . . . He does not levitate beds or fool around with little girls: we do.”¹⁰²¹ The lies we humans tell about the devil nefariously cover up the demonic aspects of ourselves. The demonized, in particular, know this.

The colonial schemes that work in and through the imagination distract and project the true substantiations of evil, causing the demonized to question their own flesh. But the demonized of the earth, the so-called sons of the Devil, know where the Devil lies at night. This becomes a power that makes it possible to untangle and escape alienation and embrace love by piercing through the lies that would make love impossible.

Conclusion

Go Tell It on the Mountain and *Just Above My Head*, then, seem to capture the discernment of spirits as an ongoing and incomplete practice. Under the auspices of empire, love can masquerade as hate, and hate can masquerade as love. Terror can accompany authentic love. Good appears evil, and evil seems good. Some characters in Baldwin’s novels begin to accept

¹⁰¹⁹ Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 101.

¹⁰²⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰²¹ Ibid., 126.

the possibility of safety and love for their own flesh by opting to confront the truth about themselves, their family, and their history. They begin to untangle these complex relationships and discern the spirits. For Baldwin, the literature, music, spirituality, worship, and art of the demonized carry a secret witness to this possibility of discernment. This song continues, revealing pathways back to the love of one's flesh and love of all flesh, in and through an undeniable power of Love.

Conclusion: Facing Our Demons

I believe Paul Tillich was correct when he ascertained that the 20th century was a palpably demonic era. Unfortunately, Tillich was only primarily cognizant of his experiences of European wars, and the therapeutic quest of existential philosophy. Tillich, like most of his theological contemporaries, failed to discern the apocalyptic landscapes of colonialism and racism stretching out from Europe and North America—a topography defined by the confounding, deceptive, and vile contours of an anti-Black demonology. Indeed, other theological trajectories are necessary to think about, untangle, and respond prophetically to the demonic situation in which we live.

James Baldwin, I believe, reflects some of the most promising possibilities for the future of demonology in the 21st century. For Baldwin, and the Black traditions he draws upon, demonology relates to the discernment of the demonic, demonizing, projects of anti-Black empire as the demonized peoples of history discern salvation and liberation. Womanist theology similarly evokes these same themes, insisting on a praxis of self-love as discernment and exorcism against monstrous systems of demonization.

Decoloniality as discernment is the work that demonized peoples, living at the peripheries of the world that coloniality seeks to create, have performed in order to discern the divine love, dignity, and liberation amidst anti-Black coloniality. The demonized have a privileged, discerning, wisdom as they parse the intersections between demonic powers and demonological languages, imaginations, and practices. It is to the demonized peoples that theology must turn in order to think about demonology today.

Discernment at the periphery is, most of all, the quest of learning and telling the truth—about oneself, about others, about God, about the realities of evil. To tell the truth is, as Karl Barth reminds us, to dispel the mythmakers that Christian theology calls the demons. The world that anti-

Black coloniality has made with theology's help is a cauldron of deadly lies. To learn how to tell the truth is to dispel these demonic powers, and extend Christ's Reign against all the powers and principalities that seek to destroy the beloved peoples that God has made.

There are likely other options and possibilities for demonology. Discernment, like decoloniality itself, is a distance from any static theological construction. At the very least, however, demonology cannot be set aside. As James Baldwin, with his perennial and convicting prescience, warns—lies can only go so far in deferring the consequences of the worlds we make: “One cannot escape anything one has done. One has got to pay for it. You either pay for it willingly or pay for it unwillingly.”¹⁰²² The colonial center and its theologies can either confront its demons or be overwhelmed by them.

¹⁰²² James Baldwin *The Last Conversation and Other Conversations* (Brooklyn: Melville House, 2014), 17.

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