CONVERSION IN A WORLD OF VIOLENCE: JAMES ALISON, THOMAS MERTON, AND THE STORIES THAT CHANGE US

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Abstract: While violence manifests in many forms, two instantiations of violence are particularly prominent in the U.S. and growing: racial resentment and polarization, both political and ecclesial. Violence emerges from the false and malforming narratives that contribute to our identities and worldviews. Insofar as these narratives contribute to the ongoing malformation of our identities and worldviews, they contribute to a bias in need of conversion; that is, violence as the result of false narratives is in need of a conversion understood as a revision of those formative narratives. In my dissertation, I draw on the work of James Alison and Thomas Merton to offer a spirituality and ecclesiology of humble discovery and prophetic accompaniment that facilitate an openness to a holistic conversion at the personal, communal, and political levels that can counter this violent bias in the transformation of our formative narratives.

In chapter one, I evaluate the role narratives play in human identity and worldview formation as well as the possibility for violence to emerge from false and malforming narratives. I focus especially on racial resentment and polarization in the political and ecclesial spheres as instantiations of violence that are uniquely pervasive and growing in the United States. I posit that these false narratives are a bias in need of conversion, and I consider conversion as a transformation of those formative narratives. Chapter two takes up the work of James Alison who, relying on the mimetic theory advanced by René Girard, offers a communal anthropology that reveals original sin to be our participation in a system

of mimetic rivalry, scapegoating and exclusionary violence, and death. The experience of the resurrection reveals both our participation in this system and that God has nothing to do with this violence and death. Alison directs us to ecclesial participation in the liturgy, wherein we experience the risen Jesus, as a communal process of conversion in which we relax into being recreated into who God intends for us to be and whose desires are realigned toward God's. In chapter three, I turn to the complementary, though distinct, work of Thomas Merton. Merton offers a process of personal conversion rooted in a practice of contemplative spirituality. This process initiates in response to the realization of our participation in "mass society," which uncritically accepts technological progress to the point of rendering us "moral infants" and atomized cogs in the machine of that same progress. This spirituality practice wrests our egos from this false logic and reveals our interconnectedness to and responsibility for our neighbor. In chapter four, I synthesize the thought of Alison and Merton and offer a framework for an ecclesiology and a spirituality of humble discovery and prophetic accompaniment that work to open us to God's grace and the resulting conversion. I apply this framework to rural, working-class, and White communities—focusing especially on my own hometown—offering a reflection on how the application of these might facilitate a conversion within these communities and counter the racial resentment and polarization that uniquely impacts these communities.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A project of this type is not all that distinct from raising children: a person *can* do it alone, but it is significantly easier with a village. And I had such a village—for both the dissertation and my children! To begin to acknowledge members of that village is particularly difficult for me because, much like invite lists for gatherings at the Cantab Lounge, I would prefer to include everyone. While I cannot do that here, I would like to offer my gratitude to at least some who have supported me and my family through this process.

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happy that we ended up here together, despite the odds, and I look forward to many, many years to come as friends and colleagues in the guild—and late nights at hotel bars during conferences!

I have been fortunate to work on this project under the guidance of an amazing committee. Brian Robinette has been more than an academic mentor, but a mentor for life. His calming presence is just as wonderful as his Indiana-grown character. I think we Hoosiers tend to gravitate toward one another, and I am lucky Brian and I did. He has accompanied me through the more challenging times and has been there in the good times. And while he has his own work to do, he is always willing to open his door for an hours-long conversation about anything—again, a genuinely good human being. Andrew Prevot has an unmatched intellect. As my first program advisor, he welcomed me into the program and helped me navigate coursework effectively. While I never had the pleasure of taking a course with him, I have nevertheless learned a great deal from him as a member of my comprehensive exam committee and organizer of the Systematics Area Colloquium. And, finally, I am so grateful for Neto Valiente. When I first visited the STM for Accepted Students Days, I sat in on a faculty panel in which faculty members discussed their own work and insights into the school. Neto was on the panel and, when I heard his reflections, I thought to myself, "I want to work with *him*." And I was able to do just that at the STM and beyond. I am tremendously lucky and thankful to be able to count him among my mentors, and I am even more lucky and more thankful to be able to count him among my friends.

Turning slightly more personal, I think that one of the primary reasons that theology was so easy for me to stick with was because of the best high school friends. The ten of us together constitute "The Boys." All of them take very seriously their relationships with God, even if we differ in some of the particulars. Through my friendship with them over the years,

I have learned ecumenism. But they have also afforded me the welcome break from the seriousness of doctoral work by sending a daily barrage of juvenile jokes on our group text.

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Nearly 20 years ago, I met the love of my life. We married just over 14 years ago. And I will be the first to admit that I have dragged her into some stuff. We lived in Indianapolis, she worked as a nurse in a local hospital, I practiced law, we had a dog and owned a home in a trendy neighborhood. All of a sudden, I asked if I can go to grad school for theology. Before she knew it, we had sold our home, loaded up the truck, and were driving across the country to a much-too-expensive apartment in Boston. And since day one here, she has been nothing but the strongest supporter, the loudest cheerleader, the most patient listener, and the hardest-working mom. I hope you know just how much I love you, Lindsey.

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DEDICATION

*For **Ruth Laurel** and **Miriam Frances**.*
May your joy outweigh your pain in this messy thing we call Church as you seek out this being we call God.

*In loving memory of **Laurel Lee Whitaker**, whose witness to faith inspired my own,*
*and **Fr. Francis Edward Bryan**, who told me not to be weird about it.*

INTRODUCTION

HOW I LONG FOR MY INDIANA HOME

"In any case, the unignorable fact—troubling or comforting, depending on one's point of view—is that bigotry, an ugly vice, can coexist with virtue."
-Mark Phillips, "Elegy for My People"

My Indiana Home—My Theological Locus

Despite Florida being my birthplace, I have very proudly claimed throughout my life that I am a "Hoosier." My parents moved back to Indiana shortly after I was born, and I was raised mostly in a rural area in the west central part of the state. I am not sure the Wabash River compares to the Gulf of Mexico, but both have their merits.

Among the many reasons I have such state pride is the gratitude I have for the type of community in which I was raised. It was truly that: a community. Of course, during my childhood, this community—or, maybe more accurately, this constellation of communities—was not subject to the pressures or influence of social media, still had a local newspaper delivered daily, and the 2016 presidential election would not take place until 13 years after I departed. Bullet dodged.

I had grandparents close by, friends of all types among the kids in the small towns, and, for a time, I lived in the home next to the house in which my great grandparents had birthed my grandfather, who now lives just a half mile up the road on the same street. It was a town where everyone looked out for each other—even if there were occasionally some "Jerry Springer-esque" disagreements—where we knew the neighborhood dogs who roamed the streets, and the fenced in dogs we did not dare approach. It was in a part of the state where the name Karanovich was not unusual, pickup trucks abounded, and what would be

considered a "nice shirt" could have a Realtree camo pattern—though I never got into that trend. Bullet dodged.

I had the great fortune of knowing many of the people in my hometown, and I would talk to them. If I saw them in a different town, I would go out of my way to talk to them. Even now, if I see an Indiana University sweatshirt or some other Indiana connection prominently displayed on a person or their car, if possible, I will say hello and ask where they are from—much to the chagrin of my wife. It was a small town, and I loved being from a small town. I liked knowing people, waving to folks passing by in their cars, baling straw, raising a pig for 4-H, going to high school football or basketball games, and when I graduated, knowing everyone with whom I graduated.

I thought at some point I would return to that small town, bringing with me the lessons I learned elsewhere to benefit the community, but that has yet to happen. And now, with children, I have to take into consideration the type of environment in which I will raise them, including questions of diversity, culture, opportunity, and the like. Admittedly, I have changed quite a bit. But so, too, has the town.

With this in mind, in the fall of 2021, I decided to write a letter to Wendell Berry. I had first come to know his work through his nonfiction pieces on rural living, community, the environment, and technology. It was only through the strong recommendation of a friend that I picked up his most famous novel, *Jayber Crow*, after having known him outside of his fictionalized Port William, Kentucky town. In both the nonfiction and fiction spheres, however, he was making an important contribution to the way we think about community and difference—a contribution he has been making consistently for decades.

Berry is from rural Kentucky. He was a talented writer from a young age and eventually went on to study at the University of Kentucky and Stanford. After his education

and a couple of fellowships, he took up a teaching position at New York University. But city life was not for him. So he and his spouse moved to a farm in Henry County, Kentucky, where he was born and where he still lives.

Given his commitment to justice and his commitment to small town living—two realities that do not often live peacefully together, especially now—I wrote to ask him about how he holds these differing aspects of his life together. How, I asked, do you live out inclusion and advocate for justice when political polarization is so extreme and when small towns are often populated by supporters of politicians who fan those flames? He wrote to me:

> As a Christian, you would not like a situation that is snooty or doctrinally exclusive, but that may only require you not to be exclusive yourself. Around here we have all kinds (No extremes, so far as I know), but don't make too much of differences. Tanya and I don't use social media or slogans.[1]

In this short passage from his only slightly longer letter, Berry makes two significant points. First, he makes it clear that the work the advocate does is not on others—we are not out trying to get others to change in some explicit manner of proving them wrong. Instead, our obligation is about ourselves: we must ensure that we embody the characteristics that we want in our community or neighborhood. In other words, we can control only what we can control—start there.

Second, he implies that, in not using social media or slogans, he engages the deeper, longer, more nuanced and complex realities and not the soundbites, memes, or headlines that stir up hatred between those who differ. What makes opponents the same is more important than what makes them different. This sentiment was revealed further in a *New Yorker* article featuring Wendell Berry published just a few months after our correspondence:

[1] Wendell Berry to Zac Karanovich, November 12, 2021.

> War, he suggests, begins in a failure of acceptance. He writes of exchanging friendly talk with Trump voters at Port Royal's farm-supply store, a kind of tolerance that is necessary in a small town: "If two neighbors know that they may seriously disagree, but that either of them, given even a small change of circumstances, may desperately need the other, should they not keep between them a sort of pre-paid forgiveness? They ought to keep it ready to hand, like a fire extinguisher." Without this, we risk conflagration: "A society with an absurdly attenuated sense of sin starts talking then of civil war or holy war."[2]

Of course, this pre-paid forgiveness that he keeps ready to hand is a hard pill to swallow for those whose existence is threatened by the potential recipients who *do* rely on social media and slogans. But I think Berry makes a strong case in recognizing that the only way to truly combat the violence that erupts in the world is by transforming our existence in the world, especially our existence *with* those who are not yet ready to change.

The Trump campaign, presidency, and aftermath—if I may use that term—has indeed changed my small town. Driving down the road on a recent visit, many flags hung from porches proclaiming loyalty to Trump for the 2024 election or even declaring their hatred of President Biden using some fairly significant four-letter words. Politics is discussed now more frequently than I can ever remember, at least in the circles I was in, and I find myself engaging in those discussions as they verge on arguments too often. *Mea culpa*.[3] But, like Berry, it is not our obligation to play the game in the same way. We can intentionally be a distinct presence in our community, sowing different seeds, and presenting ourselves in a way that might be persuasive in our actions instead of our arguments.

Not only do I see this as an option for everyone, but I believe it to be a mandate for the Christian disciple—even if I fail more often than not. Yet, the Christian disciple is

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[2] Dorothy Wickenden, "Wendell Berry's Advice for a Cataclysmic Age," *The New Yorker* (February 21, 2022), https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/02/28/wendell-berrys-advice-for-a-cataclysmic-age.

[3] In a recently published article, Mark Phillips describes his own challenges in continuing to identify with a community to which he had for so long claimed deep ties proudly. I was surprised by how resonant his reflections were with my own experience. Mark Phillips, "Elegy for My People," *Commonweal* (April 2023): 28-31.

subject to the same pressures as those to which everyone else is subject. And the disciple can find themselves living a life governed by a political identity instead of their religious identity—even if they might claim their political identity to *be* their religious identity. Too often for too many of us, the political tail wags the religious dog. How do we change that? And that is part of the question here.

The Argument to Come

In seeking to address this question and others, I argue in this dissertation that to address the problem of violence in its many forms in the world without participating in further forms of violence requires that the Christian disciple undergo conversion. Essentially, conversion is a narrative shift; that is, the stories that form our identities and our worldviews prior to conversion are marred by falsehoods and deceit, whereas the stories that form us after conversion are more consistent with the love and truth of the gospels. While conversion is ultimately the work of God's grace, there is work that the disciple can do. To evaluate that work, we turn to James Alison and Thomas Merton who, in both their thought and in their lives, advanced and exemplified a communal and personal conversion cultivated in a rethinking of Church and prayer, respectively, that facilitate our openness to graced conversion. And both, through their respective frameworks, emphasize the political implications of this work—conversion is not just for ourselves, but a gift that bears fruit in the world, that counters the world's violence.

The argument will unfold in four chapters. In Chapter 1, I lay the groundwork for understanding the violence that exists in the world. This investigation results in an expansive understanding of violence as that human element which causes a discrepancy between what something could be and what something is that prevents human flourishing. To illustrate

this violence, I turn to two particular manifestations of violence that are particularly prevalent in U.S. society: racial resentment and polarization (political and ecclesial). I then explore these through a framework extended by Bernard Lonergan, who would argue that these are also the result of bias, the response to which is conversion. Helpfully, Lonergan expands our understanding of conversion beyond what might be typically understood by the term; that is, one without faith having an experience in which they claim faith or, alternatively, when one with faith has an experience in which they change faith traditions. Instead, Lonergan describes moral, intellectual, and religious conversions—conversions that change our ideas or thoughts about particular matters. For example, assume we believe it is right to rely on the trickle-down theory of economics to care for the poor as we become more wealthy. A moral conversion would result in our recognition that this belief is shortsighted, and we would change our business practices. Adding to Lonergan's framework, Robert Doran offers a fourth category of conversion: psychic conversion. In it, the emotive, symbolic aspects of our being are transformed such that our associations and the ideas we derive from our associations are transformed—more insights are able to be gained as our internal censor is familiar with more ideas symbolically and emotively. I argue that in our efforts toward moral and intellectual conversion in those who perpetuate racial resentment and polarization, we must be mindful of the ways culture continues to influence. So, in order to change these complex and violent problems, we must seek out and open ourselves to methods that can produce a fuller, more robust conversion—one on the personal and communal levels that can impact conversion at the political level.

In Chapter 2, I engage the first of two interlocutors: James Alison. Alison offers a communal theological anthropology which describes human beings as fundamentally imitative. In our imitation, we acquire our identities through others; that is, we inherit their

stories. Because of this imitation and its resulting desire, however, we are born into animosity. This is because of our tendency toward reciprocity: friendly and hostile. Both types of reciprocity result in the creation of in-groups and out-groups. Along these "enemy lines" as well as when real or perceived scarcity results in competition within the in-group, violence results. To quell internal violence, the in-group selects an innocent victim or a scapegoat upon which they impute guilt. Once killed, peace is restored, though only temporarily. This system of peacekeeping built upon exclusion, violence, and death has been absorbed into every facet of human existence, including the Church. The resurrection, however, reveals that system to all of us who have been participating in it. With that knowledge, we are charged to live differently in the world, crossing the lines between in- and out-groups and making room for those with whom we disagree to experience the same as we also embody innocent victimhood. The ways in which the Christian disciple experiences the encounter with the resurrected Lord that sparks that conversion is in the context of the Church community—in the Eucharist and in one another. Alison's, then, is a communal conversion—the first aspect of conversion.

In Chapter 3, I turn to Thomas Merton. Merton's theological anthropology differs from Alison's in that it is more individualized. Like nesting dolls, human beings are layered false selves covering a true self. The false self is constructed by the slogans and propaganda that abounds in society. And the false self estranges us from ourselves, others, and God, which results in an overflow of internal violence into actualized violence in the world. Merton sees prayer as the antidote, imploring the Christian disciple to turn inward in meditation to chisel away at the false selves and to work toward the true self—an identity hidden in God. Once we arrive at the true self, we find within an innermost point, *le point vierge*, that is God's presence in us. It unites us to God and one another in a way that,

although we can be or remain unaware of it, is unable to be removed. Like a magnet, it draws us toward one another and to God more strongly as we reach greater depths within ourselves as our true selves are revealed in us. Merton's antidote, then, is the cultivation of a contemplative spirituality. This is personal conversion—the second aspect of conversion. But Merton's contribution does not end with just personal conversion. In a more distinctive way than Alison, Merton offers a view of contemplative spirituality that, in and through its silence and solitude, cultivates an inner freedom that, in its response to grace, can then shift toward social critique. This is political conversion—the third aspect of conversion.

In Chapter 4, I begin with a comparison of Alison and Merton in which I focus not just on the ways they are the same, but on the ways that they are different and how those differences are complementary to one another. Of particular interest is that, in the same way prayer and Church are mutually-informing in a faith tradition, so Alison and Merton are mutually-informing and mutually-affirming in their discussion of conversion. Central among these mutual-affirmations is that both Alison's and Merton's framework offer implications for the political sphere. With the disciple engaged in a process of conversion personally and in community, fruit is bore that influences society and strives for its transformation. In this way, Alison and Merton offer, quite directly, the path toward political conversion—the third, and final, aspect of conversion. After this comparison, I introduce a community that is particularly susceptible (though not alone) to narratives that result in violence, and I will focus in particular on my hometown community. This case study will draw from research done in my own hometown parish and will address the ways in which this spirituality and ecclesiology might be implemented in communities that are often the seedbed for racial resentment and polarization: rural, working-class, White communities. As part of this case study, of sorts, I will delineate the characteristics of a spirituality and ecclesiology that draw

from Alison and Merton and can serve the desired end of the fulness of conversion. And this will be done with an eye toward addressing racial resentment and polarization.

An Apology for My Interlocutors

As I considered the many options for interlocutors in this project, the two I kept returning to, and who I eventually chose, were James Alison and Thomas Merton. I would like to offer some explanation for this decision, especially at a time when theologians, myself included, are deeply troubled by the overreliance on White men in the tradition to help us think. Admittedly, my reasons are simply personal.

My introduction to James Alison occurred during my doctoral program through his piece, "Love Your Enemy: Within a Divided Self." I was tasked to teach an undergraduate class session using this article. I was hooked. Now having read nearly all of Alison's published work, I am repeatedly struck by the radicality of discipleship he is advancing. But it is a radicality that resonates deeply with me in that it does not devolve into some sort of exclusionary, cultish fanaticism. Instead, it is a radicality that only sees God's love as expanding, without limitation, to everyone—even our enemies.

Given the particular manifestations of violence that I will be addressing in this project, the socio-political implications Alison draws from his Girardian-influenced theological anthropology address these well. He is able to grapple with the exclusionary and divisive problems of racial resentment and political and ecclesial polarization effectively in his understanding of society as built upon relationships of reciprocity that serve to create in-groups, out-groups, and scapegoats.

Further, his communal diagnosis of the problem leads him to offer a conception of conversion that is facilitated by and occurs within the community of the Church to counter

this communal problem. It manifests in the disciple's courageous threshold crossings, reaching out hands to those who, at least according to the old system, are in the out-group. This is courageous because it can result in a certain form of death, but it is also totally consistent with a radical discipleship. His recommended fix also means we are to leave room for others to experience the change(s) we have already experienced, which is a difficult path in our current situation. Instead of focusing on being right, we are challenged to live in accordance with the truth as we know it, but to also be open to change offered to us by those with whom we have historically disagreed. In other words, it makes for uncomfortable pews. But, again, that is the challenge of radical discipleship—world-transforming discipleship.

Thomas Merton was introduced to me much earlier in my life. I had recently visited St. Meinrad Archabbey for the first time and was mesmerized by the monks there. I picked up a copy of *The Seven Storey Mountain*. I have to admit that I think I was a little too young and theologically undereducated to understand everything that he was writing about, but I found it compelling. After moving to Chicago and getting involved in a peace and justice group, I revisited Merton and discovered a treasure trove of writings that I resonated with on the very issues I was thinking about at the time. He offered a model of balance between traditional spirituality and social action that I hoped—and still hope—to replicate in my own life.

Merton's theological anthropology and the diagnosis of the socio-political problems of his time are distinct from Alison's, certainly. But they complement his framework in a way that focuses on the personal nature of conversion. For Merton, the answer is prayer. Through our prayer, we come to be able to see through the falsehoods peddled in society that bring about divisions and violence. And as we reach those interior depths, we also come

to learn of our interconnectedness to, and responsibility for, one another. Like Alison, Merton can effectively address the manifestations of violence that will be addressed herein. Our divisions and the violence that results are caused by our estrangement—from ourselves, from our neighbor, and from God. To overcome this estrangement requires a contemplative spiritual practice; that is, a prayer life that is active and passive—active in that we engage in prayer and meditation, and passive in that we cultivate an openness to God's work in our life. From this renewed position, we can begin to discern and discover how it is we need to engage in the world, to address the socio-political problems that abound, and what task we will take up to better it.

Alison and Merton complement each other in the same way that their recommendations complement each other: prayer, which shapes our spirituality, influences the Church; and the Church, which also shapes our spirituality, influences our prayer. It is an inextricable pairing that is mutually-forming. The dual focus on communal and personal conversion with their resulting political impacts helps us achieve a more holistic notion of conversion and a conversion that reflects the spheres of life in which we necessarily participate.

Alison and Merton further complement each other in their focus—explicitly or implicitly—on narrative. For both, a conversion brings about a narrative shift such that our stories—the stories that shape our identities and our worldviews—are no longer the same. What is more is that, while Alison and Merton focus on narrative in their theological frameworks, they also embody examples of narrative shifts—Alison in the self-acceptance and the acceptance of God's love as a gay Catholic; Merton in the shift from a world-denying monastic to a world-embracing and mystical social critic.

It is for these reasons—and more—that I have decided to engage the work of James Alison and Thomas Merton. We have much to learn from their ideas as well as from their lives.

My Positionality

Before proceeding, I want to briefly comment upon my own positionality, in particular as it relates to the communities to which I belong and issues that will be discussed herein.

First, I am a Catholic. Although there was a high population of Italian immigrants and their descendants in the area in which I was raised, Catholics were not the majority religious tradition. We attended a Roman Catholic parish whose school had closed and whose pastor was shared with two other parish communities, one of which closed subsequently. I moved to Indianapolis and attended a small, Roman Catholic college, where I studied theology, then I worked in Catholic education and parish ministry. Some years later, I attended a Catholic university for graduate studies in theology. I was married in the Catholic Church and baptized my children in the tradition. And we still practice regularly. I take my Catholicism seriously, though not without a healthy dose of good humor. And both the seriousness and humor with which I engage my Catholicism were values instilled in me by two close spiritual guides who were themselves deeply faithful Catholics.

Second, I identify as White. It is worth noting that I am firmly among those who hold race as a social construct and believe that it was largely constructed in this way for the sake of oppressing a certain group of people for the benefit of others. However, rightly or wrongly, racial categories are still the means by which we discuss racial matters. One of the challenges of being raised in a small town in rural Indiana is that I did not have the privilege

of experiencing diversity, except for some minor socio-economic diversity. My town, school, and parish communities were basically all White, with very few exceptions. Being in racially and ethnically diverse environments was not a privilege I had until I left my hometown and joined a fairly racially diverse parish—the first Roman Catholic parish in Indianapolis to integrate, actually.

Finally, while I no longer live in my hometown, it is still where I consider my home to be. Since leaving that small cluster of towns I call home, I have lived in Indianapolis, Chicago, and Boston, and this accounts for more than half of my life now. I do not have plans of returning to that small town either. However, my immediate family still lives there, and I visit as often as I can. I perceive my theological questions to have emerged from the questions raised during and after my upbringing. And I also understand the theological work I am engaged in to be in service of this community. Some questions remain as regards how and in what format this work will be returned to this community, but I am intent on ensuring it is.

I hope I have illustrated here the ways my identities and location might influence what follows. Underlying all of this, too, is an openness to being critiqued, questioned, and corrected and a willingness to engage in dialogue in my own process of learning. I do not set out to tell some proverbial "you" what to do. I am here to figure out what we, together, and, especially, what *I* must do.

CHAPTER 1

VIOLENCE IN THE UNITED STATES: THE NEED FOR A NEW STORY

"To hell with facts! We need stories!"
-Ken Kesey

"That's my story, and I'm stickin' to it."
-Lee Roy Parnell & Tony Haselden
Sung by Collin Raye

From January 1 to August 1, 2022, just over half of the calendar year, the Gun Violence Archive listed 26,175 deaths from gun violence (this includes unintentional shootings as well as suicides, the latter of which constitute over half of these deaths) and 390 mass shootings in the United States.[4] Tragically, 27 shootings have been in schools, including Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, where 19 children were killed.[5]

Despite the long history of mass shootings, generally, and school shootings, more specifically, and despite the increasingly heightened calls for action, inactivity has largely characterized Congress's response.[6] This inactivity, prominently championed by the Republican Party, is fueled by special interest groups like the National Rifle Association (the "NRA"), the premier gun rights lobbying group in the U.S., who held their annual convention just days after the Robb Elementary School shooting in Houston—a few

[4] Gun Violence Archive 2022, https://www.gunviolencearchive.org. The Gun Violence Archive defines a mass shooting as including four victims shot, not including the shooter. See "Explainer," Gun Violence Archive, https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/explainer.
[5] "School Shootings This Year: How Many and Where," *Education Week*, updated August 1, 2022, https://www.edweek.org/leadership/school-shootings-this-year-how-many-and-where/2022/01.
[6] In 2022, however, Congress passed, and President Biden signed into law, the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act. This legislation expanded background checks for those under 21, allocated funds for state intervention programs and for carrying out red flag laws, made more severe laws against gun trafficking and purchasing guns for those not permitted to have them, and banned domestic abusers from buying guns. US Congress, Senate, Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, 117th Cong., 2d sess., 2022, S.2938. See also Emily Cochrane and Zolan Kanno-Youngs, "Biden Signs Gun Bill Into Law, Ending Years of Stalemate," *New York Times*, June 25, 2022, https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/25/us/politics/gun-control-bill-biden.html.

hundred miles from the school's community, Uvalde. While the convention speakers shared their grief over the school shooting, legislative change was not their suggested remedy. Governor Abbott of Texas, in a pre-recorded speech to convention attendees, said, "There are thousands of laws on the books across the country that limit the owning or using of firearms, laws that have not stopped madmen from carrying out evil acts on innocent people and peaceful communities."[7] Responsible gun ownership, not gun control legislation, is the path forward—or so goes the NRA's logic.

This same narrative (*i.e.*, "The surest way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun."[8]) is taken up by supporters of the NRA and other advocates for the protection of the Second Amendment. As Jonathan Metzl argues, White men suffered a reduction in prestige—that is, the privilege gained by the mere fact of their being White and male—after the movements for civil and women's rights. Following this "demotion," an association was made between the idealized Whiteness of the past (and its accompanying privilege) and gun ownership—that which protects these White men from others seeking to take what is not rightfully theirs. Metzl writes that the NRA peddled a narrative that "promoted guns as the primary means of self-defense in an increasingly unsafe world, even as crime rates fell over this same period."[9]

The impasse in the conversation between Democrats and Republicans about gun control legislation is the result of competing narratives. The basic story the Democrats tell is that stricter gun laws and enforcement will result in fewer mass and, therefore, school

[7] Quoted in Rina Torchinsky, "Days after the Uvalde shooting, the NRA convention went on as planned," *NPR*, March 29, 2022, https://www.npr.org/2022/05/29/1101994074/nra-convention-houston-ends.
[8] This statement is from Wayne LaPierre, the CEO and executive vice president of the NRA, in 2014, quoted in Jonathan M. Metzl, *Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment Is Killing America's Heartland* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 74.
[9] Metzl, *Dying of Whiteness*, 74.

shootings. The basic story the Republicans tell is that the constitution reigns supreme in the United States and that mass shootings and school shootings, despite the tragic consequences of "lone wolves" or "isolated incidents," are the cost of freedom. These stories conflict, yet by their respective adherents, they are believed to be objective truth. And unless or until there is a compromise by one or the other to see the flaw in their narrative, the U.S. can expect to see more mass shootings. In a word, narratives have consequences.

As another example, consider the American Dream. But for the presence of the prevalent and powerful narrative, our society would unlikely tolerate the growing income disparities and unconscionable poverty that exist in the U.S. The American dream is, as Nancy Isenberg argues, a "myth."[10] Yet the story is so powerful that even those disadvantaged by the economic policies that flow from the narratives support those policies, arguing that they, too, are just as capable of "pulling themselves up by their bootstraps."[11] And while voting against one's interests can, at times, be altruistic, frequently in these cases, self-interest obscures voters' own self-inflicted wounds.[12] Stories are powerful indeed.

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[10] Nancy Isenberg, *White Trash: The 400-Year-Old Untold History of Class in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 313.

[11] It should be noted that it is not *only* the American Dream that facilitates the creation of the poverty and wealth disparity I am using to illustrate this point. Racism, in one form or another, is another story that impacts these policy decisions and bolsters the faulty narratives. Many different narratives—whether supporting or conflicting, yet no less intersecting—form a web of sorts through which one views and interprets the world. Therefore, while I am using this in a way that implies it is singularly operative, I am doing so as an oversimplification to illustrate the point.

[12] In a statement by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, for example, he writes, "The American Dream is rapidly becoming the American Illusion . . . since the US now has the lowest rate of social mobility of any of the rich countries." Yet, he also observed that he was "also told that the poor who want to make it in America can easily do so: they really can achieve the American dream if only they work hard enough." Philip Alston, "Statement on Visit to the USA, by Professor Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights," United Nations, December 15, 2017, https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2017/12/statement-visit-usa-professor-philip-alston-united-nations-special-rapporteur?LangID=E&NewsID=22533. See also Part II below and the discussion of the "deep story" in Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (New York: The New Press, 2016).

As is the case in political and economic life, at the heart of Christian life is a story. It is the story about the God-man, Jesus Christ, and the principles he called us to take on as our own—principles he taught in word and deed and that are now memorialized in the gospels. The story of Jesus has been inherited, interpreted, and passed down through generations of Christians all trying to embody authentic discipleship in their respective, unique contexts (*e.g.*, global, cultural, political, social, etc.). It is a story that Christians are still called to emulate, but it is one whose emulation today often looks quite different, even in principle, from the story we find in the gospels. This is because, not only the excess of meaning in this story and the different contexts that demand its reinterpretation, but also, as I illustrated in the example above, his story is not the only story influencing our lives. In our world, stories abound.

Human beings make sense of their lives with stories. Even when there are internal inconsistencies, the stories are the means by which we organize, interpret, and act in the world. While the stories that we use to understand and make meaning in our lives are partially our own creation, many of the operative narratives in our lives are inherited. We acquire stories from our society, our cultural and ethnic communities, our religious traditions, our political representatives, our educators, and our friends. Some of these stories are the creation of those persons from whom we inherit them, but, oftentimes, the narratives have unknown origins—we do not know how we know them, yet we know them.

Because stories are the basis of our understanding of and action in the world, the violence that we encounter—from mass shootings to domestic abuse, emotional manipulation to economic exploitation—is the result of one story or another, one created or inherited, one true or false, or some combination thereof. To counter that violence, therefore, requires that we interrogate those narratives and revise them.

In this chapter, I will explore two instantiations of violence in contemporary U.S. society and the stories that contribute to their existence and growth. These two instantiations, racial resentment—the more pervasive descendent of old-fashioned racism—and polarization, have been selected for exploration for two principal reasons. First, given the nature of the recent past, the U.S. is reckoning anew with the role racism plays in society. Despite having abundant evidence of the killing of black men, women, and children without cause by police officers in a system of oppression, many deny the ongoing relevance of racism or White privilege in the U.S.[13] Many more, though, will claim that they are not racist. Although racial resentment is not old-fashioned racism—racial resentment is not the conscious, malicious, and active form of racism, but a disposition held by Whites who perceive Black and other persons of color to have received a benefit undeservedly, supported by legitimizing racial myths—it does participate in perpetuating structural and systemic racism. As such, I argue here that racial resentment is a form of violence—here, the human caused reason that leads to a harmful discrepancy between a reality that could be from the reality that is and an inhibition of full flourishing—that divides those who benefit from racism and White privilege (*i.e.*, White persons) from those it disadvantages (*i.e.*, people of color). It is a form of racism. And because it is more pervasive, infecting liberals and conservatives alike, our current situation demands we grapple with it.

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[13] See Laura Santhanam, "A majority of Americans say policing should be reformed. But most White people still don't think police treat Black people differently," *PBS News Hour*, May 17, 2021, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/a-majority-of-americans-say-policing-should-be-reformed-but-most-White-people-still-dont-think-police-treat-black-people-differently (only 32% of U.S. adults "believe local police treat people of color more harshly"). However, those who deny racism's ongoing relevance are not in the majority, but a critical number still do. See, for example, Jared Sharpe, "UMass Amherst Poll Examines Americans' Views of Race Issues Including Critical Race Theory, Systemic Racism and Reparations," *University Of Massachusetts Amherst*, January 14, 2022, https://www.umass.edu/news/article/umass-amherst-poll-examines-americans-views-race-issues-including-critical-race-theory; Juliana Menasche Horowitz, Anna Brown, and Kiana Cox, "Race in America 2019," *Pew Research Center*, April 9, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2019/04/09/race-in-america-2019/; and Clea Simon, "Facing the denial of American racism," *The Harvard Gazette*, June 5, 2020, https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/06/facing-the-denial-of-american-racism/.

Second, in addition to racial resentment, polarization is pervasive and growing. Such a pervasiveness ensures that U.S. society is divided racially and ideologically. These divisions are not merely disagreements, but they constitute an unwillingness to engage in a conversation with the other. Further, they represent a lack of trust and persistent ill will toward the other that threatens not only the cohesion of American society, but democracy itself. It is on account of these issues' timeliness, pervasiveness, and threat that I have selected them as instantiations of violence buttressed by narratives below.

I will begin by exploring the role of the story, or narratives, in the identity and worldview formation of persons. We will see that we have so many stories that we are informed by that, even when they conflict with one another, we nonetheless maintain our belief in the narrative. We will then discuss racial resentment and polarization—political and ecclesial—as instances of violence caused by the malformation from certain narratives. Following this, I will then offer a definition of violence—one that expands what might be our initial temptation to connect violence to a mere physical altercation. Then, drawing on the work of Bernard Lonergan, S.J., I will outline how I perceive violence to be a manifestation of bias, and how, to counteract the violence of bias, a holistic experience of conversion is needed at the personal, communal, and socio-political levels. I will conclude the chapter by outlining the next chapters of the book, in which I will draw upon the thought of James Alison and Thomas Merton to provide the spiritual and ecclesial practices—that is, a spirituality and an ecclesiology—that can open us up to an experience of conversion.

1.1 Stories, Meaning, and Their Consequences

As noted above, human beings rely on stories to make sense of their lives. This is the case for their identities as well as their worldviews—there is no limit to our reliance on narrative. These stories are sometimes inherited and sometimes created. Many of the stories we know have unknown origins, but we nevertheless believe them. And the power of these stories is significant. Even when the stories that inform us are false or inconsistent with other narratives that inform us, we still believe in their validity. Clinging this hard to stories left uninterrogated results in our acting in the world guided by inaccurate assumptions, harmful stereotypes, and an unwillingness to be corrected. In a word, stories can be violent. In this section, I begin by exploring why stories are so significant to human beings. Then I outline the instantiations of violence on which this project focuses to show how they are rooted in false narratives.

1.1.1 The Meaning a Story Makes

There is general consensus among psychologists that human beings are storytellers. Without stories, our lives are merely disconnected units of activity or experience that indicate little about who we are (or hope to be) or how we think about the world around us. Because stories are so fundamental to our identity and meaning-making, human beings are often unsatisfied with a lack of continuity or underlying meaning of the individual acts and experiences. As Ashley Lamb-Sinclair writes, "People want to connect with characters, want to see a plot develop to its end, and want to engage in the fascinating layers of conflict."[14] This is not only the case in regard to the stories we are told, but it is also the case in our own lives. We are the protagonist, and we want our lives to have a plot and narrative arc. Even if

[14] Ashley Lamb-Sinclair, "When Narrative Matters More Than Fact," *The Atlantic*, January 9, 2017.

the plot is a fiction steeped in falsehoods, nevertheless, the human inclination is to apply narrative.

Psychologist Dan P. McAdams describes stories as the vehicle for meaning-making in human beings. It is, for him, the "natural package for organizing many different kinds of information" and is "a fundamental way of expressing ourselves and our world to others."[15] Richard Kearney agrees:

> When someone asks you *who* you are, you tell your story. That is, you recount your present condition in the light of past memories and future anticipation. You interpret where you are going in terms of where you have come from and where you are going to. And so doing you give a sense of yourselves as a *narrative* identity that perdures and coheres over a lifetime.[16]

The "narrative identity" is our, and our culture's, construct, one that develops over time, solidifies with additional coherence in late childhood through adolescence, creates a story, which creates our selves.[17]

The narrative, then, is the result of the individual practice of making sense of one's own life by tying together what could be understood as independent actions and experiences but that, if they were in such a state, would be less meaningful. These individual stories are our "personal myths," which define both our identities and our values. "The personal myth is not a legend or fairy tale, but a sacred story that embodies a personal truth."[18] But the personal myth is not an innocent story. As Jerome Bruner argues, "[T]hey always have a message, most often so well concealed that even the teller knows not what ax he may be grinding."[19] Put differently, narratives have consequences. Whether we work to overturn or

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[15] Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths and the Making of the Self* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1993), 27-28.
[16] Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2002), 4.
[17] Dan P. McAdams and Kate C. McLean, "Narrative Identity," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 22, no. 3 (2013), 235.
[18] McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*, 34.
[19] Jerome Bruner, *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 5-6.

maintain oppression, for example, is a consequence of our personal myth and can be a "decision" made without even being conscious that we are making one.

The lack of innocence is not merely one's own choosing. The personal myth is influenced by many factors, including upbringing, cultural environment, religious participation, as well as innate psychological predispositions. Because of the influence of the multiple narratives in which we play a part, Alasdair MacIntyre argues that "we are never more (and sometimes less) than the co-authors of our own narratives . . . [W]e are always under certain constraints."[20] These constraints are the other narratives (cultural or other individuals') that our personal narratives encounter. From our birth and even in our own narratives, MacIntyre writes, we have "one or more imputed characters" or social positions that we learn as we grow into them.[21] These are our inheritance, and they become the "master narrative-blueprints" according to which we structure our own lives.[22]

To illustrate the formation and influence of narratives, consider the "deep story." In her book, *Strangers In Their Own Land*, Arlie Russel Hochschild explored the influence of cultural stories on the individual narratives held by rural, working-class, Whites in Louisiana. What she found was that they held a deep story. In Hochschild's view, all of us have a deep story. Concerned less with facts, the "deep story is a *feels-as-if* story—it's the story feelings tell, in the language of symbols. It removes judgment. It removes fact. It tells us how things feel."[23] As she explains it in the context of the community she studied, the deep story is a response of both nostalgia and frustration—there is both a sense of the way things were, typified by the tenets of the American dream, as well as the keenly felt awareness that things

[20] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 199
[21] MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 201.
[22] Julie Beck, "Life's Stories," *The Atlantic*, August 10, 2015.
[23] Hochschild, *Strangers in Their Own Land*, 135.

are no longer functioning that way. And the deep story is a piece of evidence upon which people buttress their actions.

To the rural, working-class Whites that Hochschild interviewed, she found that the deep story she articulated that sought to encompass their value system and its current status was well received. She writes:

> You are patiently standing in the middle of a long line stretching toward the horizon, where the American Dream awaits. But as you wait, you see people cutting in line ahead of you. Many of these line-cutters are black—beneficiaries of affirmative action or welfare. Some are career-driven women pushing into jobs they never had before. Then you see immigrants, Mexicans, Somalis, the Syrian refugees yet to come. As you wait in this unmoving line, you're being asked to feel sorry for them all. You have a good heart. But who is deciding who you should feel compassion for? Then you see President Barack Hussein Obama waving the line-cutters forward. He's on their side. In fact, isn't he a line-cutter too? How did this fatherless black guy pay for Harvard? As you wait your turn, Obama is using the money in your pocket to help the line-cutters. He and his liberal backers have removed the shame from taking. The government has become an instrument for redistributing your money to the undeserving. It's not your government anymore; it's theirs.[24]

What her articulation of the deep story surfaces is the influential role the American Dream (a national narrative) plays in the individual narrative. In that particular deep story, the adherents believe that those who have not played by the same set of rules—typically believed to be people of color, immigrants, and refugees—are the recipients of undeserved benefits, regardless of the reality of that belief. And there is no questioning of the American Dream's validity, but rather it is accepted wholesale. This feeds at least a suspicion, if not a hatred, toward those they perceive as the undeserving recipients of the American Dream's benefits.

[24] Arlie Russell Hochschild, "No Country for White Men," *Mother Jones Magazine,* September/October 2016, https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2016/08/trump-White-blue-collar-supporters/.

But the human person is not forever subject to the tyranny of these narratives. As Julie Beck writes, "A life story is written in chalk, not ink, and it can be changed."[25] Despite the influence exerted upon us by the cultural narratives we inherit, we are agents of our own future and are free to reconstruct the narratives that define us and make sense of our world. As a matter of fact, it is precisely because we are free and because narratives are so influential that the creation and recreation of these narratives is our "psychological and social responsibility."[26]

1.1.2 The Consequences of a Bad Story

In many situations, we do not critically examine the narratives that inform our lives. In these cases, bad narratives—those that are false, inaccurate, or misleading—can result in our acting in the world in a way that is violent or complicit to violence. In the sections below, I explore two instantiations of violence that are the result of bad narratives: racial resentment and political polarization.

1.1.2.1 Racial Resentment

Since emancipation, slavery has no longer been the expression of racism in the United States, yet racial injustices perdure. From disproportionate incarceration to heightened poverty and mortality rates, black men, women, and children (and other people of color) suffer from inequalities embedded in U.S. culture.[27] The question, however, is what fuels these disparities.

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[25] Beck, "Life's Stories."
[26] McAdams, *The Stories We Live By,* 35.
[27] See Hedwig Lee, Michael Esposito, Frank Edwards, Yung Chun, and Michal Grinstein-Weiss, "The demographics of racial inequality in the United States," Brookings, July 27, 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/07/27/the-demographics-of-racial-inequality-in-the-united-

Psychologists David Sears and P.J. Henry offer a basic—if maybe oversimplified—taxonomy of the types of theories that seek to address the contemporary situation in the United States regarding race and racial disparity.[28] The first, and most broadly accepted, category includes those theories that claim a new form of racism has taken the place of the old racism—what they call "old-fashioned," "redneck," or "Jim Crow" racism. This is a broad category that includes a number of sub-theories (*e.g.*, "modern racism," "aversive racism," "laissez-faire racism," etc.) and to which racial resentment—the subject of the discussion here—belongs. The second category includes theories that argue the contemporary racial problem as an *unintended* consequence of group conflict based on structural inequalities, such as the desire to maintain privilege and power against those who challenge the groups that hold them. And the third category, which also understands the implication of race to be an *unintended* byproduct, includes theories that see politics today being in the hands of political elites who play upon the public's political ideologies, such as political platforms that advance anti-social welfare policies that have only an incidental impact on people of color.

To clarify, the latter two categories do not hold that racism is a principal contributor to our current society's racial divide. Instead, either "inevitable" group conflict or "normal" political processes lead to the existing racial disparities, and even then it is an unintended consequence. The first category, while acknowledging racism is a principal factor, does not rest solely on that bias to explain the divide. It recognizes that other factors also play a role,

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states/. See also Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York, The New Press: 2010), in which Alexander describes the evolution of institutional racism from slavery, through Jim Crow, to mass incarceration—an exploration of the ways that anti-black racism endures despite the evolution of its manifestations.

[28] David O. Sears and P.J. Henry, "The Origins of Symbolic Racism," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 85, no. 2 (2003), 259.

even, at times, a more prominent role than racism. According to Sears and Henry, the features of this category are the shared assumptions "that Whites have become racially egalitarian in principle and that new forms of prejudice, embodying *both* negative feelings toward Blacks as a group and some conservative nonracial values, have become politically dominant."[29]

In what follows, I have opted to use the first category of theories to guide my understanding as regards racial disparities over the others for two central reasons. First, too much doubt exists to fully validate the second and third categories. For example, in a 2021 study, political scientist Adam Enders found little basis for what he calls the "principled conservative thesis."[30] This thesis claims that it is actually "adherence to conservative ideological principles" (*e.g.*, hard work, pulling yourself up by your bootstraps, etc.), and not negative feelings toward a particular race, that is being interpreted as racial resentment, when it is actually an unintended consequence of advancing conservative policies (*i.e.*, a theory within category three of the Sears-Henry taxonomy).[31] Enders's primary object of investigation was the "principled" element of the thesis—whether consistent support of conservative policies indicate higher levels of racial resentment. He found to the contrary: based on use of American National Election Studies ("ANES") reporting from past elections—the classical measure for racial resentment[32]—"racial resentment is substantially

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[29] Sears and Henry, "The Origins of Symbolic Racism," 259, emphasis mine.
[30] Adam M. Enders, "A Matter of Principle? One the Relationship Between Racial Resentment and Ideology," *Political Behavior* 43 (2021): 561-84.
[31] Enders, "A Matter of Principle? One the Relationship Between Racial Resentment and Ideology," 565.
[32] The old standard of measurement was established by Donald R. Kinder and Lynn M. Sanders. The measurement was the following list of assertions to which White respondents indicated the degree to which they agreed or disagreed:
1) Irish, Italian, Jewish and many other minorities overcame prejudice and worked their way up. Blacks should do the same without any special favors. 2) Generations of slavery and discrimination have created conditions that make it difficult for blacks to work their way out of the lower class. 3) It's really a matter of some people not trying hard enough; if blacks would only try harder they could be just as well off as Whites. 4) Over the past few years, blacks have gotten less than they deserve. 5) Most blacks who receive money from welfare

more strongly related to ideological self-identification than it is to either measure of adherence to ideological principles."[33] In other words, regardless of whether a person understands and supports conservative principles, if one identifies as a conservative or a Republican, they are more likely to score high on the racial resentment scale. Given that Enders's study is not alone in its conclusion,[34] accepting as definitive other theoretical categories in the Sears-Henry taxonomy to describe the racial landscape in the U.S. is, I believe, unwise.

Second, the 2016 campaign season also called into question any race-neutral theory about contemporary U.S. society. Donald Trump's calls to "build the wall," his perpetuation of the birther conspiracy, his desire to end all Muslim travel to the U.S., and his implications that Mexican immigrants were rapists (the list could go on), along with numerous studies indicating that racial anxieties, not economic ones, contributed to increased support by some groups for his presidency illustrate the continued, and central, role of racism in contemporary U.S. society.[35] Given these realities as well as the number of individuals who

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programs could get along without it if they tried. 6) Government officials usually pay less attention to a request or complaint from a black person than from a White person.

For Kinder and Sanders, these assertions allowed for respondents to acknowledge their racial views in a "roundabout" way, not requiring them "to declare in straightforward fashion that blacks are dim-witted or lazy or promiscuous." Donald R. Kinder and Lynn M. Sanders, *Divided by Color: Racial Politics and Democratic Ideals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 106.

[33] Enders, "A Matter of Principle? One the Relationship Between Racial Resentment and Ideology," 571. Cf. Kyle Peyton and Gregory A. Huber, "Racial Resentment, Prejudice, and Discrimination," *The Journal of Politics* 83, no. 4 (October 2021): 1829-36.

[34] See also Christine Reyna, P.J. Henry, William Korfmacher, and Amanda Tucker, "Examining the Principles in Principled Conservatism: The Role of Responsibility Stereotypes as Cues for Deservingness in Racial Policy Decisions," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 90, no. 1 (January 2006): 109-128; Jim Sidanius, Felicia Pratto, and Lawrence Bobo, "Racism, Conservatism, Affirmative Action, and Intellectual Sophistication: A Matter of Principled Conservatism or Group Dominance?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 70, no. 3 (March 1996): 476-490; Alberto G. Urquidez, "A Revisionist Theory of Racism: Rejecting the Presumption of Conservatism," *Journal of Social Psychology* 51, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 231-260.

[35] For a brief overview of these studies, see Mehdi Hasan, "Time to Kill the Zombie Argument: Another Study Shows Trump Won Because of Racial Anxieties—Not Economic Distress," *The Intercept*, September 18, 2018, https://theintercept.com/2018/09/18/2016-election-race-class-trump/. These findings are confirmed elsewhere. See, for example, Vanessa Williamson and Isabella Gelfand, "Trump and racism: What do the data say?" Brookings, August 14, 2019, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2019/08/14/trump-and-racism-what-do-the-data-say/.

claim not to be racist or even claim to be actively anti-racist, we are left with Sears and Henry's first category: racial resentment.

Political scientists Donald Kinder and Lynn Sanders see racial resentment as the bitterness that emerges at "the conjunction of Whites' feelings toward Blacks and their support for American values, especially secularized versions of the Protestant ethic."[36] Edward Carmines, Paul Sniderman, and Beth Easter expand upon this idea:

> [T]he new racism is thus more refined and less offensive than the old. It claims not that blacks are genetically inferior to Whites but that they lack the moral values of individualism, hard work, discipline, and self-sacrifice that Whites believe are central to their race and American society as a whole. Blacks are faulted because they do not "try hard enough to overcome the difficulties they face and they take what they have not earned." Since racial anger and indignation have now become disconnected from biological racism and joined with cherished American values, this new form of racism has not only become widespread in contemporary America but is expressed openly and without hesitation by many Whites. Thus, the scar of racism continues to deform White America; the only difference is that "today prejudice is expressed in the language of American individualism."[37]

This new form of racism has more to do with affect and attitudes bound up with narratives (*i.e.*, an assumption about shared character traits inherent to the Black population; an add-on to an otherwise neutral race) than the biological superiority-inferiority dichotomy from earlier eras (*i.e.*, not an add-on, but intrinsic to the biology of the Black population).

To arrive at this new stage of racial resentment from earlier eras of widespread belief in the biological inferiority of Black persons, it is important to see how the resentment emerged. When slavery was still a permissible practice, resentment by Whites would not have characterized their disposition toward enslaved Blacks—the power dynamics and biological assumptions would not have reasonably resulted in resentment, but simply superiority. In

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[36] Kinder and Sanders, *Divided by Color*, 293.
[37] Edward G. Carmines, Paul M. Sniderman, and Beth C. Easter, "On the Meaning, Measurement, and Implications of Racial Resentment," *The Annals of the AAPSS* 634, no. 1 (2011), 101, quoting Kinder and Sanders, *Divided by Color*, 106.

their book, *Racial Resentment in the Political Mind*, Darren W. Davis and David C. Wilson offer the key historical turning points—what they call periods of "intensified racial resentment"—that illustrate this shift in feelings to resentment and its rise.

The first period occurred during the Reconstruction Era. After constitutional amendments abolished slavery and afforded citizenship and its full rights to Black men, the Ku Klux Klan was founded, Jim Crow laws emerged, lynching became an extrajudicial mob-enforced penalty for alleged transgressions by Black persons, and a general culture of terror against Black persons characterized U.S. society.[38] Davis and Wilson consider this period to be characterized by the disruption of the power structures in existence prior to abolition.

The next phase emerged during the Civil Rights Era. Between the 1950s and 1970s, the landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* came down from the Supreme Court accompanied by the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and the 1968 Civil Rights Act. At this point in history, according to Davis and Wilson, racism shifts from explicit acts (*e.g.*, lynching and Jim Crow laws) to a racism bound up with values: "Although many Whites viewed these ameliorative racial programs as unfair and unjust on non-racial grounds tied to the role of government or nuances about the outcomes versus opportunities, the lion's share of opposition seemed to be rooted in appraisals of symbolic values, especially merit and deservingness."[39]

The penultimate period of intensified racial resentment—the only remaining period in the past, as Davis and Wilson predict another intensification in the future when the White population becomes the minority in the U.S.—was the Obama/Trump era. The frustration of some that led to resentment's intensification was about "political correctness and the

[38] Darren W. Davis and David C. Wilson, *Racial Resentment in the Political Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022), 9-10.
[39] Davis and Wilson, *Racial Resentment in the Political Mind*, 11.

social sanctions on derogatory and offensive expressions" that chilled speech. People were afraid to critique Obama for fear of being viewed as racist. Frustrated White persons felt disadvantaged—they could not critique Obama, but black persons could "lash out at Whites, even though many Whites may have done nothing to harm them."[40] Put differently, Davis and Wilson argue that it is not primarily a matter of race that White persons feel disadvantaged, but rather that White persons feel there are different standards applied to them than to others that limit and constrain their freedoms compared to others, such as Black persons.

Racial resentment is certainly a unique phenomenon.[41] Davis and Wilson's research found higher levels of racial resentment are associated with lower education, older age cohorts, conservatives, and low political engagement—further affirming Enders's study discussed above.[42] But it can also be manifest in persons who are explicitly racist as well as those who are adamantly anti-racist. It is particularly pervasive and, because it is not explicit in the way "traditional" racism is, it can evade discovery.

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[40] Davis and Wilson, *Racial Resentment in the Political Mind*, 12.

[41] Davis and Wilson, *Racial Resentment in the Political Mind*, 5. Emphasis mine.

Against critiques of racial resentment, particularly those who argue that it is actually not possible to measure racial resentment at all—a critique raised against the former racial resentment scale—Davis and Wilson argue that the old measurement was flawed in that the scale does not include an adequate exploration of resentment, instead relying too heavily on racial antipathy or prejudice. Davis and Wilson's theory of racial resentment is constructed upon an assumption that "when Whites assert they are not racially prejudiced toward African Americans and other minorities it [what they claim] may actually be true because racial resentment does not stem *only* from racist motivations."# For many Whites, they believe that racism is a thing of the past that should not be used against White persons today, despite continuing to believe in legitimizing racial myths.

In their own attempt to balance resentment and racism, Davis and Wilson include in their own racial resentment measure assertions like the following to which respondents are asked to respond: "1) African Americans do not need any special considerations because racism is a thing of the past. 2) For African Americans to succeed they need to stop using past racism and slavery as excuses. 3) Special considerations for African Americans place me at an unfair disadvantage because I have done nothing to harm them. 4) African Americans bring up race only when they need to make an excuse for their failure." Davis and Wilson, *Racial Resentment in the Political Mind*, 82.

[42] Davis and Wilson, *Racial Resentment in the Political Mind*, 118.

There are efforts by some to downplay the racism inherent to resentment and foreground the seemingly banal resentment. However, it cannot be denied that racial resentment fortifies systemic racism. It allows legitimizing racial myths and the just-world orientation to persist. And insofar as it buttresses racism as a system, it cannot be downplayed, but rather requires being rooted out, especially considering its pervasiveness among the population—including among those who consider themselves non- or anti-racist.

While racism continues to play a foundational role, we see in the descriptions of the intensification of racial resentment that other values also become central to the growth of resentment. One of those values used by Davis and Wilson, among others, to ground their theory of racial resentment on is "just world expectations," in which persons believe that the world is fundamentally fair. Any contradiction to that fairness—in this case, any perceived undeserved benefit received by another, particularly a person-of-color—is grounds for resentment.

To perceive a benefit received by another as undeserved requires an appraisal of deservingness. The person or group judges the other person's or group's worthiness of having received the benefit. To make this assessment, one must have a baseline understanding of the person or group. This is the function of the "legitimizing racial myth." Resentment emerges if, in comparing the perceived fairness of a benefit to the legitimizing racial myth, the benefit is perceived as undeserved. And retribution for having received that "undeserved" benefit follows in the form of legislative and political policies—policies that can be violent, as I will discuss below—or overt violence. Despite what might objectively be true about the benefit, the struggle for Whites is to maintain the status quo.[43]

[43] Davis and Wilson, *Racial Resentment in the Political Mind*, 8.

Two narratives are at play in this racial resentment schema. First, there is the just-world value orientation, which holds that if one works hard, they should be rewarded; yet if one does wrong, they ought to be punished. And no one should have an unfair advantage in reaping the rewards society offers. This narrative can be problematized easily, however, as a just-world value orientation ignores the pure luck that influences much of a person's life.[44] Further, this just-world orientation is a strong enough narrative belief to elicit "motivated reasoning," which is a reasoning by someone that occurs when new information that contradicts a held belief is dismissed, reinterpreted, distorted, or forgotten in order to maintain the status quo.[45]

The second narrative is the legitimizing racial myth. Racial myths work within the larger racial ideological structure to maintain the racial status quo (*i.e.*, White privilege and the inferiority of persons of color). These myths are those beliefs and stereotypes that mischaracterize or make a caricature of different groups. These myths contribute to and uphold a "racial status quo" in which White persons are the beneficiaries of more privileges than Black and other persons of color and afford the racial status quo a moral and intellectual legitimacy.[46] For example, the racial myth that Black persons are lazy or unintelligent has found its way into the social imaginary of certain populations in the U.S. (as have negative stereotypes about other communities of color). For some White persons, this myth works in tandem with the just-world value orientation to justify higher poverty and

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[44] Davis and Wilson, *Racial Resentment in the Political Mind*, 20. See also Claudia Card, *The Unnatural Lottery: Character and Moral Luck* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996); Margaret Urban Walker, "Moral Luck and the Virtues of Impure Agency," in *Moral Contexts* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003): 21-34; Kate Ward, "Toward a Christian Virtue Account of Moral Luck," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 38, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2018): 131-145.

[45] Davis and Wilson, *Racial Resentment in the Political Mind*, 77.

[46] See Jim Sidanius, Erik Devereux, and Felicia Pratto, "Dominance Theory as Explanations for Racial Policy Attitudes," *Journal of Social Psychology* 132 (1992): 377-395 and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, 4th edition (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014).

incarceration rates among Black persons, affirm the privileges afforded to White persons, and problematize affirmative action or other social welfare policies.

Again, narratives have consequences. And these culturally-formed and informing narratives are strong enough that some White persons believe that race is being exploited by African Americans to gain advantages at the disadvantage of Whites, that race benefits African Americans even when it is not explicitly mentioned in a policy or program, and that White persons are disadvantaged.[47]

Because these narratives are inherited or learned from unknown sources and are transferred in various ways, I see the just-world orientation and the legitimizing racial myths as products of and formed by culture.[48] Media, educational, religious, and political influences all weigh in on the making of these foundational beliefs of a just-world: deservingness, consistency, and threats against the just world.

As Bryan Massingale and others argue, racism—and I include racial resentment within that—is a cultural problem. It is, Massingale defines:

> a deeply entrenched symbol system of meanings and values attached to skin color that provides group identity, shapes personal consciousness, and justifies the existence of race-based economic, social, and political disparities. The specific disparities and race-based injustices change over time; the underlying symbol system, left unchallenged, assumes shifting social forms and expressions that nonetheless reflect the underlying set of meanings and values.[49]

Racial resentment, with its reliance on legitimizing racial myths, has adopted—even if unwittingly—the symbolic system of meanings that mischaracterize persons of color and

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[47] Davis and Wilson, *Racial Resentment in the Political Mind*, 83. These results were found in the application of their new racial resentment measure.
[48] See Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*.
[49] Bryan N. Massingale, "Conscience Formation and the Challenge of Unconscious Racial Bias," in *Conscience and Catholicism: Rights, Responsibilities, and Institutional Responses*, edited by David E. DeCosse and Kristin E. Heyer (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 43.

that affirm for White persons a sense of superiority such that they feel justified in making a judgment based on the deservedness of the benefits any persons of color receive. While racial resentment might not be overt racism, it does not alter the symbolic underpinnings that support overt racism. Such is the power of culture, persons acquire identity and an understanding of the world around them, regardless whether those understandings are accurate or not—and regardless whether they intended to acquire them or not.

If culture—especially the culture of racism and racial resentment—is uncritically received, it can malform the recipient. As culture "shape[s] human groups' behavior and consciousness . . . thoughts, values, actions, and awareness,"[50] narratives about who people are or how distinct groups of like persons live can be detrimental to any sense of commonality or community. And because culture manifests itself in both individual beliefs and perspectives as well as in systems, these two mutually reinforce one another. Consider, for example, racial categories. Persons are not born conscious of racial categories, but learn them. While race is a social construct, it is reinforced by the U.S. Census and the many applications or official forms a person fills out in their lifetime.[51] Once these categories are constructed and attributed to others, an "essence" is imputed to the members of that group that "predicts an exaggeration of the differences between social categories, which motivates people to avoid interracial contact, share fewer resources with outgroup members, and support boundary-enhancing policies."[52]

To explain these differences, the beliefs take a narrative form: the legitimizing racial myth. These myths are "widely shared beliefs and stereotypes about African Americans and

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[50] Bryan N. Massingale, "Conscience Formation and the Challenge of Unconscious Racial Bias," 43.
[51] Many of those forms now make the completion of these racial questions optional, but the categories are still present.
[52] Steven O. Roberts, and Michael T. Rizzo, "The Psychology of American Racism," *American Psychologist* 74, no. 3 (2021): 476-77.

other minorities that justify their mistreatment and low status . . . [and] any coherent set of socially accepted attitudes, beliefs, values, and opinions that provide moral and intellectual legitimacy to the unequal distribution of social value."[53]

Yet contemporary Americans are mostly unaware of the origins of these narratives, uncritically accept these narratives—or fail to challenge them—and, wittingly or unwittingly, perpetuate them. In many ways, that these cultural components are perpetuated is a strength afforded them by their longevity. Kelly Brown Douglas, for example, traces the foundations of the White-black dichotomy from Aristotle, who correlated climates with the "physical, intellectual, and moral characteristics" of persons who lived in extreme climates (*e.g.*, Ethiopians' "excessively black colour signifies cowardice").[54] Then Enlightenment thinkers furthered the dichotomy (*e.g.*, John Locke speculated that "West African women had conceived babies with apes"; and Immanuel Kant developed a racial theory, securing for himself the title of "one of the founders of modern scientific racism, and thus a pioneering theorist of sub-personhood and disrespect," after considering "the Negro race" the lowest in the rankings of humanity and White "the ideal skin-color"[55]). And Christianity, she argues, continues to affirm, even if by implication only, blackness as evil and anti-Christian—consider the White Jesuses that adorn the crosses in churches and art around the world.[56]

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[53] Davis and Wilson, *Racial Resentment in the Political Mind*, 8, 20, citing Sidanius, Devereux, and Pratto, "Dominance Theory as Explanations for Racial Policy Attitudes," and quoting Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*.

[54] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Resurrection Hope: A Future Where Black Lives Matter* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021), 12, quoting Aristotle, *Physiognomics*, in *Aristotle: Minor Works*, translated by W.S. Hett (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), 812a.

[55] Douglas, *Resurrection Hope*, 28-29, quoting from Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 50; "On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy," in Jon M. Mikkelsen, *Kant and the Concept of Race: Late Eighteenth-Century Writings* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 186-87; and E.C. Eze, "The Color of Reason: The Idea of 'Race' in Kant's Anthropology," *The Bucknell Review* 38, no. 2 (1995), 217.

[56] While I am relying here almost exclusively on Douglas, *Resurrection Hope*, 11-41, Douglas is not alone in her assessment of the foundations of the conceptions of race and the black-White dichotomy. See, for example, J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Jeannine Hill Fletcher, "How Christian Supremacy Gave Birth to White Supremacy," "The Witchcraft of White Supremacy," and

These longstanding narratives that correlate Whiteness with goodness and blackness with badness endure in the legitimizing racial myths and are affirmed in the arts, media, education, and our general social and political imaginary. Racial resentment, therefore, insofar as it is supported through explicitly racist ideology or legitimizing racial myths that are argued on the grounds of effort, laziness, deservingness, or other "neutral" characteristics, is formed by and continues to form a culture of racism. Racial resentment is a cultural problem—a form of violence built upon a false narrative.

1.1.2.2 Polarization

As racial resentment divides the privileged from the marginalized, polarization works to divide everyone, regardless of privilege status—the liberal privileged are divided from conservative privileged, and progressive marginalized from traditional marginalized. Together, these issues form a web of alienation. Although polarization is not as explicitly related to immutable characteristics, its consequences, like those of racial resentment, are just as harmful.

It is important to note that, unlike racial resentment, political polarization is not bad *per se*. Nor has the U.S. always been as polarized as it currently is. In 1950, for example, the Committee on Political Parties of the American Political Science Association published a report, "Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System."[57] In the report, the committee

"When Words Create Worlds," in *The Sin of White Supremacy: Christianity, Racism, & Religious Diversity in America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 1-106; Bryan N. Massingale, "Racism and Culture," in *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 13-32; "Part I: Theorizing Anti-Blackness," in *Anti-Blackness and Christian Ethics*, edited by Vincent W. Lloyd and Andrew Prevot (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 3-74.

[57] Committee on Political Parties, American Political Science Association, "Toward a More Responsible Two-Party System," *The American Political Science Review* 44, no. 3, pt. 2 (September 1950). For some additional background on the document, see Mark Wickham-Jones, "This 1950 political science report keeps popping up in the news. Here's the story behind it." *The Washington Post*, July 24, 2018,

argued that the two-party system that had dominated U.S. politics was moderated too significantly in the Congress. The presence of liberals and conservatives in both the Democratic and Republican parties resulted in both intra- and intergroup compromise that was undermining the legislation up for debate—every bill worked toward the middle. Given this, the electorate was not afforded a true option between distinct choices, but would achieve the same result regardless which party was in the majority. To resolve this, the committee concluded, each party ought to ensure more consistency and unity among its members with regard to policy (*i.e.*, solidify its distinct platform) and offer true alternatives in the policies the parties advanced. In a word, the electorate should be given a choice between actual alternatives. Even today, it cannot be denied that some polarization—if it is understood simply as distinct or opposite positions—still affords voters a political choice. The problem, however, is when polarization reaches such extremes that there are no longer any meaningful debates or compromises between the parties, just negative partisanship and the political will of the majority party. Then, legislation—or the lack of legislation—harms the American public. Then, polarization is violent.

There is no meaningful debate about the steep rise in polarization over the last fifty years. What is left of a debate in this sphere is limited to the causes of polarization's rise,[58] and, even then, the debate seems to be waning in response to a growing scholarly consensus. One of the leading scholars of polarization and the contemporary political landscape, Alan Abramowitz, argues that our current polarization is the result of the "great alignment," by

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/07/24/this-1950-political-science-report-keeps-popping-up-in-the-news-heres-the-story-behind-it/.

[58] Michael J. Barber and Nolan McCarty offer a helpful overview and summary of the many causes attributed to the increase in polarization in Michael J. Barber and Nolan McCarty, "Causes and Consequences of Polarization," in *Solutions to Political Polarization in America*, edited by Nathaniel Persily (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 15-58.

which he means the period of time when the two parties sorted themselves out such that liberals and progressives became Democrats and conservatives became Republicans—as opposed to having both liberals and conservatives in each of the two principal parties. The cause for this alignment, Abramowitz asserts, is the significant cultural shifts that took place in the early to mid-20th century, including "technological change, globalization, immigration, growing racial and ethnic diversity, and changes in family structure and gender roles,"[59] that divided the public into two groups: those who agreed that those changes were positive and those who considered those changes as negative.[60]

The division among the American public on these changes resulted in greater intra-group disagreement, especially as elements of race came to the forefront. The New Deal exposed some of these racial fault lines. At the time of the New Deal, Franklin D. Roosevelt, a Democrat, was supported by three groups: "White southerners, northern White ethnics, and the northern White working class."[61] These groups were not mere supporters, but also the recipients of the economic benefits of the New Deal. To this point, there was an agreement between the southern Democrats (*i.e.*, "Dixiecrats") and the national party that, in exchange for the agreement to permit Dixiecrats to keep segregation and single-party rule in the south, they would vote in favor of Democratic policies. However, the redistribution of wealth envisioned in the New Deal was not just from rich to poor Whites from the north

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[59] Alan I. Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment: Race, Party Transformation, and the Rise of Donald Trump* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), x. For Abramowitz, polarization occurred on many levels: the general electorate, elites, and activists. Not one group was responsible for the polarization, contrary to some studies that argue elites and activists drove political parties to the extremes, leaving the electorate with only more polarized choices. See, for example, Joshua Robison and Kevin J. Mullinix, "Elite Polarization and Public Opinion: How Polarization Is Communicated and Its Effects," *Political Communication* 33, no. 2 (2016): 261-282. See also. James E. Campbell, *Polarized: Making Sense of a Divided America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), who argues that it was the electorate who first polarized. Elite polarization was a response to this broader polarization, though it also exacerbated the problem.

[60] Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment*, 12-13.

[61] Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment*, 19.

and south, respectively. It also included a redistribution to poor black persons. With this, coupled with desegregation under Harry Truman, "the Democratic Party became a vehicle for civil rights, betraying its fundamental compact with the South."[62] In other words, as the underlying story changed, so too did the identities and commitments of the Democrats and Dixiecrats.

Although the makeup of the two major political parties was changing, many voters still split their ballots, often voting for a Republican president and Democratic House and Senate members. From 1973 to 1993, for example, Democrats held unified control (*i.e.*, the presidency and majorities in both chambers of Congress) for only four years.[63] During the 1994 midterm elections, Republicans, under the leadership of minority whip Newt Gingrich, sought to remedy this disconnect between presidential and congressional leadership by nationalizing congressional elections. Gingrich and the Republican Party "focused on a common set of issues and common lines of attack against the Democratic president and Congress. Republican voters responded to this unified message with a sharp increase in party loyalty."[64] Put differently, Gingrich spearheaded a new narratival campaign, asking voters to hear a new story.

As the parties became more ideologically unified on the national level, the racial makeup of the political parties changed. Following the "betrayal" of the Dixiecrats by national Democrats, more White, traditionally Democratic voters began identifying as Republicans. By 2012, Abramowitz cites, "55 percent of White voters identified with or leaned toward the GOP, while only 39 percent identified with or leaned toward the

[62] Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020), 28.
[63] Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment*, 44.
[64] Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment,* 46.

Democrats."[65] Such a result, he argues, resulted from the response of voters to changes in the national platforms of both parties.

As realignment has occurred, driven significantly by racial policies, a second wedge has been further dividing persons from different political backgrounds: negative partisanship. Negative partisanship, or affective partisanship, is "partisan behavior driven not by positive feelings toward the party you support but negative feelings toward the party you oppose."[66] From negative partisanship flows higher straight-ticket voting—that is, party loyalty—and, therefore, a greater correlation between national and local election results.

Much can be attributed to this rise in negative partisanship. For example, in addition to his nationalization of elections, Gingrich also introduced cameras into the House of Representatives, which, along with cable news, provided minority Republicans "a powerful new weapon against the majority party."[67] No longer were the chambers of Congress for debate before a small gallery, but they were theatrics on the world's stage. They could tell new stories from the floor of the House of Representatives.

In addition to nationalizing elections and adding new methods for partisans to reach the public from the halls of Congress, Michael J. Barber and Nolan McCarty also note the "equally troubling" studies that show "independents increasingly prefer[ring] *Seinfeld* reruns to any news outlet," which is a form of "polarization without persuasion," meaning that voters are not subject to any news program, leaving a poorly-informed electorate who votes and, therefore, unwittingly affirms the parties' shifts to the left or right, exacerbating their unwillingness to negotiate.

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[65] Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment*, 47.
[66] Klein, *Why We're Polarized*, 9-10. According to Abramowitz, negative partisanship reached "an all-time high in 2016, but that doesn't mean we can expect it to diminish anytime soon." Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment*, 170.
[67] Barber and McCarty offer a helpful overview and summary of the many causes attributed to the increase in polarization in Barber and McCarty, "Causes and Consequences of Polarization," 34.

What drives negative partisanship—and, as a result, drives polarization—are bad stories and misinformation. For example, when Mitt Romney was running for president, a smear campaign was run against him, arguing that Joe Soptic's layoff from Bain Capital—attributing responsibility for that layoff to Romney—led to his wife's death from cancer. It was discovered that the cancer was diagnosed "several years after the layoff." Consider also Senator Harry Reid's accusation that Romney had not paid taxes in ten years or that John McCain had fathered an "illegitimate" child.[68]

Misinformation like this is now proliferated by social media. The equal access to social media, the manipulation of algorithms and user data, and the use of clickbait that helps drive up views and therefore increase advertising income, has led to a "perfect storm." This storm has led to the erosion of institutions capable of negotiating basic public consensus[69] or that could even adjudicate truth from falsehood, and that, in turn, has led to misinformation being propagated without the benefit of any social-institutional filter that would root out the "trolls." In a word, social media is a national-level epistemic attack on our ability to distinguish truth from falsehood.[70] Further, the misinformation that flows from negative partisanship, as well as its accompanying platforms for distribution, work to enhance our perceptions of the differences between ourselves and our political opponents, when in actuality those differences are infrequently as significant.[71]

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[68] See "Public Smear Campaigns, Then and Now," All Things Considered (August 10, 2012), https://www.kpcc.org/show/airtalk/2012-08-10/political-smear-campaigns-then-and-now.

[69] Here, I am thinking of universities or medical labs built upon a consensus that a liberal education or the scientific method contribute to the common good.

[70] Jonathan Rauch, "The Constitution of Knowledge," *National Affairs* (Fall 2018), https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/the-constitution-of-knowledge. The book-length version of this argument is also available. Jonathan Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2021).

[71] "Political Polarization: Often Not as Bad as We Think," *Public Health Now* (April 22, 2021). https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/public-health-now/news/political-polarization-often-not-bad-we-think.

Just as racial resentment—and racism more broadly—is a cultural problem, so too is political polarization. The polarization that exists today is built and survives upon narratives that demonize politicians from the other party and their supporters. No longer is there an ability, and even less so a willingness, to see beyond political differences to the human person on the other side. Instead, in-group versus out-group sorting creates a preference for the in-group and a belief in their infallibility, even if data could prove otherwise. We can easily trace the lineage of some of the stories that buttress political polarization.

Consider one example: It was not until the realization that votes could be gained that presidential candidates began bolstering narratives that many rural, working-class Whites believed. Rural, working-class Whites were instrumentalized for political gain. As Lyndon Johnson said, "I'll tell you what's at the bottom of it. If you can convince the lowest White man he's better than the best colored man, he won't notice you're picking his pocket. Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he'll empty his pockets for you."[72] Thus began a process of creating and affirming a caste system within U.S. society built upon longstanding systemic racism.

This creation of negativity for the political "others" is a phenomenon on the rise. As Yphtach Lelkes writes, "Political elites are increasingly engaging in 'partisan taunting,' wherein they 'espouse vitriol at the other party.' . . . Further, expressed anger at the out-party has increased dramatically in the past decade. In 1980, roughly 50% of partisans were angry at the out-party president. In 2016, roughly 90% of partisans responded similarly."[73] Partisan taunting is narrative creation—stories about political opponents that foster negativity and violence.

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[72] Isenberg, *White Trash*, 264.
[73] Yphtach Lelkes, "What Do We Mean by Negative Partisanship?" *The Forum* 19, no. 3 (2021), 483.

In the context of polarization, it is important to note that racial resentment and polarization are not always independent from each other. At crucial times, polarizing figures can use racial resentment as a tool to drive negative partisanship. And the reverse can be true too, using negative partisanship to reinforce legitimizing racial myths. For example, the campaign of Donald Trump in the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections revealed the close correlation between the two. As noted above, studies continue to show that although economic grievances were a sizeable portion of the concerns of Trump supporters, they were driven principally by racial and ethnic resentment.[74] The racial resentment, in turn, further polarized the electorate.

1.1.2.3 An Infected Church

One of the tragic consequences of the pervasiveness of racial resentment and polarization in the broader U.S. society is its implications for the Catholic Church in America. Ideally, the Church would operate at a distance from these issues, prophetically witnessing to a unified community. However, the Church is cultural too, immersed in the same narratives, and subject to the same contaminants that the rest of society is subject to.

In 2018, for example, the USCCB published their pastoral letter, *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love*. The document was the latest in a series of acknowledgments the Conference made of racism's persistence and a response to growing pressure to speak out against the discriminatory and violent acts of racism that had been brought into high relief during the campaign and immediate aftermath of the 2016 election.

While the bishops did take a stand, there was cause for criticism. Cary Dabney noted that the document "does not address current systemic racism nor identify how current White

[74] Abramowitz, *The Great Alignment*, 121-141.

Catholics, unconsciously or consciously, participate in the continued oppression of communities of color." But he considered the biggest omission to be any discussion of the problem of racism being a "fundamentally [White] problem," especially with regard to the many who are "unwittingly complicit" in the structural sin of racism.[75] These criticisms were shared by many others.[76] In a word, the times were unprecedented and demanded a stronger, clearer, and more focused response by the Church's leadership.

The document, and the USCCB itself, was opened to further criticism after Archbishop José Gomez's address to the Congress of Catholics and Public Life, in which he referred to the current social movements—among them, though unnamed, the Black Lives Matter movement—as Marxist, unchristian, pseudo-religions.[77] Gomez's comments suggested the inadequacy of *Open Wide Our Hearts* might not be a mere oversight, but the result of broader episcopal insincerity—or apathy.

History teaches us that the Catholic Church has experienced some difficulty with inculturation, instead often falling into assimilation.[78] Inculturation is the Church in and among its host culture, drawing from that culture the language (broadly understood) to

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[75] Cary Dabney, "Open Wide Our Hearts—The Ups and the Downs," *Political Theology*, March 8, 2019, https://politicaltheology.com/open-wide-our-hearts-the-ups-and-the-downs/.

[76] For just a few examples, see Daniel P. Horan, "The bishops' letter fails to recognize that racism is a White problem," *National Catholic Reporter*, February 20, 2019, https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/faith-seeking-understanding/bishops-letter-fails-recognize-racism-White-problem; Karen M. Donahue, "Open Wide Our Hearts—What I Wish the Bishops Would Have Said," *Sisters of Mercy*, January 21, 2019, http://www.sistersofmercy.org/open-wide-our-hearts-bishops-racism/; Eric Martin, "Blackface and White Comfort: Reading The Bishops' Letter from Charlottesville," *Political Theology*, February 15, 2019, https://politicaltheology.com/blackface-and-White-comfort-reading-the-bishops-letter-from-charlottesville/; Shawnee Daniels-Sykes, "Dismantling White Privilege: A Reflection on Open Wide Our Hearts," *Political Theology*, March 29, 2019, https://politicaltheology.com/dismantling-White-privilege-a-reflection-on-open-wide-our-hearts/.

[77] José H. Gomez, "Reflections on the Church and America's New Religions," L.A. Catholics, November 4, 2021, https://archbishopgomez.org/blog/reflections-on-the-church-and-americas-new-religions. For additional context, including responses to Gomez's address, see Brian Fraga, "Black Catholics respond with dismay as Gomez calls protests 'pseudo-religions,'" *National Catholic Reporter*, November 5, 2021, https://www.ncronline.org/news/justice/black-catholics-respond-dismay-gomez-calls-protests-pseudo-religions.

[78] Consider the toleration of Christianity by Constantine and the Church's adoption of imperial symbols in its worship or the feudal turn the Church took after the invasion of the Roman Empire by the Germanic peoples.

communicate the truths of the faith in a meaningful way, yet maintaining a critical distance from that culture so that it may effectively denounce actions inconsistent with the gospels and announce the Good News and the Reign of God.[79] The latter—assimilation—occurs when the Church has lost that distance. It is no longer distinct from its host culture, but instead participates in the ways of that culture in the mode of that culture.

The Catholic Church in the United States risks assimilation as it now reflects internally the polarization in the broader society, speaks in the simplistic binary language of liberal-conservative, and divides itself into teams intent on winning the issue of the day.[80] Fortunately, we might say, much of this polarization happens among the bishops, priests, religious, and theologians (*i.e.*, those who spend more time in religious discourse) and destination parishes. And it is also fortunate that the vast majority of Catholic parishioners practice apart from this ecclesial polarization—in between these destination parishes and underneath the theological disputes happening above their heads. However, because these parishioners in that broad middle are apart from those engaged in these disputes, when it comes to matters such as racism, unfortunately, these Catholics are shielded from having to reckon with the Church's complicity or their own.[81] Without the necessary distance, the Church is unable to combat the pervasive racial resentment and growing polarization or offer a critique of the cultural narratives that fuel them. And it may even be exacerbating the problems.

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[79] See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation, 15th Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 152-53.

[80] For an interesting exploration of the reality and impact of polarization in the U.S. Catholic Church, see Mary Ellen Konieczny, Charles C. Camosy, and Tricia C. Bruce, editors, *Polarization in the U.S. Catholic Church: Naming the Wounds, Beginning to Heal* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016).

[81] See Susan Crawford Sullivan, "Whither Polarization? (Non) Polarization on the Ground," in *Polarization in the U.S. Catholic Church*, 46-58.

1.2 Violence, Bias, and Their Remedy

As I have noted above, stories are what inform a person's identity and worldview. We do not understand ourselves or the world around us without some narrative that explains—sometimes accurately and sometimes inaccurately—them to us. But because narratives guide the way we understand and act in the world, they can also lead to bad acts; that is, uninterrogated, false narratives can be violent. And I have illustrated this by drawing out the narrative foundations of two instantiations of violence in the U.S.: racial resentment and polarization. In this section, I will offer a definition of violence that further confirms my assertion that racial resentment is and polarization can be violent. And I will also explain how violence is a form of bias—that is, a skewed narrative—whose solution is a holistic conversion.

1.2.1 Defining Violence

I contend that racial resentment is and polarization can be violent. At first glance, such an assertion may seem unwarranted as we compare these issues to gun violence or war. But scholarship in the field of peace studies renders the categorization appropriate and necessary.

Conceptually, violence seems to evade a straightforward definition. Part of this is because of the expanding list of actions, words, environments, and dispositions that are considered to be violent. While one might wish the principle, "I know it when I see it," [82] were operative in the case of violence, we are often, and unfortunately, taught about violence from those who are subject to it—"We know it when we endure it." Moreover, as violence is

[82] This famous line is reference to Justice Potter Stewart's concurring opinion in the Supreme Court's decision in *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 378 U.S. 184 (1964), 197. Stewart was grasping for a definition of the equally elusive terms.

often hidden in structures and cultures, it is frequently the case that the consequences of violence are the only apparent evidence of violence. To best understand the definition of violence I have adopted here, it is important to review some of the other options.

If we consider the definition of violence in medical literature, for some violence is "the exertion of substantial force, either physical or emotional, with the intent of causing harm to another individual or group of individuals."[83] This definition is one that emphasizes the actor/aggressor—a "force" is exerted with an "intent" of one party to inflict "harm" on another. Distinguish this from the definition provided by Louanne Lawson and Sara Rowe: "Violence is a violation of the fundamental human need for safety."[84] This definition focuses more directly on the victim of violence. The evaluation of violence does not require one to find "intent" on the part of an actor, but must only determine whether the victim understands their sense of safety to have been violated.

These two definitions reveal the ends of the spectrum associated with defining violence. One is either focused on the actor and their intent or on the victim. The World Health Organization seems to side with the former position in their definition:

> The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation.[85]

The WHO also provides an extensive typology of violence.[86] In their system, they detail three primary categories of violence: 1) self-directed, 2) interpersonal, and 3) collective. Each of these primary categories is further divided to include suicide and self-abuse (within self-

[83] David E. Newton, "Violence," *Gale Encyclopedia of Public Health, 2nd ed.* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2019), 1222.
[84] Louanne Lawson, "Violence," *Journal of Forensic Nursing* 5 (2009), 119.
[85] "World Report on Violence and Health: Summary 2002," World Health Organization (2002), 4.
[86] "World Report on Violence and Health: Summary 2002," 4.

directed violence); family/partner or community violence (within the interpersonal category); and social, political, and economic violence (within collective violence). Compared to the earlier examples, the definition is expansive.

But the WHO's definition and typology do seem to be missing something. Pal Ahluwalia and Toby Miller raise an important point: other issues, such as pollution and the military-industrial complex, can also be understood to have violent consequences. What Ahluwalia and Miller are gesturing toward is not a notion of violence that is agent-focused, nor is it a strictly victim-focused notion either. Instead, they are drawing our attention to indirect violence.[87]

Kathleen M. Weigert explores the "indirect" or "institutionalized" form of violence, influenced by the seminal works of Johan Galtung. She writes, "Structural violence . . . is differentiated from personal violence . . . and refers to preventable harm or damage to persons (and by extension to things) where there is no actor committing the violence or where it is not practical to search for the actor(s); such violence emerges from the unequal distribution of power and resources or, in other words, is said to be built into the structure(s)."[88] Further, this structural violence is the instantiation of another category of Galtung's, "cultural violence." Cultural violence is "those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence—exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics)—that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence."[89] For Galtung, it is in structures and through culture where "individuals may do enormous amounts of harm to other human beings without ever

[87] Pal Ahluwalia, "Violence," *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 25, no. 2 (2019), 108.
[88] Kathleen M. Weigert, "Structural Violence," *Encyclopedia of Violence, Peace and Conflict* Vol. 3 (2008), 2005.
[89] Weigert, "Structural Violence," 2007.

intending to do so, just performing their regular duties as a job defined in the structure."[90] And I believe that cultural violence is the source from which the vast majority of—if not all—other violence flows.

Encompassing all of this is Galtung's definition: "Violence is here defined as the cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is."[91] For example, when the average lifespan of a person in a particular region is X, and yet many are dying well before that age, there is likely a particular cause. For the purposes of this example, we will link the premature deaths to the unsafe emissions from a local factory. Galtung would consider the situation of *avoidable* premature deaths as a violent situation, and the source of the violence is the factory (an impersonal and unwilling object). But the responsibility would flow "upstream" to include those who have the capabilities to *avoid* such dangerous emissions. That responsibility could be shared between factory ownership, government leaders who subsidized the purchase of the land upon which the factory was built, and customers of products manufactured in the factory. It is the victim's circumstance, however directly or indirectly harmed, that flags the violence.[92] The violence is then determined through further examination of the situation.

Of course, there are challenges to this definition. Central among them is its relativity. Galtung himself understands that using "potential" as the standard against which one measures reality can be problematic. His response: "Our guide here would probably have to be whether the value to be realized is fairly consensual or not, although this is by no means

[90] Weigert, "Structural Violence," 2005.
[91] Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969), 168.
[92] Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," 178. For Galtung, "[t]he objective consequences, not the subjective intentions are the primary concern" 173. Further, "there is no reason to assume that structural violence amounts to less suffering than personal violence" 178.

satisfactory."[93] It is within this definition that we can include both direct, physical violence (*e.g.*, the ending of a life by a murderer ensures that the potential is never achieved by the victim in actuality) as well as indirect and abstract violence (*e.g.*, the continuation of assumptions of heteronormativity by society in general that prohibits the full inclusion of same-sex couples, which, for Galtung, would be a negation of an identity or meaning need). And this certainly reflects the violence that continues to be raised up by those who suffer from systemic racism, sexism, etc.

Although Galtung is forced to accept the general dis-ease with which one could apply a standard of potentiality, as described above, such an amorphous and ambiguous standard parallels the amorphousness and ambiguity of violence itself. In his exploration of cultural violence, Galtung notes that this type of violence manifests from the influence of religion, ideology, language, art, empirical science and formal science. The challenge with identifying cultural violence is that, because we are constantly swimming amidst these aspects of culture, it is hard to get the critical distance necessary to make a claim about their own problems or the problems they occlude. "Cultural violence," Galtung says, "makes direct and structural violence look, even feel, right—or at least not wrong."[94]

With these three contributions, Galtung has constructed a trio of "super-types" of violence that make up a "(vicious) violence triangle":

> Direct violence is an *event*; structural violence is a *process* with ups and downs; cultural violence is an *invariant*, a 'permanence', . . . remaining essentially the same for long periods, given the slow transformations of culture. . . . The three forms of violence enter time differently, somewhat like the difference in earthquake theory between the earthquake as an event, the movement of the tectonic plates as a process and the fault line as a more permanent condition.[95]

[93] Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," 169.
[94] Johan Galtung, "Cultural Violence," *Journal of Peace Studies* 27, no. 3 (1990), 291.
[95] Galtung, "Cultural Violence," 294.

Because of the interconnection of these three elements of violence, it can be hard to determine a particular source. The typical "causal flow" is from cultural, through structural, to direct violence. But the violence can start anywhere and can spread to the other aspects of the violence triangle.

As stated above, I contend that both racial resentment and polarization are violent. To illustrate this, I will apply Galtung's definition to both issues. It is necessary, then, to begin with the consequences.

The consequences of racial resentment are many. To give just a few examples, however, consider income disparity. In Boston in 2015, the median household income for White households was $247,000, and only $8 for Black households.[96] Consider also the role of racial resentment in the likelihood of a jury to find a Black defendant guilty. As one might expect, the higher the level of racial resentment in a juror directly corresponds to the greater likelihood of voting to convict.[97] Or consider the way racial resentment impacts Whites' attitudes toward the use of force by police—there is a direct relationship between heightened racial resentment and greater acceptance of police force.[98]

These are indeed the consequences of racial resentment. In order to deny such a claim, one must hold that the income disparity, higher conviction rate, or their being subject to greater police force without consequence is a result of something innate to the biology or character of the Black population. Given the decline in the belief in biological inferiority

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[96] Steven O. Roberts and Michael T. Rizzo, "The Psychology of American Racism," *American Psychologist* 74, no. 3 (2021), 483. Here, Roberts and Rizzo are discussing "passive racism," which would correspond to racial resentment in its assumption that many Whites perceive racism as a thing of the past and the resulting inactivity in response to racial disparity. But see, Simón Rios, "$8: The Complicated Story Behind One of the Most Repeated Statistics about Boston," WBUR (June 8, 2021), https://www.wbur.org/news/2021/07/08/greater-boston-black-families-net-worth.

[97] See Douglas Rice, Jesse Rhodes, and Tatishe Nteta, "Same as It Ever Was? The Impact of Racial Resentment on White Juror Decision-Making," *The Journal of Politics* 84, no. 2 (April 2022): 1202-1206.

[98] See J. Scott Carter and Mamadi Corra, "Racial Resentment and Attitudes Toward the Use of Force by Police: An Over-Time Trend Analysis," *Sociological Inquiry* 86, no. 4 (November 2016): 492-511.

over time and the rise in Americans who claim to be non- or anti-racist, that would be an unlikely claim. So something else must be operating behind the scenes—some other rationale for accepting this state of affairs. These are the legitimizing racial myths and the just-world orientation narrative that underlie racial resentment. Whether consciously held or not, these are the cultural narratives that buttress such disparities.

These consequences are illustrations of a "difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is." That Black persons could make a higher income on average and not live in poverty in Boston is the difference between a real potential and the actual reality. The same is true for criminal convictions or being subject to police brutality. The potential need not include a higher conviction rate or a higher subjectivity to police force. Such rates could be in parity with their White counterparts.

The violence in this situation, according to Galtung, would be the cause of this difference. Why the poverty, why the convictions, why the brutality? To raise the issue of structural or systemic racism would violate the just-world orientation held by many Whites and bring to the surface the legitimizing racial myths held by the same. But for the presence of this orientation and the power of these myths, addressing structural and systemic racism would not be perceived as unjustified for those undeserving. As such, the just-world orientation and the legitimizing racial myths that allow racial resentment to work are the violence inherent in it. And since racial resentment could not work without those two narratives, racial resentment is necessarily violent. The violence that is the cultural phenomenon of racial resentment are the stories.

Just as racial resentment is violence, so too is polarization. Negative partisanship and extreme polarization have significant consequences in American society. Some of those consequences are obvious: parties are unwilling to bargain and negotiate, leaving

compromise a precarious agreement; legislation is at the will of the most extreme party members through the use of procedural measures like the filibuster or veto; and Congress is significantly less productive.[99] This lack of meaningful work on the part of Congress, for example, leaves otherwise beneficial legislation without a meaningful opportunity to be passed. Consider the example raised in the introduction regarding gun control legislation. Until just recently, no legislative response was offered by congress because the two sides were unwilling to meet. Shooting deaths, however, continued. There is a difference, then, between the potential (*i.e.*, flourishing life) and the actual (*i.e.*, lives cut short due to shooting deaths)—a situation of violence.

But beyond the bureaucratic downsides, many other negative results flow from polarization. As political positions continue to motivate decisions, Americans can sacrifice wages, accepting lower-paying work for politically like-minded companies (*i.e.*, actual wages are lower than potential wages and this has real-world consequences).[100] Americans may be prevented from developing friendships with neighbors and colleagues from different political backgrounds (*i.e.*, actual relationships are more restricted than they potentially could be, resulting in potential psycho-social harms). Real data and meaningful information might be ignored on important issues like climate change (*i.e.*, actual knowledge about a life-threatening reality might be significantly less than it could and should be, resulting in the perpetuation of the life-threatening situation). But more pressing a concern is that this polarization and the demonization of political opponents could result in a steep rise in

[99] Studies have shown "that the 10 least polarized congressional terms produced almost 16 significant enactments per term, whereas the 10 most polarized terms produced only slightly more than 10. This gap would be even larger except for the enormous legislative output following the September 11 terrorist attacks . . . ." Michael J. Barber and Nolan McCarty offer a helpful overview and summary of the many causes attributed to the increase in polarization in Barber and McCarty, "Causes and Consequences of Polarization," 42.
[100] This and the two following examples were delineated in "Researchers Find Broad Impacts from Political Polarization," *UW Navigation* (February 10, 2021), https://www.uwyo.edu/news/2021/02/researchers-find-broad-impacts-from-political-polarization.html.

political violence. We are already witnessing an increase in hate crimes, for example, which is the result of polarization's influence in which opponents are rendered non-human (*i.e.*, the actual beliefs we hold about our neighbors is inaccurate and falls short of the potential with devastating consequences).[101] And we saw the death of seven individuals resulting from the January 6th Capitol Riot, a storming of the Capitol linked to polarizing, and false, information.[102]

In the categories of violence delineated by Galtung, racial resentment and polarization (at least in its extreme form) fall easily within the definition of cultural violence. This is the case because what is operative in these instantiations of violence are stories—the essential makeup of human cultures. Because so many who would consider themselves non- or anti-racist so easily qualify as racially resentful, and because so many consider themselves to have the truth are actually complacent in a polarizing society, it is clear that, for them, the held just-world orientation and belief in the legitimizing racial myths or the assertion that the political opponent is out to destroy the country "look, even feel, right—or at least not wrong."

1.2.2 Violence: A Bias in Need of Conversion

One way of thinking about the problems described above, how they are violent and how we might overcome them, comes from theologian and philosopher Bernard Lonergan, S.J. In his work, Lonergan explores the way persons come to know, the ways they can know wrongly, the impact of that on the community or society, and the ways they can know

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[101] Zid Jilani and Jeremy Adam Smith, "What Is the True Cost of Polarization in America?" *Greater Good Magazine*, March 4, 2019, https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/what_is_the_true_cost_of_polarization_in_america.
[102] Chris Cameron, "These Are the People Who Died in Connection With the Capitol Riot," *The New York Times* (January 5, 2022), https://www.nytimes.com/2022/01/05/us/politics/jan-6-capitol-deaths.html.

rightly. Along these lines of knowing, the basic moves in a person and a community are bias and conversion.

To best understand how these two concepts are understood, some preliminary groundwork needs to be laid. First, Lonergan describes individuals as living within horizons. These horizons are "the scope of our knowledge, and the range of our interests."[103] Horizons are neutral in Lonergan's schema, functioning as the starting point or current position of a person. But while the concept is neutral, the particular horizon one finds themselves in is also the cause of restricted knowledge and action. Lonergan notes that these horizons are both "the fertile source of further knowledge and care; but they are also the boundaries that limit our capacities for assimilating more than we already have attained."[104] Our personal horizon, then, because of the influence of many different factors (*e.g.*, socio-economics, politics, education, dominant religion, etc.) will either encourage or discourage our consideration of new horizons.

New horizons—that is, a change in one's positionality in knowledge and interest—come about through self-transcendence. And this self-transcendence is achieved by participation in Lonergan's four transcendental precepts: Be attentive, intelligent, reasonable, and responsible.[105] Through these, one attends to the world around them, thinks about that world around them, asks about the truth or falsity of their conclusions or the answers they encounter, and acts in the world. The acquisition of additional information that builds upon or reconstructs prior knowledge (*i.e.*, an insight) shifts the person into a new horizon with its accompanying new data and new questions.

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[103] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 236.
[104] Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 237.
[105] Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 103, 231-32.

The change in horizons is a gradual and lifelong process. As our interests and knowledge shift, so does the possibility for self-transcendence—both positively and negatively. Although these incremental steps can lead to individual, communal, or societal progress, the resistance to transcendence via new insights can also occur, bringing individual, communal, or societal decline. It is to this resistance—conscious or unwitting—that I will now turn.

In his book, *Insight*, Lonergan takes up a longer description of this resistance, which he terms "bias." For him, bias is an unwanted insight.[106] The exclusion of an insight, however, means to "exclude the further questions that would arise from it, and the complementary insights that would carry it towards a rounded and balanced viewpoint." It results in a misunderstanding "both in ourselves and in others." And leads us, in maybe his most damning conclusion, "into the inner drama of fantasy . . . [which] rob[s] the development of one's common sense."[107]

Lonergan delineates four categories of bias. First, there is individual bias or egoism. This is the "incomplete development of intelligence." Questions are asked by the individual, and they think for themselves. "But it fails to pivot from the initial and preliminary motivation provided by desires and fears to the self-abnegation involved in allowing complete free play to intelligent inquiry."[108] Selfishness characterizes this bias as the person is willing to take from society, but is unwilling to offer "proportionate contributions."[109] There is an unwillingness to ask the further relevant questions beyond their own interests (*i.e.*, there is no contribution to the common good).

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[106] Bernard Lonergan, *Insight*, edited by Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 214.
[107] Lonergan, *Insight*, 214-15.
[108] Lonergan, *Insight*, 245-46.
[109] Lonergan, *Insight*, 246.

Second is group bias. This category is basically individual bias on a group level, "as the individual egoist puts further questions up to a point, but desists before reaching conclusions incompatible with his egoism, so also the group is prone to have a blind spot for the insights that reveal its well-being to be excessive or its usefulness at an end."[110] The insights of individuals, cumulatively considered in a society, provide the resources for practical common sense. The individual egoist does not provide their contribution and has to secretly do so as they claim their rights but avoid their responsibilities. In group bias, however, common interests help buttress the bias. What distinguishes insights that contribute to the common good and those that do not is often based on whether they are "operative." To be operative means that an insight is capable of being implemented because it "either meet[s] with no group resistance or else find[s] favor with groups powerful enough to overcome what resistance there is."[111] Politically speaking, an operative insight is one that is the will of the people or at least the will of those with power. On the other hand, an inoperative insight is either not the will of the people (*e.g.*, because it would result in such high taxes that the individuals are unwilling to consider it) or it is not the will of those with power (*e.g.*, it would be too disruptive of the status quo in which the powerful maintain their power).

The challenge with group bias, though, is that it "may be secret and almost unconscious. . . . [W]hat originally was a neglected possibility becomes a grotesquely distorted reality."[112] The belief in the American Dream or, at least, its universality, offers an illustration of the foundation for unconscious group bias. The insights that would disprove the myth have been repressed as inoperative (*i.e.*, such insights would challenge the status

[110] Lonergan, *Insight*, 248.
[111] Lonergan, *Insight*, 249.
[112] Lonergan, *Insight*, 250.

quo) to such a degree that American culture continues to perpetuate it, further strengthening the distorted reality. But it must be acknowledged that societies are constituted by numerous groups, many of which overlap. These sub-groups can grapple with insights independently of other groups, so insights can be gained by some groups and not by others. Depending on how operative the insights are (recall that this is an assessment of will and power), different courses of action are taken by different groups, social classes emerge, and intersocietal conflict arises as some groups wish to correct group bias while others wish to repress those insights.[113]

Third, Lonergan offers the category of the general bias of common sense. This category is basically the "longer cycle" of the effects of group bias. If groups bias suppresses insights beneficial to a lower social class, for example, then general bias impacts thought to such a degree that the suppressed insights and, therefore, the further insights that would have followed erode common sense, resulting in a deprivation of "subsequent stages both of the further ideas to which they would give rise and of the correction that they and their retinue would bring to the ideas that are implemented."[114] The consequences, according to Lonergan, are dire: societal progress slows to a halt, an anti-intellectualism emerges that sees intelligent endeavors as irrelevant, and, at the extreme, this situation arises:

> [E]very type of intellectual independence, whether personal, cultural, scientific, philosophic, or religious, has no better basis than nonconscious myth. The time has come for the conscious myth that will secure man's total subordination to the requirements of reality. Reality is the economic development, the military equipment, and the political dominance of the all-inclusive state . . . [U]nless common sense can learn to overcome its bias acknowledging and submitting to a higher principle [*i.e.*, detached intelligence], unless common sense can be taught to resist its perpetual temptation to adopt the easy, obvious, practical compromise, then one must expect the succession

[113] Lonergan, *Insight*, 250.
[114] Lonergan, *Insight*, 254.

> of ever less comprehensive viewpoints, and in the limit the destruction of all that has been achieved.[115]

The solution to this longer cycle of decline is a path through culture. A person "is a compound-in-tension of intelligence and intersubjectivity, and it is only through the parallel compound of a culture that his tendencies to aberration can be offset proximately and effectively."[116] But through his long cycle, culture, too, has been tainted.

> Opinions and attitudes that once were the oddity of a minority gradually spread through society to become the platitudes of politicians and journalists, the assumptions of legislators and educators, the uncontroverted nucleus of the common sense of a people.[117]

I will return to this idea below.

Lonergan's biases are not just the result of the willful exclusion of insights, however. They result, too, from our second consciousness, distinct from the "reflective and critical consciousness" through which one practices the transcendental precepts. This fourth category, dramatic bias, results from "repression," which he calls "the aberrant censorship that is engaged in preventing insight,"[118] that functions within the emotional or affective consciousness (*e.g.*, "distaste, pride, dread, horror, revulsion"[119]). Put differently, other preexisting forces in our horizons have caused certain symbols, images, ideas, and the like from making it to the reflective, critical consciousness. The affective or emotional consciousness (*i.e.*, the "psyche) filters certain matters upon which certain new insights rely. It is not exactly a willful repression on the part of the individual, but a condition, albeit a changeable one, that prevents the insight. Robert Doran, S.J., one of Lonergan's own

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[115] Lonergan, *Insight*, 256-57, 259.
[116] Lonergan, *Insight*, 261-62.
[117] Lonergan, *Insight*, 262.
[118] Lonergan, *Insight*, 216.
[119] Lonergan, *Insight*, 215.

students, offers an insight into the rehabilitation of the constraining affective or emotional consciousness and its repression.

Countering bias, in Lonergan's understanding, are conversions. He defines conversion as "the movement into a new horizon [that] involves an about-face; it comes out of the old by repudiating characteristic features; it begins a new sequence that can keep revealing ever greater depth and breadth and wealth."[120] Although an "about-face" sounds instantaneous, it is important to note that, like bias, conversion is more often a *process* and not a moment.

Lonergan considers conversion in three categories. First, intellectual conversion is a "radical clarification and . . . the elimination of an exceedingly stubborn and misleading myth concerning reality, objectivity, and human knowledge."[121] Here, one comes to know more accurately. Second, moral conversion "changes the criterion of one's decisions and choices from satisfactions to values."[122] Here, a person makes decisions not out of self-interest, but toward the common good. Finally, religious conversion is an "other-worldly falling in love. It is total and permanent self-surrender without conditions, qualifications, reservations."[123] Here, Lonergan distinguishes between operative grace (*i.e.*, God's gift of grace—the religious conversion) and cooperative grace (*i.e.*, our ongoing acceptance of that gift of grace "towards a full and complete transformation"[124]). Put differently, the religious conversion is the accepted insight into God's love for us.

At the heart of all conversions is the religious conversion. This awareness of God's unconditional love frees a person to engage differently with the world around them. They

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120 Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 237-38.
121 Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 238.
122 Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 240.
123 Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 240.
124 Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 241.

are freed from the selfishness that prevents choosing common goods over self-interested ones. They are also freed from the stagnant or declined common sense, able to follow insights to their next set of questions. As such, at the heart of all conversion—despite the actions we might take to facilitate further conversion—is God's love; that is, God's grace.

Now, adding to these three conversions, Doran offers a fourth: psychic conversion. Quoting Lonergan, Doran notes that human persons have two ways of being conscious: the higher, critical consciousness and the sensitive, affective consciousness. The link between these two has been broken.[125] Ideally, these two would work together and not against or independent of one another. As noted above, the biases that impact persons can be willful—the product of the higher, critical consciousness (*i.e.*, individual bias and group bias)—or can be the result of dramatic bias—a person is *prevented* from gaining the insight due to repression.

These two consciousnesses are in a mutually-formative relationship. As Doran writes

> [T]he first way of being conscious, the sensitive stream of our consciousness, is being changed by the very performance of these intentional operations. Moreover, obstacles to performing the intentional operations can arise from the sensitive stream of consciousness itself, from a psychic resistance to raising relevant questions: from our sensations, images, emotions, desires, fears, joys, sadness, as well as from the individual, group, and general biases that are addressed by moral and intellectual conversion. Lonergan himself also speaks of a dramatic bias that is directly connected to this sensitive stream. Psychic conversion is establishing the connection between the two ways of being conscious, a connection that is easily lost and difficult to recover once it has been lost.[126]

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[125] That is "the link between the intentional operations of understanding, judgment, and decision, and the tidal movement that begins before consciousness, emerges into consciousness in the form of dream images and affects, continues to permeate intentional operations in the form of feelings, and reaches beyond these operations and states in the interpersonal relations and commitments that constitute families, communities, and religions." Robert Doran, "Two Ways of Being Conscious: The Notion of Psychic Conversion," *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2013), 7.

[126] Robert M. Doran, "What Does Bernard Lonergan Mean by 'Conversion'?"

As the intentional operations are undertaken, the psyche undergoes a transformation, allowing more symbols, images, and the like to arrive at the level of the critical consciousness. Therefore, one can perform these intentional operations with greater degrees of freedom as the interaction between the critical and sensitive streams of consciousness continues—as they mutually form one another. In a word, psychic conversion is "the transformation of the censor from a repressive to a constructive role in a person's development."[127]

I posit that these sensations, images, emotions, desires, etc. are the primary components of a person's culture. Bryan Massingale, drawing from and building upon Lonergan's definition, considers culture "a system of meanings and values, expressed in symbolic form, that conveys and expresses a people's understanding of life . . . the set of attitudes toward life, beliefs about reality, and assumptions about the universe shared by a human group."[128] That culture is expressed in symbolic form implicates the very sensations, images, and emotions that are subject to Doran's psychic conversion. And, importantly, this culture—the symbols, images, emotions, desires, etc.—is communicated through and informs (or misinforms) our stories.

In light of this, I follow Doran's logic in that conversion is a process that implicates both the critical and sensitive streams of consciousness. And for those intentional operations to work more effectively, one must also be open to a psychic conversion such that those primary components of culture that might facilitate further repression are broken down and those that might facilitate further conversion are let through to the critical consciousness.

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[127] Doran, "Two Ways of Being Conscious: The Notion of Psychic Conversion," 8.
[128] Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 16.

As I quoted above, Lonergan sees culture as the corrective to the long cycle of decline. I agree. If we are to counteract the violence of racial resentment and polarization, we have to confront our cultural foundations. Our cultural foundations are the sensations, images, emotions, beliefs, etc. (*i.e.*, some conscious and some unconscious operations) that are expressed in symbolic form in the narratives that pervade our lives and our society (*i.e.*, some consciously and unconsciously influential stories). This requires the practice of intentional operations, the willingness to be converted at both levels of consciousness, and an openness to a change in our stories.

The unwillingness to engage in this transformative and self-transcending process is an acceptance of the status quo, the acceptance of individual bias, and the acceptance of the longer cycle of decline. It is the acceptance of cultural malformation and, ultimately, an acceptance of violence. While we cannot consider all bias to be violence, all violence is bias. The remedy to violence, then, is the remedy to bias: conversion. And, in the case of racial resentment and polarization, this bias is built upon the cultural as it infects the moral, intellectual, and, ultimately, religious aspects of our lives. Therefore, this bias requires a conversion of culture, those foundational images, beliefs, symbols, and the stories that convey them, alongside a moral, intellectual, and religious conversion. In a word, we must revise our stories.

1.3 The Path Forward

The criticism of our influencing narratives is the subject of this dissertation. Drawing on the formative work of James Alison and Thomas Merton, I will explore herein their thought as it relates to methods by which we critique these cultural and innate narratives and unveil them for what they really are. Of particular interest are two significant cultural

institutions and expressions—the church and spirituality—and the way stories change. More specifically, I will plumb the depths of these thinkers to find the ecclesiological and spiritual practices that can predispose a person, community, and, as a result, society to conversion. And I will show how their own lives witness to conversion as a change in their narratives.

Of all the interlocutors I could have selected, Alison and Merton are well-situated to help in this exploration. This is the case because both focus significantly on the revision of the stories that inform our identities, and both are firmly committed to truth as a central aspect of their theologies and spiritualities. Further, through the ecclesial and spiritual practices that will be discussed in the following chapters, we will discover that Alison and Merton are both well-positioned to address not only the cultural aspect, but also the moral, intellectual, and religious aspects of conversion. Without this broader, more holistic vision of conversion, the transformation of our narratives—and of ourselves—will be significantly impaired.

To reiterate, then, the two unique problems that face the U.S.—racial resentment and polarization—are instantiations of cultural violence. These situations are the result of bias. To counter this cultural violence, we ought to concern ourselves with the cultural aspects of our individual and communal lives.

For the Christian, cultural positionality is influenced and formed by the Church. It is, for most, the sole and unique touchpoint for their religious lives—the location they are most in communion with the Divine and the larger Body of Christ: in the way Christians understand their ecclesiological task (*i.e.*, What are we doing on a Sunday morning?); the readings, songs, prayers, and homilies they hear; the community with whom they gather; the art that surrounds them in statuary or stained glass; and the way their church leaders

communicate the faith; the Christian imagination is formed (or, God forbid, malformed) and the Christian ideals are laid out as Christians are challenged to strive toward them.

But, as described above, the Church is not immune from the same racial resentment and polarization that plagues the larger community. It is a community and an institution that also must be scrutinized. Absent this additional scrutiny—a grappling with what Church can and should mean—it can merely facilitate a reinforcement of those societal problems.

As our culture is formed by communities of faith, our culture is manifested in our spirituality. I am heavily influenced by Jon Sobrino's conception of spirituality, which, incidentally for him, is also his conception of being a human being: "To live with spirit, to react correctly to concrete reality [*i.e.*, honesty with the real, fidelity to the real, and allowing ourselves to be carried forward by the real], is to re-create, throughout history, the fundamental structure of the life of Jesus."[129] For Sobrino, Christian humanity is charged with grappling with the *real*—sorting truth from falsehood in the world around them—and instantiating the life of Jesus in the particular historical situations in which they find themselves.

There is a necessary relationship between the church and spirituality. As the church helps to form the spirituality of its members, the collective spirituality of the members helps to create the spiritual ethos of the church. The relationship, then, is cyclical. We do not have a spirituality without the community of the faithful. But we also do not have a community of faithful without some commonalities in our spirituality. Diversity is not denied—in either the church or spirituality—but works to accommodate a grappling with the real in the many

[129] Jon Sobrino, "Spirituality and the Following of Jesus," in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology*, edited by Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 242.

diverse ways the global family encounters it. But some commonality, some uniquely Christian characteristics, bind these different spiritualities and spiritual practices.

Finally, I will look at the narratives operative in each of the thinkers I explore below. Their lives are marked by a shift in story. And their thought encourages the same for their readers. I will explore, in particular, the ways their conceptions of church and spirituality influenced their own conversions, their own story changes. And, with hope, we will see the potential fruits and possible applications of these ecclesial and spiritual practices from their lives for combatting effectively the violent resentment and polarization that we face in the United States.

CHAPTER 2

JAMES ALISON AND COMMUNAL CONVERSION

When he was at the table with them,
he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.
Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him,
and he vanished from their sight.
Luke 24: 30-31

In chapter one, acknowledging human beings as the "storytelling animal," we began with an exploration of the role of narrative in forming identities and worldviews in human persons. However, it was noted, too, that if we cannot avoid the use of stories in the creation of our identities and worldviews, we are obliged to ensure that those narratives reflect truth. Certainly, an imperfect truth will prevail through our lives, but we ought to consider the ways we can ensure our narratives reflect the truth. To do this, we need to interrogate the narratives that we hold already and critically examine the stories we encounter in the world. The reason for this is that false narratives can have serious consequences, including violence.

There are two particular forms of violence that are the focus of this study. The first is racial resentment. This elusive form of racism is significantly more pervasive than overt "traditional" racism. It infects not just those who consider themselves not to be racist, but even those who would consider themselves actively anti-racist. Racial resentment is built upon two narratives: the just-world value orientation and legitimizing racial myths. Both of these narratives are demonstrably false. Racial resentment, however, persists and has violent.

The second form of violence is polarization, understood as the division along ideological lines between people or groups within the same community. In the United States, polarization, built on a foundation of the false narratives that lead to negative partisanship, leads to tragic consequences, often resulting in the failure to pass political policies that

ensure the care for those most marginalized in society, whether in education, healthcare, housing, or other essential forms of care. And we also discovered that this polarization is not limited to the "political" sphere as it also infects the ecclesial sphere, especially in the Catholic Church. And this, too, has negative consequences, including the use of religion to support those problematic political policies mentioned above, the individualization of notions of salvation at the expense of the community of believers, and an overall deterioration of the gospel.

To further clarify how these prevalent issues are violence, I offered a working definition of violence, inspired by Johan Galtung: the human cause of the difference between the potential and the actual, between what could have been and what is, that results in some harm, including the incapacity for full flourishing. To understand violence in this way opens up for us the reach that violence has in the lives of all, as either the victims or perpetrators of violence, though often being both at the same time in different spheres of one's life. In particular, we noted how, because racial resentment and polarization are the result of false narratives, the stories are forms of cultural violence.

We discussed how these problematic narratives, or forms of cultural violence, that contribute to the particular forms of violence we are exploring align with Bernard Lonergan's notion of bias. For Lonergan, conversion is what counteracts bias. In addition to the types of conversion Lonergan established—moral, intellectual, and religious—Robert Doran added a fourth: psychic conversion. This last category of conversion, while not independent from the other categories, engages culture most explicitly. It alters one's view of images, sensory experiences, emotions, and desires. This results in an ability to see the flaws more easily and effectively in the narratives that shape us because we disconnect the feeling

from the story. In the words of Hochschild, the story no longer *feels* true. Thus, we can realign our narratives into greater consistency with the gospel.

But we cannot achieve this conversion—this transformation of our feelings, emotions, desires, etc.—without an openness to that experience, to that grace, to that inbreaking of God's self-gift. I contend that this openness to conversion is facilitated by ecclesial and spiritual practices in the Church.

In this chapter, we will explore the ecclesial and communal aspect of fostering that openness to conversion. To do this, we will engage the life and thought of James Alison. Alison, whose own life was marked by a conversion toward radical self-acceptance and an acknowledgement of his being loved by God *as* a gay man, establishes the communal-anthropological reasons for the problematic construction of exclusionary groups, the fear of being marginalized by the groups to which one belongs, and the method historically used for maintaining that structure of in-groups and out-groups. But Alison also establishes an ecclesially-based method for rethinking one's participation in that system, rethinking the institutions—including religious institutions—that perpetuate that system, and our role in the transformation of our communities in and through them.

I will begin the chapter by describing Alison's communal anthropology. This will require a discussion of René Girard's mimetic theory, upon which Alison builds his theological framework. Then I will turn to Alison's conception of conversion—its inspiration and the aspects of the process of conversion that result from that initial encounter. I will describe Alison's own conversion, which reflects the conversion process described in his theology. Next, I will offer an exploration of the ecclesial basis Alison offers for conversion. And, finally, I will apply Alison's framework toward a diagnosis of the two instantiations of violence being discussed here: racial resentment and polarization. We will

discover that Alison has much to offer for both our understanding of the problems and the path toward their remedy.

2.1 Alison's Communal Anthropology

Among James Alison's many contributions, one of his principal theological gifts is his application of Girardian mimetic theory to the reading of scripture and certain doctrines in his theological thought. From scripture and his own theological reflection, he crafts what I will refer to as a *communal* theological anthropology. While theological anthropologies typically do not imply that community or relationship are inessential to the human person, we often read in theological anthropology texts characteristics that describe us individually; for example, that we are created in the image and likeness of God, created with dignity, created good, etc.[130] It is only after establishing these individual characteristics that we come to the communal description of human beings: for example, that we were created for relationship with God and neighbor, that we are to live in solidarity, etc.

Alison flips the order of this exposition. His description of theological anthropology begins with how we are in relationship with one another because we only know who we are in the context of relationships. And only after detailing this does he turn to the marks that should characterize the individual.

In this section, I will begin by summarizing René Girard's mimetic theory, establishing the basics upon which Alison relied in the development of his own theology. I will then turn to Alison's additions to Girard's theory, in which he focuses on the

[130] See, for example, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "Classical Approaches to Theological Anthropology," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Theological Anthropology*, edited by Mary Ann Hinsdale and Stephen Okey (New York: T&T Clark, 2023): 11-22, and John R. Sachs, "Creation in God's Image," in *The Christian Vision of Humanity: Basic Christian Anthropology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1991): 12-22.

Resurrection and its impact on Chrisitan disciples, the formation of their new identities, and the formation of their new relationships.

2.1.1 René Girard's Mimetic Theory

Alison's theology is built upon the foundation of René Girard's mimetic theory. In his book *The Joy of Being Wrong*, Alison offers a thorough summary of mimetic theory as he has inherited it from his reading of Girard.[131] Here, I will offer a basic overview of mimetic theory as he outlines it in the book, and, in particular, define the main terms that we will encounter in the rest of this chapter. Girard's central insight was "the mimetic nature of desire, along with an awareness of the anthropological significance of this desire as structuring, and structured by, human violence."[132]

Mimetic theory emerged through a larger study of the activity of animals and humans, from which Girard concluded "that virtually all human and animal behavior is learned and that all learning happens through imitation."[133] In a sense, what Girard was saying is that there is no activity that is not imitated activity. In the 1990s, this conclusion would be supported with further evidence resulting from a study undertaken by neurophysiologists who discovered mirror neurons at work in the brains of monkeys and

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[131] See James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1998), 9-21. Unless otherwise noted, the summary offered in this section is drawn from Alison's summary cited here.
[132] Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 9.
[133] John P. Edwards, *James Alison and a Girardian Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 37, citing René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, translated by Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 7. For additional information about mimetic theory, see Jean-Michel Oughourlian, *The Genesis of Desire*, translated by Eugene Webb (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2010) and Jean-Michel Oughourlian, *The Mimetic Brain*, translated by Trevor Cribben Merrill (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2016).

human beings.[134] Our identity, then, including what we consider to be our "self," is the result of our imitation of others.

This imitation is key to survival. Alison states that our relationship with these others we imitate is "absolutely vital to our health, stability, sanity and so on."[135] When we are born and as we are raised, we imitate those who raise us because these are often the people who also feed us and provide us with shelter. When we enter school, and especially as we journey through middle and high school, we imitate those with whom we would like to be friends, who offer us a safe social group in which we can be authentic.

Our imitation includes not just the imitation of others' actions, but our imitation of their desire as well. Contrary to an understanding of human beings as neutral entities who develop desires based on the objects, individuals, or ideas that they encounter—what is referred to as "linear" desire—Girard posited that we desire according to the desire of another—that is, we desire what others desire. Because we desire that which others desire, Girard argued, all desire is "triangular," as opposed to linear, meaning that there are three entities or "points" involved in any act of desire: 1) the mediator/model who first desires the object, 2) a person who desires the object that the mediator/model desires *because* the

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[134] The discovery of mirror neurons has helped support the claims for the fundamental role of imitation in human beings, and mirror neurons are considered partially responsible for "empathy, affective resonance, action representation, communication and language, and theory of mind, our capacity for imitation is "vastly more complex" than mirror neurons can be responsible for on their own. Scott R. Garrels, "Human Imitation, Historical, Philosophical, and Scientific Perspectives," in *Mimesis and Science: Empirical Research on Imitation and the Mimetic Theory of Culture and Religion*, edited by Scott R. Garrels (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2011), 24-25. For additional information on the discovery of mirror neurons and their role in the brain, see Sourya Acharya and Samarth Shyukla, "Mirror Neurons: Enigma of the Metaphysical Modular Brain," *Journal of Natural Science, Biology and Medicine* 3, no. 2 (July-December 2012): 118-24, and Scott R. Garrels, ed., *Mimesis and Science: Empirical Research on Imitation and the Mimetic Theory of Culture and Religion* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2011).

[135] James Alison, *Broken Hearts & New Creations* (London: Continuum, 2010), 61. Alison argues elsewhere that mimesis "is to psychology what gravity is to physics. It is made concrete in the imitation, learning, and repetition which is what enables an infant to become a socialized human being." Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 28.

mediator/model desires it, and 3) the object of desire. In the end, the object of desire is not necessarily desirable on its own to person number two as it is desirable because the mediator/model desires it. For example, many law students who would not otherwise desire working in "big law"—law firms with high billable hour requirements and poor work-life balance, but that also pay large salaries—begin to do so because their law school classmates desire such a career and such a lifestyle.

> "[W]ho I am" is enormously dependent upon a more or less pacific relationship with that other which forms me. In fact, when I say "I," or express my "self," it is the symptom of a series of negotiations within a "we" that is speaking.[136]

Mimesis, then, is "the absolute condition for the existence of humanity."[137] Without imitation, we have no identity.

And along with identity comes belonging. Our identity is bound up with social groups, from families to clans to nations, and we, at least until we break from them (assuming we can break from them at all), tend to remain in these social groups. While the belonging created in the social groups that are our families or school friends might seem banal, there are other spheres of life in which belonging might result in more negative consequences, such as our belonging to the nation of which we call ourselves citizens, the political party with which we align ourselves, or the religious, racial, or ethnic groups with which we identify. Our imitation of desire, then, has the capacity of leading us into both positive and negative identities.

Each of these types of relationships is built upon reciprocity. Reciprocity can be understood as our reciprocating the good that is done for us as well as the harm that is done to us. Think of the saying, "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine." This is an example of

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[136] Alison, "Love Your Enemy: Within a Divided Self," in *Broken Hearts and New Creations,* 161.
[137] Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 28.

"friendly reciprocity," in which we do good to those who do good to us. But think of the Old Testament passage, "Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (Lev. 24:19-20). This is an example of "hostile reciprocity," in which we return evil for evil.

So along with the language and culture of our families, nations, religious traditions, and the like, "one of the things we pick up from our social group with astonishing ease, is enemies: the one who is not like us and, by comparison with whom, we know who we are."[138] These dual acquisitions result in a "divided self," a self received from those persons responsible for "nurturing us and yet also locking us into hostilities and hatreds we do not understand, but which inform our capacity to understand."[139] In the acquisition of our commitment to family and friends and our suspicion of or hatred for the enemy, mimesis "is both the condition for our attraction toward others and our separation from them, leading to the construction of our individuality and identity."[140]

The divided self, then, exists in a context of relationships characterized by reciprocity. The "social other" "tends to teach us a pattern of desire such that what is normal is reciprocity, which of course includes retaliation."[141] This social other "includes the whole interpersonal and cultural network of people, values, institutions, environment, etc., that constitute the framework of one's perception and knowing."[142] And as a result of our being formed by the desire or hatred of the social other, we are divided into in-groups and out-groups. We define our in-groups "over-and-against" the identities of the out-groups. *Amicus*

[138] Alison, "Love Your Enemy: Within a Divided Self," in *Broken Hearts and New Creations*, 169.
[139] Alison, "Love Your Enemy: Within a Divided Self," in *Broken Hearts and New Creations*, 171.
[140] Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 28.
[141] Alison, "Love Your Enemy: Within a Divided Self," in *Broken Hearts and New Creations*, 166.
[142] Edwards, *James Alison and a Girardian Theology*, 68.

meus, inimicus inimici mei. Put differently, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend." As Alison says, "Give people a common enemy, and you will give them a common identity."[143]

In light of these in-groups and out-groups, imitation can also result in conflict; that is, "mimetic rivalry." For example, one form of imitation is "acquisitive mimesis." This is the imitation of others' "efforts to acquire the objects that we need or desire."[144] There are other forms of mimesis beyond the acquisitive,[145] but this form offers one of the clearer examples of how mimesis, generally, can lead to conflict. In the case here, if we consider circumstances of acquisitive mimesis, and the situation is such that there is, or is perceived to be, scarcity of resources—for example, there is only so much money, so many nice vehicles, and so many safe places to live—conflict emerges between or among those who desire the particular money, nice vehicles, or safe places to live.

But conflict does not emerge just because of the presence of acquisitive—or any other category of—mimesis. Another factor must be considered: proximity. There are times when the object desired is between a mediator/model and a desiring person who, because of "distance," be that "geographical, social, or psychological barriers," prevents any conflict from arising. Put differently, the two desiring subjects are not close enough for contact. This is "external mediation."[146] However, there is also "internal mediation," in which there is sufficient proximity between the two desiring subjects such that "their respective spheres of possible identities intersect more or less extensively," and "the subject perceives the maintenance or realization of his own identity, or the acquisition of a particular object, as in

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[143] Alison, "Love Your Enemy: Within a Divided Self," in *Broken Hearts and New Creations*, 165.
[144] Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 12-13. See also Edwards, *James Alison and a Girardian Theology*, 37-38, citing René Girard, *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, translated by Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987).
[145] Acquisitive mimesis is also referred to as "possessive mimesis." Other categories of mimesis include "conflictual" or "antagonistic mimesis," as well as a third category, variously referred to as "unobstacled," "nonrivalistic," "pacific" mimesis, or "desire *au delà du scandale*." Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 12-14.
[146] Edwards, *James Alison and a Girardian Theology*, 26.

conflict with that of the mediator."[147] Here, it is not merely the object that the mediator/model is desiring that the other person wants, but they "desire to possess the mediator's *being*, which the subject perceives to be more substantial and self-sustaining than his own."[148] In order to gain their being or to experience what they are experiencing, they desire that object.

The way these conflicts are resolved is through the arbitrary selection of an "other" who, by the unanimous decision of the community, is in some way "expelled or excluded." This expulsion of the victim is accompanied by the creation of narratives that impute the responsibility for the group's conflict on the innocent victim. This, what Girard calls the "scapegoat mechanism," relies upon "the blindness of its participants as to what is *really* going on: they have to believe in the guilt or dangerous nature of the one expelled."[149]

The expulsion of the scapegoat brings a fabricated "peace" to the individuals or group who expelled them. And this process, according to Girard, is repeated cyclically; that is, the peace that emerges is only temporary, so a new scapegoat must eventually be found and expelled. However, upon discovery of the scapegoat victim's innocence, the witnesses to that victim's innocence are able to realize that they participated—actively or passively—in this cycle and begin the process of extracting themselves from it. This begins the process of transformation toward a true and lasting peace, not one simply fabricated.

As Alison summarizes, mimetic theory is a process of three "moments."[150] The first moment is "imitative desire," in which a person desires an object because the mediator/model desires the object. If the gaining of the object by a person leads to the

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147 Edwards, *James Alison and a Girardian Theology*, 27.
148 Edwards, *James Alison and a Girardian Theology*, 27.
149 Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 10. Unless otherwise noted, all emphasis in direct quotations is original to the author.
150 Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 10-12.

mediator/model not being able to obtain the object, conflict will arise. The second moment is "unifying expulsion," in which, to avoid conflict among the two persons, a third person is arbitrarily selected to be the object of their anger. As this anger festers, a real hatred of this scapegoat emerges such that they blame the scapegoat for that conflict or some other problem that contributes to conflict. Their hatred takes over their initial practical creation of this scapegoat, and they determine to expel the scapegoat in some way. Finally, the third moment is "revealed discovery," in which one who has participated in the expulsion of the scapegoat has realized the victim's innocence, which shows them "'what we're really doing' in our social and cultural lives" and has "made it possible for us to detect the innocence of our victims, and nudged us into trying alternative forms of creating human togetherness."[151]

We can think of Girard's mimetic theory being bookended by the sacred. The sacred emerges as humanity gains its uniquely human consciousness. And the violence connected to mimesis is resolved by an encounter with the sacred. I will address each in turn.

Girard's theory emerges from his conception of hominization; that is, when primates cross the threshold of becoming hominids, or the process of becoming human. Alison writes

> The key moment is when acquisitive mimesis, setting community or group members against each other, gives way to antagonistic mimesis, which unites members of the group at the expense of a victim. This corresponds to the threshold beyond which animal societies are impossible: the victimage mechanism is the threshold of hominization. The increasingly human primate was able to transform the increasing violence in the crucial phases of its biological and cultural evolution into a force for cultural development. As mimetic violence grew, so it forged the ever more rigorous prohibitions within the group and ritual channeling outside the group. More and more elaborate cultural proto-institutions enabled the greater length of time needed for the immensely vulnerable and increasingly prolonged period of human infancy, and thus for brain growth.[152]

[151] Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 11-12.
[152] Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 15.

What is asserted as happening was that when the victimage or scapegoat mechanism results in "peace or silence," there is "the first form of noninstinctual attention" that is "fixed on the victim who (whose death) has wrought this wonder."[153] The attention to the dead body is uniquely human attention, a human consciousness. In turn, human consciousness leads to the emergence of the sacred, which is results from the meaning and language that results *from* this victim and *about* the victim: "The victim appears to be good and evil, peaceable and violent, life that brings death and death that brings life."[154] Alison explains

> Because the expelled victim has brought about the peace, after its expulsion it becomes sacralized: it becomes the god whose visitation has brought first chaos, then order, a being to be worshiped with gratitude and to be feared. The group henceforward maintains its social unity by repeating, in as exact as possible a form, the process which led to the production of peace, the reenactment by ritual of the original murder . . . At the same time the group forms prohibitions of the sort of mimetic behavior that led to the violent crisis, while carefully organizing transgressions of these in the heart of the ritual reenactment of the crisis. [155]

The implications of this human foundation in violence are significant. Society, culture, human sociality, and the sacred all emerge and are "shot through with violent mimesis."

As the sacred emerges through violent mimesis, Girard also sees the sacred as its solution. As a result of this victimage mechanism being less and less effective over time, Girard argues that, as they permeate human culture now, the revelatory texts in Judaism and Christianity are a "powerful demystifying force" that can reveal the victimage mechanism as a lie. This is so because, in them, God is shown to be on the side of the victim, which reverses the structure of sacrifice as human beings know it. It is the revelation in sacred scripture that brings about the "revealed discovery" and breaks its witnesses out of the old, violent system to begin living anew.

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153 Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 16.
154 Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 16.
155 Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 19.

2.1.2 Alison's Contribution to Girard's Mimetic Theory: The Resurrection of Jesus

Alison picks up mimetic theory where Girard left off. In describing Alison's next step, however, it is important to recall the role of the social other. As noted above, the social other "includes the whole interpersonal and cultural network of people, values, institutions, environment, etc., that constitute the framework of one's perception and knowing." These social others precede us and, through our imitation of them, we participate in what I will call the "old system"; that is, the system of violent mimesis, the scapegoat mechanism, mimetic rivalry, etc. Because imitation is necessary for forming our identities, our selves, humanity is *necessarily* relational.

The problem, however, is that being formed by another means that we acquire a commonality with those who nurture us (*i.e.*, those we imitate) alongside a knowledge of those who are not "one of us." Friends and enemies, in-groups and out-groups, us and them are all formed by this imitation. And our relationships to those different groups are characterized by reciprocity—we are in a relationship of friendly reciprocity with our friends and in-group, and we are in a relationship of hostile reciprocity with our enemies and out-group. And while one might consider friendly reciprocity a good thing, Alison sees any reciprocity as a barrier to the unity to which God calls us.

Girard's idea that the sacred scriptures in Judaism and Christianity serve to break us free from the old system was made more precise by Alison. If human beings are governed inescapably by imitation, then being broken out of the old system by these texts is only one part of the solution. How are we to imitate God?[156] Alison reminds us of God's human face:

[156] In a fascinating article, Julia Meszaros questions how it is that we can move from one set of desires—those we imitate of the social other—to another set of desires—those we might imitate of the Other other—if desire plays such a significant role in our formation. She asks this question in light of the relationship between desire

Jesus. In Jesus, we have the embodiment of a human being who is imitating the desire of God. Neither God nor Jesus participates in the construction of their identity over-and-against another. Instead, we read of God and witness in Jesus that God has *nothing* to do with the violence and death that characterize the old system. So, God and (or in) Jesus are not social others. Instead, God is the "Other other," the

> one who is entirely outside any being moved, pushed, offended or any retaliation of any sort. . . . God is able to be *towards* each one of us without ever being *over against* any one of us. God is in no sort of rivalry at all with any one of us; he is not part of the same order of being as us, which is how God can create us without displacing us. Whereas we who are on the same level as each other can only move each other by displacing each other.[157]

This "Other other" was incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ, whose death and resurrection "revealed precisely that the death-locked lie of mimetic rivalry flowing from culture's hidden victims is not the original mode of desire, but a distortion of it."[158]

What makes the experience of Jesus unique is twofold. First, Jesus offered this revelation by becoming a victim—allowing himself to be killed to reveal the system for what it is. And second, when he resurrected, Jesus did not seek revenge on those responsible for his death. But, instead, he offered them forgiveness. In this process, he subverted the old system from within.

Recall how Girard argued that the sacred emerged in mimetic violence, when human consciousness sprang up in response to an instance of the scapegoat mechanism. And recall, too, that Girard perceived this process of mimetic rivalry—imitative desire, unifying

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and vision—we can only desire what we "see." If we cannot see another desire or if our desire prevents us from seeing, then something else must be at work helping us shift from one set of desires to another. She argues that Alison overcomes this in encouraging us to 1) recognize the role of grace, 2) acknowledge that we are desiring people and deepen our attentiveness to those desires, and 3) pray in such a way as to begin to transform our imaginations such that we might "see" new things to be desired. Julia Meszaros, "Desire and Vision: Problems of Conversion," *Philosophy & Theology* 25, no. 2 (2013): 199-227.

[157] Alison, "Love Your Enemy: Within a Divided Self," in *Broken Hearts and New Creations*, 166.

[158] Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 44.

expulsion, and revealed discovery—as being cyclical, such that the peace attained in the expulsion was only temporary, and violence would eventually reemerge. Throughout history, human beings participated in this program of mimetic violence because that is the way we perceived God as creating and ordaining it.

But the arrival of Jesus challenges this assumption, this projection, that the old system is willed by God. And while, according to Alison, Jesus attempted to teach this new way in his life and ministry, it was the resurrection that revealed exactly in what human beings had been participating.

> Jesus' resurrection did reveal something which was new—not new to God, but new to us. Jesus revealed that God had and has nothing at all to do with violence, or death, or the order of this world. These are *our* problems and mask *our* conceptions of God, of law and order and so forth. . . . Jesus' resurrection revealed this to us, not as part of a magic trick, but as a development of a progressive clarification as to who God really is which had emerged in the life of the Jewish people over centuries. . . . [In this,] we are the recipients over time of an extraordinary piece of Good news concerning God, God's non-ambivalence and God's non-involvement in death and violence, and this radically affects the whole of our understanding of social order.[159]

Let us unpack this claim. What Alison is seeking to combat is an, in his assessment, inadequate theory of atonement; that is, he does not believe that we were saved in the way Catholics have traditionally believed we are saved. One of these theories, taught by St. Anselm and passed on through the Church, theorized that because of the failure of human beings to obey God in the Garden of Eden by eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—what is commonly considered "Original Sin"—human beings had brought disorder into the world. Anselm argued that, since human beings are limited, they are unable to make up in their finite way for the disorder and dishonor brought about by their offense against God's infinite goodness, mercy, and justice. In order to pay the debt we

[159] James Alison, *On Being Liked* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 23.

owed God, and since a human being committed the crime, a human being had to satisfy that debt. But because no human being was capable of doing this due to their finitude, God became incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ, who would sacrifice himself to pay the human debt owed to God. This is commonly referred to as the "satisfaction theory of atonement" because Jesus Christ satisfied our debt owed to God since human beings could not.[160]

One of the central flaws in the satisfaction theory, according to Alison, is that it articulates "Original Sin" in a way that is consistent with what he calls the "order of logic," but not with what he calls the "order of discovery." By order of discovery, Alison means that we come to know chronologically as information is revealed to us. Compare this to the order of logic, by which he means that when new information is received it is placed more theoretically or formulaically with existing knowledge in order to "make sense" of an object of inquiry along logical lines. The problem with this, Alison objects, is that it neutralizes the concrete human realities in which revelation takes place or emerges.[161] It unlinks revelation from the human "experience of treachery, envy, lies, violence, exclusion, and so forth. Yet it is this experience which has to be recognized if we are going to share in the life of forgiveness which is the life of the risen human victim."[162]

Therefore, instead of thinking that the content of the doctrine of Original Sin has been known since Adam and Eve ate the fruit, we only understand the content of the doctrine of Original Sin when it is revealed to us. Put differently, if we understand Original Sin in the non-Alisonian way, our lives are governed by legalistic moral rules to keep us out

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[160] James Alison, "An Atonement Update," in *Undergoing God: Dispatches from the Scene of a Break-In* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 51. See also James Alison, "Unpicking Atonement's Knots," in *On Being Liked*, 18-19.
[161] Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 65 and 101.
[162] Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 101.

of further trouble with God. But if we understand Original Sin through the revelation of it in the resurrection, we recognize that Original Sin is, instead, the old system—the system of mimetic rivalry and violence and its resulting death. In light of the resurrection, "*[s]in ceases to be a defect which excludes, and comes to be participation in the mechanism of exclusion*."[163]

> In the resurrection, then, two things are revealed:
>
> (1) the truth about one's own (and subsequently all of humanity's) complicity in the creation and exclusion of victims and (2) the truth about God as a "purely gratuitous self-given" other who is entirely without violence and who has had nothing at all to do with the history of violence that persons have inflicted upon one another. Revelation, then, is a double process of discovery that involves a simultaneous development of understanding of who human beings are and who God is.[164]

2.1.3 The Intelligence of the Victim and Subversion without Retribution

In an attempt to reconsider Original Sin in the order of discovery, Alison writes, "One of the things that happened as a result of the resurrection was a shift in the possibility of human knowledge."[165] The reason that the order of discovery is important here is precisely this shift in knowledge. An encounter with the resurrected Jesus is an encounter with the "intelligence of the victim."[166] The intelligence of the victim is that intelligence that is revealed in violence from the victim's side.[167] The intelligence of the victim unveils the situations in which persons are victimized revealing the deeper reality beneath the facade. But what makes this intelligence unique is not that it is only in the victimization of Jesus that

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[163] James Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment: Fragments Catholic and Gay* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), 17.
[164] John P. Edwards, "The Self Prior to Mimetic Desire: Rahner and Alison on Original Sin and Conversion," *Horizons* 35, no. 1 (2008), 11-12.
[165] James Alison, *Knowing Jesus* (London: SPCK Classics, 1993), 33.
[166] Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 34. See also James Alison, "The Intelligence of the Victim and the Distortion of Desire," in *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 139-161.
[167] Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 43.

we can learn something that God is revealing. Rather, it is that we can learn something that God is revealing in the victimization of *anyone*.[168]

The possible knowledge that was revealed in the resurrection "was an area of human life that was radically unknown, maybe even unknowable."[169] Alison describes the content of this as being "the relationship between God and the victims," the revelation of God as "the forgiving victim," and that "[h]uman society is a violent place, which makes victims, and the revelation of God is to be found in the midst of that violence, on the side of the victims."[170] This intelligence opens up the possibility of reimagining God, reimagining scapegoats as victims, and reimagining a relational world void of this violence.

While this intelligence of the victim has thus far been connected to the death and resurrection of Jesus, one thing must be clear: it is not from the *victimization* that the revelation was required to emerge. Alison states, "the self-giving is prior, anterior to the sacrifice, and the sacrifice is *incidental*, *accidental* to the self-giving. So, Jesus . . . gave himself, in the full awareness that he was to be a victim, but did not want this at all."[171] That God *can* reveal in victims does not mean God *only* reveals in victims.

Incidentally, Alison argues that this intelligence was not only available at the time of the resurrection, but it was also present prior to it.[172] The problem is that none of the disciples understood it exactly. But they included the stories and sayings of Jesus in the gospels unknowingly handing on this intelligence—an intelligence only understood fully after the resurrection.

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168 Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 43. One might be hearing echoes of Johann Baptist Metz here, particularly as it relates to his understanding of *memoria passionis*.
169 Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 33.
170 Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 34, 37, and 43.
171 Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 49.
172 Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 38.

> What we have, at the root of our faith, is the claim that something happened in the midst of a group of humans. Something huge, scarcely able to be put into words, something breaking through normal schemes of description and something seen as opening up an entirely new perspective on being human. Such a happening is too mobile and subtle to be seen in itself, it can only be detected in the various bits of evidence it left behind.[173]

Alison considers this the "aha" moment: "Oh, so this is what I was doing!"[174] And that which was being done was the participation in the old system. Alison claims, "[I]f such a person rises from the dead and appears to his disciples, the whole system of thought which had led to his execution is called into question."[175] Put differently, the resurrection revealed the innocence of Jesus as it put God on the side of the victim. And, in so doing, it called into question whether any of the victims of history have actually been guilty, or whether they have been innocent victims also. If this is the case, it appears to those who encounter Jesus resurrected that the entire scapegoat mechanism is a mere ritual that has imputed violence to God when in actuality God has nothing to do with that violent death. The old system is flawed.

But further, Jesus as the innocent victim did not only show God siding with the victims of history, Jesus also offered forgiveness. And this forgiveness significantly reshapes our imagination as regards what is possible for the future.

> Jesus is determined to teach people at the level the law cannot reach: how to be free from being bound into the other by violence: so, no retribution to the other who violates you, because if you do, you remain on the same level as that person . . . It is only by not being stuck at the level of reacting to the violent other that we are free. Move out of reciprocally violent relationships, and into free ones.[176]

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[173] Alison, *Broken Hearts & New Creations*, 77.
[174] Alison, *On Being Liked*, 24.
[175] James Alison, *Raising Abel* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1996), 27.
[176] Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 44.

Our participation in the old system, either actively or passively, is participation in reciprocally violent relationships. To not reciprocate violence, to renounce retribution, is the intelligence of the victim revealed at the resurrection.

The resurrection, through the revealed intelligence of the victim, called for a radical rethinking of the system. No longer could the disciples tell the old story, but they had "to invent new ways of speaking, new structures of telling and of writing stories."[177] But to rethink the old system was not the destruction of the old system. It is important to recall that any in-group/out-group divisions, which necessarily imply exclusion, are contrary to the unity God desires. These are also characterized by reciprocity, which bind one to the violence inherent in the old system. If Jesus were to advocate for the destruction of the old system or even a separation from this system as regards, for example, Judaism, that would only result in the creation of a new identity over-and-against a new "other"—those who did not break with the old system. And so, in order for Jesus to reveal the intelligence of the victim and reasonably ask for a new system, it must be done through subversion.

Subversion, John P. Edwards notes, "is Alison's way of describing the transformation of the human person through the exposure and undoing of a false and tacit intelligence by a higher and illuminating intelligence."[178] Subversion does not destroy the system nor does it merely reverse power dynamics, but it transforms the system *from within*. And, importantly, subversion implies that, because the transformation happens from within, it will not be accompanied by a rejection of others. In the case of Jesus as the forgiving victim, subversion seeks the transformation of both the system and its participants. Instead of proclaiming those who misunderstand as excluded from the in-group, God works to

[177] Alison, *Raising Abel*, 28.
[178] Edwards, *James Alison and a Girardian Theology*, 101.

subvert the system, "continuously subversive of our notions of order, of goodness, of clear moral understanding, and so on."[179]

As part of this subversion, Jesus allowed himself to be victimized by the system—that is, he willingly engaged the system—but his resurrection was a subversion that redefined the system according to new terms. In this particular case, and by way of example, we can understand those aspects of the old system in which Jesus participated and subverted to be, first, the sacred—understood here in the context of the Jewish religious institution—and, second, social-political life.

First, as regards the sacred, Jesus revealed in this subversion that what has seemed for generations to be a well thought out and complete system for facilitating a growth in virtue and the faithful prospering of a community is actually something quite the opposite. The black-and-White categorization of good and evil, morality and sin, Jesus's resurrection reveals the enforcement of these categories mere tools for further exclusion. In other words, the substance of the concept of sin is less about the badness of an act and more about the characteristics of those persons the in-group wishes to exclude into becoming or reinforcing an out-group. Of particular importance, however, is that Jesus's critical subversion was not merely a critique of Judaism, but continues as a critique of Christianity as well as any religious tradition with such boundaries that separate "us" from "them." More will be discussed on this point below.

The second way we can see Jesus subverting the old system is in the context of political society. At the time of Jesus, political society *was* a religious society. One could not avoid the religious systems. But insofar as the empire functioned independently of any

[179] Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, 18.

explicitly religious system or group (and insofar as that was possible), the empire, too, had fallen victim to participating in the exclusion of the "enemy" for the protection and wellbeing of the imperial citizens. And, of course, in the same way that Jesus's public ministry and his resurrection was an affront to this system, it is also an affront to the political societies in existence today. Now, more political systems operate explicitly outside the bounds of religious oversight, and mimetic rivalry and violence continues. Nations define their citizens as an in-group who will violently attack or violently withstand the attack of aggressor nations or states over which they desire control. Internal strife is calmed by the declaration of a common enemy. War brings citizens together for a common cause. Of course, maybe one of the most significant examples of this in the U.S. is the long history of lynching. Out of fear of competition from persons deemed "lesser than" over control of a country, state, or community deemed as "their own," or out of fear of the overturning of a political society that had "order," White Americans participated in the lynching of nearly 3,500 Black men, women, and children.[180] These heinous acts were committed to quell any disruption of the status quo; that is, the political system with clearly defined lines—that is, Black persons being kept "in their place."

Returning to the sacred, we can understand as essential to the old system a conception of wrath—typically understood as God's wrath against us. One of the ways Alison articulates the alteration of the old system resulting from this ultimate subversion is in regards to Jesus and his relationship with wrath. Alison argues that the religious tradition—both that leading up to the intervention of Jesus, but also the tradition that remains today—has characterized the need for sacrifice as a way of avoiding God's wrath. We can

[180] There is a slight variation in this figure, depending on the source. Though this seems to be a close approximation held in common among the distinct studies. See "History of Lynching in America," NAACP, https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/history-lynching-america.

understand the sacrifice to be of animals on an altar or the sacrifice of relationships by ousting heretical figures from the ranks of the in-group. Further, he points to those moments in Scripture when Jesus acknowledges his own bringing of wrath.[181]

But Alison sees Jesus's use of this language and the religious traditions' construction of hard boundaries between the in-group and out-group in a different way. He writes:

> Yet Jesus *does* warn that the effect of his mission *is* going to be to produce wrath . . . [a]nd he then gives himself to the sacrificial mechanism . . . and becomes the lamb of sacrifice. In fact, he reverses the normal human sacrificial system. . . . [B]y putting a human back at the center of the sacrificial system, he reveals it for what it is: a murder. . . . [I]t looks for all the world as though Jesus is simply fitting into the ancient world's views about sacrifice and wrath but, in fact, he is doing exactly the reverse. Because he is giving himself to this being murdered, and he has done nothing wrong, he brings about an entirely new way to be free from wrath.[182]

In other words, wrath is not of God, but it is, instead, from a different source. Further, Jesus's participation in this sacrificial system as the sacrifice reverses its meaning and reveals its true colors. Alison declares what is there to be seen:

> What Jesus has done, by substituting himself . . . is to make it possible for those who perceive his innocence to realize what it is in which they have been involved. . . . These then begin to have their identity given them not by the group over against the victim, but by the self-giving victim who is undoing the unanimity of the group.[183]

It is the realization that Jesus, the victim, was innocent that provides this alteration of our vision of society, religion, and ourselves.[184]

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[181] Consider Matthew 10:34-36, when Jesus says, "Do not think I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and one's foes will be members of one's own household."

[182] Alison, *Broken Hearts & New Creations*, 42.

[183] Alison, *Broken Hearts & New Creations*, 42.

[184] The reader might ask how it is we account for the knowledge of Jesus's innocence. I believe this can be answered in a couple of ways. First, for the disciples of Jesus, their following of him, witnessing his preaching, teaching, and ministry, offered them a vision of him as a person, his character, as well as the impact he had on their own lives. In a way similar to our own personal relationships, those closest to Jesus would be confident in his innocence and their conviction that he was unjustly killed. Second, for both the disciples and those who hear the story, Jesus's resurrection is experienced as his vindication.

As regards wrath, then, the wrath that Jesus brings is not that of God, but rather is the wrath of the old system. It emerges from those who are scandalized by the overturning of the system they thought they understood, by the inclusion of those they believed were rightfully in the out-group, by the reformulation of the characterization of the God they believed they knew.[185] The wrath is not God's but ours. We are disrupted from our normal course, and we are angry.

Instead of wrath, however, there is a second response that one can have to Jesus's subversion of the old system: we can accept forgiveness and surrender to being recreated.

> [T]he only alternative is to undergo the forgiveness which comes from the lamb, and start to find oneself recreated from within by a peace which is not from this world, and involves learning how to resist the evil *one* by not resisting evil. This means: you effectively resist, have no part in, the structures and flows of desire which are synonymous with the prince of this world, that is to say with the world of wrath, only by refusing to acquire an identity over against evil-done-to-you.[186]

Put differently, instead of wrath, frustration, or anger, Alison argues that the alternative response to understanding Jesus as the innocent victim of the old system is to end our participation in the old system; that is, end our imitation of the social other, which buttresses reciprocity and results in violence and death, and, instead, imitate the desire of the "Other other": God.

Distinct from the social other, the Other other is God, "who is entirely outside any being moved, pushed, offended or any retaliation of any sort at all. . . . God is able to be

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Further, it is important to note that Alison does not see this revelation from Jesus as limited to only Christians. He expands the category of "those who have understood" well beyond the Christian community: "Those who have understood, whether or not they know anything about Jesus, are those who have seen their way out of the self-deception of the world which is blind to its victims, and have reached out to help them." Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 43.

[185] Alison argues that those who are scandalized are scandalized "by the fact that God himself does not fit into the scheme into which, according to them, God should fit. It is not that God is too sacred for ordinary people to be able to bear it, but that he is so *little* sacred that *religious* people find it impossible to bear it." Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, 178.

[186] Alison, *Broken Hearts & New Creations*, 44.

towards each one of us without ever being *over against* any one of us."[187] In the imitation of the Other other, our identities are not derived from those from whom we are different, nor are our identities merely built by those with whom we are in a relationship of friendly reciprocity. Instead, the death and resurrection of Jesus reveals our participation in the old system and the imitation of the social other—a breaking *in*—that then inspires in us a willingness to let God continue to work on us, to change us into who we are supposed to be outside of these social constraints—a breaking *open*. As Alison says, "Rather than the 'creation-fall-redemption-heaven' model [the "order of logic"], . . . the model is: 'The redemption reveals creation by opening up its fulfillment in heaven and reveals at the same time the fall as that which we are in the process of leaving behind [the "order of discovery"].'"[188] In other words, this revelation—the resurrection breaking in and breaking us open—begins for us the *process* of conversion.

2.2 Alison on Conversion

At the heart of conversion in Alison's thought is the experience of the resurrection—Jesus submitting himself to the old system, to the old game. As Alison puts it, Jesus "was able to lose to those who had to win, so as to enable them, by not having to win, to be able to play."[189] To those who recognized Jesus as the innocent victim, including those who participated in making him a victim, he gave forgiveness, gratuitous forgiveness, unconditional love. And this offer of forgiveness and love is an invitation to begin being recreated, being transformed over time into who God intends for us to be.

[187] Alison, *Broken Hearts & New Creations*, 166.
[188] Alison, *Raising Abel*, 55-56.
[189] Alison, *On Being Liked*, 40.

2.2.1 The Resurrected Jesus and Broken Hearts

The offer of forgiveness must also be *received* by those being forgiven. Alison tips us off to the sign of forgiveness's reception, the broken heart: "[I]n the most traditional framework of theology, forgiveness precedes confession. And the form which forgiveness takes in the life of a person is contrition, that is, a breaking of heart, a deep shift in attitudinal patterns of the sort."[190] The broken heart, Alison argues, is the beginning of the process of becoming recreated.

> This breaking of heart is eventually received as an extraordinary gift, that of being given to be someone else who I didn't know myself to be and who is much bigger and more splendid than what I took myself to be. . . . The actual verbal confession, the apology, or the asking for forgiveness, comes way down the line, and is usually a sign that the person is already receiving forgiveness.[191]

Here, Alison is acknowledging that forgiveness and its reception are a *process*. That process is the process of conversion. So conversion is also a *process* not a *moment*, despite the process being initiated by a moment.

The process of conversion is a practice of forgiveness. In this practice, we imitate the forgiveness of Jesus. As Alison says, the process begins with accepting our own forgiveness and recognizing our capacity for forgiveness.[192] And it is a gratuitous forgiveness that we both receive and offer. We are not subject to retribution or resentment after Jesus forgives us. Instead, we are offered a new path forward into becoming recreated into who we are called to be, no longer imitating the social other, but in imitation of the desire of God—the "Other other"—as embodied in the person of Jesus Christ. And as we are recreated, we also build a community of recreated persons all sharing in this process of the practice of forgiveness. Alison calls this conversion "a process of the restructuring from within of

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[190] Alison, *On Being Liked*, 36.
[191] Alison, *On Being Liked*, 36.
[192] Alison, *On Being Liked*, 37-38.

desire."[193] That is, a process of shedding the desire of the social other we have been imitating, and forming our desire around that of God's.

To begin the process of conversion, a person must have an experience of the risen Christ. Alison argues that the experience of the resurrection is what we understand the apostolic witness to be; that is, what the apostles experienced in the resurrection and what they have passed on from that experience.[194] And their experience and the way they pass on that experience is shaped by their relationship with Jesus. For the apostles, then, the experience of the resurrection was understood through the relationship that they had with Jesus Christ—a friendship.[195] This relationship influenced their understanding both of the resurrection and also of the earlier aspects of the relationship: his stories, his teachings, his ministry, etc. The relationship is both interpretive of and interpreted by the resurrection.[196]

After the ascension of Jesus, we can no longer experience the risen Jesus in the same mode as the apostles. Nor can we hear the apostolic witness directly from the mouths of the apostles. Instead, we now rely on the inheritance of this apostolic witness received in the Church and through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the presence of the crucified and risen Lord, "reproducing those changes of relationship which the risen Lord had started to produce as a result of his resurrection." These changes are an "irruption into our lives of gratuity as forgiveness, permitting a recasting of relationships."[197] In the same way that the relationships of the apostles, including their relationship with Jesus, prior to the resurrection were transformed through the resurrection, the result of an encounter with the crucified and

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[193] James Alison, *Undergoing God: Dispatches from the Scene of a Break-In* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 116.
[194] Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 6-7.
[195] Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 8.
[196] Recall above the discussion regarding the intelligence of the victim also being available, though not being understood, pre-resurrection. Given their relationship with Jesus and their familiarity with his teachings, the resurrection revealed his teachings' true meaning and/or clarified what they *thought* they knew about his teachings.
[197] Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 27.

risen Lord—through the Holy Spirit—will impact our relationships, as it will also be revelatory for us about our relationships prior to that encounter. An encounter with the resurrected Jesus is both the beginning of conversion and the process of being recreated as well as a fundamental reframing of our relationships, an inspiration to be in relationships in a radically new way—outside of mimetic rivalry and violence.

One aspect of our relationship with the crucified and risen Christ is that this encounter was then, and is now through the Holy Spirit, an encounter with a human being. The Incarnation continues to warn us against the temptation to spiritualize our faith. As Alison says, that Jesus was a human "not only says something about the presence of human nature in heaven, but something about the presence of God on earth."[198] The Incarnation also allows us to see a fully human example, an archetype, of the gratuitous self-giving that characterizes a life after encountering the risen Christ—a life broken free from relationships of reciprocity. In our attempts at living this new life, we are witnesses of Christ in and to the world, and we are instantiating an imitative resurrection—that is, offering forgiveness and love—in the world.

Our participation in this new life, being "other Christs" in the world, is only partial, but the practice leads us further through the process of conversion as we continue to reshape our desires. This point, Alison remarks, further contributes to an understanding of the "density" of the apostles' experience of the resurrection. The apostolic witness is not merely a message, but it is also "normative for any experience of Jesus which we might have."[199] Put differently, our experience of the resurrected Christ is that of the inescapably human Jesus. All further dealings with the divine are also going to be at that "human level,"

[198] Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 25.
[199] Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 25-26.

including that which is transformed in that encounter (*i.e.*, our humanness) and that which we address in our own gratuitous self-giving (*i.e.*, other human beings).

Our encounter with the crucified and risen Christ, then, brings about a change of heart and the process of being recreated into something wonderfully new. And it changes how we relate to the world around us. If our experience of the resurrected Christ is at the human level, then there is also an obligation on the part of the disciple that we do our best to give others that experience in our offer of gratuitous forgiveness and unconditional love.

2.2.2 Conversion at No One's Expense

One of the temptations ever present in any conversion experience is that the conversion merely recreates or reinforces the old system. For example, one undergoes a significant change—maybe from the way they were raised, or from one faith tradition to another. Then they cast judgment upon those who are still in those "old" ways in which they once participated, or they now consider themselves part of a new in-group and define those away from whom they have converted to be part of the out-group.

In the context of conversion within Alison's framework, resentment is part of the old system. "Resentment is a pattern of desire such that someone is much more occupied with the obstacle to their project than with the project itself."[200] We become concerned about the obstacle in that we want to rid ourselves of that obstacle, be it a person, a community, a faith tradition, or any number of other things. But if we are allowing ourselves to focus instead on the process—the process of being recreated—then we allow those "hurdles" the opportunity to also experience the conversion by being an experience of the risen Jesus for them.

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[200] Alison, *On Being Liked*, 130.

To resent means that we have opted to connect more closely with our new group, with whom we are likely in a relationship more strongly characterized by friendly reciprocity and seemingly capable of offering us protection against death, in whatever form, at the hands of the new out-group. But this is a misunderstanding created in the old system. The new system challenges us to see the futility of resentment and to recognize it as the true hurdle to achieving the new system. Resentment is merely the dismissal, once again, of an "excluded other by whom we make ourselves good."[201]

Resisting the risk of resentment is aided by baptism. It is in baptism that we undergo that certain form of death such that the extension of gratuitous forgiveness and unconditional love to one who is or who has recently become a member of the out-group is no longer a risk with meaningful consequences—death has already been conquered. And baptism is reaffirmed in our participation in the Eucharist; that is, one way we can encounter the risen Christ today.[202]

Resentment can also stall or stop our own conversion process. As Alison claims, "our holding on to what has been done to us . . . makes it impossible for another to speak us into being."[203] He continues elsewhere:

> We also learn that one of the ways of falling off the ride [the conversion process] is precisely to identify too exactly what it is that we are leaving behind, and therefore what we can call evil. . . . To do this is to refuse to undergo being given meaning, significance, life, at the hands of the only lure which really can do so, and to grasp at the ersatz meaning instead. To settle for instant but fake meaning instead of deferred meaning, and being over time.[204]

Alison's concern is that, instead of considering evil those from whom we are converting and perpetuating the old system, we should strive to "become able to be merciful and gentle with

[201] Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, 111.
[202] Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, 123.
[203] Alison, *Broken Hearts & New Creations*, 121.
[204] Alison, *Undergoing God*, 80.

[them] as part of helping [them] and ourselves to un-attach and be re-attached."[205] If conversion is a process of the practice of forgiveness—giving and receiving—then our relationship with those from whom we have converted does not end, but is essential to the process of conversion—ours and theirs.

2.2.3 The Risk of a New Story: Death

The process of conversion through the practice of forgiveness is an alteration of our story. "The 'I' that is hidden with Christ in God," Alison claims, "little by little, and somewhat tentatively begins to build a new life story in the midst of the ruins of the previous collapse."[206] We are offered the opportunity to create our story anew, to create the story in such a way that we model ourselves after the life of Christ, the foundational truths of the Gospel. But this new story, which includes gratuitous forgiveness and unconditional love, is a more difficult story to tell than the old black-and-White story of the old system. Alison writes:

> The old story was easy to tell, because it was always a story over against others, with goodies and baddies, the taking of positions, and the desire to be a hero or a victim, or both at the same time. The new story has no clear script, though it does have a short preface: the preface is one of being killed, and finding oneself held in a life that can no longer be destroyed.[207]

The old story included clear lines, obvious in-groups and out-groups, and it afforded its adherents the opportunity to exclude those who acted outside of those clear boundaries. The new story includes significantly more nuance as it acknowledges the complexity of human persons and their activity in the world. It recognizes human limitations and the strength of

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[205] Alison, *Undergoing God*, 80.
[206] Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, 41. Recall in the discussion of the intelligence of the victim above that, once the resurrected Jesus was experienced by the disciples, they could no longer tell the old story, but had to create a new story.
[207] Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, 95-96.

the old system's pull. The resurrection has radically transformed our understanding of the basics of our social realities and our participation in them.[208] So the changing of the story is a work-in-progress for those followers of Jesus as we continue the process of conversion, of being recreated.

Anyone who has attempted to recreate their own story knows this challenge well. Consider, for example, the person who wants to change their lifestyle, being more intentional with their sleep schedule in order to rise earlier for meditation. This keeps them from a weekly poker night or movie night in which they have participated with their close circle of friends. As trivial as it might sound, this person might experience the loss of those friends during the transition, or they may be subject to pressure, "Oh, come on!" Or "You're not as fun as you used to be." The challenge I am describing here is when a person is undergoing a recreation of their *own* story. The recreation of the fundamental narrative structure shared by *all*—that is, to try to live differently within the narrative of the old system—will almost certainly be met with resistance.

This example illustrates the risk inherent in the process of conversion: death. This does not necessarily have to be actual death, this death can take many forms. Consider what forgiveness could result in within the old system. If forgiveness is offered by the victim to those who have victimized them, it is their extending a hand across a significant, if not impenetrable, threshold in the old system between an in-group and an out-group. To have been victimized by another implies in the old system that the victimizer was part of the out-group. The victim was likely in a relationship with them characterized by hostile reciprocity. The boundaries are clear. The old system and its narrative demands retaliation against the victimizer by the victim and members of the victim's in-group. In the old system and under

[208] Alison, *Raising Abel*, 29.

the old narrative, forgiveness betrays the victim's in-group. It challenges the clear boundaries between "us" and "them." And it calls into question the victim's relationship to members of their own in-group. How can they be trusted?[209]

Death and its risk, however, are essential elements of the process of conversion. The centrality of death is rooted in the fact that the knowledge of our forgiveness emerged in Christ's death and resurrection. Through Christ's life, death, and resurrection, God's truth is revealed; that is, God is removed from the old system and understood to have nothing to do with violence or death. God is a God of life—something death cannot conquer. And knowing this truth opens us up to the process of being recreated.

> Whatever death is, it is not something which has to structure every human life from within . . . but rather it is an empty shell, a bark without a bite. None of us has any reason to fear being dead, something which will unquestionably happen to all of us, since that state cannot separate us effectively from the real source of life.[210]

Death is both a risk and an inevitability. But the process of conversion relieves us of the fear of it. Jesus has conquered death in his own resurrection and promises his disciples a share in that same resurrection. And, in imitation of this new life in Christ, we are initiated into the Christian community through baptism—the sacrament of symbolic death to the old self and resurrection to the new self. By entering that old system and dying at its hands, Jesus "was producing in his disciples a belief in the non-importance of death by passing through it himself in the first place to show that it is possible."[211] Without the fear of death, the disciple

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[209] One example of this challenge within the in-group of a forgiving member is the division of Robert Kennedy's children with regard to the granting of parole to his assassin, Sirhan Sirhan. While two of Kennedy's children advocated for his being granted parole, the six remaining siblings were adamantly opposed. See James Queally, Leila Miller, and Phil Willon, "Kennedy family deeply divided over parole for RFK assassin Sirhan Sirhan," *Los Angeles Times* (August 28, 2021), https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-08-28/kennedy-family-divided-parole-robert-f-kennedy-rfk-assassin-sirhan-sirhan.

[210] Alison, *Raising Abel*, 29.

[211] Alison, *Raising Abel*, 61. It is important to note, though not central to the conversation here, that the centrality of death and focus on Jesus relieving humanity of its concern about death in Alison's thought is inspired by his use of Girard. The imitation and desire alongside its resulting violence is ultimately rooted in a

can freely enter into the process of conversion—of being recreated into someone they might have not imagined themselves to be—and into radically forgiving and loving relationships.

To summarize, conversion is a process sparked by the forgiveness by, and realization of the innocence of, the victim of scapegoating in the cycle of mimetic violence. This innocence reveals the old system in which we participate and the truth about God; that is, a God who has no part in violence or death. It allows us to accept our forgiveness and inspires us to gratuitously and continuously offer it. In being forgiven and in practicing forgiveness, we are freed from the old system such that we can be recreated, imitating the desire of the Other other, and learning a new story. As a result of Jesus's resurrection and our own baptism, the risk and inevitability of death does not hinder us in our practice of forgiveness and transformation into who God desires us to be. And in this process of conversion, we are also called to reproduce that experience of the risen Jesus in the world through our lives and in our own contexts such that others might have a similar experience.[212]

2.3 Alison's Conversion from a "Marginaholic"

Alison's emphasis on conversion seems well-placed, especially considering his own biography. His life is evidence of conversion as a process of coming to forgive and to be recreated—and illustration of the type of conversion he has developed in his theological work.

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desire for *being*. We connect to the in-group via friendly reciprocity and reject the out-group via hostile reciprocity as part of a broader tactic aimed at self-preservation; that is, we want to avoid death. However, Jesus's resurrection and conquering of death in his being the first to be resurrected from death frees us from this preoccupation with survival—an unnecessary longing for more time—and allows us to focus on being—an authentic desire to be who God desires us to be.

[212] "In fact, the 'happening' [an encounter with the resurrected Jesus] can be reproduced wherever . . . This is what we mean when we talk about Christ giving the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit turning us into other Christs." Alison, *Broken Hearts & New Creations*, 78.

Born into an Evangelical Anglican family, Alison experienced falling in love with another male classmate in primary school.[213] Alison did not make known his attraction to this other student. Alison did not even know how to articulate the feelings he was having until he was reading the Bible and discovered "that there was something true about the gospel, that it had something to do with what I was experiencing, and that this was surely not the same thing as my parents' religion."[214] But once he was able to put words to his experience, he was immediately struck by "the realization that now I was cast adrift on a sea of impossibility, was an abomination, would never arrive at a safe port, had lost my parents, and worse, that my love would—could—only do harm."[215]

As a teenager, he fell in love again. This time, he associated the "warmth" he sensed in the boy as connected in some way to the boy's Catholicism. By 1978, Alison had come out as gay and, inspired by Padre Pio, became a Catholic. In the depression that followed his coming out to his parents, he "came close to killing myself . . . undergoing what I now understand to have been a psychotic break."[216] While studying in Mexico City, a friend's family took him in—a family Alison claims to "owe my survival" to, including his introduction to the Dominicans.[217]

Upon returning to the United Kingdom, he had joined the Dominican order and was studying in Oxford toward ordination. It was during this time that he was introduced to the work of René Girard. It was this engagement that "altered his own theological perspective. The influence of Girard's thinking led Alison to see that confessing the Christ required more

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[213] Unless otherwise noted, I am drawing much of Alison's biographical information from Edwards, *James Alison and a Girardian Theology*, 2-6.
[214] James Alison, "Brought to Life by Christ," *Christian Century* (August 26, 2020), 31.
[215] Alison, "Brought to Life by Christ," 31.
[216] Alison, "Brought to Life by Christ," 31.
[217] Alison, "Brought to Life by Christ," 32.

than the merely intellectual; it also included the 'visceral,' that is, the deeply personal and existential."

In 1994, after being ordained a priest and having worked a number of years with the AIDS community—at a time when AIDS was still a fear-inducing mystery linked to the gay community, who, as a result, would be even further marginalized—he took a teaching position in Chile. A number of religious superiors, however, whose community members were sent to study in the same school in Chile, complained about Alison's employment there on the basis that he was a "militant" gay man. They sought his immediate termination. However, his supervisor refused to fire him.

The accusations by the superiors (note that there were no written charges made, and all claims were hearsay) were, according to Alison, "a fairly brutal piece of violence."[218] A few weeks later, Alison went on a month-long Jesuit retreat, and his study of Girard led to an epiphany of sorts. Alison reflects:

> [D]uring that retreat something totally unexpected reached me: a perspective which I had perhaps understood intellectually, but which had never got through to my gut. It was the absolute separation of God from all that violence. I understood something new: that God had nothing to do with what had happened, and that it was simply a mechanism of human violence, nothing more. What enabled me to reach this, and here I am talking, of course, of the human means, was the realization that since, out of this group of 14, I had only ever met three, all that violence (and apparently they had worked themselves up over this for a couple of days, finding it difficult to get round to the agenda of their meeting) could not be taken personally. Rather it was a mechanism within which the participants had got themselves caught up in such a way that they couldn't perceive what they were doing. The moment I realized that I was dealing with a mechanism whose participants were its prisoners, at that same moment I was able to take distance from what had happened, and forgiveness started to become possible.[219]

[218] James Alison, "Theology amid the Stones and Dust," *Theology & Sexuality* 11 (1999), 99.
[219] Alison, "Theology amid the Stones and Dust," 99-100.

Here, Alison is describing an encounter with the resurrected Jesus, the realization of the scapegoat mechanism and its accompanying violence at work in his own life. But this realization was not the conclusion. Alison continues:

> For, when I understood that God had nothing to do with all that violence, I began to understand something much more painful: the degree of my own participation in the mechanism of violence, not as its victim, but as a manipulator. For the charge that I was an 'internationally known homosexual militant' did not fall like lightning from a clear sky. Rather this incident was the third time that my behavior and attitudes in different countries had provoked a similar rejection.[220]

And this experience only enhanced the process of conversion—the process of being recreated, of receiving a new story—that would occur in his life.

> I am describing schematically something which was a non-schematic whole, and which has taken me several years to begin to understand. First there was the perception of the absolute non-involvement of God in all that violence, then the perception of my non-innocence, and of my idolatrous and violent manner of having been caught up in all that. And then, at root, what began this whole process of beginning to untie myself from the idols I had so assiduously cultivated, what I had never dared to imagine, the profound "Yes" of God, the "Yes" spoken to the little gay boy who had despaired of ever hearing it. And . . . from the moment it reached me, the whole psychological and mental structure by which I had built myself up over all the previous years, began to enter into a complete collapse.[221]

Alison's experience was, through the Holy Spirit, an encounter with the crucified and risen Jesus. This revealed the scapegoat mechanism and the violence of the old system to Alison, but it also revealed Alison's own participation in that system—not in an accusatory, punishing way, but rather in an offer of forgiveness. This results in Alison's broken heart; that is, his acknowledgment of his own participation in the system, which prompts a letting go and relaxing into the process of being recreated—the process of conversion. And in this

[220] Alison, "Theology amid the Stones and Dust," 100.
[221] Alison, "Theology amid the Stones and Dust," 101.

process, Alison says that he opened up to "the possibility of just being, and liking being, human."[222]

Notice that Alison's conversion was a story change. No longer was the narrative one of a gay priest ostracized by the Catholic Church having to fight the establishment or live as a "fake Christian." Instead, he recognized that the Church itself was caught up in the victimage mechanism with its members unwittingly participating in violent exclusion. And recognizing this, Alison's story became one of a co-victimizer who was able to receive forgiveness as a victimizer and offer forgiveness to those religious superiors who victimized him. In that practice of forgiveness, he began the ongoing process of conversion—of being recreated by God into the person God had intended him to be all along.

2.4 The Church as a Resource for Facilitating an Openness to Conversion

Now that we have explored the central claims of Alison's theological framework, his conception of conversion, and the story of his own experience of conversion—or at least one aspect of his process of conversion—we will now turn to the question guiding this discussion: How does Alison suggest we open ourselves to the experience of conversion? As a preview to what follows, I will invoke Grant Kaplan, "[T]he Church is the community that radically reorients community. It provides a space and time in which to grow into this new being, to unlearn patterns of false being, and to settle into and to undo false ways of belonging."[223] Given Alison's focus on the impact of forgiveness and reconciliation on a community, I will first explore the communal experience that can open one to conversion. Specifically, I will evaluate Alison's understanding of church, the role it can play in

[222] James Alison, "Confessions of a Former Marginaholic," in *On Being Liked*, 70.
[223] Grant Kaplan, *René Girard, Unlikely Apologist: Mimetic Theory and Fundamental Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2016), 139.

conversion, and the responsibilities it implies in that conversion with regard to the truth of our and our communities' stories.

2.4.1 Encountering the Risen Jesus Institutionally

As noted above, Alison states that the central event in which we are challenged or inspired to alter our ways is the resurrection of Jesus, the recognition of the scapegoat as an innocent victim of the old system. Our process of conversion *begins* with our encountering the crucified and resurrected Jesus.

It is hard to overstate the significance of this transformation in the encounter with the risen Lord. Its revelation results in a radical alteration of our perception. In a sense, it cannot be "unseen." Instead, it becomes a core memory[224]—it might at times be obscured, but being reminded of it makes it as vivid as that first encounter. Despite it being characterized by a certain level of immediacy, this conversion toward unity through forgiveness (both receiving and offering) and reconciliation is a *process*—it is far from a perfect, instantaneous "about face." Instead, it begins the radical and profound transformation of our selves and our relationship with others.

An example might be helpful here. Consider becoming a parent. When one has a child, they are no longer the same—they have categorically changed from "childless" to "parent." And with this titular change comes other responsibilities, many of which the parent is called upon to fulfill in the middle of the night. While the ideal of parenthood looks like self-sacrificial love that no longer considers one's own needs over that of their child, that is not a shift that happens naturally nor once and for all. Often, throughout the first year or

[224] "They cannot be 'unforgiven' and, therefore, they cannot 'unwitness' it." Edwards, *James Alison and a Girardian Theology*, 125.

two of a baby's life, a parent can find themselves wrestling with the desire to go back to sleep—a preference that is inconsistent with the needs of the child and the obligations of a parent. Over time, however, even if those preferences persist, the parent exercises that muscle, so to speak, in a way that allows them to respond to the child's needs consistently, putting their own desires aside. In the same way, the conversion experience sparked by the encounter with the risen Jesus and the received forgiveness in that experience does mark a categorical or titular change, but we will not always act or desire to act in ways that are consistent with our new identities. But, no less, the process has begun in that first experience of encounter.

Because Jesus has not only resurrected but also ascended, our access to Jesus—our encounter with the risen Jesus—can no longer be direct in the way it was with the disciples who accompanied him.[225] Instead, Alison argues, our experience of Jesus is through "the apostolic witness"; that is, "we receive witnesses to his resurrection. That is what the New Testament is: the apostolic witness set down in writing, which is the norm of the faith of the Church."[226] The apostolic witness is *textual*; that is, we encounter the risen Jesus in the texts.[227] And the curator and keeper of those texts is the Church. So in addition to the textual nature of the apostolic witness, it is also *institutional*.

Alison notes that, in his life, Jesus prepared his disciples "to be his followers even through his death, so that after his death they might be foundational witnesses to him, as well as, in their imitative living toward martyrdom, being living signs of the foundational

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[225] Alison distinguishes between two types of presence with Jesus: Jesus's "actual physical presence" and Jesus's "gratuitous forgiving presence." The apostles, Alison argues, experienced Jesus's presence in both forms. "They do not come together for us." Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 26.
[226] Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 7.
[227] John P. Edwards argues that this apostolic witness, while explicitly made present in the New Testament texts, can, in effect, be found in any text "if they are able to evoke in readers a deeper awareness of their need for reconciliation by enabling them to receive forgiveness or at least to imagine the possibility of forgiveness." Edwards, *James Alison and a Girardian Theology*, 139.

nature of his self-giving."[228] Here, the term "foundational" is referring directly to the founding of the community of believers—the Church. As the apostles encountered the resurrected Jesus—that is, began their own processes of conversion—they began to engage relationally with others in new ways in imitation of Jesus—relationships of forgiveness, and unconditional love.[229] They became a community of believers who sought, in community, to live their relationships anew.

In light of this reliance on the Church to take the place of the encounter with the resurrected Jesus, faith can be understood as "the faith of the Church, and is structured *as* Church, *as* the unfulfilled but nevertheless real sign of the coming into being of the new unity of humanity formed by and around a totally new 'other': God as self-giving victim."[230] Therefore, the encounter with the resurrected Christ and the ongoing process of conversion wherein we are recreated into a new mode of being "can be suggested . . . only through and with the human, historical signs [the actions, texts, and institutions that bear and enact the apostolic witness] of that new being which are given us in the Church (which is given us as the Church). The Church is then the human sign of the new 'other' making possible our access to our possession by that 'Other.'"[231]

And it is as Church—what Alison is calling here the "ecclesial hypostasis," by which he means the being, our being, that we are given, or are being recreated as, in the Church—where we receive our new identity "precisely by participation in the gratuitous ecclesial reception of identity from the forgiving victim . . . the reception of a social belonging that is

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228 Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 168.
229 "Undergoing his forgiveness, the disciples find their hearts broken open—the literal meaning of contrition—to receive the abundance of the new creation." Christopher Ruddy, "In Defense of Desire: The Theology of James Alison," *Commonweal* 136, no. 2 (January 30, 2009), https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/defense-desire.
230 Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 59.
231 Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 59.

completely removed from any sense of self-justification."[232] This identity, Alison argues, is gained by receiving and offering forgiveness—the practice of forgiveness.[233] Conversion, then, is "intrinsically ecclesial."[234]

2.4.2 The Risen Jesus in the Liturgy—Especially the Eucharist

As noted above, we can no longer experience the physical risen Jesus post-ascension. We can only experience the "gratuitous forgiving presence" of Jesus as mediated through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit

> makes present the crucified and risen Lord, thus perpetually reproducing those changes of relationship which the risen Lord had started to produce as a result of his resurrection. . . . [A]ll the really important elements of the resurrection—the irruption into our lives of gratuity as forgiveness, permitting a recasting of relationships—all that, is made constantly available to us by the Holy Spirit, so that we are able to become witnesses to the resurrection in our own lives.[235]

Our primary experience of this community of the Church is at the Eucharistic Liturgy or Mass. Alison states, "Because it is the celebration of the presence of the crucified and risen Lord whose resurrection is our forgiveness, it is also the place of our conversion."[236] It is the community in which we rid ourselves of the old system and practice the new system. It is the community in which we rid ourselves of our old selves—the selves

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232 Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 169.
233 Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 175.
234 Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 62. Alison also states that "the intelligence of the victim [that is, what Jesus reveals in the resurrection] makes it apparent that belief in the resurrection automatically implies belief in Jesus' founding of one unique Church and of the Church as something necessarily universal." Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 91. But Alison does not limit the experience of the encounter with the resurrected Jesus via the Holy Spirit to only those within the Church. Alison argues instead that grace—here understood as the encounter with the same Spirit making present the resurrected Jesus—is "christoform," meaning that it is not merely limited to Christians, but has its shape in that it involves "a turning toward the victim, that is, a certain form of conversion." Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 92-93. This christoformity of grace seems to address the concerns of some that Alison is advocating for the Roman Catholic Church as the one, true Church. See Scott Cowdell, "Conversion and Roman Catholicism: An Anglo-Catholic Ecclesiological Response to James Alison," *St. Mark's Review*, no. 218 (November 2011): 48-55.
235 Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 27.
236 Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 94.

that participated in the old system—and undergo the process of being recreated. It is the community in which our stories are transformed.

Essential to this liturgical experience of the "slow, almost imperceptible" conversion process is the encounter with the other. Here, I do not necessarily mean someone different from ourselves (*e.g.*, culturally, racially, socio-economically, etc.), but rather I mean any other person. And in this encounter, we are first recognizing and accepting our own being forgiven out of gratuity and then responding gratuitously. More concretely, this is an experience and a process "whereby we cease to think of ourselves primarily as victims, and start to see ourselves primarily as actual, or potential persecutors."[237] And in this recognition within ourselves, we can then recognize this in others and respond accordingly.

Fortunately and unfortunately, there is nothing spectacular about this process of conversion within the Church. It is a slow process, even if it began in a more remarkable way. So while the unfortunate part is that Church is not necessarily going to be terribly exciting, the fortunate part is that if we perceive it as somewhat boring, we might very well be on the right track. Alison encourages us:

> [Mass is] supposed to be boring. . . . It's a long-term education in becoming un-excited, since only that will enable us to dwell in a quiet bliss which doesn't abstract from our present or our surroundings or our neighbor, but which increases our attention, our presence and our appreciation for what is around us.[238]

Church affords us the weekly—or even daily—opportunity to step out of a system that demands attention and strives toward excitement on matters without merit, into a community striving to attend to what is truly present—how we participate in the old system and how we can help usher in the new. In other words, it is a practice ground for a new way

[237] Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 94.
[238] Alison, *Undergoing God*, 45-46.

of living and a new way of being in relationship. Alison cites Thomas Merton in referring to Church as our escape from a "collective hypnosis."[239] Kaplan adds

> This means understanding the celebration of the Eucharist not so much as something to entertain or excite us, but to pull us out of a force field of romantic self-regard and into a remembering of our being forgiven by the innocent victim. It is only by *abiding* that we can experience the slow process of coming to understand how we are caught up in unhealthy being and belonging.[240]

In a unique way in the liturgy of the Church, the priest invokes God to send the Spirit to bless our offerings of bread and wine so that they may be transubstantiated into the Body and Blood of Christ. Alison reminds us of this presence:

> The principle way by which all this is kept alive in our midst is: the eucharist. . . . The real presence of Jesus in the eucharist is the real presence of the crucified and risen Lord, giving himself, founding the new Israel, making possible the conversion of those who participate. It is the real presence of the grace which justifies. In all the other celebrations we call sacraments, one or other dimension of this presence of the crucified and risen Lord is emphasized. In the eucharist however, the whole package is present, if only we have open eyes and hearts to perceive it, and to receive him![241]

And if one experiences the risen Lord in the Eucharist in such a way that they experience that transformative apostolic witness, they "can never again belong wholeheartedly to any other social, or cultural, or religious group. . . . The only unity to which he or she cannot escape belonging is the new unity of humanity that the Holy Spirit creates out of the risen victim, the unity which subverts all other unities."[242]

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239 Alison, *On Being Liked*, 1.

240 Kaplan, *René Girard, Unlikely Apologist*, 148. John Baldovin, S.J. notes, "The Eucharist represents a ritual unfolding of Christ's undoing of the trapped condition of human nature (original sin) and God's ultimate 'No' to the violence and envy that characterize so much of our world. In this sense Christ's sacrifice is an ironic term, an *antisacrifice*—a 'No' to making scapegoats and working out our own failures, fears and incapacities on the backs of others." John F. Baldovin, S.J., *Bread of Life, Cup of Salvation: Understanding the Mass* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 154-55.

241 Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 85-86.

242 Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 90. It is worth noting here that in the epiclesis in the Eucharistic prayer of the Roman Catholic liturgy, except the first, is the invocation of the Holy Spirit to imbue the gifts of bread and wine such that they may become the body and blood of Jesus Christ; that is, the Holy Spirit mediates the presence of the risen Lord. In Eucharistic Prayer II, for example, the prayer states, "Make holy, therefore, these gifts, we pray,

2.4.3 A Church that Transforms Narratives

In order for the Church's communal gathering to effect the ends it should, it must work on us more deeply. It must also be the location where our stories are revised. As we explored in chapter one, Alison would agree that human beings' identities and worldviews are shaped by the stories they create or inherit. This is true of his anthropology, about which he says, "It is as we learn to imitate sounds and gestures that we begin to be able to receive and to tell a story: exactly the same process by which we come to have an identity."[243] And it is also true about the old system more generally. He argues that the old system can only be accepted if the persecutors really believe that the victim of the old system (those victimized to keep the peace of the in-group) is guilty: "This means that the story which they tell is a deceitful memory of what in fact happened, and by means of this deceitful and lying memory, they create and constitute their identity as a group and their group frontiers."[244] It is in the encounter with the innocent victim, the resurrected Lord, that a new story is introduced. And that new story is an invitation to us:

> [T]hat counter-story, which no one manages to forge with absolute limpidity, is not the story of Jesus superimposed on our own, but it really is *our* story . . . it is exactly our hope in God's creative vivaciousness which allows us *not* to grasp onto our story, but to allow God to create, by means of us, something much richer and more extraordinary than we could imagine that we are about.[245]

So the Gospel story gives us the opportunity to break free from the story perpetuated by the old system. It allows us to undergo the recreation of our own story and to participate in its

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by sending down your Spirit upon them like the dewfall, so that they may become for us the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ."

[243] Alison, *Raising Abel*, 111.

[244] Alison, *Raising Abel*, 114.

[245] Alison, *Raising Abel*, 172.

recreation. We allow our stories to be transformed through the reading of scripture interpreted through the intelligence of the victim. Kaplan notes that "[m]imetic theory suggest reading scripture as self-corrective."[246] And in this self-correction, we are not displaced. Instead, we "are invited into a process of discovering the 'divine story,'" that "makes it possible for humans to overcome the story of human violence and victimization by being transformed into imitators of Jesus' peaceful reception of an identity from the Father."[247]

If our stories are to be transformed, we must be able to admit that the story (or stories) we once identified with and with which we built our worldview were wrong. And because the Church has frequently used scripture—the narratives that ought to transform the old system's stories—to instead reinforce the old system for its own benefit, the Church also has work to do. Purifying its narrative and facilitating the recreation of narratives of those in attendance is a central role the Church plays in the ecclesiology Alison is advancing. It too must be willing to be wrong.

One biblical illustration Alison points to when encouraging Christians to live without fear of being wrong is the "Parable of the Talents."[248] The basic story is this: A master must leave on a trip, and he gives his servants his talents. When he left, each of the servants did something different with the talents that had been given them. Two of them—those who had been given more talents than the third—traded with them and doubled the total talents they were initially given. The third, however, hid his master's talents in a hole he had dug. After returning from his trip, the master inquired about his talents. Upon receiving the

[246] Kaplan, *René Girard, Unlikely Apologist*, 145.
[247] Edwards, *James Alison and a Girardian Theology*, 102-03.
[248] See Matthew 25:14-30.

reports from the servants who had doubled the talents entrusted to them, he conveyed his gratitude.

> Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, "Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not scatter, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours." But his master replied, "You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance, but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. (Mt 25:24-30)

Alison claims that the key to understanding this parable is recognizing that it is about "the imagination of the servants as to what their master is like."[249] The old system has crafted the servant's imagination such that their narrative forces them to think of God as being not keen on taking risks or being wrong. To take such risks and to be found wrong leads to guilt and culpability in the old system which, in turn, takes one outside the bounds of the in-group. Put differently, Alison would argue that the servant who hid the master's talents was scandalized by the risks taken by his fellow servants. It is to those who have taken risks that God shows God's satisfaction.

Rooted in the acknowledgement of the gratuity of God's loving forgiveness, especially in its explicit form in the resurrection of Jesus, the innocent victim, Alison argues that the gratuity of God means that God does not just love us, but God *likes* us. God likes us *as we are*. And, he argues, once we "relax into" this being loved *and* liked, we are freed to participate in the recreation of our identities by taking daring leaps and acting in ways unafraid of mistakes and willing to learn from them.[250] We cannot be the co-creators of the

[249] Alison, *On Being Liked*, 109.
[250] Alison, *On Being Liked*, 108, 110-111. Kaplan adds, "When reconciliation happens, one not only feels forgiven from that particular sin but also feels that the God who only loves you when you are good slowly

new system without the freed imagination to think creatively and take risks for the new system. The failure of the servant, then, was a failure of imagination; that is, the servant was not able to envision a master "who likes us and so is delighted that we will come up with crazy new daring schemes which didn't seem to be part of the programme at all."[251]

The Church is a place in which our imaginations can be reformed, where we can understand God as both loving *and* liking us. We can go from a belief in a God of exclusion to a God of inclusion; from a God of strict, black-and-White rules to a God of mercy and compassion for our humanity. We can go from a belief in a God who desires us to make no waves and to maintain the status quo to a God excited for us to try out new ideas. And in the way that the Church provides for the reformation of our understanding of God, God can liberate the Church to reflect this new understanding of God and the new system God wills for us.

The challenge, Alison notes, is that the Church has also played a role in the malformation of the imagination. It has perpetuated the narrative of the old system. We do not need to look that far into history to see an unwillingness on the part of the Church to take risks. Recall Alison's own conversion story above in which the religious superiors sought the termination of his employment as a theology faculty member because they believed him to be "militantly" gay or Alison's belief prior to this experience of a God who only says "No" to him regarding his sexuality. Both of these are opportunities to take the risk of imagining a God that is unrelated to exclusion.

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fades away as one comes to know a God who simply likes you. The act of reconciliation allows for a reimagination of a relationship not rooted in reciprocity." Kaplan, *René Girard, Unlikely Apologist*, 141.

[251] Alison, *On Being Liked*, 110.

2.4.4 A Church that "Makes Room"

In rethinking the Church as an institution willing to take risks, Alison uses the beautiful image of a party to characterize the Church of the new system.[252] Jesus is inviting us into a party, and we are surprised at who we see entering the party—folks we did not expect would be invited, maybe even some we have been offended by and could be hurt that our friend would seem so callous to our concerns by inviting them. But there is something special in our being invited to this party. We are liked as well. And if we open our eyes to what is there, we see the capacity to like those we have long since decided to despise. Alison thinks the Church has much to learn from this "promiscuity" of the host, evidenced in the invited attendees. The lesson is about how we deal with those we do not like and with whom we do not agree—an issue that is not just important, but "the only really important issue at hand."[253]

The reason this is of central concern is that it reflects an honest engagement with the reality of the old system. Exclusion was the old system. Now, in light of the revelation in the resurrection, we can see "how we have all been wrong together in which I too am on the side of those with whom I disagree as someone undergoing a change of heart along with them."[254] Alison continues:

> But we'll never work through our own fundamentalisms and our own anger and small-mindedness, our own longing to be safe in a group of people like us, and so come to all truth, unless we find ways of hanging in with those whom we think of as unlike us. Especially since their "unlikeness" is usually a projection of the bits of ourselves we don't like onto someone we feel safer about fearing than ourselves. It's only when we can relax about God wanting *them* at the party that we really will be able to get over our hidden fear that [God] can't really want *us*.[255]

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[252] Alison, *Undergoing God*, 168.
[253] Alison, *Undergoing God*, 169-70.
[254] Alison, *Undergoing God*, 170.
[255] Alison, *Undergoing God*, 171.

This changes the focus of the Church. In the old system, the Church was preoccupied with its desire to be right. Now, in the new system, the Church must occupy itself with perpetuating the encounter with the resurrected Jesus; that is, it must concern itself with reconciliation.[256]

This has important implications. Alison argues that as a result of this priority of reconciliation—and in light of death already having been conquered by Jesus—our responsibility lies in making room for others to be reconciled to God and one another. We do not hold over them any perceived "rightness" in contrast to their "wrongness." Instead, we do not mind being perceived as wrong, ignorant, or naive. Again, this is not because in the end we are right. Rather, it is because we are in the same position as everyone else: possibly wrong, maybe even very wrong. And in the same way we would want others to make room for us to be reconciled, recognizing our participation in the old system and turning toward the new, we too must offer that same space for others.[257] This space is the Church, a "safe space, especially to those who feel most threatened by the shifting of order, togetherness, goodness, the loss of a world where the good is good and the bad is bad. This place . . . is where we can work through our wrath [our discomfort and anger resulting from a system we understand being taken from us] over time."[258]

And so the work in the Church is a work of honesty in which we gather together to be led through and to undergo the recreation of our stories such that they reflect the truth of the gospels. Honesty, however, does not mean a claim to the truth which we wield against others we perceive to be wrong. But it is a gift given to us—one toward which we strive, but in the end are gifted. And, as such, one of the disciple's principal responsibilities is to be self-

[256] Alison, *Undergoing God*, 172.
[257] Alison, *Undergoing God*, 172-74.
[258] Alison, *Undergoing God*, 174-75.

critical—as an individual, but also with the institution; that is, the community of the faithful. Only with this self-criticism can we be led to being recreated—again, individually and collectively.

2.4.5 The Church at Prayer

Alison's focus in his discussion of conversion is heavily ecclesial. In the same way that the community shapes our identity in the old system, it is in the community that our identities are reshaped for the new system. But in between those times in community, we have the opportunity to cultivate another practice to sustain us: prayer. I will discuss here only briefly the role Alison affords to prayer in the process of conversion since this will be a more explicit focus of our discussion of Thomas Merton in the next chapter. But in light of our desire to utilize the insights of both Alison and Merton, exploring what both have to say about these two common and interrelated areas will help us.

In its essence, Alison understands prayer to be the more personal place where we learn to desire like God—the Other other. It is a practice of self-reflection in which we try to delineate the ways in which we continue to participate in the old system and allow ourselves to envision—or imaginatively practice—our participation in the new system. As Alison writes:

> [P]rayer in the presence of the risen Lord is therefore able to enmesh the person praying into the various deep changes that are made available by the resurrection. It is perhaps one of the most privileged ways of working out in quiet and solitude the change of relationships which must be worked out as well in concrete ways in the context of daily life.[259]

In other words, in prayer we see a path forward in this new system, and we evaluate how we might alter our present course of action in our relationships to better reflect that new system.

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[259] Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 96.

This is part of the reformation of our desire. We are praying "unceasingly" in order to be able to see the world "through the eyes of the One who reveals the mind of God." [260] We are praying to become other Christs.

In Alison's understanding of prayer, then, we are not attempting to get God to accomplish something with or for us. Instead, "our praying to God is moving us. It is truer that we are being prayed-in than that we pray."[261] We are human, after all. And the power of the old system—one we will continue to exist within, even in our attempts to transform it—continues to put pressure on us to conform. Prayer offers a retreat from this space to a new space in which we can reflect on God's boundless love for us and be freed from that internal and external pressure to remain the same.

2.4.6 The Church of the "Old System" and the Church of the "New System"

As noted above, despite being formed to subvert it, the Church is not immune to participating in the old system. As a matter of fact, it participates effectively—and often unwittingly—in the old system. It does so in its own forms of reciprocity, both friendly and hostile. Let us discuss three ways in which the Church participates in the old system: baptism, participation in the life of the Church, and obedience to the Church.

First, to baptism. In the old system, if one is baptized, they belong to the Church. Not only that, but the Catholic Church teaches that baptism is an indelible mark on the soul.[262] That it is indelible means that it cannot be "removed," even if removal is attempted, such as in a disavowal of the faith. With baptism, one can be included in and judged by the

[260] Alison, *On Being Liked*, 1
[261] Alison, *On Being Liked*, 142.
[262] John Paul II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., (Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2011), sec. 1272.

Church. And because it is indelible, the baptized are considered subject to the Church's judgment in perpetuity. Further, without baptism one is excluded from full participation in the life of the Church and is judged as "other," excluded, or in the out-group.[263]

If one participates in the life of the Church, especially if it is participated in with a conception of baptism as described above, one's participation buttresses the old system. They can experience the Church sacraments—especially the Eucharist—transactionally. This commodification of grace, which skews one's capacity for the reception of grace, results in a person who might claim the Christian identity but is unwilling to undergo the recreation offered by the risen Christ. This results from an overly individualistic conception of salvation and the nature of our relationship with God. Forgiveness is not perceived to be offered for participation in the old system but is instead a forgiveness for sins against God but with little-to-no real-world impact. Once they have confessed their sins to a priest, received absolution, and walk out of the confessional, their responsibilities have concluded, and they are able to identify themselves more closely with God over and against those unrepentant sinners. Of course, this implies that they can present themselves in good conscience to receive the Eucharist. Despite its shallowness, this participation assures those who participate in this way of their own salvation and convinces them of others' damnation.

Finally, we can be obedient to the Church in a way that buttresses the old system as well. Traditionally, and despite the recent emphasis on the primacy of conscience, there has been a focus on faithful obedience being directed to the Church. And even then it often has a greater focus on accepting the Church's teachings unquestioningly and living within the

[263] As noted above, for many—though less the case for the Church in its official teaching—being outside the bounds of the Church means being outside the bounds of salvation. Even if it is not an official teaching of the Church, that it has been such a significant theme in the Church's history leads to the *de facto* participation in the old system.

bounds of the Church's moral teachings. Like participation, obedience to Church teaching (doctrinal and moral) can be shallow, devoid of any relational aspect, and can foster a pride that reinforces an in-group mentality against a damned out-group.

If society is going to achieve the end desired by God—that is, the new system—then the Church cannot merely perpetuate the old system. Instead, the Church must be a location in which the new system is enacted and practiced. It is, after all, a microcosm of society and of the world. As the late Michael Himes taught:

> Christianity claims that my relationship to God is dependent on my relationship to my brothers and sisters. . . . when we love one another we are experiencing the presence of God. That, I suggest to you, is the deepest reason for the existence of the church. . . . Our capacity to live together as a community of people with mutual forgiveness and deep concern for the well being of all members of the community and our desire to spread that community to all our brothers and sisters are the ways in which we come to know what the word "God" means.[264]

In other words, the Church is the location in which we hear about "the Happening"—that is, the forgiving encounter of the apostles with the risen Jesus—and practice our derivative "happenings"—our offering of forgiveness—such that we continue, and allow others the opportunity, to experience the risen Christ. In asking one another for forgiveness for our sins, offering a sign of peace before communion, and in sharing a meal around a common table, we catch glimpses of that new system. And the more we attend to the ways in which these seemingly symbolic gestures are, in fact, much more meaningful and significant, the better we can request forgiveness, offer peace, and share our goods in the world outside the parish doors.

Let us consider briefly what a Church in the new system looks like within the three categories discussed above: baptism, participation in the life of the Church, and obedience to

[264] Michael Himes, *The Mystery of Faith* (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2004), 41, 44-45.

the Church. First, baptism shifts from mere membership to the conduit through which the Christian is freed to undergo being recreated and to participate in the new system. Baptism is our symbolic participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in which we shed the old self—here, the self who participates in the old system —and begin that process of being transformed into a person with a new identity based on the desire of the Other other. It allows us to not fear death in whatever form death might present itself: social, emotional, or even physical. And without this fear, we are not afraid to make room in the Church for those with whom we disagree. Baptism facilitates our conversion, and it allows us to give space for others to experience the same.

Regarding participation in the life of the Church, we can do so in a way that is reflective of the new system: allowing ourselves to be recreated, accepting and offering forgiveness, preferring inclusion over exclusion, maintaining an awareness of the experience in the Church as an experience of the risen Lord. Notice that this is not about a transaction. In some sense, we are not bringing anything to the table with which to exchange except ourselves. We are offering ourselves, or surrendering ourselves, to the process. We attend and participate not in order to fulfill an obligation but to say yes to the gift being offered.

And obedience can be rethought as well and perceived as something directed toward the work of God in our life and the life of the community, not an obedience to a particular set of rules or regulations that keep us "safe" from damnation. Obedience can take on a form that builds the new system. If the essential experience of the Christian is that of the encounter with the risen Lord, then our only opportunity for that is in our encounter with the Holy Spirit. And since the Spirit continues to move, enliven, and enrich the disciple and their community as they are recreated, then there must be an openness to the new—to a new way of understanding the doctrines of the faith and a new way of relating to others. This, at

least as Alison characterizes it, would result in a more nuanced understanding of truth and hazier boundaries between those in the Church and those who are not.

In the same way that conversion is a process, the Church facilitating and fostering conversion is a process as well. It is not something that can be received in one visit, but it requires a persistence that patiently accepts the minor moves, week to week, the Church is helping us accept.

2.5 Alison's Diagnosis of Racial Resentment and Polarization

Having now explored Alison's framework for a communal anthropology, conversion, and the Church as facilitating that openness to conversion, I will now use his framework to diagnose the two instantiations of violence discussed in chapter one: racial resentment and polarization.

2.5.1 Racial Resentment as Exclusion

Recall from chapter one that racial resentment is a negative affective response by White persons to Black and other persons of color when it is perceived by those White persons that a benefit has been received undeservedly. Those benefits could include a pay raise at their place of employment, the benefits of social policies, or even the *perceived* benefit of being able to rely on claims of racism against White persons that are not at the disposal of White persons. Supporting these judgments are two narratives: the just-world value orientation, which holds that life is a level playing field that should benefit those who work hard and punish those who do wrong; and legitimizing racial myths, which are the stereotypes that justify the inequality of persons of color. If one judges a person-of-color to have received a benefit undeservedly, supported by these two narratives, the response is

violence—either political policies that harm the recipient or their community or, worse, overt violence—to retain the status quo. Applying Alison's framework, we can understand racial resentment to fit squarely within the old system—the system built upon the scapegoat mechanism and the violence and death that the mechanism includes.

For the sake of supporting the dominant society, Africans were brought to this country, enslaved and forced to work for the economic benefit of Whites. In an economic system still developing on the world's stage, the need for low-wage labor was high. Put differently, there was acquisitive mimesis for the money to be made in commerce that led to a rivalry, a conflict, that required a scapegoat of sorts. What followed was the construction—or uncritical acceptance—of narratives that subjected persons of color to subhuman status that justified their enslavement.

Encounters with the resurrected Jesus began to reveal to some the old system for what it was and their participation in it; that is, they saw the innocence of those persons who had been enslaved. Emancipation followed—though not without its own violent conflict—yet those old narratives were still uncritically passed from generation to generation and new narratives were created, resulting in the legitimizing racial myths that still persist today.

What remains is an unwillingness or an inability to allow that revelation—the intelligence of the victim—in. We prefer some version of the old system. In the old system, we are born into families who look like us, they care for us, and we are told that "we" are not like "them," which, in the case of racial resentment, is a message passed on implicitly. This is less likely to take the form of explicit comments that further the stereotypes imposed upon the Black community. It is more likely to be comments that merely imply some difference—comments about particular places or neighborhoods. And in addition to these legitimizing racial myths, the privilege of White people hypnotizes them into a belief that the

world is fundamentally fair and that we are rewarded according to the degree of our hard work. Our children and grandchildren inherit and pass on these narratives, if they are not critiqued. And, implied in that inheritance, is the continued identity formation over-and-against people of color; that is, we work harder, are more deserving, and are superior to them—again, even if we are not explicitly saying these things, and even if we actively work for racism's abolition.

Racial resentment is a form of mimetic violence that emerges when the assessment of the benefits received by persons of color concludes that it was undeserved. They are the recipients of benefits—benefits I paid for, no less—that they do not deserve. There is only so much money to go around and, if I am being disadvantaged in the unequal distribution of those resources, I will respond violently, seeking to advance policies that retain the status quo. The status quo is my perception of fairness and is often built upon forms of violence (*e.g.*, lack of funding for housing, health care, education, etc.).

These beliefs and perceptions are a failure of imagination, they are evidence of being bound in by the old story such that taking the risk of being wrong about my own assumptions is not an option, lest I fail in some way. So I rest in what I think I understand: the systematic exclusion of persons of color from the in-group is justified.

2.5.2 Polarization as Not Making Room

Unlike racial resentment, polarization is not necessarily violent—a difference of opinion is sometimes quite beneficial. However, the degree of polarization we face today in our politics and our places of worship is a form of violence. Recall that polarization as we experience it today emerged during a period of time when the nationalization of elections was effected in general elections, when Congress was televised such that new narratives

could be peddled by politicians from the chamber floor, and during a rise in negative partisanship, not to mention all of this following on the heels of the New Deal that divided Democrats and Dixiecrats on the basis of equal rights for persons of color. The violence that emerges from polarization is in the lack of the political will to negotiate toward policies that benefit the marginalized in society. Instead, governing results in the policies of those in power—as "extreme" as they might be on either side of the aisle. And this implies a concern not just for their own constituents, but also their party and the power available to them; that is, reelection is more important than results.

This polarization, then, is built upon false narratives. These false narratives include not just that politicians are altruistically interested in the wellbeing of citizens, but also the misinformation peddled for political gain that we see in mudslinging campaigns or on social media. And the ends toward which these false narratives work is the power desired by politicians and their supporters.

In Alison's framework, we can understand this polarization to also be within the old system. In the U.S. government, there are only so many seats to which a person can be elected. This means that the power associated with those seats is a limited resource. Through acquisitive mimesis—the desire of a politician for the power that others desire—a mimetic rivalry is established, and naturally so, through the campaign and election process. In order to achieve that end, mimetic violence emerges in the form of falsehoods or misinformation that work to undermine the political opponent for political gain.

Politicians' supporters are caught up in this mimetic violence as negative partisanship is fed by these falsehoods and misinformation that lead to an extreme form of exclusion of the other party—a party with whom they not only disagree, but also hate. Extreme exclusion and an unwillingness to recognize even the humanity of the political opponent or the other

political party, along with the desire to gain or maintain their political power for their or their constituents benefit only, leads to an unwillingness or inability to reach compromises to advance political policies that can benefit those most marginalized in society. It is the violent consequence of an inability to communicate.

The inability to communicate reflects in politics an unwillingness to take the risk of being wrong. The belief in one's own correctness supersedes any capacity to recognize that they, like their political opponents, have also been wrong and may continue to be so. It is an unwillingness to be forgiven because of an unwillingness to see their own error. And because they cannot accept their own forgiveness—let alone accept their own need for it—they are unwilling to see any commonality with their opponents. Put differently, they are unwilling to offer the space needed for their opponents to see the need for their forgiveness. This is not just a disservice to the political opponent, but it is also a disservice to the original politician. They are merely living in the clear, black-and-White illusion of the old system. They prefer the old story they understand to any new story that might decenter them from their place of power.

As noted above, the Church is also subject to these same temptations. As we often imitate the desire for the political success of the preferred political party of our parents, we also imitate the faith traditions of our parents—unless, in either case, we encounter others whose desire we would be drawn to imitating instead. Having gained the identity as a Democrat or a Republican or as a Progressive or Traditional Catholic, we also gain a belonging to those parties and groups. Entrenched as we can become in those groups, we develop an inability and unwillingness to see any other way of doing things. This leaves us bitter toward those in the out-group. So not only are we unwilling to share political power or ideas with those across the aisle, we are also unwilling to seek truth by making space in our

pews for those with whom we disagree. This failure of imagination and of taking risks, we lock ourselves into an us-them mentality, making the Church an institution of the old system in which there are the saved and the damned—which, like the determination of deservedness in received benefits, is a judgment we cannot make and should not make. In restricting our own imaginations, we restrict the Church from being the location in which we encounter the risen Jesus, receive and give forgiveness, and transform ourselves, the Church, and the world.

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored the work of James Alison. Alison offers a Girardian view of communal anthropology; that is, human beings are imitative and desiring in a way that leads inevitably to violence and death. This is the old system—a system perpetuated by society and even by the Church. It is a system of inclusion and exclusion, in-groups and out-groups.

The old system, however, was disrupted when Jesus, the innocent victim, was put to death and resurrected. In the resurrection, he offered forgiveness to his persecutors and to all of us who have participated in this old system. This forgiveness is the start of a conversion process, should we allow it to be, that is a practice of forgiveness—accepting our own and offering forgiveness to others. This allows us to undergo a transformation in which our desires are shaped not by the social other but by the Other other, God. And this works to build the new system—a system of persons and communities whose identities are not gained by exclusion or the use of violence over or against anyone else.

For Alison, the Church is the location in which we practice this new system and in which we have our imaginations transformed in such a way that our narratives change. We

are no longer beholden to the stories of the old system that demand exclusion and the upholding of the status quo. Instead, we are baptized into a community who, because of Jesus's resurrection, are unafraid of death and so are liberated to take the risk of extending loving hands of forgiveness to those once considered the out-group. And it is a place where all are welcome—those with whom we agree and those with whom we disagree. The degree to which we give room for all to experience the conversion process is how we gauge the success of the Church. And such a position necessarily transforms the Church away from an authority on truth to an instantiation of the new system at work—or at least a community striving toward such.

Alison is not without his limitations, however. Among these shortcomings are his possible overreliance on imitation and desire, not acknowledging a more fundamental freedom with which we can choose to follow Jesus. While I do not deny the affective reality of conversion's start (*i.e.*, being able to see the victim's innocence), more should be recognized as regards the capacity of our freedom to lead us—intellectually, for example—to the insights that flow from the resurrection.[265] Further, his focus on needing to see society's problem first before moving to our participation in it seems to limit the personal relationship that we can have with God in the Holy Spirit that can also lead us to the self-transforming conclusions he wishes for us to gain. Prayer, for example, is a reflection on our participation in a society behind whose curtain we have been able to peak, instead of an opportunity to

[265] Not unrelated to this is the question about what Alison believes of this more real self that God desires us to be. Has it preexisted in us in some way? "Yet Alison himself acknowledges that this 'new' self, oriented toward the gratuitous God, already existed in some sense even prior to conversion. Alison asserts that conversion brings about 'the transformation of our receptivity' in which 'our desire becomes a desire for God and is discovered to be such not as something plastered over our distorted desires, but *as the real sense behind even those distorted desires, as something anterior to them*.' . . . However, Alison does deny this self as a reality that persons *experience* or perceive in *any way* (thematically or unthematically) prior to their conversion." Edwards, "The Self Prior to Mimetic Desire: Rahner and Alison on Original Sin and Conversion," 29.

reflect on our personal experience and come to more universal conclusions about the world around me.

In the next chapter, we will turn to the life and thought of Thomas Merton. The social activist, writer, and contemplative will complement Alison, especially as regards the shortcomings I note above. Merton's view is fundamentally distinct in its understanding of the source of, and our ability to ascertain, our true identity. But he shares with Alison the belief that, without addressing the societal-communal pressures and individual barriers that mutually inform one another, our identities will only facilitate the growth of the old system. To overcome this, to undergo a personal conversion that informs the community, Merton encourages us to pray. It is this spirituality that we will discuss next.

CHAPTER 3

THOMAS MERTON AND PERSONAL CONVERSION

"The monk is reproached for his isolation: 'You isolate yourself in order to save your soul behind monastery walls, but you forget the brotherly ministry to mankind.' We shall see, however, who is more zealous in loving his brothers. For it is they who are isolated, not we, but they do not see it."
-Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

In chapter two, we engaged the thought of James Alison as we sought to uncover his insights into the ecclesial means of facilitating conversion; that is, we looked to Alison to describe the ecclesial-communal aspect of conversion. We turned to Alison because of his Girardian communal anthropology—that human identity is necessarily communal, that our identities and worldviews are impressed upon us through a system of desire largely external to ourselves. Belonging was our imitation of the desires of others, to do or not do what they do or do not do, to like or not like those they like or do not, etc. The problem, so Alison claims, is that these group formations of belonging took on a moral valence in which those in the in-group were "good" and those in the out-group were "bad," and in which morality, ethics, God's favor, and the like were defined by these arbitrary groups. And to ensure this desire to be in the in-group is fulfilled or to ensure that the in-group's internal conflict does not reach group-destroying levels, groups will choose a scapegoat, or common enemy, to create a bond among the in-group. This innocent victim calms any conflict.

Alison clearly articulates the structure of this imitative and reciprocal group construction, but then explains that Jesus changed that system. Like other victims before him who suffered death as the scapegoat for a group's false peace, Jesus was an innocent victim. But distinct from other victims, and in light of his resurrection, his death *revealed* for

those witnesses that it is this system—the old system—that is flawed, yet this is the system that all people have been participating in through history. For Alison, this is "Original Sin"—the state of things into which we are all born and in which we all participate. This realization by the witnesses revealed in Jesus' death begins a process of conversion wherein the witness recognizes their misplaced desire and begins the process of being reformed (note the passive language), undergoing the process of being created into their new identity, their new sense of humanity, their new sense of responsibility, their new mode of relationships; that is, they are given over time a new narrative.

The narrative they are given is that narrative that Jesus told us by his life, death, and resurrection: we are, often at different times in our lives, both the innocent victim and the victimizer. Yet, we are also forgiven, made aware of our participation in that system in a way characterized by forgiveness and love instead of condemnation. And in our reception of this gratuitous love and forgiveness, we are called to transform that system, taking the side of the innocent victims in history, and forgiving offenders in a way that invites them into the same transformative process.

For Alison, the Church is the location where we come to learn this story, to continually remember our participation in that widely accepted old system and to continually remind ourselves to allow ourselves to be transformed as we reshape our desires to imitate those of God through the example of Jesus Christ. And it is the place where we practice giving room to others also undergoing that transformation to allow God to work on them as we do the same, still ridding ourselves of the falsehoods we continue to hold that put us into conflict with those others. It is a testing ground, a field hospital, a microcosm where we all have our narratives revised in light of being recrafted such that our eyes are opened to a deeper truth. This practice is reinforced in our consistent participation in the mass where we

encounter the archetype of innocent victimhood, Jesus Christ, in the Eucharist. We cannot stop there, however. Alison's theological framework for conversion is essential to any discussion of conversion as it reflects a community-centered approach to the recreation of oneself into who God desires us to be through the practice of forgiveness in community and the reorientation of our desires.

In this chapter, we will evaluate the supplementary practice to liturgy: spirituality. It is important to note that, despite it often being a solitary practice, spirituality is *not* personal or individual as much as it is *interior*. It is, after all, informed by the community and the Church. As well, it also contributes to shaping the community of the Church. It is in the practice of our prayer and meditation in which we come to similar, though distinct, conclusions about our identities in the world and our responsibilities to the world in a way that complements the communal we discussed in the last chapter.

Some argue that a committed practice of prayer, especially among those who have committed themselves to monastic life, is a world-denying, selfish practice. Thomas Merton, however, argues that we only really understand the world when we put distance between ourselves and it. This distance offers us the opportunity to sift events from pseudo-events, to relish in the monotony which was gifted to us by God instead of the day-to-day perpetual umbrage that seems infect everyone. And it also allows us to have the layers of the false self that these pseudo-events and society's old system put upon us peeled away—like a film that obscures the view through our window.

The practice of prayer, by which I am referring to individual prayer and meditation, is a complementary practice to that in which we participate in the Church's liturgy. It is what helps continue to ground us "between Sundays." It is the internal partner to the liturgy's externality. And, in prayer, we can take the lessons learned in community and work on

ourselves as we prepare to return to community—either the community of the Church or the communities outside the Church.

We will see in this chapter that the practice of prayer helps us understand the estrangement that exists first within each of us and which serves as the broken anthropological foundation that Merton claims results in the alienation from others and from God. Left unaddressed, this alienation can overflow into the violence we experience in the world. And through this same prayer, we undergo the process of conversion—releasing our ego's grip on us and our understanding of the world and having our real identities and the real stories that construct those identities revealed as we take that authenticity into the world to challenge society's status quo and false narratives.

Merton's life, like Alison's, is also marked by conversion, characterized by the renunciation of certain aspects of his life to permit his development as he progressed toward an ever-truer self. But, regarding the same risk we addressed in the last chapter, he was concerned to not allow conversion to be accompanied by contempt—renunciation should not include resentment. Instead, the progress toward the true self necessarily includes a concern for others, seeking unity by critical self-examination, honest and authentic relationships, and loving witness. While grace is certainly necessary for the success of the conversion process, Merton asserts that we are not helpless, action is possible, even if God's is the final action.

I selected Alison as an interlocutor for the last chapter because he has a specifically ecclesial-oriented approach to conversion, sparked by an encounter with the resurrected Jesus, and that works not just for the transformation of the community of the Church but also society, insofar as the Church is a microcosm of society. I selected Merton as the interlocutor for this chapter because his approach is wonderfully complementary to Alison's.

His framework for conversion is a spirituality-oriented approach, sparked by an internal awareness of God's presence within, and that works not just for the transformation of the individual, but also society as we find our connection to everyone else through God's presence within us. Our responsibility as disciples to the world is derived from this inward turn. We can only critique the world and understand how to respond to its problems by removing ourselves from the heat of its fire and letting the coolness free us for creative thought. And, in particular, Merton's social turn takes up our alienation from one another, especially in the context of racial divisions.

In this chapter, I will begin by exploring Merton's understanding of the term "stranger." We will find in this discussion his fundamental convictions about the makeup of human persons and the interconnectedness of humanity. Then I will delineate some aspects of Merton's theological anthropology as well as his assessment of what he believes to be the central problem facing society that flows from this anthropology. Following this, I will explore Merton's understanding of prayer as that which opens us to conversion, including a discussion on his concern for avoiding resentment in the process of conversion—renunciation without resentment or conversion without contempt. I will then discuss Merton's own conversion experiences as they evidence narrative changes in his life. And finally, I will offer an evaluation of how we can diagnose the two instantiations of violence we are discussing in this project through Merton's theological framework, including a more focused discussion of Merton's approach to race, which has much to offer this project, given the abundance of his own writing on the topic historically.

3.1 Merton's "Nesting Doll" Anthropology: *Le Point Vierge*, True Self, False Self

It might seem odd to begin an evaluation of Merton's conception of conversion by investigating his meaning of the word "stranger." But doing so helps us situate Merton's anthropology on a particular foundation: the essential unity of humanity.

Merton refers quite explicitly to the idea of "stranger" in two primary and well-known works.[266] The first is a brief essay entitled, "Day of a Stranger," which was written in 1965 as Merton took up his residence at the newly built hermitage on the grounds of the Abbey of Gethsemani. He wrote the essay in response to an inquiry about his daily routine.[267] Beyond artfully detailing his *horarium*, Merton begins to describe aspects of his spirituality that also allude to some underlying commitments he has about the human person. His time in the hermitage is his attempt to understand himself. And, as is seen throughout his writings, he also takes the opportunity to forcefully reject the myth of progress and technological advancement devoid of any ethical reflection, which renders human persons as automatons, cogs in the machine, and, most significantly for Merton's reflections, estranged from themselves.

Living in the hermitage, Merton can assert that he is "free not to be a number" and that "[t]here is, in fact, a choice" in that matter.[268] It is not always apparent, even now, that we have a choice in our participation in society as we understand it or that there is even an alternative in the first place. And while his life in the hermitage, a place usually characterized by strict solitude, is not totally disconnected—he does, after all, visit the monastery daily as he also "live[s] in the shadow of the apocalyptic cherub" that are the bombers that fly

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[266] Merton's engagement with the concept of "stranger" is certainly not limited to these two works, but these are the two most significant for our purposes as it relates to his anthropology.
[267] Lawrence S. Cunningham, ed., *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992), 214.
[268] Thomas Merton, "Day of a Stranger," in *Thomas Merton: Selected Essays*, edited by Patrick F. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2013), 233.

overhead—he is there to "cool" the temperature of his life. And, relaxing into this coolness, Merton can seek out a deeper and truer version of himself in the simplicity of the life of a hermit.[269] It is his effort to do just what he reminds us: to choose not to be a number, to choose not to participate in society's status quo. This "cool" hermitage is distinct from the "hot medium" maintained in the monastic life—a heat produced by "words like 'must,' 'ought,' and 'should.'"[270]

This "hot medium" is also the frenzy of the common contemporary spirituality, he claims, which arises because people think they "ought" to cultivate a spiritual life. Instead, Merton argues, a proper Benedictine spirituality is cooled. Merton seeks his "true fulfillment" in this coolness, honoring and "preserv[ing] the stillness, the silence, the poverty, the virginal point of pure nothingness" within which he experiences the "central tonic note" to which all other sounds meet—or, the being to which all other being finds its connection.[271]

The stranger in this particular essay is Merton himself, the one about whom the inquirer has little familiarity, but also the one about whom Merton has some unfamiliarity too. As Patrick O'Connell writes, "He is a 'stranger' not because he lives an exotic existence apart from others, but only in the sense that he is aware that his identity, like that of everyone, is a mystery that cannot be defined by a role or function."[272] This is a reality of our humanness. We cannot be known completely by anyone else but God. Not even we can understand ourselves completely. While this can cause some frustration as we strive to live

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[269] Merton, "Day of a Stranger," 234.
[270] Merton, "Day of a Stranger," 235. This sounds quite similar to the concerns of the Church of the old system Alison describes, with its overreliance on black-and-White doctrinal statements and moral rules instead of the ability to take risks or imagine new ways of understanding God and imagining life in community.
[271] Merton, "Day of a Stranger," 237, 239.
[272] Merton, "Day of a Stranger," 233.

intentionally with some clear direction, especially as regards questions of vocation, there is something beautiful about our being so mysterious that we will always have more depths to plumb, more corners around which we can look, and, as a result, more authenticity to discover all throughout our lives. Put simply, our being a mystery is not necessarily a bad thing.

This insight about identity-as-mystery is expressed even more explicitly in the second work in which we find Merton readily using the term "stranger." In the book published just a couple years after the letter above was written, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton describes his famous experience at the corner of Louisville, Kentucky's Fourth and Walnut Streets that occurred in 1958.[273] He had gone to the city on some business for the monastery, and while walking through the shopping district, among the busy-ness of downtown, Merton writes:

> I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness of spurious self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and supposed holiness. The whole illusion of a separate holy existence is a dream.[274]

Merton is undergoing a conversion, a switch flipped, that unveils the earlier understanding of his monastic vocation as being held in error and shows him, instead, a deeper truth. Notice that this is not a conversion that he decides for himself—some choice he makes—but a realization or a revelation that is gifted to him. But it should also be noticed that, at this time, he *is* a monastic who gives his life to prayer and contemplation. So although this experience

[273] If you find yourself in search of that corner, note that, in 1978, Walnut Street was renamed Muhammed Ali Boulevard.
[274] Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image, 2014), 153-54.

is gifted, it is not without some preparatory work, some openness to the reception of God's revelation (which will be discussed in more detail below).

The realization Merton has is that, instead of being the separation from the world that he thought entering the monastery offered him, such a separation *did not* take place because that type of separation *cannot* take place. He was not removed from the world, but united to it even more in his apparent separation—it is an inseparable connection.

The separation of monks, Merton realizes, is not that they are not in the world, but that they "take a different attitude to all these things [worldly matters], for we belong to God. Yet," he adds, "so does everybody else belong to God. We just happen to be conscious of it, and make a profession out of this consciousness."[275] In other words, the monastic is one who enters a regular practice of evaluating the real and getting beneath the layers of distracting worldly matters such that they can better understand the deeper truth that exists. It is, he acknowledges, a practice that all of us could do, monastic or not. But the monastic has made it their life's work and done both for themselves and for the rest of humanity.

Merton expresses happiness and regret at having had this reality revealed to him—happiness that he received it, but regret because it cannot be easily conveyed or replicated:

> This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud. And I suppose my happiness could have taken form in the words: "Thank God, thank God that I *am* like other men, that I am only a man among others." . . . But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.[276]

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[275] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 154.

[276] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 154-55. Here, Merton is referencing the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other, for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 18:10-14).

Merton alludes to the role that grace plays in conversions of this sort. He was awakened, and the intimacy of humanity—regardless of the recognition of it by humanity as a whole—was revealed to him. It is not that it did not exist before, but that he was unable to see it, at least with the clarity he saw it at that intersection. And it is not clear from the context that he had been thinking about it specifically. It was, in a sense, infused. Because it is infused knowledge, "poured in" by God, it is not something that he can have others realize. They must come to that realization in the same way; that is, they must cultivate an openness to such revelation and grace.

Having realized the interconnectedness of humanity and the inability to be truly separated from others, he nonetheless affirms that his solitude—a term I use here to distinguish it from separation—is valuable. Exploring his own vocation and seeing with greater clarity the reality of the world around him, he continues:

> This changes nothing in the sense and value of my solitude, for it is in fact the function of solitude to make one realize such things with a clarity that would be impossible to anyone completely immersed in the other cares, the other illusions, and all the automatisms of a tightly collective existence. My solitude, however, is not my own, for I see now how much it belongs to them—and that I have a responsibility for it in their regard, not just in my own. It is because I am with them that I owe it to them to be alone, and when I am alone they are not "they" but my own self. There are no strangers![277]

Given the mention of "stranger" in these excerpts, it is clear that Merton uses it in different ways. There is a colloquial use that, in using it, he even considers himself a stranger when describing his life as a hermit. But as an actual theological term or category, Merton asserts that strangers do not exist. Instead, there is a unity among humanity and with God making all essentially one.

[277] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 155.

The interconnected identity is his foundational anthropological claim, "*le point vierge*." He writes:

> At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of *absolute poverty* is the pure glory of God in us. It is so to speak His name written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our dependence, as our sonship. It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely. . . . I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere."[278]

The "*point vierge*" is a central element of Merton's anthropology as it is, for him, what constitutes the unity of human persons with one another and with God.[279] It is what nullifies strangerhood.

Elsewhere in his writings, and connected intimately to this notion of *le point vierge*, Merton offers two additional categories that add to his fundamental conviction about the human person: the true and false self. In brief, the true self is that self we each have that is given to us by God uniquely. As Merton says, "For me to be a saint means to be myself. Therefore, the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self."[280] This identity is hidden in God and only capable of being found when we "become identified with Him in Whom is hidden the reason and fulfillment of my existence."[281] The false self, by contrast, is the self upon which we have not worked. While God created trees to be trees, God created human beings with a freedom that

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[278] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 155-56.
[279] For additional discussions of "*le point vierge*," see Nass Cannon, "Attending to the Presence of God: Thomas Merton and *Le Point Vierge*," *The Merton Journal* 18, no. 1 (2011): 11-17, and M. Madeline Abdelnour, S.C.N., "Le Point Vierge in Thomas Merton," *Cistercian Studies* 6 (1971): 153-71.
[280] Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions Books, 1961), 31.
[281] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 36.

trees do not have. With this freedom, we can remain unaware of our true selves—because we are born in sin, we "came into the world with a false self"[282]—or we can search it out in God. The false self, however, is an "illusory person" whom God "does not know anything about" because the false self is estranged from God.[283] This is distinct from the true self, who is not estranged from God because, in order to be found, the self must be in relationship with God.

Therefore, in addition to the true and false self, with the *point vierge*, it might be helpful to think of Merton's anthropology taking the form of a nesting doll—layered levels of false selves covering the true self at the center of which exists the *point vierge* core. Covering this divine spark is the true self layer or a spectrum of iterations of the self that are closer to what God wills for our life—a distinct path for each of us. And outside of this is the false self that "wants to exist outside the reach of God's will and God's love—outside of reality and outside of life. And such a self cannot help but be an illusion . . . [an illusion that my self] is the fundamental reality of life to which everything else in the universe is ordered."[284] The core functions, in a sense, like a magnet: despite our estrangement, we are nonetheless drawn toward others and toward God, our magnetic fields in contact with one another. The more we are able to remove the layers of the false self and get to truer versions of ourselves, the more that magnet is able to draw us toward others, overcoming that estrangement.

Together, this "structure" of the human person is the fundamental conviction Merton holds that serves as the foundation of his theological anthropology, his assessment of society's ills, and his understanding of conversion.

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[282] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 33.
[283] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 34.
[284] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 34-35.

3.2 Alienation and the God of Progress

While Merton disavows the existence of strangers, he does believe that we can be strangers in the colloquial understanding. We can be estranged from God, estranged from our neighbor, and estranged from ourselves. Estrangement—what I see as Merton's colloquial use of "stranger"—is not a negation or voiding of the essential unity among human beings with God, but rather, it obscures our essential unity and Merton's fundamental conviction about human beings. To clarify how I am distinguishing between estrangement as denial of something's existence and estrangement as an obscuring of something's existence, we might consider strained family relationships. At times, we hear of a son or daughter who is estranged from their parents. In this situation, estrangement does not mean that the fundamental relationship of the parents to their child is nonexistent. Instead, it *is* a relationship, but it is being ignored, unacknowledged, or avoided. So estrangement in this case means we are avoiding a relationship with ourselves, ignoring relationships with our neighbors, or not acknowledging our relationship with God.

It is our estrangement from ourselves that leads to the estrangement we have from God and from our neighbor. And the estrangement we perpetuate in these relationships, Merton claims, leads to violence in all its various forms. So, while Merton holds that strangers do not actually exist because of humanity's essential unity in God—a realization he made in the hustle and bustle of downtown Louisville—we can be estranged no less. And this has dangerous consequences for humanity and for society.

In this section, I will discuss Merton's evaluation of how estrangement manifests itself in society through technological progress, which I deem a pseudo-religion under a god of progress. Then, in addressing the more individualized focus Merton takes in his

assessment of society's problem, I will touch more briefly on the influence of existentialism and personalism in his thought, especially as it helps understand better the pseudo-religion.

3.2.1 Society's Pseudo-Religion under the God of Progress

One of the ways Merton addresses this estrangement in its societal form is through technological progress. This emerged after his reading in the area, especially after reading *The Triple Revolution* which addressed, "cybernetics . . . new forms of weaponry that cannot win wars but can obliterate civilization . . . [and] the universal demand for full human rights."[285] Paul R. Dekar argues that it was this pamphlet that "offered an excellent starting point from which to diagnose and ameliorate a pattern of illness in the United States and elsewhere, namely, distortion of our true humanity."[286]

With technological progress being considered the primary situation or experience that humanity was faced with, he began his response. Merton argued that technological progress has rendered human beings "moral infants."[287] Society has given technology a disproportionate amount of autonomy; that is, we trust that any technological advancement is positive and therefore morally good—or, at least, morally neutral. Doing so has subjected human reason to the "rule of quantity," within which "the person, the subject of qualified and perfectible freedom, becomes *quantified*, that is, becomes part of a mass—mass man—whose only function is to enter anonymously into the process of production and

[285] Paul R. Dekar, "What the Machine Produces and What the Machine Destroys: Thomas Merton on Technology," *The Merton Annual* 17 (2004), 216.
[286] Dekar, "What the Machine Produces and What the Machine Destroys: Thomas Merton on Technology," 216.
[287] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 71.

consumption."[288] Here, we see Merton raising the concern between "can" and "ought,"[289] in which the "can" rules as victor and persons must subject themselves to it, rationalizing its results because it has become deified as a god of progress.[290] We are either "with" this progress or "against" it. But, further, we are often not offered a choice in the matter. We might consider the number of resources that we must utilize—I am thinking here of health care, education, banking, and the likes—that no longer have, or have greatly limited, non-technological options for navigating their services. If one is without an internet connection or a smartphone, they might find themselves without meaningful access to essential services. Put simply, we are not given a choice but to participate in the fast-moving and ever-changing technological progress in society. (And what might be even more interesting here is that when one decides not to utilize a service that is inessential but considered by society at large to be essential, such as Facebook or Instagram, one might find themselves on the receiving end of shocked disbelief that one could function without those services!)

As these above examples illustrate, the god of progress, Merton claims, has rendered our existence as one "under a tyranny of untruth," evidenced by the way we submit to the rule of quantity and to "plausible and useful lies" that help us make sense of something that,

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[288] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 70-71. Think of the way Americans discuss the "invisible hand of the market" as something that we cannot question but to which we must surrender ourselves. This lack of any meaningful critical evaluation of the system(s) in which we participate is the natural consequence of the belief in the benefit of technological progress, whether such benefit is real or not.

[289] These are two distinct questions. First, can we do something? And second, ought we do it? The ethical question is the second. To subvert the second question to the first confuses the ethical question with a question devoid of ethical implications. We should not do anything simply because we can—a deeper evaluation must be made.

[290] I think it is worth taking note of the current conversation regarding the risks of one type of technological progress: artificial intelligence (AI). From the more trivial risk of ChatGPT being used to write term papers to the more significant risks of disinformation, job loss, or a humanity-threatening loss of control over AI. See Cabe Metz, "What Exactly Are the Dangers of A.I.?" *New York Times* (May 1, 2023), https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/01/technology/ai-problems-danger-chatgpt.html. See also Cabe Metz and Gregory Schmidt, "Elon Musk and Others Call for Pause on A.I., Citing 'Profound Risks to Society'" *New York Times* (March 29, 2023), https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/29/technology/ai-artificial-intelligence-musk-risks.html.

at its root, is contrary to reason.[291] In other words, we find ourselves subject to a system with a desire to not be wrong about that system. Who would want to be wrong about a system in which one is participating? And so we create or inherit narratives—true or false—that sustain our "rightness" within the system. We have no regard for the truth or falsity of the stories that buttress our position within that system—as long as we are right.

Being right, however, means that we are often tempted to believe in two narratives (or more) that contradict one another and cannot be held simultaneously under any logical evaluation. These, Merton says, are "apparently irreconcilable opposites"—the fruits of the conflict between the rule of quantity and the rule of reason; that is, simple logic—and in an attempt to "keep ourselves together," we claim that we desire truth when, in actuality, we desire "to be in the right."[292] We often cling so tightly to this desire to be right and the stories that ensure we are right in the arguments in which we engage daily that we could consider technological progress, the justness of our participation in that progress societally, and the underlying stories that strengthen that system the answer to our ultimate questions. In this way, it is a "religion" of sorts—one we would consider idolatrous—with a god of its own: the god of progress.

Within this pseudo-religious structure under the god of progress, because this is our god and the answer to our ultimate questions, we defend it. And in order to defend it (that is, to maintain our rightness), "the rest of the world becomes wrong" to the point that we identify "the outer world, other people, other societies" as "heretical, malicious, subversive,

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[291] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 62.

[292] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 207, 72. The "rule of quantity" in Merton's thought is the generally accepted status quo within society's technological progress. Our participation in and defense of that system is governed by the "rule of quantity" (which could be likened to the "invisible hand of the market"). The "rule of reason," on the other hand, is the logic that governs our evaluation of anything—it is objective (as much as something can be objective) and seeks the truth over an argument that might be persuasive but false.

demonic, etc."[293] To buttress our own side, we rely on "the emotional use of slogans and political formulas" and the persuasion "of power, of quantity, of pressure, of fear, of desire."[294]

This reality is not hard to find in the world. Take, for example, the politician who changes their position on marriage equality. Often, the shift in position—which has almost exclusively taken the form of being against marriage equality and then shifting to support it—occurs when the politicians know that the majority of their constituents will agree with them; that is, the constituents will believe that the politician is "right" on this matter. Whether Democrat or Republican, we have seen examples of politicians either coming out in favor of marriage equality or acquiescing to its reality. High profile Democrats have done this, such as Barack Obama, who opposed marriage equality during his 2008 presidential campaign because, as Obama's chief strategist and advisor David Axelrod claimed, it was politically expedient.[295] This is a far cry from Obama's statements in the wake of the 2015 Supreme Court's decision in *Obergefell v. Hodges* legalizing same-sex marriage in which he claimed it as a "victory for America."[296] And Republicans have also made the switch, even if they have done so more slowly. For example, Senator Thom Tillis once supported a measure in his home state of North Carolina to define marriage as between one man and one woman in the state constitution while serving as speaker of the chamber.[297] But in 2022, he was one

[293] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 207.
[294] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 59
[295] Hunter Schwarz, "Obama's latest 'evolution' on gay marriage: He lied about opposing it, Axelrod says," *Washington Post* (February 10, 2015), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/02/10/axelrod-says-obama-lied-about-opposing-gay-marriage-its-another-convenient-evolution/.
[296] Scott Neumann, "Obama: Supreme Court Same-Sex Marriage Ruling 'A Victory for America,'" NPR (June 26, 2015), https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/06/26/417731614/obama-supreme-court-ruling-on-gay-marriage-a-victory-for-america.
[297] Steve Harrison, "In backing bill to protect same-sex marriage, Tillis says LGBT community owed 'certainty,'" WFAE (November 17, 2022), https://www.wfae.org/politics/2022-11-17/in-backing-bill-to-protect-same-sex-marriage-tillis-says-lgbt-community-owed-certainty.

of 12 Republicans who supported the Respect for Marriage Act, protecting currently married same-sex couples from any potential reversal by the Supreme Court of the right to be married.[298] If we assume that these politicians have always accepted same-sex marriage, then their earlier opposition to it would illustrate a desire to be right instead of any concern on their part about the truth. Only when the political consequences have lessened are politicians willing to make these shifts. And this is a testament to the working of the system that is subject to the effects of estrangement.

The reality for Merton, however, is that this conflict between "us," who value "truth," and "them," who are the "heretics" and "demons," is actually the manifestation of a battle among our own inner contradictions: "All the inner force of man is boiling and bursting out, the good together with the evil, the good poisoned by evil and fighting it, the evil pretending to be good and revealing itself in the most dreadful crimes, justified and rationalized by the purest and most innocent intentions."[299] Merton considers it a "sickness of disordered love . . . that realizes itself simultaneously to be self-hate and instantly becomes a source of universal, indiscriminate destructiveness."[300]

One important thing to note here is that, just like in the old system we explored in Alison's thought, it is often the case that, because of the pressures of society, the persuasiveness of the narratives we inherit, and the general modes of communication we most engage with, a person is often unknowingly involved in this pseudo-religion. Merton is not claiming here that it is with malice or sinister intentions that a person is estranged from themselves in such a way that it boils over violently. Instead, Merton is merely

[298] Maggie Astor, "The 12 Republicans Who Voted to Protect Same-Sex Marriage," *New York Times* (November 16, 2022), https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/16/us/elections/republicans-same-sex-marriage-vote.html.
[299] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 62.
[300] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 62.

acknowledging the estrangement neutrally. It is what we do when we become aware of this estrangement and its consequences that triggers the possibility of moral culpability.

The consequences of this pseudo-religion are obvious. We are estranged from ourselves, one another, and God. We are, in a colloquial sense, strangers to one another. And we cannot, without something more, bridge that divide. Dialogue is an impossibility because we are the bearers of "truth" and the outsiders bear only error. The risk of our "truth" being tainted by contact with their error requires that we destroy those bearers of error.[301] And they, of course, think the same about us. Not only is this unsustainable as a social situation, but it gives power to "our prejudices, our limitations, our selfishness."[302] Merton parses no words: "We are idolaters. We make *simulacra*[303] and we hypnotize ourselves. . . . [W]e have 'exchanged the glory of the immortal God for the semblance of the likeness of mortal man.'"[304] He continues:

> We are all the more inclined to idolatry because we imagine that we are of all generations the most enlightened, the most objective, the most scientific, the most progressive and the most humane. This, in fact, is an "image" of ourselves—an image which is false and is also the object of a cult. We worship ourselves in this image. . . . Since our "objectivity" for instance is in fact an image of ourselves as "objective," we soon take our objectivity for granted, and instead of checking the facts, we simply manipulate the facts to fit our pious conviction. . . . If facts seem to conflict with images, then we feel that we are being tempted by the devil, and we determine that we will be all the more blindly loyal to our images.[305]

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[301] Here we hear some echoes of Alison's "death." When we destroy the enemy who bears error, we are trying to remove them and their views from circulation. This does not require physical death, but it can succeed in just a social death. Think of the winning of a political victory—the opponent no longer has the platform from which to share their "error."

[302] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 73.

[303] Merton defines "simulacrum" as mask-like deceptiveness, intellectual cheating, and an ideological shell-game. *See* "Events and Pseudo-Events," in *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 152.

[304] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 153. Notice he says that when we encounter conflicting facts "then we feel that we are being tempted by the devil." To be convinced that one is being tempted in such a significant way indicates a strength to the belief system—otherwise it would be a fairly outsized response. I think that this further illustrates the probability of our participation in the pseudo-religion being unknowingly.

[305] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 154

Merton's description of society as a pseudo-religion makes abundantly clear the grounds for his conclusion (discussed above) that merely telling someone about our essential human unity based in *le point vierge* and the impossibility of separating ourselves from the world is impossible. He has described the society of his day as filled by persons with shells of fake selves. In other words, when we make an evaluation or take inventory of the issues facing society currently, we are rarely engaging human beings as they *really* are. Instead, we are getting hollowed-out versions, with their true identities obscured from our or their sight.

In order to understand this deeper reality—the unity of humanity and the impossibility of our being separated from one another—we must open ourselves to that revelation, to that gift. This requires that we grapple with our estrangement. And since it is the estrangement from ourselves that leads to the estrangement from God and neighbor and to the violence that results, we must begin with ourselves.

3.2.2 The Personalist and Existentialist Influence on Merton

What Merton is establishing here is the societal problem emerging from a theological anthropology that is assessed from a slightly more individualized perspective, at least in its initial focus, than Alison's. This individualistic and inward-turning approach is derived from the influence of existentialism and personalism on Merton. Regarding personalism, Anne Carr reminds us that Merton was heavily influenced by Jacques Maritain from an early stage of his life, which led to Merton's more "bipolar understanding of the human being," in which "the material pole is expressed in the term *individual* and the spiritual pole in the term *person*."[306] She continues

[306] Anne E. Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit: Thomas Merton's Theology of the Self* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 122-23.

> When the material side dominates the whole, there is an *individualism* that Merton describes as a sham, illusion, and fully "disreputable" because it is, in his understanding, the inferior side of the self. It is the mere ego-self masquerading as the whole. This domination of the whole by the self-centered ego-self he calls the "false self" or the merely external self, because it is indeed a "lie" that denies the truth of the real person as spirit. In a genuine *personalism*, the spirit is the heart and controlling center of the integral human being.[307]

At least at the time he wrote *Seeds of Contemplation*, he saw that contemplative prayer would help break through individualism and arrive at the desired personalism; that is the true self in real relationship with others' true selves.

The stark binary of his early thought between the true and false self organically shifts to something more nuanced. As well, the role that we take in seeking out or uncovering our true self also shifts. While a complete discussion of this shift on our part is beyond the scope of this project, I will quote Carr on this point. "Moving through Merton's discussions of the self one senses an important shift from the idea of the *discovery* of the hidden self, preconceived by God, to that of the self's continual and responsive *creation* or re-creation of itself in changing personal and historical context."[308] Distinct from personalism, this shift reflects the influence of existentialism on Merton.

Patrick O'Connell argues that "Merton's attraction to existentialism . . . as a way of thought and a way of life, is due to its focus on the concrete and the personal dimensions of existence, an undermining of abstractions and mystifications that he considers to be a recovery of a fundamentally biblical perspective . . . and in the call to conversion and community articulated" at Vatican II.[309] In his essay, "The Side of Despair: Notes on Christian Existentialism," Merton makes it clear that existentialism is timely and continues to be helpful, despite the view by some in the Church that it is dangerous. The reason that

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[307] Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit*, 123.
[308] Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit*, 130.
[309] Patrick F. O'Connell, editor, *Thomas Merton: Selected Essays* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 258.

existentialism is still timely is because of the ongoing "process of leveling" that happens in society. Citing Kierkegaard, Merton explains that leveling is the process by which individuals are brought into the status quo. In this sense, they are alienated from themselves, God, and others by having become the "mass man." He writes, "The inner life of the mass man, alienated and leveled in the existential sense, is a dull, collective routine of popular fantasies maintained in existence by the collective dream that goes on, without interruption, in the mass media."[310] That is, the process of leveling is the initiation into the pseudo-religion under the god of progress. But "they consent [to this initiation] passively, they do not choose, they do not decide. They accept what has been decided by the public, that is, by nobody."[311] He describes the experience of the alienated self:

> He is intent on one thing above all: the mental and social gymnastics by which he remains at the same time a participant and a spectator, public and private, passively involved and emotionally distant in the amorphous public mass in which we are spectators and yet all somehow inexorably perform the enormities which the public "does."[312]

This transforms human beings into things or cogs in the machine. They are commodified in a way that prefers profit above personality.

Existentialism, Merton claims, is part of the solution to this problem. The solution begins with a decision to "exist truly and freely," by the "acceptance of one's own finiteness, one's own limitations, in fact, one's own nothingness" that, because it is acknowledged outside of the anonymity of the mass society, "acquires a name, a presence, a voice, an option in the actions of the real world."[313] It is a wrestling out of the stranglehold that mass

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310 Thomas Merton, "The Other Side of Despair: Notes on Christian Existentialism," in *Thomas Merton: Selected Essays*, edited by Patrick F. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013), 268.
311 Merton, "The Other Side of Despair: Notes on Christian Existentialism," 266.
312 Merton, "The Other Side of Despair: Notes on Christian Existentialism," 266.
313 Merton, "The Other Side of Despair: Notes on Christian Existentialism," 266.

society has on us, believing that conformity to mass society is acceptance of a "fraudulent world of authentic and illusory relationships."[314] It puts flesh on reality.

> This true-being [consistent, in a sense, with Merton's true self] is not found by examining the subject as if it were another object. It is found in personal self-realization, that is to say, in freedom, in responsibility, in dialogue (with man and God), and in love. Existentialism is, in other words, concerned with authentic personal identity, and concerned with it in a way that behaviorist methods and psychometry can never be.[315]

To enter the process by which we can unveil our true self draws us, then, into authentic relationships with ourselves beyond falsehoods and slogans, with God beyond mere ritualistic piety, and with others as "flesh-and-blood human beings" for whom we have responsibility.[316]

This responsibility becomes more obvious when we reconnect to Merton's personalist influences. Christian personalism, Merton notes, is the "discovery, the respect" for "that which is *irreplaceable*, genuinely unique, on the deepest spiritual level."[317] This "inmost secret," he continues, does not need to be revealed to anyone—or even understood by ourselves—but a Christian personalism is "the sacramental sharing of the inner secret of personality in the mystery of love."[318] It is both "the discovery of one's own inmost self, and of the inmost self of one's neighbor, in the mystery of Christ."[319] That is, as we come to know ourselves in and through God, we shift toward our neighbor and help in their similar journey.

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[314] Merton, "The Other Side of Despair: Notes on Christian Existentialism," 26.
[315] Merton, "The Other Side of Despair: Notes on Christian Existentialism," 264.
[316] Merton, "The Other Side of Despair: Notes on Christian Existentialism," 272.
[317] Thomas Merton, "Liturgy and Spiritual Personalism," *Worship* 34, no. 9 (1960), 503.
[318] Merton, "Liturgy and Spiritual Personalism," 504.
[319] Merton, "Liturgy and Spiritual Personalism," 504.

We will see that, despite the initial focus being individualized through the influence of personalist and existentialist thinkers,[320] there flows from that initial focus strong communal connections and implications. Merton's is not a communal anthropology in the way Alison's anthropology was. Instead, his is a theological anthropology that begins with the individual's misapprehension of themselves that then leads to the societal consequences that implicate all of us. Unaddressed, however, individuals are at risk of becoming cogs in the machine of society, thoughtlessly participating in the pseudo-religion of technological progress under the god of progress, and then, unwittingly, defending that pseudo-religion in a way that necessarily results in violence. What, then, is Merton's prescribed path out of this situation?

3.3 Merton on Conversion: Turning Inward to Turn Outward

Merton's works illustrate his theological anthropology with clarity: when we engage internally in prayer and meditation, our connection to God is uncovered—a connection inextricably connected to uncovering our true selves—and we see that humanity is ultimately one. Persons belong to each other and, as they come to understand themselves in God, they understand their connection to one another. As a result of this and their createdness, strangers—theologically understood—do not exist. To overcome this estrangement—that is, being a stranger in the colloquial understanding—Merton has offered a framework for conceptualizing what one undergoes: renunciation without resentment, or conversion

[320] As noted, Merton was influenced by Kierkegaard and Maritain. To this list, we can also include Etienne Gilson, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Martin Buber, Nikolai Berdyaev, D.T. Suzuki, Kitaro Nishida, and Louis Lavelle, among others. See Merton, "The Other Side of Despair: Notes on Christian Existentialism," 269, and Bonnie Bowman Thurston, "Zen Influence on Thomas Merton's View of the Self," *The Merton Annual* 1 (1988): 18, in which Thurston notes that "Merton understood the truth in our lives to be forged by a process of consciously made decisions to act and to believe. In Christian terms, we are partners with God in creating the truth of our selves."

without contempt. To this end, one can glean insights from Merton's exploration and explanation of prayer that, if practiced well, prayer can facilitate a receptivity to grace and truth. And in receiving these, when a person transcends their former identity in their journey toward God—that is, conversion—Merton's method ensures that it is not a matter of being right over and against those with whom they no longer agree, thus creating a "new stranger."[321] Instead, Merton's method is a challenge to act *toward* the truth and love *with* those other persons. This method emerges from an evaluation of Merton's teachings on prayer.

It is worth taking note again of two things from the discussion above as regards Merton's theological anthropology before shifting to a discussion of Merton's notion of conversion. First, recall that, for Merton, each human person is like a nesting doll, the center of which is *le point vierge* or the divine spark, which all of us have and which unites us to God and one another. And second, remember that Merton claims that the reason our world is overrun with violence in all its forms is because of the estrangement taking place inside each of us. Our inner contradictions pit our reason against technological progress's dominant rule of quantity and lead to an estrangement from ourselves, our neighbors, and God.

Before proceeding, one additional clarification should be made. In the conversation below, I will be discussing two different categories of activity within Merton's contemplative spirituality. The first is the human side, which we call prayer, meditation, or contemplation. These are the practices that we put in place to open ourselves to the grace that brings conversion. Merton has referred to this as "active contemplation" or "mediate contemplation."[322] The second is from God's side, which is also called contemplation. Here,

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[321] Or, in Alisonian terms, Merton's conversion is not creating a new in-group and out-group.

[322] According to Merton, in active contemplation "there is a deliberate and sustained effort to detect the will of God in events and to bring one's whole self into harmony with that will. Active contemplation depends on

as with his *le point vierge* experience in Louisville, Merton is referring to the goal of prayer: the gift given to us being brought into an experience of God. We can approach that door through prayer and meditation, but only God can bring us into contemplation. Merton has referred to this as "infused contemplation" or "passive contemplation."[323] The challenge here is that contemplation, in Merton's works, can refer either to a practice or to an experience. In some of his writings he makes this distinction within contemplation's categories clearer. For example, in *Contemplative Prayer* he considers active contemplation as our having an "intuition of the inmost reality, of our spiritual self and of God present within us" that we actively participate in realizing (*e.g.*, in prayer) as distinct from infused contemplation that grants us these intuitions without our action or assistance.[324]

3.3.1 Prayer Uncovering the True Self

As Merton describes it, prayer, as distinct from liturgy in an ecclesial context, is a practice that becomes a disposition or a mode of being. He writes, "Prayer must penetrate and enliven every department of our life, including that which is most temporal and transient."[325] Distinct from liturgy, which occurs at a particular time and place with a particular person, prayer can happen everywhere and at all times. As St. Paul implores the

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ascesis of abandonment, a systematic relaxation of the tensions of the exterior self and a renunciation of its tyrannical claims and demands, in order to move in a dimension that escapes our understanding and overflows in all directions our capacity to plan." Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience: Notes on Contemplation* (New York: HarperOne, 2003), 58.

[323] Infused contemplation occurs when "[i]n the darkness of unknowing the contemplative passively receives the touch of divine knowledge . . . Traditionally, the most characteristic note of Christian contemplation is this passivity, this reception of divine light-in-darkness as a supremely mysterious and unaccountable gift of God's love." Merton, *The Inner Experience*, 72. For the sake of clarity, I will refer to active contemplation as "prayer" or "meditation"; and I will reserve "contemplation" for infused contemplation.

[324] Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Image, 1996), 57.

[325] Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 143.

Thessalonians, "[P]ray without ceasing" (1 Thes 5:17). Merton's teaching on prayer encourages us to take up that task as well.

Prayer ultimately permits us to see through our false self and to perceive the gradual unveiling or uncovering of our true self—a self found in God and that unites us to others—in a way that draws us out of the false narratives and slogans which we are tempted to cling to simply because they help us feel "right." He writes:

> The whole function of the life of prayer is, then, to enlighten and strengthen our conscience so that it not only knows and perceives the outward, written precepts of the moral and divine laws, but above all lives God's law in the concrete reality by perfect and continual union with His will. The conscience that is united to the Holy Spirit by faith, hope, and selfless charity becomes a mirror of God's own interior law which is His charity. It becomes perfectly free.[326]

Note here Merton's emphasis on the divine law being something we can grasp in our prayer and God's will being something that liberates us. This suggests that God's will and the divine law are accessible to anyone who turns inwardly in prayer. But it also gives us courage that we will not be uncritically obedient servants by observing God's will in our lives but that God's will liberates us from having to participate in society's pressure to be our false selves. As with Alison, it frees us from the game.

Merton is clear on this point: "As a man is, so he prays. We make ourselves what we are by the way we address God."[327] Put differently, our prayer transforms us. We put down our guards and allow the Holy Spirit to work on us. Merton continues, "It is when we pray that we really *are*. Our being is brought to a high perfection by this, which is one of its most perfect activities."[328] And through our prayer practice, we become habituated to being aware of God in us and in the world.

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[326] Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, Co., 1955), 41.
[327] Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, 42.
[328] Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, 43.

Prayer that can result in contemplation has some conditions, however. In order to achieve these ends—or to be open to the gift of these ends—we must cultivate an interior silence and solitude. Silence "dissolves the barrier between ourselves and God," whereas solitude "cleans the soul, lays it wide open to the four winds of generosity" and allows the praying disciple to "develop the good that is his own."[329] These dispositions are just a start, and they must be practiced because doing them well does not come at once.

To achieve that contemplative end, including the inner silence and solitude that help us get to the door where God awaits, we have to practice prayer in order to "develop and perfect our mind and will and our whole soul."[330] This process requires work on our end.

> [W]e ordinarily have to labor to prepare ourselves in our own way and with the help of His grace, by deepening our knowledge and love of God in meditation and active forms of prayer, as well as by setting our wills free from attachment to created things.
>
> About all these things many books have been written. There are all kinds of techniques and methods of meditation and mental prayer, and it would be hard to begin to talk about them all. That is why I shall talk about none of them except to say that they are all good for those who can use them and everyone who can get profit out of systematic meditation should not fail to do so, as long as he is not afraid to lay the method aside and do a little thinking for himself once in a while.[331]

Merton's recommendation is to start with whatever aid is most beneficial. But he warns against overreliance. The books themselves are only tools to get us started—they are not the end result. "As soon as any thought stimulates your mind or your heart," Merton says of using these books, "you can put the book down because your meditation has begun."[332] And the result of this is drawing closer to contemplation by freeing ourselves from the falsehoods of the world.

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[329] Merton, *No Man Is an Island*, 256, 248.
[330] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 214.
[331] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 215.
[332] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 215.

> The real purpose of meditation is this: to teach a man how to work himself free of created things and temporal concerns, in which he finds only confusion and sorrow, and enter into a conscious and loving contact with God in which he is disposed to receive from God the help he knows he needs so badly, and to pay to God the praise and honor and thanksgiving and love which it has now become his joy to give.[333]

For Merton, prayer is ultimately "a deepening of faith and of the personal dimensions of liberty and apprehension to the point where our direct union with God is realized and 'experienced.'"[334] Note here, again, the process reflected in full: we pray, working inwardly, until God brings us into direct union with God. In addition to inner silence and solitude, this requires a renunciation of "our selfish and limited self" in order to discover "an inner center of motivation and love which makes us see ourselves and everything else in an entirely new light."[335] As we move inwardly, we pass through stages of faith, contemplative illumination, and, ultimately, mystical union.[336] Note that this mystical union is synonymous with *le point vierge*, the place in which we "experience" God as that which unites us to God and everyone else as non-strangers. It is our arrival at a "loving knowledge."[337] And while he admits that this innermost point is not a place we can access on our own, he reminds us of the possibility of cultivating certain practices and disciplines "to prepare us for it"—this is the prayer we have begun to discuss.[338] This process, then, begins us on the path toward contemplation. And the work on the path itself bears fruit!

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[333] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 218.
[334] Thomas Merton, "Contemplation in a World of Action," in *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 157.
[335] Merton, "Contemplation in a World of Action," 157.
[336] Merton, "Contemplation in a World of Action," 157.
[337] Merton, "Contemplation in a World of Action," 159.
[338] Merton, "Contemplation in a World of Action," 159.

3.3.2 Self-Criticism and Renunciation (without Resentment) in Service of Truth

We can better recognize the fruits that prayer bears on the path by acknowledging that these practices can help facilitate our own realization that, while life should be "nothing but a struggle to seek truth," that truth is something "we already possess. . . . [But o]ne cannot simply open his eyes and *see*. The work of understanding involves not only dialectic, but a long labor of acceptance, obedience, liberty, and love."[339] Put differently, to approach the divine spark that unites us in love, Merton maintains that we must engage in these prayer practices in order to break through the shell—or shells—of the false self and to continue digging, continue uncovering.

To accomplish this, our prayer and meditation must be accompanied by a critical self-examination to root out the prejudices, propaganda, biases, and falsehoods that we hold because of our participation in the pseudo-religion of "mass society." We enter into the messiness of life, the complexity, the grayness—distinct from the black and White—and we "must learn to accept, indeed to choose, . . . the evident impossibility of giving everything a clear, definitive meaning."[340] Put differently, prayer helps us to recreate the narratives in which we participate, seeing beneath the false narratives of the pseudo-religion and uniting ourselves to the truth that God reveals regarding ourselves and society. Such a process is not easy, Merton acknowledges, but prayer helps us seek God's will over and above any of those other matters that we claim as our own.[341] And as we seek out God's will, divesting ourselves of those false notions, we are practicing renunciation—another one of prayer's requirements.

The contemplative—a designation that Merton uses to include both monastics and non-monastics practicing meditation toward contemplation—must renounce something,

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[339] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 181-82.
[340] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 190.
[341] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 187.

whether that means accepting the "everyday routine of work, poverty, hardship, and monotony that characterizes the lives of all the poor" or just living more frugally or simply.[342] This is because "all sanctity depends [on] renunciation, detachment, self-denial."[343]

Beyond the renunciation of material things, Merton also challenges us to renounce sin and other faults, including falsehoods. This, in effect, chisels away at the layers of the false self. In a sense, we claim the true self for ourselves, taking action to seek it out. We can do part of this alone, by giving up "our deliberate faults and imperfections . . . obvious sins . . . [and] things that are evidently wrong."[344] We need to interrogate the stories that are operative in our lives to inform our identities and worldviews of which we are conscious. To achieve this, prayer leads us to a recognition of the narratives and spurs us to action—in this case, further critical engagement of the narratives and exploration to find the truth.

But, in addition, we also need to renounce "all our unconscious attachments to created things and to our own will and desires."[345] We will obviously have a more difficult time determining those unconscious narratives. So prayer, in this vein, requires the help of others. Our prayer should open us up to the work of God or others, helping us to see that of which we are unaware but nonetheless needs purified. Of course, to be open to others telling us how we are wrong is an unpleasant and uncomfortable position, but Merton asserts, "you were not created for pleasure: you were created for spiritual JOY."[346] And "anyone who knows true joy is never afraid of pain because he knows that pain can serve him as another opportunity of asserting—and tasting—his liberty" in the face of the pseudo-religion.[347]

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[342] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 251.
[343] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 255.
[344] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 255-56.
[345] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 256.
[346] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 259.
[347] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 259.

Prayer on the path toward contemplation, then, is a matter of renouncing "not only pleasures and possessions, but even your own self."[348] There are echoes here of Alison's caution that conversion brings about a sort of social death as it also demands undergoing the recreation of our selves.

As we shed these layers of the false or less-than-true self in prayer and its accompanying practices, we are undergoing a process of conversion. We reach new levels of truth and new understandings of God's will, both of which liberate us from the world's falsehoods. We are no longer bound to the political slogans of our preferred political party, for example. Neither are we required to peddle religious platitudes in the face of suffering, but we can engage our faith more deeply to offer a more complex, though truer, statement of solidarity.

However, we also leave behind certain things, and sometimes people, in those conversions. Merton warns against renunciation in conversions that leads to resentment. For example, when we renounce participation in a community heavily addicted to drugs or alcohol, our renunciation should not lead us to resent that community of people. Or when we renounce the problematic values of our hometown, that renunciation should not lead us to resent our families or friends still holding to those values. Like Alison's assessment, doing this does not get the human community to which we are inextricably linked any closer to the fullness of truth or love. It merely draws new, and only slightly different, lines around particular groups.

Not allowing renunciation to result in resentment, however, does not mean an acceptance of the mass society, addiction, or problematic values. Rather, it calls us to engage even more deeply in the meditation that allows for the purifying self-criticism that permits

[348] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 261.

one to turn outwards toward the world in love. Merton reminds us that, although meditation and prayer are often considered practices for isolated individuals, the solitude that we cultivate in prayer is only justified if "it will help you to love not only God but also other men."[349] And in cultivating a contemplative spirituality, we are able to present ourselves in the world in a way that invites others to do the same—not in that we proselytize, but we witness to the truth.

Renouncing everything for the sake of God's will further facilitates our progress toward our true selves and that divine spark. When we have those experiences of unity within ourselves—that is, experiences that overcome our estrangement from ourselves—in the love of God, we are gifted a joy that is given to "overflow from our souls and help other[s] to rejoice in God."[350] It is the experience of the love that is "the deepest law of nature" to which we are inclined and by which we are fulfilled.[351] Contemplation helps us to arrive at a truer version of ourselves whom we can love and, because of the joy that comes from that in the experience of unity with self and God in ourselves, that love pours out into political action.

3.3.3 Prayer's Political Implications: Insights from Nonviolence

Before proceeding, I would like to explore one more of Merton's commitments: nonviolence. His thoughts on this topic help us to understand the relationship between our practice of prayer and the cultivation of a contemplative spirituality and the social-political responsibilities that emerge from their practice and cultivation.

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[349] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 52.
[350] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 268-69.
[351] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 117.

For Merton, our attempts to assist others in their own journey toward inner integration will be fruitless "without deepening [our] own self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love."[352] The move from self-concern to sharing our experiences of God with others requires us "to be completely docile and subject to the most delicate movements of God's will and His grace."[353]

Dangers abound here. Without the effective scrutiny of that which we are interrogating in our prayer or that which emerges in our prayer, we can communicate false or misleading information. And, further, we can too hastily encourage the movement of our neighbor through a process that God is already leading them through more slowly. It will also be no small jolt to our neighbor, as it is to us, when we point to the falsehoods they hold and the faults they have habituated. But, as with the development of our own selves in contemplation, it is a practice in service of truth.

We renounce untruth to facilitate conversion, and we must assist our neighbors in doing the same. Yet we lead with love.

> In the long run, no one can show another the error that is within him, unless the other is convinced that his critic first sees and loves the good that is within him. So while we are perfectly willing to tell our adversary he is wrong, we will never be able to do so effectively until we can ourselves appreciate where he is right. . . . Love, love only, love of our deluded fellow man as he actually is, in his delusion and in his sin: this alone can open the door to truth. As long as we do not have this love, as long as this love is not active and effective in our lives . . . we have no real access to truth. At least not moral truth.[354]

Our work with others can take the form of relationship or witness, the latter of which, emboldened by faith, "risks intolerable purifications."[355] As witnesses to this commitment, we pave the way for others to participate similarly, facilitating the possibility of their

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[352] Merton, "Contemplation in a World of Action," 160.
[353] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 270.
[354] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 65
[355] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 65.

receiving God's mercy, resulting in their reception of "the light of truth" to judge themselves and change their own lives.[356] Like Alison, Merton encourages us to *be* a particular way in order to "make space" for others to experience the same thing—in this case, a realization of their participation in the falsehoods of society and its pseudo-religion and the worship of the god of progress.

Merton argues that this integration of the self and overcoming the estrangement that exists within oneself and with God and others is essentially a practice of truth. And truth, Merton cites Gandhi as saying, is "[t]he way of peace" and the "law of our being."[357] Lies, on the other hand, bring violence and disorder.[358] Our commitment to truth in nonviolence, Merton's political position, "seeks the salvation and redemption of the opponent, not his castigation, humiliation, and defeat. . . . It strives to operate without hatred, without hostility, and without resentment."[359] And this is key. Again, our conversions are not to be at the expense of those who think differently from us.

Our renunciation of those former falsehoods is not to spur on estrangement. Instead, our progress toward truth includes bringing others *with* us. And to bring others with us requires that we talk about truth: "[W]e must risk falsity, we must take courage and speak," and in so doing, assert our own "yes" and "no" such that we can operate with the fullest possible freedom, making us truly persons.[360] Our spiritual unity depends on our working together to "dissipat[e] the more absurd fictions [held by both of us] which make unity impossible."[361] But to take this risk has potentially significant consequences—

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356 Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 75.
357 Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 79-80.
358 Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 80.
359 Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 81.
360 Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 88, 86.
361 Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 91.

potentially negative ones. "You must be willing, if necessary, to become a disturbing and therefore an undesired person, one who is not wanted because he upsets the general dream."[362] But "[n]o one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13).

As described here, Merton's theological anthropology, his explanation of prayer, and some adjacent lessons drawn from his political commitments work together to illustrate his conception of conversion without contempt. The divine spark unites us, our spiritual practices help us overcome the falsehoods that keep us from recognizing that in ourselves and our neighbor. Once we crack through our false selves to truer versions of the self, we grow in truth and love, following God's will, which eventually overflows and turns outward toward our neighbor, countering the violence that emerges from our internal estrangement. Delicate and loving action helps us witness to the conversions we have undergone, hopefully inspiring a certain disposition in our neighbors to accept undergoing the same. But "acceptance" is key: While we can engage in practices and disciplines to dispose ourselves to it, this process relies on the gift of grace.

3.3.4 Church as Prayer's Supplement

Merton's relationship to the Church was not without its tensions. Yet, he found in the Church both the mystical tradition that so deeply informed his own spirituality as well as the liturgical life that taught and sustained his prayer and contemplation. Put differently, the Church served as a supplement to his spirituality, and, in return, his spirituality influenced his vision of what the Church was and ought to be.

As Robert Inchausti writes

[362] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 92.

> In 1948, Merton published a pamphlet titled "What is Contemplation?" It described contemplation as something that is taught by liturgy. Through prayer, music, scripture, reflection, and Eucharist, we are united to Christ, "who is the very embodiment of contemplation—a human nature united in one Person with the infinite Truth and Splendor of God." In this work, Merton didn't try to explain contemplation as a cultural or psychological phenomenon . . . , but entirely as a religious phenomenon.[363]

For Merton, the Church is where we encounter Jesus Christ. And, in this encounter, we are drawn into a relationship with one who *is* what it is we seek to experience: being one with God. In this way, the Church functions as our teacher. Its liturgy instructs us. As Inchausti claims, liturgy "moves us beyond the reaches of our intelligence, so it is often felt before it is understood."[364] It is like the encounter of one *le point vierge* with another: there is proximity and we are drawn toward the other. In this case, Christ's "magnet" will always pull more. And Merton himself makes the case for the Church even clearer:

> The Liturgy . . . is also essentially concerned with the Mysteries of the Christian Cult, which are the chief and most immediate means by which both individuals and society are sanctified and brought into intimate participation in the life and contemplation of God.[365]

The liturgy, he argues, facilitates our contemplation both in "spoken revelation" as well as in "ritual mystery" or "sacred action."[366] What he means is that through certain articulated aspects of the mass, such as psalms chanted or readings proclaimed, our response is a form of active contemplation which "awakens or renews in us our divine life as sons [and daughters] of God."[367] And further, these acts are part of how we "'realize' the truth of God's love for us and for the world."[368]

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[363] Robert Inchausti, *Thinking through Thomas Merton: Contemplation for Contemporary Times* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2014), 55.
[364] Inchausti, *Thinking through Thomas Merton*, 73.
[365] Thomas Merton, *The Waters of Siloe* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949), 363.
[366] Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Image, 1969), 61.
[367] Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 61.
[368] Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 61.

In addition to this spoken revelation are the sacraments, or "ritual mysteries," that actually convey the grace that it symbolizes.[369] In so doing, these sacraments help to pave the way for our true contemplation—both our ability to enter into a practice of prayer and meditation with the right intention as well as our capacity to let ourselves be taken into a more direct experience of God. The fullness of this in the tradition comes in our participation in the Eucharist in which "the believer affirms his union with Christ in His Passion, Death, and Resurrection from the Dead. He becomes one heart, one mind, and one spirit with the Blessed Savior. He becomes lost in the Mystical Christ."[370] And, in particular consideration of the Eucharist, we are able to enter into "infused" prayer—what Merton claims to be that prayer in which we are more passive in the reception of the experience of communicating with God—because Christ is *really* present in the sacrament, not just symbolically so. Merton concludes:

> By active participation in the liturgy the Christian prepares himself to enter into the Church's "contemplation" of the great mysteries of faith. . . . It involves man's whole being, body and soul, mind, will, imagination, emotion, and spirit. Worship takes man in his wholeness and consecrates him *entirely* to God, and thence contemplation is the perfection of worship. Without contemplation worship tends to remain lifeless and external. The mere existence of the Church's liturgy is, then, a call to active contemplation.[371]

For Merton, then, the Church is both the training ground for prayer as well as the first instances of our experiencing contemplation.

But the Church serves another purpose in Merton's framework. It is in the Church where we "must be able to put aside the concern with our superficial selves" in such a way

[369] Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 62-63.
[370] Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 62.
[371] Merton, *Contemplative Prayer*, 63.

that we take on "the responsibility for the whole"; that is, we take upon ourselves the responsibility for others.[372] Merton continues

> Of course no one assumes this responsibility merely in obedience to arbitrary whim or to the delusion that he is of himself capable of taking the troubles of the whole Assembly on his own shoulders. But he emerges "in Christ," to share the labor and worship of the whole Christ, and in order to do this he must *sacrifice* his own superficial and private self.[373]

Church, then, is where we begin or continue to practice the outward turn toward others that is initiated in our inward turn in prayer. It helps draw us closer to our true self such that we can realize the magnetic connection drawing us to our neighbor.

3.4 Merton's Conversion(s): The Story of the "World" Transformed

Merton has been considered by many a person of numerous conversions.[374] Especially when we think of conversion as a shift in narrative, we can see that Merton indeed had many such shifts. In this section, I will discuss how the conversions that Merton encountered were explicit narrative shifts—from a more binary sacred-secular worldview, to a world teeming with grace.

One central shift was his religious conversion—the experience that brought him to baptism in the Roman Catholic Church. In a way mirroring that of St. Augustine's conversion in the garden, Merton heard a voice within: "What are you waiting for? Why are you sitting up there? It is useless to hesitate any longer. Why don't you get up and go?"[375]

Of course, it is not an external voice that Merton was hearing, nor necessarily a voice different from his own (except that it was internal). Instead, these are the questions that are

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[372] Merton, "Liturgy and Spiritual Personalism," 506.
[373] Merton, "Liturgy and Spiritual Personalism," 506.
[374] See, for example, Anthony T. Padovano, "The Eight Conversions of Thomas Merton," *The Merton Seasonal* 25, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 9-15.
[375] Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1998), 236.

raised after a certain shift is already taking, or has already taken, place in the process of transforming that narrative. The questions were an explicit engagement of the implicit shifts that were occurring within. Put differently, these are the beginnings of a new narrative that attach to the emotional, felt realities that are not as easy to explain without a broader story shape. This is not that distinct from James Alison's understanding of how we tell stories—new or recreated stories—after their conclusion. Alison says, "We can only start from the end because we can only tell stories whose end we already know."[376] Here, Alison means and Merton is illustrating how, when our stories are being changed, we are often unable to tell the new story until we have arrived at a new location, a new end, even if that new end is itself temporary as we continue toward another end.

Another narrative shift can be seen in his "Vision in Louisville."[377] And the shift can especially be seen in his further realization that, although he is in the monastery, he is no less obligated to participate in the world's happenings, especially as it relates to racial and political issues. This "second conversion" speaks to a conversion in which particular commitments of faith are deepened and other commitments of faith are realized, but it is not a religious conversion in the sense that Merton is going from one faith tradition to another—a category of conversion beyond the scope of this project. I will forgo rehearsing the story again in full.

Merton had long before this Louisville experience taken interest in a life of prayer, even if he did not yet practice it. This was even prior to his attending a Catholic mass or actually praying. As Monica Furlong writes of this time, "He smoked enormous quantities of cigarettes; 'got plastered,' as he says, fairly regularly; and pursued girls with his usual vigour and enthusiasm. The difference now, perhaps, was that as he got drunk he talked more and

[376] Alison, *Broken Hearts & New Creations*, 23.
[377] For the term "Vision in Louisville," see Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), 311.

more about mysticism to his friends. He felt a growing desire to pray and began to do so fairly regularly."[378]

Of course, the now well-known story of his religious conversion led him both to become a Catholic and to seek out committing himself to religious life. After a failed attempt at joining the Franciscans, he was accepted into the Abbey of Gethsemani—a Cistercian monastery in rural Kentucky. As he expresses in his autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, his story was that he was leaving the world behind, giving himself to God in a radical way, rejecting the lifestyle of his past. It was binary thinking—too binary to be held true by him as his thought developed. He had not only renounced the world, but he resented it as well.

Following the publication of his autobiography, he wrote *Seeds of Contemplation*, which included many passages that encouraged the praying disciple to remember their connection to humanity, despite their search for that interior silence and solitude. Furlong acknowledges that at this time, "Merton still sees virtue in running hard from many aspects of the modern world. There is a strong sense of 'us' and 'them' as he looks at the spiritual person as opposed to the worldly."[379]

But how would Merton know differently? In his theological and spiritual readings and, in particular his engaging the lives of the saints, the pious narratives that were told of the saints were stories of a hard break, a rejection of a past life, a conversion to some new life without looking back except in penance. Merton swam in these narratives as he entered the Church and the monastery. After all, what is the purpose of monastery walls if not to shut out the world?

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[378] Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography*, rev. ed. (Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1980), 71.
[379] Furlong, *Merton: A Biography*, 141.

On occasion, Merton would have business outside the monastery, taking him to Louisville, for example. Over time, these visits, which included longer hospital stays, included more engagements with others—lunches, meetings, and the likes. He had claimed to miss the monastery when he returned, again spurning the outside world. But then, following the success of some of his books, and the publication of some of his more "activist" writings, he began to receive guests at the monastery with some regularity and a rather large number of guests at that—especially for Cistercian standards. As a result, his engagement with the world became inescapable. Even if he sought to block it out, the world came to him.

In 1958, the Vision in Louisville occurred. Merton found himself in a position where, in response to his active contemplation bore fruit in this experience. His prayer was infused. God had gifted Merton a revelation about his connection to the world and the inescapable reality he participated in despite the monastery walls. From this point forward—though others would argue that it had been bubbling beneath the surface all along—the narrative of his entrance to the monastery was different. He could not tell the old story anymore.

In 1966, Merton explained this shift in an article published in *Commonweal*, "Is the World a Problem?" In it, he denounces the old monastic Merton as a "sort of stereotype of the world-denying contemplative"—a stereotype that he acknowledges he is likely at fault for creating.[380] Denouncing the binary between the sacred and secular worlds, he declares, "I am the world just as you are!"[381] To think he was escaping to the monastery is a mere "illusion." Instead, he argues, the world is inescapable, at least in the sense that the world is "a complex of responsibilities and options made out of the loves, the hates, the fears, the joys, the hopes,

[380] Thomas Merton, "Is the World a Problem?" in *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 141.
[381] Merton, "Is the World a Problem?", 142.

the greed, the cruelty, the kindness, the faith, the trust, the suspicion of all."[382] In other words, regardless where one finds themselves spatially—an apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan or a monastic enclosure in rural Kentucky—the world is the sum of my and everyone else's existence and participation in it. And he praises Vatican II as allowing the Church to choose the world. "Not only can it be chosen," Merton claims, "but in fact it must be chosen."[383] And it is chosen to improve it and the lives of those who live in it.

We hear in this an argument of Merton's we discussed above; that is, the world is a problem because we are a problem. It is our inner estrangement that leads to our overreliance on technological progress, our being resolved to war as inevitable, our exclusion and oppression of our brothers and sisters. And further, Merton claims that we can only really solve these problems when we turn inwardly. "The way to find the real 'world' is not merely to measure and observe what is outside us but to discover our own inner ground. For that is where the world is, first of all: in my deepest self."[384] And, as we noted above, it is in this deepest self that we also discover our unity with God and neighbor and the responsibility owed to them.

Throughout his life, at times gradual and at times somewhat rapid, Merton's narrative shifted. These conversion experiences, especially after his entrance into monastic life, became more profound because of the life of prayer that he cultivated—one taught and nourished by the liturgy and sacraments of the Church, and one cultivated in the silence, solitude, and renunciation of the monastery. This narrative shift resulted not just in a recognition of God's more pervasive love, especially as we see in his own story shifting to a love for the world outside the monastery walls, but also in his desire to know the truth and

[382] Merton, "Is the World a Problem?", 13.
[383] Merton, "Is the World a Problem?", 146.
[384] Merton, "Is the World a Problem?", 152.

to challenge others to see the truth. His prayer bore fruit with regard to both the revelation of love and the empowerment for social action—in his case, through his writing.

3.5 Merton's Diagnosis of Racial Resentment and Polarization

We have now explored Merton's framework for his anthropology, conversion, and prayer as facilitating the openness to conversion. Now, I will now use Merton's framework to diagnose the two instantiations of violence that were discussed in chapter one: racial resentment and polarization. Unlike Alison, Merton's contemplative spirituality and the convictions that flowed from that spirituality led him to engage in a significant amount of social criticism. The topics that received most of his attention were nonviolence, peacemaking, and race. We are lucky here to be able to draw upon a number of his writings to determine his diagnosis of racial resentment in a significantly less speculative way than we had to do with Alison's thought in chapter two.

3.5.1 Racial Resentment as Rooted in Invented Identities

Given the era in which he was writing, one might be surprised to learn the degree to which Merton appears to have understood the underlying issues that contribute to racism. But what might be more surprising is the degree to which he knew what the role of a White Christian disciple is in combating racism: to talk to Whites.[385] As David W. Givey notes, "Most White liberals, [Merton] contended, were basically ignorant of the racial situation, of

[385] Merton was not without his own limitations, however. See, for example, Daniel P. Horan, "Racism Is a White Problem: Thomas Merton, Whiteness and Racial Justice," *The Merton Annual* 33, (2020), 78-81.

the true motives and feelings of black Americans. Although they might be well-meaning, average White liberals would sell a black person down the river to protect themselves."[386]

In light of this contention, Merton took up this responsibility of talking to Whites in a number of publications written with them in mind as his primary audience. Central among these publications are his, "Letters to a White Liberal."[387] In these letters, and in his other writings on the topic, he roots his defense of Black persons in Christ and the Church. The Church, he argues, must be able to present itself to the world in a way that, in the Church, the world sees Christ. If that is to happen, Merton continues, the Church must continue to be "supremely concerned with the human person and his rights. We do this because our ancestors regarded every man as Christ, wished to treat him as Christ, or at least believed this to be the right way to act, even though they did not always follow this belief."[388] The Catholic approach is to not only believe that Whites and Black persons are equal, but "that they are brothers in the fullest sense of the word."[389] He then questions the White liberal: "How, then, do we treat this other Christ, this person, who happens to be black? . . . It would not be easy for a Christian to mutilate another man, string him up on a tree and shoot him full of holes if he believed that what he did to that man was done to Christ."[390]

At the heart of the problem, according to Merton, is not that White Christians do not believe that we should treat human beings as Christ, but that they do not perceive Black persons to be persons. Instead, a Black person's worth is evaluated on their contribution to profits—echoes of Merton's evaluation of the "mass man" discussed above. "A man is to us

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386 David W. Givey, *The Social Thought of Thomas Merton: The Way of Nonviolence and Peace for the Future* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2009), 91.
387 Thomas Merton, "Letters to a White Liberal," in *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964): 3-71.
388 Merton, "Letters to a White Liberal," 13-14.
389 Merton, "Letters to a White Liberal," 61.
390 Merton, "Letters to a White Liberal," 17.

nothing more nor less than 'what he is worth.' He is 'known' to us as a reality when he is known to be solvent by bankers. Otherwise he has not yet begun to exist."[391] But it seems that the ability of the White person to make that assessment about Black persons is not much different from their ability to make that assessment about themselves. Merton continues

> Our trouble is that we are alienated from our own personal reality, our true self. We do not believe in anything but money and the power or the enjoyment which come from the possession of money. We do not believe in ourselves, except in so far as we can estimate our own worth, and verify, by our operations in the world of the market, that our subjective price coincides with what society is willing to pay for us.
>
> And the Negro? He has so far been worth little or nothing.[392]

And as regards whether there are any Black persons that are "worth" anything, Merton argues that the few Black millionaires are worth something in that they give Whites an example to point to in arguing that there really is no racial disparity after all—hardly a worth anyone would desire for themselves.[393]

Givey reminds us that Merton believed "the ultimate violence that people can do to one another is to impose upon them an invented identity."[394] For the Black population, Merton argues that they have felt "imprisoned in the fantasy image of [them] devised by the White man: an image of subservient, subhuman, passive tutelage and minority."[395] This imposed image helps Whites disregard the Black community's striving toward equality.

When striving toward equality peacefully did not work in full—that is, when equality was granted *de jure*, though was not granted *de facto*—and the Black Power movement was

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391 Merton, "Letters to a White Liberal," 24-25.
392 Merton, "Letters to a White Liberal," 25.
393 Merton, "Letters to a White Liberal," 26.
394 Givey, *The Social Thought of Thomas Merton*, 91.
395 Thomas Merton, "From Non-Violence to Black Power," in *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 121.

foregrounded, Whites were able to point to that movement and the violence associated with it as evidence of the Black population's inferiority. Merton, however, held a mirror up to Whites and quoted Rap Brown: "Violence is part of your culture. There's really no doubt about it. You gave us [the Black community] violence and this is the only value that black people can use to their advantage to end oppression."[396] This violence is learned from the government, drawing that conclusion from the many examples of "Whitey's versatility" is oppressing persons of color globally, and it is also learned from Christianity in either the incrementalistic concern for order and peace or the complacency of Christians more concerned with their privilege. Merton challenges American Christians:

> The American racial crisis which grows more serious every day offers the American Christian a chance to face reality about himself and recover his fidelity to Christian truth, not merely in institutional loyalties and doctrinal orthodoxies (in which no one has taken the trouble to accuse him of failing) but in recanting a more basic heresy: the loss of that Christian sense which sees every other man as Christ and treats him as Christ.[397]

But, again, the White Christian, even if they are supportive of the Civil Rights Movement and the equality of the Black community, is more interested in the idea than the reality. This is so because if the Black community enters into "White society, then *that society is going to be radically changed*. This of course is what the White South very well knows, and it is what the White Liberal has failed to understand."[398] He often uses the example of the impact on home value after a Black family moves into a White neighborhood to illustrate the "radical change" that White liberals have not realistically grappled with. But, he continues,

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396 Merton, "From Non-Violence to Black Power," 123.
397 Thomas Merton, "Religion and Race in the United States," in *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 143.
398 Merton, "Letters to a White Liberal," 8.

Whites "must dare to pay the dolorous price of change, *to grow into a new society*. Nothing else will suffice!"[399]

While Merton argues in places that the racial problem is a White problem,[400] he also sees great power in the message that the Black community is trying to advance in their striving—it is not "mysterious and magic answers in the realm of politics and social control," but there is a "*spiritual insight into our common crisis*" that ought to be heard.[401] And this has to do with the something much deeper:

> The problem of racial conflict is part and parcel of the whole problem of human violence anyway, all the way up from the suppressed inarticulate hate feelings of interpersonal family and job conflicts to the question of the H-bomb and mass extermination. The problem is in ourselves. It is everybody's problem. The racial conflict is only *one* symptom.[402]

The diagnosis of racism Merton offers in his writings is informative for a diagnosis of racial resentment. If racism is rooted in false narratives held by Whites and imposed upon Black persons and other persons of color, these have been passed on and retained in some form as the predecessors to the legitimizing racial myths that support racial resentment. And the reason that these narratives were accepted in the first place was because of a fundamental alienation from ourselves that required us, in our attempts at being "right," to ensure that we are deriving the benefits—that is, the profits—from our quickly progressing technological society. Whether lip service is paid to the just-world value orientation or not in a world governed by technological progress, because we so religiously believe in the goodness or rightness of technological progress, we would perceive that the system's consequences are appropriate responses to our and others' "input" into that system. This

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399 Merton, "Letters to a White Liberal," 9.
400 Merton, "Letters to a White Liberal," 46.
401 Merton, "Letters to a White Liberal," 69.
402 Thomas Merton, "The Hot Summer of Sixty-Seven," in *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 167.

means that any discrepancy in opportunity or benefits between White persons and Black or other persons of color must reflect what is actually deserved, and this only serves to reinforce the underlying narratives that accept that reality. In Merton's framework, then, racial resentment can be understood as the result of the false narratives of invented identities given to communities-of-color.

3.5.2 Polarization as Incarnate Alienation in the Desire to be Right

In Merton's framework, polarization can be explained within the context of the pseudo-religion under the god of progress. Recall that Merton's anthropology sees us suffering under a tyranny of untruth due to the moral infancy that we have been relegated to as we have subjected ourselves to technological progress. This progress has us caught up in its movement such that we have no meaningful choice regarding whether we will participate in it or not. As a result, we strive to ensure that our participation is justified, even if it is not. To justify our participation, we cling to whatever narratives, statements, or slogans that will support our side.

To be more concerned about being right than questioning the pseudo-religious system itself means that our interest is not in truth. This contributes to an alienation from ourselves as well as an alienation from others. We are only concerned for ourselves or our side. As such, we easily grasp onto the misinformation that demonizes the heretics on the other side of the aisle—that is, the fodder for negative partisanship—and use that misinformation as a cudgel. No meaningful conversation can occur toward a compromise or the joint efforts to find a higher truth. Instead, we avoid one another.

This results from the false self since the false self is papered over with these falsehoods and slogans. Because of the density of those layers of the false self, the magnetic

capabilities of *le point vierge* or even our true self to draw us into relationship with others is impaired. It is not that we are not in a relationship with those with whom we disagree, it is rather that the connection is significantly obscured.

The resulting polarization, if not addressed, becomes an unbreachable divide. And as this happens in our political sphere, Merton recognizes the Church as also being implicated in this. He calls it "Christian violence"

> [which] becomes more and more irrational in proportion as it implies both an absolute conviction of one's own rightness and a capacity to approve the use of any means, however violent, however extreme, in order to defend what one feels, subjectively, to be right. This is an axiom. This totalism amidst no distinctions, no shades of meaning. "Our side" is totally right, everyone else is diabolically wicked.
>
> Naturally, this synthetic and sweeping "rightness" is compounded of many unconscious doubts and repressed fears. Nor are all the fears repressed. But they take a more or less symbolic form.[403]

In this way, the Church has too easily adopted the language of the dominant culture in an uncritical way and has failed to meet its own obligations of recognizing others as Christ such that they can see through the counterfeit divisions our pseudo-religion has imposed.[404] So, while the Church ought to be a place that those still acting from our false selves can go for transformation, the false narratives are only reinforced when the Church is constrained by its own polarizing violence.

3.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored the thought of Thomas Merton as it relates to conversion. We have seen that Merton offers a theological anthropology that defines the human person as a true self covered by layers of false selves. These false selves are the

[403] Merton, "Religion and Race in the United States," 140.
[404] See also Merton, "The Other Side of Despair: Notes on Christian Existentialism," 270ff.

manifestation of society's facile answers and faulty logic that serve to buttress a pseudo-religion of technological advancement—a religion that cares more about whether we *can* do something than whether we *ought* to do something—under the god of progress. As a result of these false selves and strengthening these false selves is the estrangement we experience from ourselves, God, and our neighbor. The frustration we have internally as we try to reconcile the rule of reason with the rule of quantity spills over into violence in the world.

Merton's response to this problem is his encouragement to us that we pray. Prayer—in this case both our act of meditating and our experience of contemplation—helps us to overcome that estrangement by aiding us in seeing through the false selves and the slogans that bedeck the false selves. As we work toward our true self, we come closer to *le point vierge*, or our innermost point, where God dwells. We cannot access this space on our own—through active contemplation or prayer—but are instead invited in by God—an act of infused contemplation. And as we have this experience of God or even as we come in proximity to that experience of union with God, we come to discover our identity in God and our inescapable connection to, as well as our responsibility for, the rest of humanity.

Realizing our connection to everyone else helps us to acknowledge our responsibility to them in countering the ways our estrangement has victimized them in violence. And so we live lives governed by narratives of connection in love and truth, recreated from the old narratives of our false selves, and through witness and accompaniment, we help others find that love and truth.

We explored how this framework is different from but supplements the framework Alison offers. And we also began to discuss ways in which these frameworks can be reconciled. Ultimately, however, Merton offers us a vision for personal conversion resulting from a practice of prayer in a contemplative spirituality. This supplements the vision offered

by Alison for communal conversion resulting from ecclesial practices. And both, in their recognition of our responsibility to one another in love and truth, give a diagnosis of the socio-political violence and offer a path toward political conversion via the mutually-informing the personal and communal spheres, the spiritual and the ecclesial.

As in the case of Alison, Merton too has his limitations. Let me return to Carr once more: "[T]here is no indication of a simple line of 'progress' in Merton's thought, nor of the dominance of any particular religious model or preconceived pattern of development. In an important sense one is always a beginner."[405] So we should be warned against thinking that active contemplation or prayer is the silver bullet—it is not. Which is why we must rely also on other thinkers, including Alison. But such is the nature of this entire conversation. While there is something we can *do*, when it comes to conversion, we also must be open to the grace that ultimately effects the conversion. Of course, I believe that the grace of conversion is always and everywhere made available to us in God's self-gift. But it requires a letting go. Merton, while acknowledging the need to let go in order for grace to work on us, spends many, many pages explaining how we go about *doing*. Such a focus—maybe a flaw of this project as well—can be misleading. And insofar as it is misleading, Alison offers a balance to that *doing* in his focus on an openness to revelation and a relaxing into being recreated—that is, not *doing* but *receiving*.

In the next chapter, we will draw from these frameworks to construct the characteristics of a mutually-informing system of spirituality and ecclesiology as well as the practices that constitute them. From this, we will explore the ways Merton's and Alison's thought help us better understand violence generally and racial resentment and political and ecclesial polarization specifically. And we will apply the constructed spirituality and

[405] Carr, *A Search for Wisdom and Spirit*, 129.

ecclesiology and their practices in a case study with those communities where these issues can be most problematic: rural, working-class, White communities and the Catholic Churches within them.

CHAPTER 4

FAITH IN ACTION: LESSONS LEARNED AND APPLIED, STORIES CHANGED

"[A]nd for once we believed him, because
down in the dark mess of our little skull closets
some puzzle pieces were clicking together
and our world made some terrible kind of sense."
-Barbara Kingsolver, *Demon Copperhead*

In the last two chapters, we have explored the work of two Catholic thinkers whose lives and thought have offered examples of and insights into conversion. The framework for each of them is distinct as a result of their different starting points. For James Alison, the starting point is the Resurrection. In the experience of the Resurrection, the veil is lifted to reveal what it is that we, as a community, have been participating in. Drawing from the mimetic theory of René Girard, Alison asserts that we have been participating in a system characterized by the violent exclusion of scapegoats, the creation of identities formed over-and-against others, and ongoing rivalry enhanced by relationships of reciprocity. In addition to revealing the "old system," the Resurrection also showed its witnesses that God has nothing to do with that system of violence and death, but is instead on the side of the victim—not just Jesus, but all victims.

If the Resurrection was truly experienced by its witnesses—that is, if they saw what was there to be seen—this marked the beginning of a process of conversion among the witnesses. This conversion leads to the imitation of the Other other—God—instead of the imitation of the social other within the "old system" that perpetuates exclusion, violence, victimage, and death. To imitate the Other other is a practice of forgiveness, which means that, in the same way we accept that forgiveness, we also are called to offer that forgiveness to others. So the Church forms as a place where disciples gather to recognize their

participation in the old system, accept the forgiveness God offers, and offer forgiveness to their fellow victimizers. In and through this process, we undergo a recreation of our identities, including a revision of the stories that shape our identities and our worldviews. We are different, our relationships are different, and our Church is different. The old system is being recreated into something radically new.

For Thomas Merton, the starting point is a recognition of the alienation we experience from ourselves. This alienation results from and contributes to the "mass society," which is characterized by the uninterrogated technological progress that marks the world around us. We are caught up in this progress without consent as cogs in the machine. We work for its success as we seek to justify that progress and our participation in it. To do this, we cannot think independently of the misinformation that flows from that mass society through the mass media and other mass persons. And so our true selves are "papered over" with slogans and false narratives that ensure we are right—about our participation in mass society and in our conversations with other mass persons.

Through prayer, we are offered a resource we can use to begin to see through the layers of our false self toward truer versions of ourselves. This requires both an active prayer life in our conscious and regular inward turn as well as a passive prayer life—an openness to God working in us. As those layers of the false self are removed, not only do we get to truer versions of ourselves, but we also draw near to *le point vierge*—the innermost point in which God dwells. We meet God there. But we cannot get there on our own, instead, God must welcome us in. This welcome is the infusion that we must passively receive. It is the knowledge of the grace and love of God as well as where our true identities are revealed. It is also in that innermost point where we recognize our connection through God to everyone else. We cannot separate ourselves from our neighbor, even if we are estranged from them.

Through prayer, we are able to overcome that estrangement from ourselves, God, and others such that we can enter into relationships with them in new, more meaningful ways—as ourselves and with the understanding of the true stories that shape us.

While these starting points create distinct systems or plans of action, we have seen that Alison and Merton share a conception of conversion as a narrative shift. The stories that we once believed—about ourselves, about others, about society—are transformed toward truth. And we are able, in both of their frameworks, to connect our participation in the Church and our prayer practice to an ongoing transformation through which we rid ourselves of falsehoods and biases as we move closer to the truth. Our stories begin to take on the character of the gospels.

Similarly, both frameworks offer a path in which our conversion is not at anyone's expense. This means that, whether in our participation in the ecclesial community or in our becoming truer versions of ourselves through a practice of prayer, our responsibility to our neighbor remains the same. We are to either make space for them to undergo the same conversion experience or we are to work with them and for them in their own search for truth through a life of witness or committed accompaniment.

We undertook an exploration of Alison and Merton in an effort to gain insights about conversion that can address violence, generally, but two instantiations of violence, in particular: racial resentment and polarization (political and ecclesial). As we saw in chapter one, these two forms of violence permeate U.S. society: racial resentment, the more-pervasive derivative of traditional racism; and polarization, a plague that is infecting political society and the Church. As we saw in the evaluation of both in chapter one, these can be considered forms of violence because they are a human cause of a harmful difference between what could be and what actually is—that is, a difference that prevents the full

flourishing of a person by way of some deprivation or malformation. In the case of racial resentment, it prevents the full flourishing of Black and other persons of color as it perpetuates biases against these communities rooted in legitimizing racial myths. In the case of polarization, this situation in the extreme form that we experience it, prevents the passage of laws that could work toward ameliorating the hardships faced by those most marginalized in the U.S., such as laws that provide additional access to health care, education, housing, etc. Further, polarization prevents the Church from being what it could be as well: a united community. Instead, the Catholic Church in the U.S. is made up of destination parishes that house communities on the "left" and the "right" and a vast middle ground of moderate parishes that are, unwittingly or complicitly, not helping overcome the divide in the Church.

At the heart of these forms of violence, we saw, were narratives. As human beings, we are storytellers. It is through stories that we craft our identities and form our worldviews. But these instances of violence show that false narratives can cause problems. By holding to the false narratives of the just-world value orientation, legitimizing racial myths, or the negative partisanship fueled by misinformation, mudslinging, and smear campaigns, we support the continued spread of racial resentment and polarization, in political society and the Church. Because these false narratives are a form of bias, we turned to Lonergan to show us that the cure for bias is conversion.

For Lonergan, conversion has many aspects: intellectual, moral, religious, and psychic—a fourth category included by Doran. Together, these conversions help us to overcome the falsehoods we hold and move toward truth, recognize the ways that we are supposed to participate in society toward the common good instead of in self-interest, love God and receive God's love more deeply such that our lives are transformed by that love, and, in the psychic category, have the symbols, images, and meanings of culture transformed

such that insights into deeper truths are not prevented from happening. In a word, we are trying to transform our conscious and subconscious filters such that we can come to a fuller sense of truth. This is the task of conversion.

In this final chapter, I will be drawing upon the work done in the first three chapters to bring the central insights about conversion from Alison and Merton to bear on the naming of specific characteristics of a mutually-informing spirituality and ecclesiology that opens us to conversion. But I will be constructing this list with a particular community in mind. Rural, working-class, White communities and, in particular, my hometown. These communities are particularly, though not uniquely, susceptible to these flawed narratives that contribute to the challenges that face the U.S.: racism, sexism, heterosexism, xenophobia, etc. In the recent past, we have seen these communities receive greater attention because of the role they have played in presidential elections. In some cases, the narrative refers to them as evidence of the "silent majority" who many did not believe existed. In other cases, the narrative writes them off as being ignorant. Because of my own upbringing in a community like this, my perception of the community is much more complex.

As I discussed in the introduction to this work, I was raised in such a community—a small town, exclusively White, in which lived working-class families. And I am grateful for my upbringing. I learned values that are essential to my character that govern the way I engage the world, my community, my friends, and my family. But in that same community, I also heard things that I wish I did not hear—racial slurs, insensitive comments about certain communities, and the like. But, as I quoted Mark Phillips, how can I not still love these people? Vice *can* and *does* coexist with virtue—not just in these communities, but in *all* communities. My intention, then, is to apply the ecclesiology and spirituality I develop to my hometown in a case study, of sorts. And I hope that, through this practice, we can begin to

find ways to affirm the beauty in these communities while also striving toward the transformation of their uglier side—that is, to revise the story. But that includes working on ourselves. We must learn to accompany one another in these conversions so that our virtues are affirmed and our vices rooted out. I do not stand as an outsider asking a community to change "or else." Rather, I stand as a son of that community, asking to join them in a joint process of conversion.

In this chapter, I will begin by offering some comparative remarks on Alison and Merton. I will delineate particular categories in which their frameworks diverge and converge. And I will show how, together, they offer a path toward opening ourselves to a more holistic conversion—at the personal and communal levels. But in an effort to ensure we are discussing all of the levels of a holistic conversion, I will next offer some thoughts as to how each of these thinkers provide paths toward political conversion. Then I will introduce my hometown. This town will be the focus of my "case study." In the summer of 2022, I engaged in a number of interviews with members of the local Catholic parish. The data from these interviews provides a helpful insight into the current Catholic life of the community and will enhance the "case study" by grounding it in the lived religious experience of community members.[406] Following this, I will introduce the characteristics for an ecclesiology and a spirituality that opens us to conversion. These characteristics, I call "humble discovery" and "prophetic accompaniment." Inspired by the common and complementary frameworks for conversion in Alison and Merton, these characteristics will help form an ecclesiology and a spirituality that can open us to a more holistic conversion. And throughout the discussion of these characteristics, I will be applying them to

[406] In compliance with Boston College's research policy, prior to conducting these interviews, I consulted with the Office of Research Protections and received approval from the Institutional Review Board for this study.

communities like my hometown with an eye toward addressing racial resentment and polarization.

4.1 James Alison and Thomas Merton: Complementary Conversions

In light of our discussion in chapters two and three, we can now engage in a more in-depth comparison of the conversion frameworks offered by Alison and Merton. We will find that these figures, though distinct, have a great deal of overlap in their thought and, where they differ, can be seen as complementing one another as we strive toward a more holistic understanding of conversion. I will make this comparison with an eye toward conversion as a narrative shift. This will allow us to offer a more robust recommendation toward an ecclesiological and spiritual solution for racial resentment and polarization, given their foundation in false narratives.

4.1.1 Conversion as a Process of Unveiling

Common to both Alison and Merton are their expositions of conversion as a *process*. Conversion is not instant or momentary but is for both a back-and-forth process through which the convert is in relationship with God and others as they undergo conversion—a process that is always necessarily unfulfilled.

For Alison, conversion begins with an encounter with the risen Jesus, the innocent victim. In that encounter, two things are revealed: a reality about us and a reality about God. The reality about us is the revelation of what it is we have been participating in as a society—mimetic rivalry, the victimage mechanism, and death. The peace we have maintained through our practice of ritualistic exclusion has been artificial as exclusion does not bring peace but only more rivalry. The reality about God is that God is on the side of the victim—not just

Jesus, but *all* victims in history—and, as a result, God has nothing to do with violence or death.[407]

While the revelation in the encounter with the risen Jesus makes this information instantly available, that does not mean that it will be instantly received. Even in Alison's own conversion experience, the encounter and his acknowledged reception of that revelation, he says, happened over time.[408] This speaks to the "density" of the experience—there is a depth to it such that it requires unpacking, even for those in closest proximity to Jesus, such as the apostles.[409]

Following this encounter, our process of conversion continues ecclesiologically—in our liturgical participation, in which we have an opportunity to be in relationship with others who have been victims and victimizers as we all engage in a practice of forgiveness. In this practice of forgiveness in the community of the Church, we relax into being recreated by God and becoming the beings God desires for us to be. Put differently, we acquire a new story. The new story realigns our personal narratives with that narrative of the gospels in and through which we desire as God desires, we imitate Jesus Christ in our discipleship, and we engage in relationships without rivalry, exclusion, and violence.

John Edwards's perspective on Alison's process of conversion sees conversion and theology (*i.e.*, theological reflection) in a reciprocal relationship:

> God's address is expressed most fully in the living presence of the crucified Christ. One both receives and participates in that address through an

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[407] Again, the reader might sense a connection to the thought of Johann Baptist Metz with Alison's emphasis on Christ as the principal victim, God's siding with the victim, and the "intelligence of the victim," though it is also important to note that their proposals in light of this knowledge take on different forms. Metz is more directly combating the oppression, whereas Alison does not take such an oppositional view except in seeking its transformation—that is, Metz is "against" oppression, but Alison avoids in all God talk any language of "against."

[408] Alison writes, "Of course, I am describing schematically something which was a non-schematic whole, and which has taken me several years to begin to understand." Alison, "Theology amid the Stones and Dust," 101.

[409] For a discussion of the "density" of the resurrection experience for the apostles, see Alison, "The Resurrection," in *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 70-77.

> experience of being forgiven, which converts the recipient into a witness of the crucified and risen Christ, and causes his or her intelligence to be gradually "subverted from within" by the intelligence of the victim. Theology is the witness' conversion. The reciprocal nature of the relationship between theology and conversion becomes apparent as the witnesses' theological expressions become an occasion for new or renewed experiences of conversion in the witnesses' readers or hearers.[410]

The expression of that experience of being forgiven in our encounter with the resurrected Christ is in the communication of that experience to others—that is, offering forgiveness. As we continue to do that, our intelligence continues to be subverted as we allow our imitation to be realigned toward the desire of the Other other. Put another way, conversion occurs as we inherit and pass on the intelligence of the victim. Conversion, then, continues as long as we continue to participate in it. The density of the experience leaves us with no end to mining its meaning.

As noted in chapter two, Alison leaves open the possibility that the authentic self that God desires us to be and toward which we are converting has been given to us already.[411] Of course, this is a difficult possibility to see in actuality because of Alison's reliance on Girard's mimetic theory, which holds that there was no preexistent self, but rather that the identity we have always had was formed by our imitating the desire of those with whom we come into contact (*i.e.*, the social other). *If* a God-ordained self was preexistent, Alison still holds that we would not have access to it. Regardless whether the self pre-existed or not, however, God is still unveiling (*i.e.*, revealing to us) our authentic self within us, even if still through the mediation of the Holy Spirit in ecclesially-centered relationships or with victims. This occurs as we encounter the apostolic witness in the liturgy through the Holy Spirit, in the texts of the New Testament, in the Eucharist, and in our

[410] Edwards, *James Alison and a Girardian Theology*, 66.
[411] See Edwards, "The Self Prior to Mimetic Desire: Rahner and Alison on Original Sin and Conversion," 29.

prayer. We are not creating ourselves anew, but are being *recreated* in the gradual realignment of ourselves toward God.

Like Alison, Merton also considers conversion a process. Unlike Alison, the process does not typically begin by some grand revelation or encounter. It appears that the process of conversion as Merton envisions it begins as gradually as it progresses. For Merton, conversion is an impulse toward interiority through which we move from the false self to the true self. And in the movement, we experience the gradual release of our ego's hold on our consciousness and freedom. It permits consciousness and freedom to flourish in a way they cannot if we uncritically or unconsciously participate in "mass society."

Mass society is characterized by Merton as the community which is subject to unquestioned technological progress. We are caught up in this progress without giving our consent and, through a process of "leveling," we are brought into conformity with this status quo. We do not question this progress but become cogs in its machinery. And to justify our participation, we cling to whatever aids us in our defensiveness: misinformation, political slogans, and false narratives. When we realize that we have become a "mass person"—not that different from the realization of our participation in the old system within Alison's framework—we make a conscious and free decision to no longer conform to the fraudulent reality. And this begins our process of conversion. A switch is flipped such that we are awakened to our becoming caught up in the unthinking of technological progress and realize we are not our "self." And being a false self prevents us from right relationship with ourselves, our neighbor, and God.

After we make the realization that we have become dehumanized in some sense, the process of conversion, for Merton, begins in a practice of contemplative prayer—an active contemplation—through which we seek to remove the layers of the false self, to release

ourselves from the grip of our egos. And while contemplative practice is, by nature, an individual practice, we engage in contemplation more effectively when in relationship with God and neighbor because our relationality is an essential truth of our createdness. Our "progress" in building our relationship with God and neighbor is directly related to the degree to which we freely subject ourselves to God and neighbor in the service of truth and love. In our active contemplation, we are, at times, infused by an experience of God's grace and love—an experience of God's creative freedom. And when we find ourselves *in* God, we also find our *selves* in God. As we continue our practice of prayer, continue to experience God in our inner self, God gradually reveals our true self to us and the interconnectedness we share with all other persons

The influence of existentialism on Merton also left open the possibility that the self was not necessarily preexistent. However, distinct from Alison, the principal thrust of his writings did hold that the true self was preexistent. In addition to this distinction, Merton foregrounded a more active role in the process of revealing that true self. Even if we are still ultimately reliant on God's grace for that true self to be revealed more fully, such as in moments of infused contemplation, through our own contemplative practice, we can experience certain realizations of aspects of our true selves as they are in God. This latter aspect is the human-initiated active contemplation that Merton prescribes. Merton writes:

> Our vocation is not simply to *be*, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny. . . . [W]e are even called to share with God the work of *creating* the truth of our identity. . . . He alone can make me who I am, or rather who I will be when at last I fully begin to be. But unless I desire this identity and work to find it with Him and in Him, the work will never be done.[412]

[412] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 33.

If God dwells within us and if our identity is in God, then our true self is within us i*n some form.* Merton holds that God does indeed dwell within us in *le point vierge*, the innermost point of nothingness to which God only has and can give access. As we move toward truer versions of ourselves, we are also in greater proximity to this innermost point. There, we are united to God and, through God, to everyone else. Our inextricable link to everyone else has its source in this innermost point.

Note the distinctions between Alison and Merton. Alison's conversion is initiated by an encounter with the risen Jesus. The encounter sparks in us a new understanding of the old system and our being forgiven. And the process of conversion is one in which we have our desires realigned toward that of God in the imitation of Jesus Christ. The process takes place in an ecclesially relational mode—in the community of the Church, in the offer and reception of forgiveness, etc. Merton's conversion is sparked by an awareness of our being caught up in mass society. This awareness allows us to realize our living as "false selves" that wrongly believe in our existential isolation—that we are not connected to others. And the process of conversion happens through prayer and contemplation that are enhanced by our relationships with others.[413] In the process, our true selves are revealed to us which, in turn, discloses our innate connection to one another as we find ourselves—and, therefore, everyone else—in God.

Alison's conversion is toward an authentic version of self that might not have pre-existed in us, whereas Merton's authentic version of self is covered over by layers of false selves. Or, assuming Alison *does* hold that a preexisting identity is present within us, he argues that we have no access to it, whereas Merton believes that our active contemplation is

[413] The importance of the relationships within Merton's understanding of contemplative practice will be discussed below in §4.1.3.

indeed a practice in which we can participate that can lead us toward our true self. Ultimately, however, our path toward our authentic or true self is marked by the unknown—we do not know what that authentic or true self looks like, exactly. Which is why, in their respective frameworks for conversion, Alison and Merton encourage us to be conscious of, and lean into, the risk of creativity, the risk of making mistakes.

Further, Alison does not rely as heavily on our active participation in our own recreation. While he does acknowledge that conversion happens through our internalizing—being subverted from within by—the intelligence of the victim, this is a process we relax into. Except in our practice of forgiveness, we play a comparably passive role in our recreation. Compare this to Merton, who, like the practice of forgiveness, advocates for an active practice of contemplation that opens us to God removing those layers of our false self. But note that this active practice of contemplation is ultimately a training for the passivity through which actual conversion takes place—as we engage in "active" contemplation, God works in us, graciously drawing us closer to God's presence and our true self within; that is, "infused" contemplation. Put differently, our activity is a practice in removing the barriers that create a false rift between ourselves, God, and one another and receiving what is always being offered to us: God's grace. The active-passive distinction I draw upon here is only to distinguish what Alison and Merton foreground in their conversion frameworks. But both are experiences of *receiving* our authentic or true selves from God, not *retrieving* them from God. Both are the work of God's grace.

Alison and Merton reflect a focus on the communal and personal dimensions of conversion, respectively. But both also implicate the other dimension (a sharp contrast between the two on this point would be inaccurate). In community and in the Church as well as in our practice of prayer, we are transformed. For Alison, this change takes the form of

being realigned toward the desires of God and the imitation of Jesus Christ. It redirects our attention to the victims of history and to the victims in our midst who challenge us to see their victimization as a result of the old system's proper functioning. And it challenges us to see our responsibility to all to avoid practices of exclusion. For Merton, this change takes the form of having our false selves—selves who believe themselves to be isolated, atomized individuals disconnected from others, including the responsibility for them—removed, revealing our true selves who are inextricably connected to God and everyone else. It shows mass society for what it is and frees us to criticize mass society, the malformation of human persons by mass society, and the false isolation it fosters. These ends within Alison's and Merton's conversion frameworks reveal what is essential to both of their anthropologies: human beings are created *in relationship*. We not only cannot escape our connections to others, we have a responsibility for them.[414]

4.1.2 Complementary Directionality and Mutually-Informing

Despite the differences between Alison and Merton as regards the stimulus and process of conversion, they both perceive conversion as a process of revealing. For both, conversion reveals what society is and who we are. Turning from this form of complementarity in their distinct frameworks, we can now consider the way their frameworks are a dual process at the level of ecclesiology and at the level of spirituality. These two spheres, while distinct and important in their own right, are interrelated in a

[414] One aspect of the frameworks for conversion for both Alison and Merton that is worth acknowledging, though that is outside the scope of this project, is that these experiences of conversion are not merely matters of personal or communal transformation toward authenticity. Instead, these processes are intrinsically connected to salvation. As processes connected to salvation in this way, our responsibility to the community (and to society, as will be discussed below) becomes more apparent. See Alison, "The Search for a Soteriology," in *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 64-111, and Merton, "Things in Their Identity," in *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 29-36.

necessarily mutually-informing way. Spirituality is strengthened in the Church, but it is also developed through the Spirit's work in individuals. The Church informs spirituality, but it is also informed by the common aspects of the community's spiritualities.

We cannot have a faith community—a Church—without spirituality. Nor can we have a spirituality without a Church. As Sandra Schneiders reminds us,

> [R]eligion [here, in its institutionalized form] that is uninformed by lived spirituality is dead and often deadly, while spirituality that lacks the structural and functional resources of institutionalized religious tradition is rootless and often fruitless for both the individual and society.[415]

And so our spirituality is best enhanced and informed by our accompanying liturgical practices,[416] and our liturgical practices are best enhanced and informed by the spiritualities of the participating members.[417]

What Alison and Merton together offer us is a sense of conversion that relies on both spheres. To focus exclusively on spirituality would leave the individual without a community that helps shape and temper that spirituality in a way that is consistent with the truth of the Gospel. To focus exclusively on the Church, however, would leave the community without the creativity or ingenuity of the Holy Spirit manifesting itself in the life of a particular community member or group of members.

By way of example, let us consider the Second Vatican Council. What emerged from the Council was a Church that reflected a distinct spirituality—if we understand spirituality here, as I do, as the way in which we, in our whole person, engage the world around us. The spirituality emerging prior to the Council was informed by many cultural shifts, among them

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[415] Sandra M. Schneiders, "Religion and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?" The Santa Clara Lectures 6, no. 2 (February 6, 2000), 19.
[416] See Gregory K. Hillis, "Merton the Priest," in *Man of Dialogue: Thomas Merton's Catholic Vision* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021): 44-55.
[417] See John P. Edwards, "Being Freed from the Illusion of the Enemy: James Alison on Contemplative Prayer and Eucharistic Liturgy," *Who Is My Enemy? Religious Hope in a Time of Fear*, edited by Darlene Fozard Weaver and Jeffrey S. Mayer (Villanova, PA: Villanova University Press, 2011): 1-16.

new biblical scholarship, a recognition of historicity's valid application in the Church, and the like. Spirituality was toward less spiritualized ends and focused, instead, on the concrete, political impact of faith in the world. This engagement with the world in the spirituality prior to the Council was enshrined in the Council documents. As the Church began to receive these documents, we saw the Church reflecting this new spirituality in communal—and, in this case, global—life: greater participation by the laity, deeper involvement in social and political issues, more intentional engagement with other disciplines to inform doctrine, and the like. And the Church, in implementing these liturgical changes, helped influence the spirituality of Catholics as well.

This back-and-forth, mutually-informing relationship between spirituality and ecclesiology is precisely the complementarity that we see in the conversion frameworks offered by Alison and Merton. But what is significant about the reliance on both the Church and spirituality is that these are elements of culture. In their use of story, symbol, image (or, in the case of some types of spirituality, no image), and song, liturgy and spirituality reshape not just our way of knowing, not just our way of being in relationship, but also our cultural milieu. In terms of Doran's psychic conversion, relying on Church and spirituality helps modify our censor—the unconscious filter that permits or prohibits new insights from being received. With our stories being transformed, we are able to come to new understandings. Consider, for example, engaging the parable of the Good Samaritan. Hearing it preached about in the context of mass and actively meditating with the story can help transform our image of what a "good person" can look like, leading us to an openness for recognizing goodness and virtue in those who do not look like us. Stories about ourselves *and* about others are, then, transformed.

4.1.3 On a Risky Path Toward Truth

Merton's perception of mass society leads to his diagnosis of humanity being subjected to a "tyranny of untruth." He considers life "nothing but a struggle to seek truth." For a monastic to put life's work in these terms—that is, without a more explicit reference to God—reveals what our search for God entails, or, rather, what keeps us from that search. Foregrounded in his process of conversion is the virtue of truth-telling. Merton's search for God is a process of removing our false selves. What constitutes these false selves is misinformation, political slogans, false narratives—all of the arguments, opinions, and beliefs that construct our defense of our participation in mass society. Removing the false self is accomplished primarily through a practice of prayer in which God reveals our true selves to us. Additionally, within this practice of prayer, we must grapple with what is real.

In Merton's discussion of nonviolence (which we touched upon in chapter three), he argues that our process of conversion is facilitated by our renunciation of untruths. This requires us to focus intently on our beliefs such that we can rid ourselves of the falsehoods and biases that we can recognize that we hold. Merton writes of this initial stage:

> But before [infused contemplation] begins, we ordinarily have to labor to prepare ourselves in our own way and with the help of His grace, by deepening our knowledge and love of God in meditation and active forms of prayer, as well as by setting our wills free from attachment to created things.[418]

This initial phase of seeking God that includes a deepening of knowledge about God and freeing ourselves from attachment to created things leads to a necessary critique of the false idols we have unwittingly raised up in our lives in mass society. For us to know God, we must understand and rid ourselves of those things we have considered to be God but are not. This is our free choice to not let our participation in the world be one we have not

[418] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 214.

decided for ourselves. But our own prayer cannot accomplish all it must to help us purify ourselves from the biases and falsehoods within the stories that shape our identities and worldviews.

We also must rely on the assistance of God and others to help us to see the falsehoods and biases that we cannot, on our own, recognize. While we begin in a practice of prayer, our prayer is supplemented through relationships in which we intentionally open ourselves to the truth we can receive from those with whom we are in relationship. Further, we must also be willing to take the risk of speaking truth to those with whom we are in relationship. Merton says, "[W]e must risk falsity, we must take courage and speak," and in so doing, assert our own "yes" and "no" such that we can operate with the fullest possible freedom, making us truly persons.[419]

As Merton foregrounds truth-telling, he also demands discernment. Discernment, through which new understandings are arrived at or decisions made, helps us to distinguish between the "truths" offered us by the world—those "truths" that buttress mass society—and the truth from God. Further, discernment aids us in determining when and how to assert God's truth in our relationships. As with all discernment, certainty is elusive. It is necessarily risky. Risk, then, is inherent to the process of conversion. For Merton, the risk is profound because it is relational. We must be willing to risk the embarrassment of being told we are wrong, and we must also risk being despised because of our telling others they are wrong. Merton challenges us to lead with love as we tell others they are wrong. In order to successfully seek the transformation of the other along the path of truth and, therefore, conversion, means that they must be convinced of the truth that we love them and care for their wellbeing. This, of course, also requires that we actually love them. Otherwise, we risk

[419] Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, 88, 86.

not being able to help them in that circumstance, so much so that we risk even losing that relationship, resulting in the disunity we are seeking to ultimately overcome. At the same time that we are challenged to ensure our yes means yes and no means no, then, we also are subject to a provisionality in which our yeses and nos might require revision. As such, conversion that includes a commitment to truth-telling, a discernment of that truth and how to share that truth, necessitates the cultivation of humility; that is, a willingness to accept the need for revision.

In Merton's life, the way this truth-telling manifested itself was through his frequent and public social critique. Merton was a prolific social critic. As noted earlier, from war, peacemaking, and nonviolence to race and the "other," Merton spoke out. His commitment to truth in social criticism was published in his books and in various journals. And while this social commitment to truth could sometimes have a fairly sharp edge to it—certainly one of those correctives that would be difficult to hear if it were said to you in person—it was fundamentally a practice of love. Again, as his writings on nonviolence make apparent, Merton was committed to truth *with* the other, not at their expense. It was a process of conversion without contempt—a renunciation of untruth without a resentment for those who still held it. After all, would Merton blame mass man's participation in mass society given his conviction that we are caught up in mass society without our consent? But such a conclusion was one he could arrive at by his being a monk. Being set apart from the world offers a perspective to understand the deeper realities at play in contemporary life—the events or the pseudo-events. So he was able to engage the world as an outsider of sorts, revealing for others what his life of prayer and community was able to reveal to him.

Alison, too, was committed to seeking truth. As with Merton, his assessment of society concluded that society's normal course being bound up in the scapegoat mechanism,

mimetic rivalry, and death was actually participation in a system that was false, in a fraudulent reality. In order for that system to continue with the support of the population, they had to be convinced of the story claiming that the innocent victim was actually guilty and that his expulsion or death brought about a real peace. In Jesus's resurrection, it was revealed to the apostles that that system is actually false. The victim is innocent, and the peace is artificial.

Having realized the old system was built upon a false narrative, the apostles—and all those who encounter the risen Jesus after them—take up a new relationality in the world based upon the new story. By relating to the world according to the new story, they are seeking to facilitate an encounter with the risen Jesus in others. This, in turn, begins the process of transforming their narratives. This work continues in the Church as we reflect on the scriptures, allowing the singular story of the gospels to aid in the reconstruction of our own personal stories.[420] And this is a commitment to truth—relationships that are *not* built upon exclusion, identities that are *not* formed over against anyone else, and communal life that is peaceful *not* as a result of death.

Unlike Merton, however, Alison takes a slightly different approach to the way in which we facilitate that conversion toward truth in others. While Merton becomes a prominent social critic, Alison is less inclined in that direction. Of course, his publications are many, and he offers a significant critique of society and the Church in them. But his

[420] "My conviction is that there is only one Bible story, and that it is the story told by God, and it is within this that we are invitees to inscribe ourselves. In other words, God calls us into being through giving us the gift of story, and that uncompleted story is one in harmony with, and nourished by, the fragments of biblical nudges towards it. To make the point another way: it is not a question of us searching for a story, but of us discovering, slowly, painfully, and through endless muddle and losing the thread, that we are being invited to inhabit a story which is one not of reaction, but of being called into being and rejoiced in. it is much more a question of discovering ourselves to have been dragged into an unimagined story than of us sitting down after some crime and working out how best to sell ourselves when the cops come by." Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, 197.

approach is quite distinct. Merton's position as marginalized from the world, in a community of monastics living an alternative lifestyle from mass society, affords him the opportunity to see the problems anew and encourage the same renunciation through an indictment of the broader society. Alison, on the other hand, is less focused on indictment and denunciation than he is on "making space" for others. The reason for this, I might suggest, is that Merton's life is a renunciation of the "world," meaning the world of the mass society, and so he can encourage a similar renunciation by all Christians in order to achieve their true selves and experience the effects of that renunciation when accompanied by the practice of prayer. Alison, however, is averse to using language that suggests anything over-and-against anyone. He does not create his identity from those who have been excluded. Rather, through a radical *inclusion*, he seeks to participate in a community that witnesses to a life of discipleship reflecting the desire of God. As the Church community offers Alison a new way of relating to others in a way consistent with the new system, Merton also sees his communal participation—in this case, the community of monks—as the means by which he relates more deeply to the world; he is set apart in order to see the deeper connection to everyone else in and through God.

The approach of making space is not an insignificant act for someone who, like Alison, is marginalized in the Church. This is because it is not an act of protest, exactly.

> The point of the Pope and the Vatican is not that it is the Temple, but that it is Peter. And the whole point of Peter is that he is not something splendid and heroic and imposing, but something weak and unheroic and vacillating. That is to say, just the sort of person with whom we cannot maintain real communion unless we learn to like him without paying too much attention to whatever bit of braggadocio he and his groupies have come up with . . . but because God has chosen to make God's strength and salvation available to those who are able not to mind being in the company of the unheroic, the vacillating, the weak.[421]

[421] Alison, "The Importance of Being Indifferent," in *On Being Liked*, 126-27.

Truth, according to Alison, is a reality witnessed to in the way we relate to the world, not the condemnation or prophecy yelled from outside the parish doors. That is not to say Alison does not take issue with some of the Church's teachings and their impact; he does—everything from original sin to salvation to teachings regarding sexuality. But conversion, in his mind, is a process by which we get comfortable with God's "promiscuous" permitting of *anyone* into the community. It is a version of truth-telling that he has discerned to be most effective, given his commitment to the anthropological framework he asserts.

And, like Merton's method, Alison's implies a certain degree of risk as well. For Alison, to be risky means that we take the risk of not "proving" that we are right or, if we are right, lording it over others still in the process of getting to that truth. Instead, we have to take the risk of *never* being understood or judged as correct. It is our work toward truth in community that stands on its own—we let our work toward truth be the experience of Christ we offer to others.

While Alison's method of truth-telling witnesses to communal living governed by a different set of desires, Merton's method is how we get beneath the "pseudo-event"—an event he would attribute to mass society—and to an evaluation of the real issue.[422] In the end, the differences between Merton and Alison are not irreconcilable. The differences, after all, are a result of their anthropologies. With such different starting points, distinct diagnoses and proposals are to be expected.

Further, the different focus on prayer and Church within Merton and Alison does not imply that these are not *both* necessary to achieve some conversion. Instead, we can see how both recognize that the spirituality that fosters a personal conversion and the ecclesiology that fosters a communal conversion are indeed mutually informative. But, if the

[422] Merton, "Events and Pseudo-Events: Letter to a Southern Churchman," 150.

process of conversion is "followed," both thinkers offer paths forward with significant political implications, implications that can serve to address the violence we see at the political level in the U.S. today. Theirs are two dimensions of a multi-dimensional, holistic conversion—one that is personal, communal, and political.

4.1.4 Toward a Political Conversion

Despite the differences between Alison's and Merton's approaches, both provide frameworks with significant political implications. As we saw in chapters two and three, the distinct diagnoses they offer for the instantiations of violence we have been discussing since chapter one—racial resentment and polarization—are diagnoses of a political problem, yet their focuses with regard to conversion are on more personal and communal levels. But this further evidences what Merton says: violence is the result of alienation—it is the violence inside of us overflowing and spilling into society. And Alison concurs: "Oh—*this* is what we have duped ourselves into believing is true?! *This* is what *I* have been participating in?!"

In Alison's work, for example, what the encounter with the resurrected Jesus includes is forgiveness. The forgiveness is offered to address our "culpable" participation in a social system that perpetuates exclusion, violence, and death, especially at the expense of innocent victims. As our discipleship is developed through participation in the Church, and as we are recreated so as to have a new story not characterized by participation in this system, we become participants in society who are necessarily counter-cultural. We are not participating in the "game," but are, instead, offering forgiveness to others—as Christ did—to free them from the game they do not actually have to play.

Further, instead of participating in mimetic desire based on the imitation of the social other that leads, naturally, to violence and death, we become mediator/models of

something radically different: divine forgiveness and love. To offer even one meaningful option among a sea of shallow desires, we become a different ripple. And if other participate in that option as well, together we become a "current that can sweep down the mightiest wall of oppression and resistance."[423]

An example of becoming a mediator/model of God's forgiveness and love would be Archbishop Desmond Tutu who, following apartheid in South Africa, led the Truth and Reconciliation Commission ("TRC"). In the final report, Tutu, in regards to amnesty for those responsible for terrible repression, writes:

> We have been concerned, too, that many consider only one aspect of justice. Certainly, amnesty cannot be viewed as justice if we think of justice only as retributive and punitive in nature. We believe, however, that there is another kind of justice—a restorative justice which is concerned not so much with punishment as with correcting imbalances, restoring broken relationships—with healing, harmony and reconciliation. Such justice focuses on the experience of victims; hence the importance of reparation.[424]

Tutu was only one member of the TRC, even if his membership was significant. But even as just one person, Tutu's leadership as a counter-cultural presence in post-apartheid South Africa witnessed to the smaller-scale conversion needed—and required of all of us—to effect a political conversion.

In Merton's work, through our prayer, we are able to deconstruct the false self, which is made up of the false narratives or slogans that saturate our culture. Prayer deconstructs the constructed "truth" peddled by society. As we approach our true self, then, we also participate in society differently, no longer simply "going along" with mass society's norms. And in the spirit of Merton, we can take up the loving, if sharp, critique of society's

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[423] Robert F. Kennedy, "Day of Affirmation Address," University of Cape Town, South Africa (June 6, 1966), https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/the-kennedy-family/robert-f-kennedy/robert-f-kennedy-speeches/day-of-affirmation-address-university-of-capetown-capetown-south-africa-june-6-1966.
[424] "Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report, Volume One," Truth and Reconciliation Commission (October 29, 1998), https://www.justice.gov.za/trc/report/finalreport/Volume%201.pdf.

infatuation with the "pseudo-events" that have become so prominent on cable news and social media. In this criticism of the salaciousness we are so hypnotically attracted to, we can point to our more authentic, human, and humane roots. As we engage in this way, we help to recraft the broader social narratives that contribute further to the fraudulent reality.

Thinking of what this would look like in the concrete, two examples come to mind. The first is Wendell Berry. In addition to his writing—fiction, nonfiction, poetry, etc.—he has been a strong social critic, living a low-tech but public life on a farm with his family in rural Kentucky. From these "margins," he has much to offer us as regards truth. And he finds it necessary to communicate them, "It's either that or kill each other."[425] He continues

> [Killing each other is] a shorthand, a short cut. We are always faced with a choice between solving our problems by communicating with one another and with our place in the world—that is, paying respectful attention and responding respectful—or solving them by applications of raw industrial power: more machines, more explosives, more poison. So far we have been choosing raw power, whether we're dealing with international "competitors," or with the land, water, and air of our country. We seem to regard forms of violence as "efficient" substitutes for the respectful, patient back-and-forth that real solutions require. By real solutions what I mean are the solutions that are not destructive, that are kind to the world and our fellow creatures, including our fellow humans. Our dominant practice now is to solve problems with other problems. This is now obvious in industrial agriculture. What we need to do is submit, for example, to the influence of actually talking to your enemy. Loving your enemy.[426]

This is not the "truth" of mass society. This is the wisdom of true, not pseudo-, events. To be a voice of reality that chisels away at fabricated reality is indeed in service of the truth and to God.

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[425] Amanda Petrusich, "Going Home with Wendell Berry," *The New Yorker* (July 14, 2019), https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/going-home-with-wendell-berry.
[426] Petrusich, "Going Home with Wendell Berry." For additional insights like this from Berry, I recommend another *New Yorker* interview: Dorothy Wickenden, "Wendell Berry's Advice for a Cataclysmic Age," *The New Yorker* (February 21, 2022), https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/02/28/wendell-berrys-advice-for-a-cataclysmic-age.

This attention to ensuring we are getting real truth and not lies can also be found in another example, Jaron Lanier. Lanier is likely best known for his book *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* and his appearance on the Netflix documentary, "The Social Dilemma." In an age in which we feel so necessarily connected to one another through social media platforms but are also inundated with falsehoods and simplistic untruthful thinking, we forget that we do not need to participate in this aspect of technological progress. Echoing Merton, Lanier writes

> Before Facebook, there were ways to do most of the things Facebook allows, and there still are. There are other ways to keep up with friends, be informed, discover local events, announce your own life events, publish opinions, meet new people, and so on. . . .
>
> Quitting Facebook is a significant project, just like overcoming an addiction. The company does what it can to make the process difficult and uncertain. It also hoards data and fine-tunes options, which make it hard for people to control what happens with their data, much less leave. . . .
>
> Facebook is designed to take up as much attention as possible . . .[427]

This social (media) critique is one example of the ways in which we can alter the social narrative by ensuring that the information we receive is information *found*, not information *curated*. By this, I mean that just by taking up this one counter-cultural task ensures that the information is not merely the result of an algorithm pushing us further into ideological corners. It breaks from technology in a way to purify false narratives.

These three figures—Desmond Tutu, Wendell Berry, and Jaron Lanier—offer modern-day examples of the process of political conversion in a way that is consistent with the frameworks of Alison and Merton; that is, what political conversion in an Alisonian or Mertonian key might look like. They work in service of unveiling to society the truth, as they know it, and forming new narratives against those created by mass society and its mass

[427] Jaron Lanier, "Be a Pioneer—Delete Facebook," *The Guardian* (March 27, 2018), https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/mar/27/pioneer-delete-facebook-addiction-social-life.

media. It is through no stretch, then, that we arrive at the political implications of their frameworks. Rather, Alison's and Merton's frameworks naturally flow to this end.

One further example of how Alison and Merton's frameworks lead naturally toward political conversion is an article by Alison on Merton, "Contemplation in a World of Violence: Insights from René Girard and Thomas Merton." In it, Alison writes of the complementarity of their frameworks. He shows in the article how the events around September 11th in the United States revealed, as Merton would call it, "a sort of collective hypnosis."[428] And that, through contemplative practice and liturgy, we are awakened from this collective hypnosis to a new "sort of seeing."[429]

A new sort of seeing was needed, Alison claims, because in the acts of September 11th, the "old sacred worked its magic: we found ourselves being sucked in to a sacred center, one where a meaningless act had created a vacuum of meaning, and we found ourselves giving meaning to it."[430] Thinking of our narrative identities, we should understand that, when acts create a vacuum of meaning, we are *impelled* to create a story for it. As Alison argues,

> We are tempted to be secretly glad of a chance for a huge outbreak of meaning to transform our humdrum lives, to feel we belonged to something bigger, more important, with hints of nobility and solidarity. What I want to suggest is that this, this delight in being given meaning, is satanic.[431]

Being driven to attribute the sacred to these meaningless vacuums is "satanic," which, for Alison, means that is appears to bring a unanimity to us—that is, an in-group at peace—and that it is the very lie that Jesus undid in his crucifixion and resurrection.[432]

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[428] James Alison, "Contemplation in a World of Violence: Insights from René Girard and Thomas Merton," in *On Being Liked* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2003), 1.
[429] Alison, "Contemplation in a World of Violence: Insights from René Girard and Thomas Merton," 1.
[430] Alison, "Contemplation in a World of Violence: Insights from René Girard and Thomas Merton," 4.
[431] Alison, "Contemplation in a World of Violence: Insights from René Girard and Thomas Merton," 6.
[432] Alison, "Contemplation in a World of Violence: Insights from René Girard and Thomas Merton," 6.

What Jesus encourages us to do, instead, is to avoid accepting any constructed meaning that implies that there is a sacredness to this event. God is not involved in violence or death, nor is God involved in exclusion. And in order to act in light with these truths, we must see through different eyes. Those who can see the world anew must "have been disciplined to watch, those who have not been hypnotized."[433] Instead of being caught up in these false meanings, we must "look away, not be ensnared, to desacralize."[434] In other words, the story is *radically different* from any story the world has taught us.

To see through these "pseudo-events"—here, Alison is channeling Merton—we must learn "to see through Jesus' eyes."[435] We do this in prayer and in liturgy through which we are detoxed from our addiction to the fantastic and theatric, preferring instead the boring and quotidian. We learn to have removed from us these false narratives and meanings, despite how alluring they might seem, as we are recreated into a new desiring being whose new desires result in new relationships based on the belief that "God likes us. All of us."[436]

4.2 Introducing Home

We have now taken the opportunity to offer a comparative view of Alison's and Merton's frameworks. And we have seen how these are complementary frameworks that address personal conversion and communal conversion as they also offer paths forward toward political conversion. From this analysis and the discussion in the preceding chapters, we will seek an application of these frameworks in a complementary key. Before offering the characteristics of an ecclesiology and spirituality of conversion drawn from Alison and

[433] Alison, "Contemplation in a World of Violence: Insights from René Girard and Thomas Merton," 12.
[434] Alison, "Contemplation in a World of Violence: Insights from René Girard and Thomas Merton," 12.
[435] Alison, "Contemplation in a World of Violence: Insights from René Girard and Thomas Merton," 14.
[436] Alison, "Contemplation in a World of Violence: Insights from René Girard and Thomas Merton," 15.

Merton, and before applying them to a representative community that can be considered rural, working-class, and White, I will introduce this community: my hometown.

As I noted above, I had the occasion of interviewing members of the community's Catholic parish. These conversations offered insights into the theological atmosphere of the Catholic community there. In addition to discussing some of the information derived from these interviews, I will also provide an insight into how the town has changed racially over a number of years. I hope that beginning here will allow for a more robust application of the proposed ecclesiology and spirituality I offer later in this chapter.

4.2.1 Why These Communities?

I have selected to focus on rural, working-class, White communities for a couple of reasons. First, as I explain in the introduction, I am the product of such a community. And, further, I am proud of that fact. Second, these communities—as the focus of many recent studies has shown—have drawn the interest of many in the U.S., especially around the election of Donald Trump. What has often been discovered in the study of communities like this is a strong presence of the types of narratives—good and bad—that form and malform identities and worldviews.

Let us, for a moment, return to the "American Dream." While some do achieve what is promised in this dream, Nancy Isenberg argues that it is simply a "myth."[437] Researching in communities that we would consider rural, working-class, and White, her studies show that system of values held by these communities is both as it is romanticized to be (*i.e.*, characterized by fidelity to one's neighbor, hard work and the stigmatization of social welfare programs, and a certain religiosity [even if that religiosity is sometimes nationalistic]) and as

[437] Isenberg, *White Trash*, 313.

Hochschild describes it.[438] And the development of this complex and internally contradicting value system—the enmeshed and inextricably linked American dream and some similar form of the deep story—is the product of, and further supports, ongoing educational oppression, economic exploitation, and political manipulation.

It was not until the realization that votes could be gained that presidential candidates began bolstering the narratives which rural, working-class Whites believed. Put differently, rural, working-class Whites were in many ways instrumentalized. As Lyndon Johnson said, "I'll tell you what's at the bottom of it. If you can convince the lowest White man he's better than the best colored man, he won't notice you're picking his pocket. Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he'll empty his pockets for you."[439] This political manipulation affirmed the myth bound up in the community's deep story and exploited the use of the American Dream for political gain.

As a result of these factors, rural, working-class Whites tended toward supporting smaller government and freer markets because this is what "fit" with the deep story, the myth, and the American Dream. This manipulation is not relegated to the past, however. In April 2019, Vice President Mike Pence commented, "Was the American dream in trouble? You bet . . . I really do believe that's why the American people chose a president whose family lived the American dream and was willing to go in and fight to make the American dream available for every American."[440] Before Trump became president, Pence further

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[438] Recall from chapter one Hochschild's assessment of the "deep story," in which the American Dream is being for Whites due to the "cutting in line" of those less deserving.
[439] Isenberg, *White Trash*, 264.
[440] Ashley Turney, "Mike Pence says the American dream was 'dying' before Trump became president," CNBC (April 11, 2019), available at https://www.cnbc.com/2019/04/11/mike-pence-says-the-american-dream-was-dying-until-trump-was-inaugurated.html.

argued, the American dream was "dying."[441] While I agree with Isenberg that the American dream is indeed a myth, even among those organizations that still believe in the American dream's possibility, there is a disconnect between those rural, working-class, White communities who act on the basis of this American dream and the benefits that actually reach those communities.[442]

As a myth, the American Dream can be understood in many ways, verging on the false (*e.g.*, a legend or a folk tale) or on the true (*e.g.*, an allegory or a parable whose purpose is to communicate a truth). With the influence of these myths in rural, working-class, White communities, although they might initially be rooted in a virtuous system of values (honor, loyalty, and hard work), the decisions—generally speaking—of rural, working-class Whites are often also contrary to their own good and drive them toward an incapacity for solidarity with those similarly situated to them, be they immigrant, refugee, or poor person-of-color.[443] But this turn "against" those similarly situated, even if not uniform among members of these communities, also does not characterize the whole of these communities' histories.

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[441] Turney, "Mike Pence says the American dream was 'dying' before Trump became president."
[442] In a study completed by the Economic Innovation Group entitled, "Is the American Dream Alive or Dead? It Depends on Where You Look," the organization found, for example, that among the counties in which the American Dream is out of reach—those distressed counties where young people will earn less than their parents, and where poverty and inequality is perpetuated across generations—"Trump carried 79 percent of these counties representing 72 percent of the population in the group—dominating this category of places more than any other." Study available at https://eig.org/dcieop.
[443] Consider, for example, widespread support of the repeal of the Affordable Care Act by rural, working-class, Whites and—paradoxically—the reality of who benefits from the law. See Vann R. Newkirk II, "Simply Repealing Obamacare Will Hurt the White Working Class," *The Atlantic*, November 22, 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/11/trump-healthcare-plan-working-class-Whites/508325/.

4.2.2 A Hometown with a History

My hometown, which is actually a cluster of very small communities close in proximity, includes the primary city, Clinton (*i.e.*, "town") and a number of smaller communities—Blanford, St. Bernice, Universal, Centenary, and a few others. The history of the area reveals an interesting past. To illustrate this complex history, I will focus on Blanford, within this cluster of towns.[444]

Between 1890 and 1920, the number of foreign-born residents in Vermillion County (where Blanford is located) had grown exponentially. While the immigrants in Vermillion County represented Italians, Austrians, Hungarians, and the likes, Blanford was a bit different. It "was a tough coal mining town where" as Eliot Jaspin describes it, "Italians, Serbs, and blacks drank, fought, and struggled to stay alive." And while that might sound like a community of adversarial anarchy, it might be better understood as a community of diverse persons who were all marginalized outcasts.

The Ku Klux Klan, who had seen a resurgence in membership at this time, were, in addition to anti-Black activities, also experiencing a strong nativist movement in response to the Bolsheviks, "those spawns of the war's chaos, [who] had swept through Russia and were now, the *Daily Clintonian* [Blanford's local newspaper] warned in 1919, poised to strike Indiana." The fear of Bolshevism led the *Clintonian* to "obsess" over "the threat of foreign radicals and anarchists." In January 1920, Vermillion County saw the arrest of nine potential radicals in what was known as "the Palmer Red Raids." This left a suspicion in the community that the radicals were all immigrants and, therefore, that immigrants were all potentially radicals, leading to one headline in the *Clintonian*, "All Reds Are Foreigners." This

[444] This story is told by Eliot Jaspin, whose account will be the basis of my retelling here. Eliot Jaspin, *Buried in the Bitter Waters: The Hidden History of Racial Cleansing in America* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), 184-99.

fear, along with a coincidental and simultaneous crime wave in Clinton and the surrounding area (which included Blanford), led to a deep suspicion of immigrants: "Communism, crime, and alcohol were the interrelated problems facing Vermillion County at the beginning of the 1920s, and it was no wonder that the Klan took strong root there."

Another important note about the Klan at this time was the way that it was able to find legal loopholes and sneak its way into authority in Indiana. On the state's law books, a provision existed for a Horse Thief Detective Association ("HTDA"), which was originally formed prior to the Civil War to find horse thieves. Local groups could form a chapter with the approval of county governments and were granted by the state "the same powers as the police . . . [to] investigate crimes and make arrests." As one could imagine, an organization with the HTDA's stated purpose would not last long once fewer horses were owned, used, and therefore stolen, but in 1924, membership in Indiana HTDA chapters climbed to over 15,500 people. Considered an "open secret," the Klan grew in membership, organization, and action by forming chapters of the HTDA—in Vermillion County alone, there were four chapters. A large number of these chapters were later discovered to have memberships overwhelmingly—though not surprisingly—made up of Klansmen.

There were three types of people that lived in Blanford in the early 1920s: Black persons, immigrants, and "Americans." This latter group, as Blanford local Eli Skorich described to Jaspin, "were the Whites of the Klan and the Horse Thief Detective Association." Skorich, a descendent of Serbs, claimed, "We [Serbian immigrants] didn't have anything against the coloreds[.] . . . Them horse thieves just didn't like the colored. If you weren't American there was no place for you to live here." While not explicit, Skorich seems

to be describing a comradery or initial peace between two outcast groups in Blanford: the Black residents and the immigrants. What threw that distinction—between Americans, on the one hand, and the immigrant and black population, on the other—into high contrast was the alleged assault of Thelma Bales, a twelve-year-old White girl, by a Black man.

Following the alleged attack, "several hundred men attended a mass meeting in Blanford and issued an ultimatum to the town's blacks that 'unmarried adults must be out of Blanford by 7 o'clock [Saturday] and that married persons and their child would have until 7 P.M. Wednesday to leave in case the fugitive is not produced.'" While not many, there were 235 black persons living in Vermillion County at the time, a number that, following the expulsion, would reduce to merely 69 at the time of the next census.

Later, however, several gaps would emerge in the story about the alleged assault and the perception of Black residents in Blanford. The Fantone family—who had just a few days prior to the Bales incident alleged that a black man had been pursuing their daughter—shrugged off any suggestion that his family or Blanford more broadly had any antipathy toward the Black members of the community. Further, "there is also not a single account in any newspaper of Whites attacking blacks during the five-day grace period [following the 'expulsion']." As Jaspin notes, "Men like Bales [the assault victim's father], born in America and steeped in its culture of racism, might be upset, but Fantone and his fellow immigrants, who made up much of Blanford's population, were less impressed with the [image of the] black menace." What resulted instead was that the "Americans" took advantage of the vulnerability of the black community members, forcing their own wishes on the community with the assistance of the HTDA.

A few days after the expulsion, two Black store owners returned to Blanford to get their inventory, which coincided with a Serbian wedding in the town. Someone—likely an "American"—fired shots into their store, after which the police were called. The sheriff showed up with the Helt Township HTDA expecting a riot that did not materialize, so they swept through town, stopping in on the local Serbian wedding. The *Clintonian* reported that one of the deputies walked to the stove in the back of the dance hall, "ordered everyone to hold up their hands, and then fired into the ceiling. The wedding goers, assuming they were about to be robbed, started shooting at the police." As Jaspin argues, "When the KKK/police entered the dance hall within days of a racial cleansing, it is not hard to imagine that the Serbian wedding party saw this as a provocation." Skorich noted, "They had no business to come into this wedding. They just wanted to disrupt it. When they run the coloreds out, they were the same guys that come into the wedding. They were after the foreigners."

Skorich's assessment of the relationship between Black and immigrant residents in Blanford historically is in stark contrast to the position of residents today. In a YouTube video published in 2006, Blanford is featured in a video series "about the history of racism in small towns across the American south" that was made for the *Austin American-Statesman*, one of the daily newspapers in Austin, Texas.[445] While the video begins with a tip-of-the-hat to the beauty of Blanford, it quickly turns to the town's darker history. What is remembered in the stories told in this more recent video is interestingly told from the "American" side.

[445] Jsanhuezalyon, "Vermillion County," December 6, 2006, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fyq3REkDy6o&app=desktop.

Noting that the triggering event was the alleged assault of a White girl by a local Black man, residents of modern Blanford explain how the Black residents were expelled and warned against returning by a sign on the "green iron bridge" that alerted all Black residents with some variation of, "When the sun goes down, coloreds out of town."

This is a troubling history. Given what appears to be something of a kindred spirit among the immigrant and Black residents of the small town—likely rooted in those immigrants not yet being considered "White"—it is disappointing that the racism in its history is the story that survived.

4.2.3 The Community Today and Its Church

Today, the same cluster of towns located in southern Vermillion County has a population of around 10,000 people, more than 98% of whom identify as White.[446] Approximately 80% earn less than $50,000, 25% less than $15,000. In 2016, while the individual precincts vary slightly, Donald Trump carried Vermillion County at 65% (compared to Mitt Romney's 52% in 2012), and, in 2020, he carried the county at 69%.[447] While I do not wish to make broad assumptions about these results in a community with these demographics, they can be telling no less.

The only local parish is Sacred Heart Catholic Church. The parish was founded in 1891. The current archdiocesan numbers show 180 registered families, though only 64 families appear in the parish directory, so the most accurate number likely falls somewhere

[446] For all demographic information, see "47842," U.S. Census Bureau, https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=47842&tid=ACSST5Y2020.S0601.
[447] "An Extremely Detailed Map of the 2020 Election," *The New York* Times, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/upshot/2020-election-map.html.

between these two numbers. Like the area, the parish is basically exclusively White.[448] My home parish is, as best as I can decipher, the quintessential rural, working-class, White parish.

In the course of the conversations I had with parishioners, I wanted to know how they made sense of their religious and political lives and, in particular, how they envisioned the church responding to the most pressing social and political issues of our day, with a particular focus on racism. I interviewed a representative number of longtime, active members of the parish who also were of different generations, genders, and political preferences.[449]

I interviewed seven individuals, which represents somewhere between 7 and 10% of the average weekend mass attendance.[450] Of them, five were women and two men. They ranged in age from 36 to 80 years of age. For all but one interviewee, the participants had belonged to the parish for all (or nearly all) of their lives—the other, for all of his adult life. Their education levels ranged from two years of college at one end to a master's degree at the other. While not asked directly, it was apparent in the conversations that five would likely identify as Democrats or progressive and the other two Republicans or conservative, though those identities were complex and many would later claim that their religious identities were more central.

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[448] To clarify this point, no registered members in the parish directory identify as people of color. However, in a few of the interviews, the participants noted occasionally seeing folks who would likely consider themselves non-White (*i.e.*, Hispanic and Filipino). So I qualified "exclusively White" with "basically" to account for the possibility that some occasional attendees, although not members of the parish, are not White.

[449] "Active" here includes either participation in activities outside of liturgy or regular attendance and participation in liturgy—a broad understanding of the term warranted by the limited opportunities for participation outside of the liturgy.

[450] One of the unique aspects of this project was the proximity I have to the subjects of this study. This parish was mine for the better part of my childhood. I even went to the parish school for two years in a joint 3rd and 4th grade class, and, if you can believe it, my great aunt was my teacher. I have known those I interviewed nearly all of my life, which I believe gave me privileged access to their stories—I was a friendly interviewer and they knew I was not operating under false pretenses—while it also increased the level of responsibility I felt I had to execute the interviews with care.

The interviews I conducted revealed contradictions, but they worked to nuance and make complex the perspectives of rural, White people who, because of an abundance of recent literature on similar communities, we tend to think we understand.[451]

My questions were plentiful.[452] And while I explored many topics, I was focused on getting their perspectives on racism, White privilege, and *Open Wide Our Hearts*—the USCCB's recent document on racism—through their perspective as Catholics at a rural, White parish in an all-White town.

The results of these interviews help us to understand two items that relate to our frameworks of conversion. First, they help clarify for us the degree to which average, active parishioners are informed about the Church, such as encyclicals and bishops' documents as well as the more pseudo-event-like happenings, such as the recent controversies connected to Archbishop Carlo Viganò.[453] Second, they help clarify the degree to which—or if—their liturgical experience is recreating them in a way directed toward conversion.

Universally in their responses, there was some relationship between the faith and socio-political lives of the interviewees. The distinguishing characteristic for each, however, was what exactly constituted faith. For two interviewees, faith was informed simply by the creed accompanied by a pro-life commitment as well as some general notions of Catholic

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[451] I am thinking here of the recent discussions of communities which can be broadly characterized as rural, working-class, and White and their relationship to the success of Donald Trump's presidential campaign. An abundance of literature has been published on communities like that, and public opinion seems to have largely fallen into a consensus about who they are, how they think, and, maybe more problematically, how they vote.
[452] The questions I asked were within four general categories: 1) personal positions and parish perceptions, in which I asked about the interviewee, their participation, and how they understand the parish; 2) church news, in which I inquired about the sources for their ecclesial information—local and global; 3) the relationship between church and politics, in which I asked about their familiarity with Catholic Social Teaching, documents from the USCCB on socio-political issues, and the role of politics in the church and vice versa; and, finally, 4) race and the parish, in which I asked about their reactions to and perceptions of how well or poorly discussions of racism would be received in the parish.
[453] See Claire Giangravé, "Archbishop Viganò pushes conspiracy theories about Ukraine and Russia in 10,000-word letter," *America* (March 7, 2022), https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/03/07/vigano-ukraine-242526 and Brian Roewe, "Who is Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano?" *National Catholic Reporter* (August 28, 2018), https://www.ncronline.org/news/who-archbishop-carlo-maria-vigano.

Social Teaching ("CST"). These interviewees were catechists at some point in their past. For the majority of those interviewed, faith seemed to verge on "moralistic therapeutic deism"[454] and was compartmentalized in a libertarian, "live and let live" outlook. Faith helped them in their own decisions during elections or navigating their beliefs about certain issues (here, abortion and same-sex marriage). Overwhelmingly, however, the interviewees limited the normative aspect of faith to themselves, insisting it not be imposed upon others, even if they, as one did, believed that those others would still be judged by the same standard.

When asked whether they had heard any homily on a social or political issue—something I clarified time and again to not be negatively understood, but anything that could bear on our common life—the answers were almost universally "no." This was the case even when I offered abortion or same-sex marriage as examples of likely topics. There were two exceptions to this near-blanket no: two individuals indicated they had heard a homily against the death penalty when the moratorium on federal executions was lifted under the Trump administration (Terre Haute, the biggest city near Clinton, is home to a federal prison where executions take place, so this is highly probable); and another individual had claimed that she had heard homilies on these topics, but when pressed could not name a particular topic and referenced a pastor from the 1980s as being the most vocal on "those issues." It is worth repeating here that all but one of these interviewees had been members of the parish their entire lives—some 80 years.

After explaining some of these CST documents in brief, I asked how they would receive hearing homilies about these topics and how they perceived the parish would respond. The answers here began to diverge from one another. Except one, all said that they

[454] See Chapter 4, "God, Religion, Whatever: On Moralistic Therapeutic Deism," in Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

personally would be interested in hearing homilies on these topics and learning more about CST. The exception said that they already knew the answers to these topics and did not seem to be interested in having homilies beyond the basics of cultivating a spiritual life.[455]

Each of them noted the risk inherent in making homilies more social or political. Some saw certain issues as being potentially interpreted as irrelevant, especially racism and White privilege, because of the racial makeup of the parish. Others considered the parishioners to be mostly interested in spiritual nourishment—an internal focus, not a public one. Another interviewee considered the difficulty some parishioners might have in taking action, even if they were receptive to CST. But there were a few who noted that, although there is a risk associated with some of these teachings, there was also a possible benefit—namely, the chance that being more socially conscious might attract more young people to the aging parish. Most agreed, however, that it would be important to have homilies on these topics and for Catholics to know this aspect of their tradition.

As it relates to racism, White privilege, and *Open Wide Our Hearts*, responses were varied. A few interviewees noted that most of the parish would not see how these issues pertain to them. Sacred Heart is, after all, a basically all-White community in an almost all-White town. Some thought it might be off-putting for some parishioners who would not return. Though most agreed that the majority would be polite and listen, even if conversations after mass might be more critical.

Many interviewees expressed concern about the future of the parish, given its declining membership. It is unclear exactly what happened to change this participation. But

[455] Let me state here that this particular interviewee was the least clear in her responses. It appeared at times that she did not see the social-political implications of the faith, while at other times she seemed more keyed into those implications. What was overriding in the discussion with them was that faith started in the home, the parish should be considered a home to be cared for, and that if we spent adequate time in prayer—especially with the rosary—we would likely begin to see a turnaround in the diminishing faith.

poverty is likely relevant. One interviewee noted that the local high school has 60-70% students on free or reduced lunch rates. Others acknowledged that the parish can currently pay its bills, but that larger capital expenses were only possible through donations from wealthy members of the parish or with assistance from the archdiocese, to whom they already owed money. To expect that parishioners, or the rest of the community, could be involved in matters outside what could be considered necessary (*i.e.*, work, taking care of the family, church) might be misplaced.

Additionally, if the parishioners are facing the same issues that the community at large is facing, then some of the influences raised are likely also true: broadscale individualism, the overall decline in religiosity (especially in the Catholic Church), a focus on "me." Mass, for those who still attend, risks becoming a social club.[456]

It is also important to note that one of the interviewees noted just how political Sacred Heart actually is. Sacred Heart is in a part of rural Indiana that has historically been represented locally by Democratic politicians. While Trump has thrown the future into question, strong Democrats still populate the area and Sacred Heart. Among them are some of the wealthier parishioners who are able to offer the parish those additional funds for necessary projects beyond the parish's own capacities. So while, as one might expect, there are politically conservative parishioners in the rural parish, there are also politically liberal parishioners to balance that out. Keeping the peace, then, is paramount.

One additional matter is worth noting. In every interview, I asked the same question: "Did it ever mean anything, positive or negative, to you or anyone you know that three of the last four pastors of the parish have been men of color: two priests from India, and one

[456] See Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1955).

African American?" The answer was no. While one interviewee revealed that a now-deceased member of the parish said that she refused to take communion from the pastor who was Black, no other instance of rejection, confusion, question, or dis-ease was noted—not even by someone else.

When I asked if they could comment on why they thought that was, given the nature of the broader community, they said that priesthood made the difference. They either recognized that the priest shortage meant that they would take anyone assigned to them or that the priests' clerical status trumped any other characteristic, even racial.[457]

In the above introduction to my hometown and its local parish, we are able to see that the community—at least one of the smaller towns within the community—has an interesting past that might not be well known among community members. And, through the interviews with parishioners, we can gain insights into what parish life is like for those who regularly attend, especially as regards the role the social and political teachings in the Church are passed on to those who attend, what I believe to be, an average rural, working-class, White parish.

It is with this community in mind that I now turn to applying Alison's and Merton's framework.

[457] What I anticipated I would hear was complicated further by another bit of information I learned: soon after Sacred Heart was built—a parish that brought together the Irish and Italian populations of Clinton—dynamite was planted in the church, some of which detonated, destroying the front of the church. While there were no convictions in this crime, the interviewee told me, it was the longstanding belief that the Klan was responsible for it—an organization with deep roots in Indiana. I was not immediately able to find a record of this event, but it is worth further exploration.

4.3 An Ecclesiology and Spirituality of "Humble Discovery" and "Prophetic Accompaniment"

We began this chapter with a comparison of the frameworks for conversion as offered by Alison and Merton. And while they are different, there is significant overlap in the way they envision conversion as a narrative shift, even if the method toward achieving that has different starting points. Then I offered an introduction to my hometown as an example of a representative rural, working-class, White community. I selected this focus because these communities have been the object of much discussion in recent years. Because of my own love for my hometown community, I wanted to address it more on its own terms than on the way it has been caricatured.

In chapters two and three, I offered an evaluation of the frameworks for conversion in the work of James Alison and Thomas Merton—Alison representing "communal conversion" and Merton representing "personal conversion," while both lead to a "political conversion." Within those chapters and in relation to the particular types of conversion each foreground in their work, I also drew a connection to the practices that they recommend or that would flow naturally from their thought. For Alison, that practice occurs in the community of the Church; that is, ecclesiology. And for Merton, the practice is prayer; that is, spirituality. In this section, I will explore this practical side of Alison and Merton, offering a consideration of both an ecclesiology and spirituality of, as I will refer to them, "humble discovery" and "prophetic accompaniment."

Before I proceed, however, I would like to briefly note why I have joined these two aspects of discipleship (*i.e.*, ecclesiology and spirituality) under the same two characteristics. As I mentioned above, spirituality and ecclesiology are mutually-informing spheres. Our ecclesiology is derived from the spirituality (or spiritualities) of the community of faith. And

our spiritualities are informed by the ecclesiology (or ecclesiologies) in which we participate. Put differently, I am taught to pray in the mode of the worshiping community to which I belong. And as my own personal prayer develops, it, along with the prayer of the other members of that same community, impact the way we worship together. We can see examples of this mutual influence in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal and in the liturgies within the Hispanic Catholic community, and we might even consider the way religious orders also reflect this.

For example, consider Benedictine spirituality. The life of prayer among monastics or oblates tends to be rhythmic, seeking a balance between prayer and work—*ora et labora*—and heavily favors the praying of the Liturgy of the Hours and practicing *lectio divina*. And as those same monastics join in prayer as a community of faith, such as in a monastery, their liturgies are marked by silence, the simple praying of the psalms in chant, and they are seated in choir stalls, often keeping their eyes low to avoid contact with others. It is a personal spirituality that is informed by the worshipping community, but it is a community that mirrors its members' personal spirituality—men and women enter these orders with a predisposition toward these prayer styles.

With this connection in mind, then, I approach describing *both* ecclesiology *and* spirituality in a way that is characterized by "humble propheticism" and "discovery in accompaniment." I will first explain the constituent parts of these concepts through the life and thought of Alison and Merton before explaining how they function together as a characteristic. Then I will discuss how it could be applied to rural, working-class, White communities, especially my hometown, in an effort to address the narratives that contribute to racial resentment and polarization.

4.3.1 Humble

"[H]e humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross."

(Phil. 2:8)

Alison's entire framework begins with an encounter with the risen Jesus. In effect, the central message revealed in the death of the innocent victim is this: "You were wrong." We were wrong about the societal program in which we participate, we were wrong in developing our identities over-and-against others or by their exclusion, and we were wrong in thinking that true peace came through the death of an innocent victim. Further, we were wrong about God. We were wrong in thinking God was behind or even desired violence and death. We were wrong.

To be declared as "wrong," however, does not mean we are condemned. Humility is to understand ourselves as God understands us. Understanding humility in this way means that, when we are told we are wrong, it is for some better end, a more authentic end. In this case, that end is understanding ourselves in the way the Being who loves us and knows us most understands us. It is to be wrong in order to be better, but not by some imposed standard. Instead, it is a standard that we would desire for ourselves because it removes all of the inauthentic and fraudulent standards that are imposed upon us by those who do not love us in the same way, but are instead in a relationship of reciprocity or rivalry with us.

This is not without risk, however. To humble ourselves in order to receive ourselves does risk a certain form of death—social or actual. But, as Alison reminds us, because of the resurrection, we are no longer concerned about death. We no longer fear death because it has been conquered.

Our humility allows us, in Alison's framework, to participate in the recreation of the world. It facilitates our own recreation, which implies a new relationality with the world to

transform our communities and our society. And if we ever hope to achieve this new system, we must be humble in order to be wrong.

Alison argues that, in response to the encounter with the risen Jesus, humility is the disposition with which we acknowledge our new desire: to be something different. He writes,

> I'd like to point out an important part of the way the new "self" of desire is brought into being. That is by *saying* "I want." Please notice that this simple act of *saying* something, and in fact saying it frequently is much more important psychologically than it seems. For it is not that there is an "I" that has such and such a desire, which it is now expressing. Rather, among the patterns of desire which are running this body, is having the humility to recognize that it needs to be brought into being by being directed in a certain way, and so is, as it were, making an act of commitment to a certain sort of becoming. [458]

In other words, saying that we want to be made anew, recreated into the being God desires us to be, is an act of humility—in a sense, a denial of the "old self"—that is our vow or oath that commits us to the process of conversion.

Similar to Alison, Merton exemplifies a commitment to humility. In order to unveil our true self, we must be humble enough to acknowledge the inaccuracies and misinformation that construct our false selves. This requires a humility that is not only fostered in silence and solitude, but might actually result in silence and solitude. This is because those with whom we are in a relationship might flee when we challenge their belief system by witnessing a life against mass society. This is not to be confused with a militancy against mass society, but even the simple ways we can be counter-cultural can often result in relational disturbances—when we do not pay attention to pseudo-events, when we fast from "news," when we disconnect from social media. While these allow us to focus on the nuance of the deeper narratives at play in our shared life, we will be out-of-sync with the world. But

[458] James Alison, "Prayer: A Case Study in Mimetic Anthropology," https://jamesalison.com/prayer-2/.

we will know that we are—or are inching closer to—our true selves, the self God knows us to be.

Merton says of humility:

> It is the only key to faith, with which the spiritual life begins: for faith and humility are inseparable. In perfect humility all selfishness disappears and your soul no longer lives for itself or in itself for God: and it is lost and submerged in Him and transformed into Him.[459]

Humility, then, is essential to a theology of conversion. And as it erodes our pride, it increases our courage.

> For a humble man is not afraid of failure. In fact, he is not afraid of anything, even of himself, since perfect humility implies perfect confidence in the power of God, before Whom no other power has any meaning and for Whom there is no such thing as an obstacle.[460]

The risk of humbling oneself—a humility to even accept death—is the source for and the strength we achieve in conversion.

4.3.2 Discovery

"They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body."

(Lk. 24:1-3)

I use discovery here not as the discovery of something one was searching for, but rather a discovery of something unexpected. To discover—literally, "to uncover"—means also to be *attentive*, as we do not discover that which we do not or cannot see. Discovery implies an openness to something new, to something that counters what we previously thought to be true, thought we understood, or were comfortable with.

[459] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 181.
[460] Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 190.

We see discovery as central to the frameworks for both Alison and Merton. Alison's discovery was in the encounter with the resurrected Jesus. His personal discovery is both that those who oppose him were caught up in the old system and that God has nothing to do with his exclusion but loves—or rather, likes—him. Merton's discovery, among others, was that his separation from the "world" through his entrance into the monastery was not actually a separation because humanity is intimately interconnected through God. As priests, one could argue that these discoveries occurred as a result of the openness that Alison and Merton cultivated toward deeper truths. The same could be true then of any Christian. But I think the focus should be on where discovery fits into one's life. Here, we can learn much from Alison's "order of discovery."[461]

The order of discovery means that our knowledge is not formulaic—we do not seek to fit pieces of reality together like a proof for our desired ends or to fit a preexisting understanding. Instead, the order of discovery is an openness to understanding truth in the order in which it is discovered. Alison's primary example of Original Sin illustrates how, if we evaluate the doctrine through the order of discovery, we find that Original Sin was not something humans realized immediately after the fall and for which they were seeking a solution. Instead, Original Sin was understood after the resurrection—the act which "saves" us from the "consequences" of Original Sin. In that case, Original Sin is what it was revealed to be: the old system of mimetic rivalry, violent exclusion, and death and our being born into a participation in it.

To be open to revelation in the order of discovery means—or should mean—that *things can change*. In the same way that the doctrine of original sin or salvation can be understood differently after the resurrection, we can be open to the revision of what we

[461] See Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 65 and 101.

believe. I am not thinking here of dogma, necessarily, but rather doctrines. And as regards doctrines, I do not think that "doctrinal development" is explicit enough to explain what it is that is happening—or could happen.[462]

Consider, for example, the experience of LGBTQ persons in the Church. I will not rehearse here all of the arguments from the essays Alison has on the subject. I will, instead, take the conversation in a slightly different direction. In an interview for "The Religion and American Life Podcast" through the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College, James Martin, S.J. noted that there was something misplaced in the bishops' concern for "scandal" about how mainstream same-sex relationships have become. Martin argued that the real scandal is that, in a Church that claims to be universal, an LGBTQ person can have such a drastically different experience of Church in Boston than they can in places like rural Iowa.[463]

If the Catholic Church were operating under the order of discovery, they might see that, instead of having to denounce relationships between persons of the same gender, they could be open to the revelation of authentic love between two individuals who are members of the Church, actively participate in the life of the parish, and raise their children in the faith as mirroring the love of God. Instead of condemning the couple or questioning their parenting, they could be open to a recognition of God's presence in this family and, then, *revise* what has been previously held. It does not—or should not—require the Church to make some disingenuous claim that it has "always and everywhere taught" that God's love can be found between two people of the same gender, but that they were not open to the

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[462] See John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).
[463] Mark Massa, host, "Gender, Sexuality, and the Church: An Interview with Rev. Dr. Kelly Brown Douglas and James Martin, S.J.," The Religion and American Life Podcast, April 25, 2022, https://www.bc.edu/content/bc-web/centers/boisi-center/podcast.html.

discovery—that is, uncovering—that the Spirit was performing and that to which the Church was not then attentive.

Would such a revision be scandalous? According to Alison's framework, likely yes.[464] But it is in those who are *not* scandalized that we see the conversion of individuals and communities toward a faith in the true God—a God without exclusion. Would this result in a gradual unraveling of all of the Church's teachings? It is unlikely that it would unravel them, but discovery could very well revise them. And what, we could ask, is the problem with revision? If we are truly seeking truth, we want to ensure that our truth is as true as it can be.

Discovery also implies risk. There are times when we can discover something that may frighten us—especially change—or that leads to a responsibility on our part. Depending on what it is that we discover, we may be challenged to take courage, to step into what is unknown. If we discover injustices, abuse, neglect, marginalization, hunger, poverty, homelessness, we might be called upon to respond or to act. We might not have to bear the weight of the entire discovery on our own shoulders, but our discipleship requires that we not look away. Discipleship implies risk.

4.3.3 Prophetic

"And he said, 'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in his hometown.'"

(Luke 4:24)

M. Shawn Copeland offers an insightful assessment of prophets:

> The prophets are *messengers* who announce truths their audiences fervently seek to avoid or to deny. Prophets do not so much address error in understanding, but a *scotoma* or blind spot on understanding—when kings or priests or the

[464] Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, 178.

> people persist in deliberate repression of questions or knowledge through willful ignorance or egoism or unexamined loyalty or corrupt alliances. . . .
>
> The prophets are *witnesses*. They testify to what they see and read in the signs of the times in light of the Word that God gives them to speak. The prophets take their stand beside those most excluded and marginalized in society. . . .
>
> The prophets are *watchmen* who see, grasp, name and warn of impending danger in order to avert it. The prophet's pronouncement presupposes the capacity and willingness on the part of the community or people to turn away from injustice and idolatry and to turn toward God and to accept and obey the Divine will.[465]

Copeland offers this description of the prophets in order to show how Merton was just that. In the context of the racism and movements for equality in the 1960s, Merton was a prophet in the midst of the White community. He had come to the truth of racial equality and was challenging other Whites to do the same:

> This is the "message" which the Negro is trying to give White America [regarding what was contained in Merton's "Letters to a White Liberal"]. I have spelled it out for myself, subject to correction, in order to see whether a White man is even capable of grasping the words, let alone believing them. For the rest, you have Moses and the Prophets: Martin Luther King, James Baldwin, and the others. Read them, and see for yourself what they are saying.[466]

But these prophetic claims were not at the expense of Whites—Merton did not declare to Whites, "My way or the highway." Instead, his emphasis was on their similarity. As I noted in chapter three, Merton offered his prophetic remarks from the perspective of a faithful Catholic, one who fervently believed with the Church that all are equal on the basis of our being Christ for each other. The failure to see this equality was a failure of Christianity and "doing the gravest harm to Christian truth."[467] Instead, he wanted Whites to know that

> A genuinely Catholic approach to the Negro would assume not only that the White and the Negro are essentially equal in dignity (and this, I think, we do generally assume) but also that they are brothers in the fullest sense of the

[465] M. Shawn Copeland, "The Watchmen and the Witnesses: Thomas Merton, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Exercise of the Prophetic," *The Merton Annual* 30 (2017), 159.
[466] Merton, "Letter to a White Liberal," 70.
[467] Merton, "Letter to a White Liberal," 58.

> word. This means to say that a genuinely Catholic attitude in matters of race is one which concretely accepts and fully recognizes the fact that different races and cultures are *correlative*. *They mutually complete one another*. The White man needs the Negro, and needs to know that he needs him.[468]

But we should not limit Merton's propheticism to just his comments on race. We should, instead, recognize that in all of his social criticism, these prophetic characteristics were present. When reminding Americans that the violence in our own streets is nothing more than a lesson learned from America on the world stage, he was a messenger articulating a *scotoma* in their eye. He was a witness to the signs of the times in his denunciation of technological progress's influence on making us "moral infants." And he was a watchman in that he foresaw only great violence to come if we did not seek to overcome our multifaceted alienation.

Alison, too, focuses on the prophetic, but from the perspective of one who seeks to ensure we understand with greater precision what the prophets are actually saying. This requires a radical reinterpretation of the prophetic messages in light of the resurrection. For example, Alison provides an analysis of the prophets in the Old Testament as regards the emerging monotheism. He warns against the old method of interpreting messages from the divine:

> "We" are the people who have received the message from the one true God, and live under it, and the way we live under it is to recreate the uniqueness of God by developing a strong sense of what is other than us . . . we become an extension of the "I" of the one God whose message we have received, and our job is to bring others to obedience from their otherness (often an otherness which is either wicked, or impure, or both), or at the very least to keep high the difference between us and those others and encourage fervor in resisting assimilation to those others when they are more powerful than us.[469]

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[468] Merton, "Letter to a White Liberal, 61.
[469] Alison, "Monotheism and the Indispensability of Irrelevance," in *Undergoing God*, 19-20.

This interpretation of the prophets, Alison explains, is merely an extension of ourselves—there really is no God speaking through this. Instead, the message provides "a rallying point, something totemic, around which people can gather and which gives them a strong sense of rightness" over-and-against the other.[470] When it comes to propheticism, then, if the interpretation creates a "we" over-and-against a "they," Alison continues, "we have reason to doubt that anything is present . . . [that is, it is merely] functional atheism."[471]

Distinct from this approach to propheticism, drawing upon the example of the prophets Isaiah and Amos, Alison explains that *real* monotheism—in this case, we can understand Alison as referring to a *real* relationship with the *true* God; that is, the God who is not over-and-against anyone and who prohibits us from forming our identities in that way—emerges when it "appears to begin as a voice which is far tougher on the 'we' than on the 'they,' and indeed berates the 'we' for paying far too much attention to the 'they.'"[472] The propheticism that Alison is advocating for, even if implicitly, is one in which the message is not me-against-them or a condemnation of "them" by "us." Instead, it is a message that "we" receive. God speaks to us, we are all the recipients, even those who perceive themselves "outside" that group being addressed. We cannot leave other recipients behind, but we must be with them, accompanying them in their transformation—a theme that will be discussed more below.

This seems to inform his own approach to new life. When we are in the process of conversion, we attend to the community by making space. This is a prophetic stance that recognizes the commonality among us rather than our differences. But to make room is a

[470] Alison, "Monotheism and the Indispensability of Irrelevance," 20.
[471] Alison, "Monotheism and the Indispensability of Irrelevance," 21.
[472] Alison, "Monotheism and the Indispensability of Irrelevance," 29.

propheticism wherein we communicate a message for both of us—the message is that we are both forgiving victims and forgiven victimizers. The message is not for "them," but "us."

4.3.4 Accompaniment

"But Ruth said, 'Do not press me to leave you, to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God.'"

(Ruth 1:16)

If you will, please indulge me as I share a personal anecdote. When I was first engaged, I was having a conversation with the priest who married us—a dear friend of mine, fifty years my elder. I inquired about how one knows if they have found "the one." He laughed and said, "In your life, you will fall in and out of love many times. The point of marriage, however, is that you've committed yourself to one."

Like marriage, our discipleship is a commitment to one: God. But unlike marriage, our discipleship is also a commitment to all. As Merton's "Vision in Louisville" illustrates, we cannot disconnect ourselves from our brothers and sisters in the world—those close or far, those like us or not. Instead, this discipleship implies a responsibility to them, to aid them as they seek their true self, their more authentic participation in the world, not driven by mass society. At times, this responsibility will be difficult—it is hard to share the same pew with persons who are loyal to the opposing political party. But it is a responsibility no less that we accompany one another in this process.

To accompany another in the process of conversion requires that we be humble enough to take the risk to not be right. While this can mean that we are not right about a particular matter—the truth we held was proven false, for example. But here, it can also mean that we are not concerned with being right in the sense that we are not going to wield

our truth against another like a cudgel. We let our witness do the prophesying, and we accompany without concern for *proving* anything.

One place where this might be difficult, however, is when we are responsible for accompanying someone who denies us our dignity. Consider someone who might think Black persons are subordinate to Whites. Consider someone who might think that men should be the decision makers and women subservient to them in the household. Consider someone who thinks that transgender persons are a moral abomination. How do we accompany people in situations like this? Two things must be noted here. First, there are distinct virtues at play within this framework. Here, the virtue of self-care plays a prominent role.[473] At times we must be selective about those we must accompany, even if we do not deny our responsibility to them. But second, returning to an earlier point, we are not tasked with carrying the burdens on our shoulders alone. Recall the words of St. Paul, "Now there are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of services but the same Lord, and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:4-7). In the same way, to accompany as part of our responsibility to all means that others are sometimes called to accompany those which, for meaningful reasons, we are not able to accompany in the same way. How do they come to change those exclusionary and inhumane beliefs without encountering those against whom they hold these beliefs? They do so through the witness of those who do accompany them. When we are accompanied by those who are committed to seeking God in truth and, as part of that process, willing to admit their own mistakes and held falsehoods, we are working toward the same ends.

[473] For additional discussion of self-care as a virtue to govern ethical behavior, see James Keenan, "Proposing Cardinal Virtues," *Theological Studies* 56, no. 4 (1995): 709-29.

4.3.5 The Opportunities for Conversion through a Spirituality and Ecclesiology of "Prophetic Accompaniment" and "Humble Discovery"

Having described briefly what each of the terms I am using means in this context, I will now turn to describing a spirituality and ecclesiology of humble discovery and prophetic accompaniment and then applying them to my hometown—an example of a rural, working-class, White community—as it pertains to addressing racial resentment and polarization.

4.3.5.1 A Spirituality and Ecclesiology of Humble Discovery

I offer the category of humble discovery in order to emphasize that we must always be open to the truth wherever we might find it, but also that our search for truth is only available to us if we recognize, first, our being wrong—or at least that we do not have the complete truth. A spirituality of humble discovery, then, is a disposition to *receive*. Our disposition to receive cultivates an openness to God in the Spirit and through one another. And such a disposition can be cultivated in our prayer.

In the lives of Alison and Merton, we see their example of opening themselves to hear a new truth, to learn a new truth, to being recreated with a new story. And in opening themselves to this deeper connection to truth, they saw their connection to others. Whether their story was being recreated by lessons from scripture or through the reading of other prophetic voices (*i.e.*, Martin Luther King, Jr., James Baldwin, and others), they sought truth. And this implies a fundamental acknowledgment: "I could be wrong."

In the context of a rural community, a spirituality of humble discovery can manifest in an individual in a practice of prayer that is self-critical and open to truth wherever it may

be found. It is a practice of prayer grounded in the idea that what we perceive to be around us is not all that there is. As Norman Wirzba writes,

> [T]o pray is to want to participate in the coming to earth of God's kingdom, the assumption being that the best life is one where the power of God's love is the only power at work inspiring our attention and animating our action. To participate in this life, however, is not automatic. People must prepare themselves daily with prayer . . . When looking to Jesus's prayer, we can see that three elements emerge as essential. Prayer (a) transforms a person's desires; (b) teaches people to receive life as a sacred gift; and (c) calls them to practice forgiveness.[474]

The humility here, in addition to the acknowledgement that we can be or are wrong or incomplete, is that we are ultimately reliant on God—in and through the work of the Spirit and one another. What we discover in this spirituality are the creative ways in which we are inspired and animated by God to attend to and act in the world.

Consider a trivial example of the way even time helps in our humble discovery. When we receive a critical email from a boss or co-worker, we are often tempted to fire back a curt or aggressive response that may, in the end, do more harm than good. Many suggest that the better option is to wait, to sleep on it, and only then to respond. Often, we will gain perspective on the situation and be able to respond with greater understanding and charity.

In rural communities, in particular, especially given the influence of agriculture, an acknowledgment of reliance upon God should be easy to see. That which is within our control, such as planting and harvesting times, is subject to things that are not within our control, like—and especially—the weather. Too much rain or too little puts the livelihoods of farming families at risk. The spirituality of humble discovery means that those who *do not* farm must pray to be attentive to the ways God calls them to attend to their farming neighbors and ensure they are cared for. Along with Alison and Merton, Wirzba similarly

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[474] Norman Wirzba, *Agrarian Spirit: Cultivating Faith, Community, and the Land* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), 70.

clarifies that the result of our prayer is always ultimately outwardly focused toward the other.[475] I am not an atomized individual seeking my personal salvation, but I am one of God's own who, through my relationships, helps build the unity God desires—our communal salvation.

Insofar as my spirituality is a whole-person engagement with the world, in humble discovery, we can see in others the opportunity of discovering God in truth and love. This is not an instrumentalization of the other, but rather a component of our being drawn together into a relationship of responsibility. And we must recognize, too, that we mediate God to others and so must be authentically present to them as we accompany them in their own discoveries of God through love and truth.

Given this potential openness to grace that is conveyed through others, a spirituality of humble discovery is also critical of the media and of social media. Too often, we (not limited to persons from rural communities) are subject to the influence of media and social media as interpreting our information for us. Despite the commonly held belief that news should merely be a restatement of objective facts, all information from these sources is conveyed already having been interpreted. This is the case for both local and national news. When it comes to political matters, then, we have to take the critical eye to that which we read, watch, scroll through, or otherwise encounter. Doing so can ensure that what it is that we receive is filtered to remove the biases. We always ask the next best question regarding the truth.

A disposition such as this, cultivated by a spirituality of humble discovery, means that rural community members can look for additional information about the Black Lives Matter movement, instead of accepting the "All Lives Matter" retort. We can research ways

[475] Wirzba, *Agrarian Spirit*, 71-76.

to understand how White privilege is perpetuated even by all-White communities, instead of taking exception to any claims of disparity that were received without a personal conscious choice. But prayer, however, should not just be characterized by a dissonance with one's identity or worldview. From a practice of prayer, which might perpetually be accompanied by dissonance, comes also the consolation of making progress—however one might define that—toward their true self.

In the context of the rural community, an ecclesiology of humble discovery must restructure the Church in a way that is not hierarchical. This new structure should be less "vertical"or "top-down" in conception and should strive toward a structure more "horizontal." It is an ecclesiology that emphasizes some of the principal teachings of the Second Vatican Council, including understanding the Church as a "pilgrim"; that is, the Church has not yet "arrived," but requires continuous movement and commitment to God and one another in our striving toward deeper truth and greater love. It must be a Church in dialogue, emphasizing the welcome we have for the contributions of all, those who are of different faith traditions and even those who are militantly opposed to faith. We cannot be a Church that limits the work of the Spirit.

Essential to being the Church open to humble discovery, our liturgies must be places where we recognize that, despite our differences, we can affirm common traits among those gathered: a fundamental acknowledgment that we can be wrong, a shared desire to seek the truth with one another. And this ecclesiology of humble discovery, however, must be witnessed to by Church leaders as well. The Church historically has difficulty acknowledging when it has been wrong. But for the ongoing revelations of sex abuse being covered up by Church authorities mandating the public statements of remorse, we might never hear anyone

in Church leadership express their faults—at least authentically.[476] The Church of humble discovery in the rural community is a Church in which homilies grapple with real-world issues, current events, and cultural concerns in a way that both acknowledges the role the Church might have played in exacerbating these problems as well as how we as Catholic Christians can be the leaven in the world, transforming it in and through our discipleship. If the average parish only hears homilies about their individual, atomized spiritual lives, it is difficult for the parishioners to take that to the "streets." It is not completely unrelated, of course, but it is sadly inadequate.

In the rural community, this means also that our Church must speak on matters that push us on topics we may not know about or see our connection to. As described above in the interviews, the parishioners thought that any homily on racism or White privilege would not be well received because it is not relevant to an all-White parish. Without raising awareness about what White privilege is and how it can be affirmed in complacency, the parish would continue operating as if it were disconnected from the rest of society. Especially since the USCCB has determined to speak on this issue multiple times throughout the years—even if inadequately—it is apparent that the teaching authorities in the Church understand the topic as necessary to engage. An ecclesiology of humble discovery understands that we must remain open to the possibility of the discovery of creative paths forward among the faithful on matters about which they might not yet have awareness. Only when we cultivate the humility to acknowledge we are not in possession of the full truth can we have the eyes to see—that is, to discover—what we might be able to do in response to a significantly violent social issue.

[476] I am distinguishing the authentic expression of faults from those we do sometimes here of a Church leader, which, in essence, is some variation of "I am a sinner."

As these spheres of personal and communal conversion verge into the political, we can see how, with regard to polarization, a spirituality and ecclesiology of humble discovery can reshape our political and ecclesial involvement in a way that, similarly, recognizes that we neither have the full truth nor do we have the full range of experiences that might lead us to deeper insights. In the context of Church, and as evidenced in the interviews described above, the average rural parish is part of the vast middle ground of parishes that, outside of the extremes of progressive or traditional parishes, are part of a collection of parishes that also likely do not have knowledge of the disputes that happen at different levels of the Church. Because of this lack of awareness, no activity can follow to help resolve the polarization that is occurring within the Church and fostering division among the faithful. To be in a disposition of humble discovery, the Church in the rural community can take a significant leadership position when it comes to redefining what it means to be Church. We can discover our own unity in diversity and be a beacon for the rest of the Church of a commitment to one another despite opposing views because of our capacity for humble discovery.

This, of course, would result in working to overcome the division that exists outside the parish. When we can recognize Christ in our brothers and sisters with whom we share the pews, we can also begin to recognize Christ in our brothers and sisters in the rest of society. If we maintain a spirituality of humble discovery that is reinforced in an ecclesiology of humble discovery, we can see, for example, that our identity as "American," for example, can evolve and change. Given the rural communities' focus on nationalism, to cultivate this humble discovery can lead us to recognize in others the same "American" identity, even if our ancestors have gone through significantly different experiences than ours—whether as indigenous persons, immigrants, native born, etc. This can help us in a process in which we

expand the umbrella under which fall those we identify as "American," including those with whom we disagree.

4.3.5.2 A Spirituality and Ecclesiology of Prophetic Accompaniment

I use these concepts together to note that we have an obligation to be prophetic, in some form or another. But as a spiritual and ecclesial practice, it necessarily implies a prophecy that is relational—in the same way that we are prophetic, we must also be open to prophecy. This, I believe, emerges naturally from a spirituality of humble discovery, though I recognize that when we think we understand the truth, it is still difficult to hear we are wrong or incomplete.

Despite the difficulty of being prophesied to, accompaniment demands that we stay faithful to our responsibility to remain with our neighbors. This takes humility. In calling others to the process of conversion, despite the discomfort that may arise, in our accompaniment, we lead by example. Sometimes, then, we are not the prophet, but we are the ones being prophesied to. These two components *together* ensure that we continue this process of conversion *in community*.

My seeking the truth is to better my relationships in the same way that my encounter with the risen Jesus forever alters the way in which I engage with others. And in our accompaniment of those who might be at a different place in the process of conversion, such as an earlier or later stage, we might find truth in them as well. Accompaniment, then, affirms the pervasiveness of grace in the world—the mediator for truth. To renounce those we would prefer to "write off" cuts us off from the possibility of reaching deeper truths—and reaching deeper truths *together*.

What could such an ecclesial practice look like in rural, working-class, White communities like my own hometown? In community, prophetic is about witnessing to the truth and sometimes telling the truth. But it does not absolve us from continuing to seek the truth from others. We must be aware of the Spirit's continual movement in offering an encounter with the risen Jesus in others and the new selves into which those others are being recreated. This puts the spirituality described above into practice with others.

The call to prophetic accompaniment is consistent with rural, working-class, White communities like my hometown. One typical feature of rural communities is the desire (or need) to keep the peace. Recall the quote from Wendell Berry in the introduction:

> If two neighbors know that they may seriously disagree, but that either of them, given even a small change of circumstances, may desperately need the other, should they not keep between them a sort of pre-paid forgiveness? They ought to keep it ready to hand, like a fire extinguisher.[477]

Note here that Berry is not advocating that we avoid disagreement, but rather that we avoid the disavowal of those with whom we disagree. In small towns, you encounter the same people frequently—the post office, the grocery store, the pharmacy, the filling station. Grudges, especially when you want to keep your distance from the person against whom you are holding the grudge, are hard to hold. Consider the experience of some of the interviewed parishioners above—if challenging topics are preached about, most would listen respectfully, even if they might be critical elsewhere.

But when relationships are such that there is an overriding desire to keep the peace, sometimes the truth is hard to share. Recall Merton's warning: if you are going to tell someone they are wrong, they have to know that you *really* love them—it is a delicate task. This does not happen through personal condemnation, but through personal relationship,

[477] Wickenden, "Wendell Berry's Advice for a Cataclysmic Age."

even with those with whom we disagree. As Arthur Brooks wrote in *The Atlantic*, "Go out of your way to welcome those who disagree with you as valued voices, worthy of respect and attention. There is no 'them,' only 'us.' Bring them into your circle to hear your views."[478]

However, pushing back against this desire to keep the peace and avoiding the risk of telling someone the truth as they know it is an advantage rural communities have. The advantage of communities like these is that they are actually communities. There is already a connective tissue and a trust of sorts—a "pre-paid forgiveness"—between persons such that certain assumptions can be made about the intentions of those being prophetic.

In this practice, parishioners must be encouraged to recognize their role in social matters even if it is not apparent. Recall from the interviews those who said that the parishioners would find it hard to see the point of homilies about racism or White privilege because of the makeup of the community. But we have something to learn, in our prophetic accompaniment, when we explore issues that seem unrelated. Can an almost completely White-identifying community be immune to the trappings of White privilege?

More directly in line with Alison and Merton, an ecclesiology of prophetic accompaniment is one in which the community gathered recognizes the inescapable interconnectedness of humanity in God, even among those who are outside the Catholic Church. Given that all churches are in decline—Catholic and Protestant alike[479]—and given the decline in the populations of rural communities, greater ecumenical and interfaith relationships can help the presence and service of faithful people in the community. My hometown is quite low-income—given the number of students on free or reduced lunch

[478] Arthur C. Brooks, "A Gentler, Better Way to Change Minds," *The Atlantic* (April 7, 2022), https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2022/04/arguing-with-someone-different-values/629495/.
[479] The Catholic Church lost members twice as fast as Protestant churches in the last 20 years, and the Catholic Church closed nearly 3,000 parishes in the last 20 years.

currently—and as such there is a need in the community that must be met. The aging churches, among them the Catholic parish, cannot address these problems alone, but must do the work together.

Prophetic accompaniment as an ecclesial practice is one that leads naturally to the political sphere. Here, disciples must lead by example. And this includes disciples who hold positions of authority in the political sphere. We must be willing to speak. And we must be willing to speak with those with whom we disagree, either because of their political affiliations, in the case of political polarization, or their political commitments, in the case of racial resentment.

As regards racial resentment, an ecclesial practice of prophetic accompaniment in rural communities means that we preach about Black lives and White privilege. But in doing so, we do not condemn those who might hold false or improper beliefs, but rather we invite them into conversation—and we make the realistic time for those conversations. We stop by one another's homes; we ask one another to lunch or have them over for dinner. We express our prophetic witness in the context of loving and committed relationships, unwilling to let politics or other disagreements stand in our way. We do not shy away from conversations that implicate politics or race, but we maneuver through them with great care, ensuring that our conversation partners know that we will not leave them.

We must also apologize when we are wrong. We cannot expect our politicians to apologize only when they have been caught, if we also as a community do not ask for and offer forgiveness for our faults and errors. We must expect of ourselves and of those who are also seeking truth that *necessarily* we and they will at times be wrong. If we foreground

seeking truth—missteps and all—we can expect the beginning of a transformation among the community and in our politics. All of us are in need of the ability to trust again.[480]

In our prophetic accompaniment, it is prophetic in the sense that we speak truth to those we accompany. But it is also prophetic in our accompaniment—that we do not allow polarization to drive us apart. Our commitment to one another—our love for our brothers and sisters—is what characterizes us as Christians. We are called to share and witness to that love in community with one another as disciples, but also with the rest of the world. Only then will we be able to see us overcome our legitimizing racial myths and our political and ecclesial polarization. We will be humble seekers of the truth and open to discovering the Spirit's creative work in the world in and through others and ourselves. We will witness to that truth as we know it, and we will be willing to be witnessed to. And through all of this, we will witness to our discipleship by our committed accompaniment to our fellow Christians and the world.

Humble discovery and prophetic accompaniment enrich our ecclesial and spiritual practices to open ourselves to truth and relationships in a way that can only interrupt those uninterrogated deep stories we hold as they drive us to new and authentic stories that form us as individuals, communities, and the world.

4.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I offered a comparative analysis of Alison and Merton following the more detailed accounts of both of their frameworks in chapters two and three. We found

[480] In June 2022, Pew Research Center found that, since the National Election Study began tracking public trust in the government, it is currently at nearly its lowest. This is a range from ¾ of the public trusting the government in 1958 to, since 2007, no more than 30% at any given time. Pew Research Center, "Public Trust in Government: 1958-2022," (June 6, 2022), https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2022/06/06/public-trust-in-government-1958-2022/.

that their frameworks, while distinct, are complementary and include many overlapping themes, especially as regards our seeking truth, our responsibility communally and politically, and how narratives shift as an essential part of the conversion process. I then offered an introduction to rural, working-class, White communities generally in order to explain why, when dealing with narratives underlying the violence of racial resentment and polarization, these communities are particularly susceptible (though not alone) to acquiring them. Then I introduced my hometown, both in its interesting history, but also in its current situation, including through the eyes of some local parishioners. All of this led to the constructive element of this project: the construction of an ecclesiology and spirituality of humble discovery and prophetic accompaniment. And, with these characteristics, I drew out the implications for personal, communal, and political conversion and detailed what I considered to be an application of this type of spirituality and ecclesiology for my hometown and communities like it as it relates to racial resentment and political and ecclesial polarization.

My contribution here is no silver bullet. But I believe it to be representative of the Christian tradition, as it relates to conversion, in that it is concerned with a holistic notion of conversion—one not limited to us as individuals, but that keeps our communities and our politics in mind as well. Each of these spheres are necessary as each of them also influence the other spheres. We do not have spirituality without the Church, and we do not have the Church without the influence of spirituality. In a word, our conversion is a web that needs tending on many fronts.

Central among the process of holistic conversion is the shift that occurs in the narratives that shape our identities and that inform our worldviews. These stories are part of our culture—we create them and we inherit them, even if we do not always know where we

learned it or what the source of the story is. To counteract them, insofar as they are false, we need other cultural narratives. This is why spirituality and the Church were the focus of this project. These spheres of our lives bring with them symbols, songs, images, and rituals that shape our unconscious censor—that which permits or prohibits us from gaining insights. Through the spirituality and ecclesiology of humble propheticism and the ecclesial practice of prophetic accompaniment, we do much to shape our imaginations in a way that permits us to see our need for correctives, that permits us to work in correcting others in a loving way, to be open to the radically new that might require significant revisions, and to stay by the sides of those for whom we are responsible. Our stories change, others' stories change, and the world changes. This is conversion. This is discipleship.

CONCLUSION

THANKS, PAPAW

"I have had the opportunity to go back
to the same places and the same people, over and over again.
And that's an important part of it—you've got to go back
to look and listen and think again."
-Wendell Berry

This project is just a beginning. It is not the final word, if a final word even exists. In this conclusion, I would like to offer two brief reflections. First, I would like to reflect on some questions that have emerged for me in the writing of this dissertation—what we might call next steps or enduring questions. And second, I would like to return to Wendell Berry for some closing thoughts.

Next Steps and Enduring Questions

In the course of this project, I have found myself at times having to refrain from following emerging questions, despite their temptation, when they cropped up. Such is the nature of a dissertation—to maintain a strict scope lest you write a tome (though I am not sure I was ever at risk of that). Some questions emerged from within the project, meaning that they were questions that could not be answered here, but were nonetheless related to a great degree. Other questions were external to the project, meaning they implicated other figures or other concepts that would have been considered more than a tangent if they appeared in these pages. Let me offer a few.

Johann Baptist Metz

In a few footnotes in the preceding chapters, I noted the "echoes" of Johann Baptist Metz, the German political theologian. He haunted this project. While Alison and Merton effectively lead us to political conversion through their frameworks for, what I categorize as, personal and communal conversion, Metz's thought does so explicitly and well.

Metz, whose framework sounds much like those of Alison and Merton, argues that our world is marked by an "evolutionary" and "materialistic-dialectic" framing of time. By this, Metz means that "people feel like they are being sucked into the waves of an anonymous evolution that mercilessly rolls over everything from behind. With this experience of a more fragile identity a new culture is in the offing; its first name is apathy."[481] We have deadened the apocalypse so much so that we no longer see an end, but see time as "an empty infinity without surprises" whose "eschaton is boredom and apathy."[482]

Reaching these conclusions, Metz was responding to Marx. Marx called to question subjecthood, basing society's positive advancements on the proletariat's revolution—an assignment of responsibility within his understanding of emancipation[483]—while negating the guilt necessary for any complete subjecthood—Marx pinned guilt only on the bourgeoisie (the "other").[484] These, for Metz, are problematic exculpatory mechanisms that call into question subjecthood.[485] As he articulates it, theology's principle drive is to ensure that all of humanity are subjects before God, not merely the "bourgeois subject" nor only partially responsible ones who stand as the victors' (or, in the case of the proletariat, the potentially

[481] Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2007), 26.
[482] Metz, *Love's Strategy*, 154.
[483] Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 115-16, 120.
[484] Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 120.
[485] Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 120-21.

future victors') representatives—those who write history.[486] Metz's theology, then, is a response to post-Enlightenment religion, which is subject to privatization and at odds with society's considerations of tradition, authority, and reason, leaving the task of theology to fundamentally reject these influences of the Enlightenment.[487]

In a partial acceptance and partial rejection of the outcomes of these crises and their demands, Metz firmly holds that "no theology can hold itself to be politically innocent or neutral without self-deception or self-delusion."[488] With this in mind, and conscious of the challenges brought on by the malformation of theology after the Enlightenment, Metz centers his theology on time-bound praxis and the subject. Praxis grounds discipleship and also Metz's epistemology—"[t]he Christian idea of God is in itself a practical idea"—and our response to God is "[m]etanoia, conversion, and exodus"—all actions.[489] As such, when we talk about God, we are remembering our active response to God, our entering into relationship with God, and therefore it "has an essential and inalienable memorative and narrative structure"—memory and narrative playing a central role in Metz's thought.[490]

Of these narratives, however, we consider not just those narratives of the victors, but also those narratives in the "surplus of historical factors" that are considered "'dangerous,' as subversion and rebellion" to those victors' narratives.[491] This renders praxis more expansively: it "attends not only to praxis as action . . . but praxis as 'suffering.'"[492] This praxis is centrally a solidarity—another of Metz's principal concepts—that is implicit to

[486] Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 43.
[487] Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 47-59.
[488] Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 60.
[489] Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 62.
[490] Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 62.
[491] Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 66.
[492] Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 67.

Christian discipleship and is a solidarity that looks backward in addition to around and forward to be in "solidarity with the dead and the vanquished."[493]

The centrality of solidarity is based on Metz's perspective that Christianity is essentially communal. "The history of religion in the Bible is the history of a people, and the individuals within it, becoming subjects in the presence of their God . . . not . . . isolated individuals."[494] Our response to God is our taking up the responsibility that those, like Marx, would prefer we project, at least in part, onto others. God, then, is a political option as "it appeals to the history of human beings as subjects in God's presence and tries to compel Christians to respond to the practical demands that this history makes. Their praxis ought to give some inkling of the fact that all persons are called to be subjects in the presence of their God."[495] Such a task is not suitable for the Enlightenment subject, instead it is the responsibility of those religiously formed subjects to have "the practical interest in others becoming subjects—those others who live in obscurity and under oppression—to be, if not a sufficient condition, then at least a necessary condition for the possibility of his or her own being a subject before God."[496] They understand that "the Gospel is already political . . . and makes political claims on the Christian."[497]

This religious formation makes certain definitive assertions. Central among them is that "the God of the Gospel is no God of victors, but a God of slaves," which is evidenced in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.[498] As such, one can glean the responsibility for a radical solidarity, not just with the living, since God is the God of the living and the dead

[493] Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 67.
[494] Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 70.
[495] Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 76.
[496] Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 78
[497] Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 78.
[498] Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 79.

who seeks a "universal justice that shatters the standards of our exchange society and saves those who have died suffering unjustly, and who, therefore, calls us to become subjects or unconditionally to support others becoming subjects in the face of hateful oppression."[499] But again, we claim our responsibility fully, in that God "calls us to remain subjects in the face of guilt and in opposition both to the dissolution of individual identity into 'the masses,' and also to apathy."[500] Christian faith is, then, "a praxis in history and society that understands itself as a solidaristic hope in the God of Jesus as the God of the living and the dead, who calls all to be subjects in God's presence."[501]

What we saw in the social and political framing and implications from Alison and Merton complement well this framework laid out by Metz. And Metz's more explicit focus on narrative and the victims of history help complement Alison and Merton and draw even more political implications for Christianity. In any future study, Metz would certainly be an addition to ensure that political conversion is not derived from conversion frameworks more personal and communal in nature—as all theology is political—but rather from a political conversion framework in its own right.

The Prophetic Office and Authority

As I noted in the last chapter, the Church has greatly limited our imagination as regards the prophetic office within the threefold offices of Christ. In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the fathers of the Second Vatican Council explored a renewed theology of the Church, delineating particular tasks of the Church's members with a unifying theme found in the *tria munera*—the participation of the baptized in the priestly, prophetic,

[499] Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 80.
[500] Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 80.
[501] Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, 81.

and kingly offices modeled in the person of Christ. This threefold vocation, found in various council documents and applied in some form to all its members, is made especially clear in the document's discussion of the laity.

Pointing always to Christ as the model, *Lumen Gentium* charges the laity to the prophetic office to educate and witness to Jesus Christ as faithful and hope-filled people with a central concern for matters of marriage and family. These tasks do not necessarily strike the reader as particularly prophetic, as we commonly understand prophetic activity—radical discipleship manifested in speaking truth to power, calling the community into right relationship with God and one another in the way Merton has exemplified in his own social critique. But *Lumen Gentium* does not entirely avoid a more "prophetic" tone either. For example, the document quotes Paul's concern about the Ephesians' hope: "Let them not hide this hope then in the depths of their hearts, but rather express it through the structure of their secular lives in continual conversion and in wrestling 'against the world rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of iniquity'" (*LG* 35, Eph 6:12).[502] The overall tendency in the documents, however, is to describe the prophetic office as more accessible, affirming the responsibility for prophetic work as emerging in ordinary daily life.

If the council fathers' goal is this accessible prophetic office, *Lumen Gentium* adequate. However, if we read the documents holistically, a more "prophetic" engagement with the world and even the Church is described, especially in *Gaudium et Spes*. The documents gesture toward a more radical discipleship and "prophetic" prophetic office. But as the discussion grows more "prophetic," as we colloquially use that term, the language of the prophetic office is notably absent. This is especially clear in *Gaudium et Spes*—the word

[502] Document quoted from Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations* (Northport, N.Y.: Costello Publishing Company, Inc., 1996).

"prophet" (or any variation of it) is used only once and in reference to biblical prophets, even though the documents description of the Church's relationship to the world would naturally lend itself to a prophetic office, if not by comparison the most "prophetic" of all the Council's documents.

The prophetic, then, is an area of challenge in the Catholic Church. In calling for a spirituality and ecclesiology characterized by prophetic accompaniment, I have in mind the more colloquial use of "prophetic." But as regards the prophetic office, the Church seems to relegate being prophetic to something like the work of a catechist or religious educator. I am certainly not denying the need for catechists. But, in keeping the prophetic hemmed in as this language suggests, the Church naturally takes on an inward-facing position. It becomes more concerned with passing on the faith and the individual spiritual lives of its members, as opposed to the work discipleship demands of us outside of the Church—that is, in the political sphere.

Further, keeping the prophetic office tied so explicitly to teaching inhibits a truly dialogical Church. If bishops are the teaching authority in the Church, then any expression of the prophetic office is in some sense subject to the bishops' vetting. While I do not oppose the need for some oversight in a Church of this size, I am suspicious of the ability to communicate to a receptive Church what the Spirit might be saying if it is coming from the laity and not the hierarchy—which, in this case, would only revert us back to the "top-down" approach to teaching.

The truth has no authority—it *is* the authority. When the Spirit moves, despite the ongoing need for a community of believers to assent, it must have a path forward. To best facilitate this, we need to radically rethink the prophetic office in the laity's responsibility. Doing so would greatly enhance the call for prophetic accompaniment.

The Psychology of Change

One of the recurring concepts that will emerge in this project is the relative lack of control in the construction of our identities. Social psychologists, especially, have brought attention to the fact that genetics plays an outsized role in our political predispositions—constituting some one-third to one-half of those predispositions.

Jonathan Haidt argues that the human mind contains six moral foundations: care/harm, liberty/oppression, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation.[503] Arguing from the social intuitionist model, Haidt asserts that the moral decisions persons make are first intuitive and built upon these foundations, and then we justify these decisions with reasons. But, importantly, our intuitions (*i.e.*, the activity of our emphasized moral foundations) are innate at birth—we are born with a disposition toward being a liberal or a conservative. But innateness, Haidt clarifies, does not mean that it is unchangeable. He illustrates this like writing a book, claiming that the first draft is written by the genes. No chapter is complete, but neither is any chapter a blank page upon which society writes.[504] John R. Hibbing, Kevin B. Smith, and John R. Alford agree with Haidt that our ideologies are predispositions. They argue that there are "biologically and psychologically instantiated defaults that, absent new information or conscious overriding, govern response to given stimuli."[505]

Put differently, our innate human condition is one marked by dispositions toward particular moral foundations or preferred principles. Beyond our initial control, then, we are

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[503] For a description of each of these moral foundations, see Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 153-77, 197-205.
[504] Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 152-53.
[505] John R. Hibbing, Kevin B. Smith, and John R. Alford, *Predisposed: Liberals, Conservatives, and the Biology of Political Differences* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 24.

aimed in a certain socio-political direction from our first moments. While these predilections are not fully formed, they are formative; they are the default position to which we consent or against which we revolt.

It is not denied that there exists a capacity to change these defaults. As Hibbing and his colleagues suggest, to spend time in a world unlike one's own allows a person to get a sense of other ways we can perceive the world and live in it. Nor is it denied that there is some benefit to having different types of persons with different moral preferences. Haidt makes the point that while liberals are better able to see victims of a social arrangement and advocate for a change to those arrangements, libertarians and conservatives offer a counterbalance to liberals as they argue that we need to keep the whole in mind when advocating for change for the few so as not do destroy the community.

While, as we have seen, racial resentment and political polarization are perpetuated through the use of narratives that are either ill-informed or fundamentally wrong, our predispositions work to prevent our ability to see and our desire to change the flaws in our reasoning or the lapses in our logic. The combination of our biological and psychological predispositions with our in-group preference work to reinforce the divisions between "us" and "them." When left uncritiqued, our default mode is easily manipulated by party extremists and persuaded by racist tropes.

Should this study continue, this area of research would prove invaluable in analyzing how stories work on our identities and what we can do to change them in light of the science.

Wendell Berry Revisited

In the course of this study, I have, among other things, sought to do two, seemingly contradictory, things. The first of these is to follow in the footsteps of James Alison and Thomas Merton as they seek to delineate two categories: the true and the fabricated. In the case of Alison, that is the distinction between the old system of exclusion, rivalry, victims and death and the new system characterized by the recreation of ourselves and our communities into something creatively new. Merton's two categories are the system of alienation and technological progress into which we get swept up and from which violence emerges and the new society that develops from the relationships of true selves with one another. This task is perennial, unfortunately. We catch glimpses of the Reign of God, but there is always the "not yet" to keep us hoping for more.

Wendell Berry, in an agricultural key, offers a delineation of these two categories as well, which he calls "opposite kinds of mind":

> I conceive a strip miner to be a model exploiter, and as a model nurturer I take the old-fashioned idea or ideal of a farmer. The exploiter is a specialist, an expert; the nurturer is not. The standard of the exploiter is efficiency; the standard of the nurturer is care. The exploiter's goal is money, profit; the nurturer's goal is health—his land's health, his own, his family's, his community's, his country's. Whereas the exploiter asks of a piece of land only how much and how quickly it can be made to produce, the nurturer asks a question that is much more complex and difficult: What is its carrying capacity? (That is: How much can be taken from it without diminishing it? What can it produce *dependably* for an indefinite time?) The exploiter wishes to earn as much as possible by as little work as possible; the nurturer expects, certainly, to have a decent living from his work, but his characteristic wish is to work *as well* as possible. The competence of the exploiter is in organization; that of the nurturer is in order—a human order, that is, that accommodates itself both to other order and to mystery. The exploiter typically serves an institution or organization; the nurturer serves land, household, community, place. The exploiter thinks in terms of numbers, quantities, "hard facts"; the nurturer in terms of character, condition, quality, kind.[506]

[506] Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, edited by Norman Wirzba (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2002), 39.

We easily hear in these words a cultural critique that ranks among those of Alison and Merton. And it further illustrates the epigraph from the introduction that vice and virtue can, and do, coexist. One thing to note here is that, despite these two categories or two "kinds of mind" being so radically different in Berry's assessment, these two sorts are both representative of rural life—the miner and the farmer. The first in my family to immigrate to this country, Božo Karanovich, was himself a coal miner who lived in Blanford.

The second thing I have set out to do is to, also like Alison and Merton, overcome these divisions. Is it not also the case that we all, in some way, maintain these same conflations of virtue and vice? Are we not all just saved sinners? Regardless who might be in the limelight at any given time, we all have work to do. But in doing that work, who are we attending to? Who teaches us?

Since moving away from my hometown in 2003, I have found many great teachers—actual educators, but also persons who have shared their wisdom. And that list would be very long, as I have been quite lucky to encounter some really amazing people along the way. Many of these teachers have offered their insights or lessons, doing so in a way intending to bestow that knowledge on me in more or less formal ways. But I have also been fortunate enough at times to see what was there to be seen in others who taught in less formal ways by their actions.

One key example of this is my paternal grandfather, Robert "Bob" Karanovich, Sr. As I mentioned in the introduction, he lives in the same town in which he was born—Blanford—in a home on the same street. His presence in Blanford is somewhat interesting. He is what could be easily called a "home body," rarely leaving the house for more than a few errands in town or the occasional doctor's appointment. He keeps a beautiful yard and an abundant vegetable garden. He hunts deer, rabbit, squirrel, and turkey, along with

mushrooms when the seasons are in. And in his backyard, he has a shed of modest size with a wood-burning stove made out of an old metal barrel keeping the place warm. This shed is a frequently visited site by the neighbors, friends, and visitors that come to Blanford to see him. And he always greets them with kind hospitality—offering a beer or a pop. They come to check in on him as he ages (though he is in great health), talk about hunting, local news, or whatever might come to mind. And when early evening comes, he closes up the shed and retires. The next morning starts around four.

I have always been interested in what is beyond the horizon, moving away from home at an early age and not returning, instead choosing to move to bigger and bigger cities. He, on the other hand, has stayed. I have gone to school and met remarkable people from all walks of life. He, on the other hand, has stayed. I have raised my children in a fast-paced town with cultural opportunities and entertainment options. He, on the other hand, has stayed.

When entering the monastery, Benedictines take vows of obedience, fidelity to the monastic way of life, and *stability*. What my grandfather taught me in his example was stability.

Our world is fast paced. Technological progress continues to move us along, concerned more with the "can" than the "ought." We seek entertainment at all costs, including the entertainment of the new gadgets we buy, the new homes we purchase, and the new cars we own. If I am not careful, I find myself attempting to "keep up with the Joneses." That is what society tells me I should do—more stuff, buy more stuff. And with that more stuff, I am better off than "they" are. This mindset is a constant temptation, an ever-present trapping of modern life.

My grandfather—as I am sure is the case with many grandparents of those my age—is counter-cultural. He has built his life considering the Joneses just another family who, if they needed it, would get a home cooked meal from him. He has not fallen for the trappings of the "next best thing," but has instead cultivated a life where he is. And in doing so, he cultivates neighborliness, offering a welcoming spot for all to drop by. It does not matter to him your political persuasion, or the car you drive, or how much money you make—you are welcome there.

He is creating the new system. Not by going out to get specialized information, but by staying. It is in and through the relationships with those who visit his shed that he offers a truer version of himself and shares his loving kindness. He is humble, knowing that he does not know it all. He is open to discovery, especially the new insights gained from those who talk with him. He is prophetic, in that his witness to stability calls us to a new way of life outside the current normal course. And he accompanies all he meets—there is never a dispute that cannot be overcome. Notice that it is not with great fanfare that this new system is being created, but rather the simple stability of staying put. I have much more to learn from his witness.

In a second letter from Wendell Berry, he reminded me

> So far as I can tell, Jesus didn't discriminate, but talked to all hearers, and he spoke the outrageous sentences of Matthew 5:44-48,[507] which remain Top Secret to all but the Old Order Amish. Opposition will be furnished by the management.[508]

[507] "But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."
[508] Wendell Berry to Zac Karanovich, December 7, 2021.

We have a great distance to go to keep up with Berry's assessment of the Old Order Amish—though I think keeping up with them is a better option than the Joneses.

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