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

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Citizenship and Discipleship: Upholding Ultimate Allegiance to Christ in Modern States

Boubakar Sanou

Modern nation-states construct a sense of belonging through legal frameworks, civic rituals, and nationalist narratives. These practices reveal the state not only as a political institution but also as a symbolic system that often operates with quasi-religious force, shaping identity and loyalty. For Christians, this dynamic creates a persistent tension, since discipleship calls for supreme allegiance to Christ that cannot be subordinated to civic or national claims. Drawing on anthropological theories of the state, biblical and theological analysis, and historical examples, this article examines how believers have navigated the competing demands of citizenship and discipleship. It argues that while Scripture affirms the legitimacy of political authority, it also places clear limits on the state's claims, particularly when they encroach upon obedience to God. The study highlights both the dangers of conflating nationalism with discipleship and the possibilities for cultivating a faithful presence that honors civic responsibility while resisting the sacralization of political power.

Introduction

The state, defined here as a political apparatus of government that rules over a given territory, exercising authority grounded in a legal system and enforced through the capacity to use force in implementing its policies (Giddens et al. 2021, 418; Sider 2012, 28), occupies a paradoxical position within Christian thought and practice. On the one hand, Scripture commands believers to honor and submit to governing authorities as servants of God who maintain order and promote the common good (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17; Titus 3:1). On the other hand, Christians are reminded that their ultimate allegiance belongs to God alone (Acts 5:29; Matt. 22:21).

As states provide order, security, and a shared sense of belonging through laws, institutions, and civic rituals, they often claim loyalty in return, demanding a form of allegiance that can rival the devotion Christians owe to God alone. This claim to loyalty is what enables nationalism to function with quasi-religious force, shaping identity and meaning in ways that challenge Christian discipleship (Perry and Whitehead 2020). State theorists have long pointed out this tension. Max Weber defined the modern state as the entity that claims "the *monopoly* of the *legitimate* use of physical force in the enforcement of its order" (1978, 54, emphasis in the original), thereby concentrating authority and loyalty. Clifford Geertz had previously pointed out the states' reliance on mores, symbols, rituals, race, and religion to create an identity that seeks to sacralize power and elicit allegiance (1973, 240-241, 260). From this perspective, the modern state operates not merely as a political structure but also as a symbolic system, cultivating identities that often demand primacy over other affiliations.

In post-colonial contexts, these tensions have intensified. Nation-states built on territorial sovereignty and national identity often demand loyalty from citizens of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds by constructing new norms of belonging and exclusion. Because the modern nation-state intervenes in nearly every sphere of personal and social existence, everyone, religious or not, inevitably comes under the reach of its far-reaching authority (Asad 2003, 25, 193, 199). For Christians, this raises pressing questions: How can disciples honor civic responsibilities without compromising their allegiance to God? What

resources do theology and anthropology provide for navigating this ambivalence?

This article explores these questions by placing theological reflection in dialogue with social science theories of the state. Drawing on biblical exegesis of selected texts, historical case studies, and social science analysis, the article highlights how Christians in diverse contexts have navigated the tension between citizenship and discipleship. It argues that Christians must cultivate a posture of faithful presence that affirms civic responsibility while refusing to compromise ultimate allegiance due to Christ. Such faithful presence is not merely reactive but includes active participation in shaping public life toward justice, peace, and the common good. While a substantial body of philosophical, theological, and practitioner-oriented literature has explored Christian engagement with political authority and the modern state (e.g., Wallis 1996; 2006; Wolterstorff 2008; Stearns 2010; Sider 2012; 2015), this study does not attempt a comprehensive review of that literature. Instead, it seeks to complement that scholarship by bringing anthropological theories of the state into dialogue with biblical and theological reflection on citizenship and discipleship.

The Concept of the State in the Social Sciences

Social sciences provide valuable tools for understanding the nature and function of the modern state. Although often taken for granted as a fixed political reality, anthropologists and sociologists argue that the state is in fact a social construct characterized by sovereignty, nationalism, and citizenship rights (civil, political, social, and religious) and sustained through institutions, rituals, and narratives (Giddens et al. 2020, 458-461; 2021, 418-420; Barkey and Parikh 1991, 530-531). Rather than viewing the state as a fixed or monolithic reality, they highlight its cultural, symbolic, and contested dimensions, showing how the concept of state is continually produced, negotiated, and experienced.

To highlight the state's cultural embeddedness and social construction, Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta argue that the state must be understood not merely as a set of institutions but as an idea and a set of practices continually produced and reproduced in everyday life (2006, 1-29). Complementing this cultural analysis, other state theorists observe that sovereignty rests on a state's ability to enforce a monopoly of coercive power over all who live within its territory (Barrow 2008, 102; Giddens et al. 2021, 418). They argue that for a state to exist, it must centralize authority in law, administration, and military force, since sovereignty is undermined wherever competing groups retain independent governing power (Nelson 2006, 7-8; Plessner 2018, 10; Barrow 2008, 102). By monopolizing coercive power, the state not only maintains social order but also legitimizes itself as the ultimate arbiter of authority, justifying demands for loyalty and obedience from citizens, often framed as a patriotic duty (Peter 2023). This dynamic has frequently driven authoritarian governments to perpetrate widespread atrocities, ranging from systemic violations of human rights, political repression, and large-scale acts of violence against their own citizens (Fiorenza 2013, 57; Mabat 2022, xvi-xviii, 40-41).

Social scientists have also shown that the state's power operates as much through symbolism as through coercion. Benedict Anderson's theory of nations as "imagined communities" highlights how shared narratives, symbols, and practices, such as national anthems, flags, and memorial rituals, create affective bonds that cultivate a sense of belonging. At times, these bonds inspire sacrificial devotion, even persuading citizens to die or kill for the state (2016, 6-7; see also Cole 2019, xxiv). Scholars also note that states rely on rituals and symbols to sacralize authority, functioning not only as bureaucratic entities but also as theatres of power where public ceremonies reinforce legitimacy. Political systems are sustained not merely by force or consent but also by the cultural symbols and narratives that establish authority (Geertz 1973, 240-241, 260; Cohen 1969, 221, 224). Likewise, scholars of nationalism have argued that secular rituals such as voting, reciting pledges, or celebrating national holidays operate in ways analogous to religious practices, shaping identity and cultivating loyalty (Verdery 1991, 86-90; Perry and Whitehead 2020). These dynamics raise important questions for Christians, who may find their discipleship tested by practices that blur the line between civic participation and devotion to God.

Other state theorists highlight that the state is contested and shaped by historical events. In his critique of the Western notion of linear historical progress, Pierre Clastres challenges the assumption that so-called "primitive" societies represent the unfinished or failed stages of human development. He notes that such societies are often conceived as "the rejects of universal history," marginalized as remnants

outside civilization's trajectory. He contends that their non-state organization is not a sign of backwardness but a deliberate social and political choice to resist centralization and coercive authority (1989, 189). Some scholars have likewise critiqued universalizing models of political evolution, with some insisting that political centralization takes culturally specific forms (Skalník 2009, 5-24). Others challenge the assumption that secularism separates religion and politics, arguing instead that modern states actively regulate and reshape religious communities, structuring them into forms of belonging compatible with national identity (Asad 2003, 25-27).

The above insights highlight both the functional necessity and the moral ambiguity of the state. On the one hand, the state performs indispensable functions by maintaining social order, enforcing justice, regulating collective life, and providing structures that facilitate human coexistence. In this sense, political authority can serve as a means of restraining chaos and encouraging the pursuit of the common good. On the other hand, the same concentration of power that enables the state to secure stability also renders it susceptible to corruption, coercion, and self-exaltation. Thus, the state is essential for social flourishing, but it can also challenge the spiritual values of those who live under its authority.

Biblical and Theological Tensions in Relation to the State

The relationship between the Christian community and the state is marked by complex biblical and theological tensions that have shaped Christian political theology across the centuries. Scripture presents a range of perspectives that affirm both the legitimacy of governing authorities and the necessity of maintaining ultimate allegiance to God alone. A close reading of texts such as Daniel 3:8-18; 6:1-28; Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17; Titus 3:1; Acts 5:29; and Matthew 22:21 illustrates this tension, revealing a dynamic interplay between obedience, discernment, and resistance.

The narratives of Daniel 3 (the fiery furnace) and Daniel 6 (the lions' den) are foundational biblical case studies for exploring the continuing tension between obedience to God and submission to civic authorities. Both stories unfold under imperial regimes that claim total loyalty. Babylon and Medo-Persia represent examples of states that attempt to consolidate absolute authority by demanding unqualified loyalty and conformity. In Daniel 3, Nebuchadnezzar's golden image functions as a political symbol of unity and submission. It was an act of worship that merged political loyalty with religious devotion. Similarly, in Daniel 6, Darius' decree that all prayers be directed to him for thirty days transforms royal authority into a quasi-divine status (Longman 2024, 671). In both cases, governing authorities attempted to sacralize themselves, demanding religious conformity as proof of civic obedience. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's defiance, "we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold" (Dan. 3:18), is not an anarchic rebellion but a covenantal fidelity. Their allegiance to Yahweh supersedes imperial decrees because worship belongs to God alone. Although they acknowledge God's power to save them, they also recognize the possibility that he may choose not to intervene. No matter the case, deliverance or death, they remain unwavering in their resolve not to yield to the king's idolatrous demands. Likewise, Daniel's deliberate continuation of prayer "three times a day" (Dan. 6:10) represents not defiance for its own sake, but uncompromising devotion to his God. Because his faith serves as the guiding principle of his life, he demonstrates unwavering obedience to God (Longman 2024, 667, 671). Daniel and his companions model a theology of faithful presence within the state. They serve diligently in public office, contributing to the welfare of the empire, but draw a firm line when loyalty to God is compromised. In both narratives, the message is clear: honoring earthly authorities is conditional, not absolute. When human decrees contradict divine law, faithfulness to God must prevail.

Paul's exhortation in Romans 13:1-7 is one of the most cited texts in discussions of church-state relations. Here, governing authorities are described as divinely instituted, "for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (Rom. 13:1). The state, in Paul's view, serves a divinely ordained function of restraining evil, promoting order, and commending those who do good. As such, he calls on believers to submit to "any person who represents the power of the state" in recognition that "they 'stand under' government in the scheme that God has instituted for ruling the world" (Moo 2024, 1076). This text has often been used to encourage submission to political authority, even under hostile regimes. However, Paul also qualifies his statement by grounding the state's legitimacy in its service of justice. The ruler is called "God's servant for your good"

(v. 4), implying that when the state ceases to serve justice, its authority is distorted. Romans 13 therefore affirms the necessity of government while implicitly setting moral limits on its claims. Douglas Moo observes that "While not always explicit, Paul assumes that one's ultimate submission must be to God and that no human being can ever stand as the ultimate authority for a believer. When governments order us to do something incompatible with our allegiance to God, our highest authority, we must 'obey God rather than human beings (Acts 5:29)'" (2024, 1076).

Similarly, in Titus 3:1, Paul instructs believers to "be subject to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work." This exhortation underscores the legitimacy of civic obedience as a dimension of Christian discipleship. Still, like Romans 13, it assumes that obedience is tied to doing good rather than surrendering to evil, thus providing a framework for discernment. In other words, although the proper attitude toward secular rulers and authorities is one of submission, not every call to submit to human authority requires obedience, especially when such obedience would violate God's higher law (Liefeld 2024, 1214). Therefore, in Romans 13:1-7 and Titus 3:1, Paul's affirmation of political authority must be understood as conditional rather than absolute. His nuanced view of governance affirms the importance of submission to civil authorities while simultaneously making such obedience contingent upon the just and moral exercise of that authority.

The First Epistle of Peter offers a complementary, yet nuanced perspective. Addressed to "exiles of the Dispersion" (1 Pet. 1:1), the letter situates believers as resident aliens within the Roman Empire, underscoring the precariousness of Christian identity in a hostile world. The exhortation to "honor everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor" (1 Pet. 2:17) reflects this tension. Christians are instructed to respect political authorities and live honorably within society, yet they are also reminded that reverence belongs to God alone (Sanou 2024, 51-64). In other words, "The Christian is to be obedient to the structures of society and to live within those structures, but such obedience at times may involve a justifiable civil disobedience to something unjust or idolatrous that remains within that governmental structure (cf. Acts 5:29). Christians at such times must speak out against government. But this has to be done in ways that honor God and remain peaceful and nonviolent" (McNight 2024, 1257). This careful balance prevents uncritical submission to the state, situating civic responsibility within a higher loyalty to Christ. Furthermore, Peter reframes suffering under political oppression as participation in Christ's own suffering (1 Pet. 2:21), suggesting that fidelity to God may lead to social marginalization or persecution. Thus, 1 Peter calls Christians to responsible engagement in civic life while affirming that ultimate allegiance to God may bring them into conflict with the state.

This higher loyalty is made explicit in Acts 5:29, where Peter and the apostles affirm that obedience to God takes precedence over obedience to human authorities. Here, the principle is unambiguous: whenever obedience to human rulers conflicts with obedience to God, the latter must prevail. Acts 5:29 serves as a critical counterbalance to Romans 13:1-7 and Titus 3:1, preventing them from being read as legitimizing unconditional submission. Peter's determination to remain steadfast in this instance grants him the credibility to instruct the church later that God must stand at the pinnacle of every hierarchy (Fernando 2024, 999).

Jesus' own teaching in Matthew 22:21 provides another angle on this tension. By stating, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's," Jesus both affirms the legitimacy of civic duty and establishes clear boundaries to state authority. Caesar may receive taxes, but only God deserves ultimate loyalty and worship. This suggests that allegiance to God must take precedence over allegiance to the state, particularly when the state seeks to claim what belongs to God alone. Believers are called to serve the state in a way that is honoring to God (Wilkins 2024, 786; 2004, 722). Another key point contained in Jesus' statement, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's," is this: The coin which bore Caesar's image should be surrendered to him; but because human beings bear God's image, they should surrender themselves to God's authority. In other words, matters of limited and delegated authority may be rendered to human institutions, but the weightier matters of ultimate allegiance, identity, and discipleship belong to God alone (Keener 2014, 102; Sanou 2022, 291). This distinction preserves the rightful place of the state while safeguarding the sovereignty of God over every human claim.

Daniel 3:8-18; 6:1-28; Romans 13:1-7; Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13-17; Acts 5:29, and Matthew 22:21 articulate a theological tension. Theologically, this tension reflects the "already/not yet" character of Christian

existence. Believers live within earthly political communities and have responsibilities to them. Yet, their ultimate citizenship is in the kingdom of God (Phil. 3:20). This unresolved tension prohibits anarchism by affirming the legitimacy of political order as a gift from God for human flourishing, while also preventing political absolutism by denying that any earthly authority can claim divine prerogatives. The church is thus positioned as both a participant in and a critic of political life, called to seek the common good while resisting demands of the state that compete with allegiance to God. In practice, this means Christians must cultivate discernment, submitting where possible, resisting where necessary, and enduring where inevitable. In this way, the biblical witness equips the church to live faithfully as both citizens and disciples engaged in the world but not captive to it, honoring rulers yet confessing that Christ alone is Lord.

Historical and Contemporary Case Studies

The tension between submitting to human authority and giving ultimate allegiance to God has echoed throughout Christian history. Believers have continually navigated the tension between honoring the state as a God-ordained structure and resisting its claims when they threatened the primacy of discipleship. Examining specific historical and contemporary cases illustrates both the diversity of Christian responses and the enduring challenge of balancing citizenship with ultimate allegiance to Christ.

The early Christians lived under an empire that tolerated religious pluralism but demanded political loyalty, expressed through worship of the emperor. The church's refusal to participate in emperor cult rituals often led to persecution and martyrdom. Tertullian articulated the Christian posture clearly:

> But why dwell longer on the reverence and sacred respect of Christians to the emperor, whom we cannot but look up to as called by our Lord to his office? So that on valid grounds I might say Cæsar is more ours than yours, for our God has appointed him. Therefore, as having this propriety in him, I do more than you for his welfare, not merely because I ask it of Him who can give it, or because I ask it as one who deserves to get it, but also because, in keeping the majesty of Cæsar within due limits, and putting it under the Most High, and making it less than divine, I commend him the more to the favour of Deity, to whom I make him alone inferior. But I place him in subjection to one I regard as more glorious than himself. Never will I call the emperor God, and that either because it is not in me to be guilty of falsehood; or that I dare not turn him into ridicule; or that not even himself will desire to have that high name applied to him. If he is but a man, it is his interest as man to give God His higher place. Let him think it enough to bear the name of emperor. That, too, is a great name of God's giving. To call him God, is to rob him of his title. If he is not a man, emperor he cannot be. (1885, 63)

In this context, the church embodied duality, praying for those in authority in response to scriptural injunction while refusing to grant them divine honors. When Constantine converted to Christianity in the fourth century and subsequently Christianized the Roman Empire, the church entered into a new relationship with the state. Christendom blurred boundaries between citizenship and discipleship, creating conditions where allegiance to Christ was often conflated with loyalty to the empire or nation. While this provided stability, it also fostered complacency and, at times, complicity with unjust political structures. As a response, Augustine, in his *City of God,* articulated a theological framework for this paradigm. While he affirmed the state's role in maintaining order, he firmly distinguished between the earthly and heavenly cities.

During the Reformation, various traditions developed distinct perspectives on the relationship between the church and the state. The Roman Catholic Church continued to claim supremacy over temporal rulers, a position it had consolidated since the time of Constantine. Popes asserted authority over kings and emperors, maintaining that political power was subject to papal oversight. This fusion of church and state enabled the church to wield immense political and social influence, although it also fostered tension and corruption. Reformers such as Martin Luther rejected papal supremacy (Murza 2021, 90-91). In his 1523 treatise, "Secular Authority: To What Extent Should It Be Obeyed," Martin Luther distinguished between two spheres of God's rule: the spiritual kingdom, in which God governs through the gospel and the church, and the earthly kingdom, in which God governs through law and civil authority. He argued that secular authority is to be obeyed insofar as it preserves order, restrains evil, and safeguards the well-being of its citizens. However, obedience ceases when such authority exceeds its proper limits by

intruding into matters of faith and conscience, which belong to God alone (Vaughn 2018; Murza 2021, 91-93).

Huldrych Zwingli went further, envisioning a close alliance between church and state. For him, civic magistrates were legitimate leaders of the church, charged with defending God's honor and enforcing divine law. Unlike Luther's reliance on princes, Zwingli emphasized republican ideals, granting the wider civic community a direct role in shaping religious life (Murza 2021, 93-94). John Calvin offered a more balanced model of cooperation. He affirmed that church and state were both divine institutions, each with distinct responsibilities, but called to serve the common good together. While Calvin preserved the church's independence in spiritual matters, he also expected the state to defend true religion and safeguard the church.

He was of the opinion that when civil authority comes into conflict with religious obligation, obedience to God must take precedence. Although he allowed for resistance to state authorities, he nonetheless insisted that such resistance be exercised peacefully and through representative bodies, such as the consistories of pastors and elders he organized to oversee theology and moral life within the community and to impose discipline, a principle that later influenced constitutional and democratic traditions (Murza 2021, 94-95). The Anabaptists stood apart from the magisterial Reformers by insisting on a complete separation of church and state. They rejected state control of religion and refused to participate in political practices that compromised their discipleship, including swearing oaths, bearing arms, or holding public office. While they acknowledged that God ordained rulers to maintain order, they insisted that obedience was limited to matters not contrary to faith. The church, in their view, was to be a distinct and faithful community modeled on the New Testament, characterized by nonviolence, mutual care, and, in some cases, shared property. This radical vision often brought them into conflict with both Catholic and Protestant authorities (Joireman 2009, 73-91; Estep 1996, 135-140; Murza 2021, 95-96).

The emergence of totalitarian regimes in the twentieth century highlighted the tension between the state and the church. In Nazi Germany, many church leaders accommodated Hitler's demands, aligning nationalism with Christian identity. However, the Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church resisted, affirming in the 1934 Barmen Declaration that "Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear, and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death" (Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 2007, 249). Figures like Dietrich Bonhoeffer embodied costly discipleship, resisting even unto death the state's call to ultimate allegiance (Bonhoeffer 1997, 381-383).

Under apartheid, the South African state imposed racial segregation, often defended by theological rationalizations. However, many churches resisted, articulating a prophetic critique of unjust structures. The 1985 Kairos Document declared apartheid a heresy and called Christians to resist state injustice in the name of the gospel. The document articulated a critique of both "State Theology" which serves to legitimize and reinforce the oppressive status quo and "Church Theology" which maintains a posture of passive observation. In contrast, it advanced the notion of "Prophetic Theology" which calls the church to solidarity with the oppressed, active engagement in prophetic witness, and, when warranted, the exercise of civil disobedience as a means of resisting the tyranny of the apartheid regime (Kairos Theologians 1986, 3-27). For the Kairos Theologians, discipleship involves rejecting the state's demand for loyalty when it conflicts with allegiance to God.

In Latin America, Gustavo Gutiérrez developed a theological vision in the late 1960s and early 1970s, shaped by widespread poverty and the rise of military authoritarianism across the region. He denounced not only these repressive regimes, which persecuted minority religious groups such as Protestants, indigenous movements, and emerging evangelical communities while promoting Catholicism as a marker of national identity (Medilien and Steigenga 2025, 1, 3-4; Mabat 2022, xvi-xviii, 40-41), but also elements within the Roman Catholic Church that lent them support. He explicitly critiqued ecclesial complicity in oppressive social orders, arguing that Christian faith cannot legitimize structures that oppress or exclude (Gutiérrez 1990, 9-25; 2023, 125-126). However, unlike some contemporary theologians associated with radical political praxis, Gutiérrez did not issue a theological mandate to overthrow regimes and rejected the use of violence as a means of achieving justice. His perspective centers on prophetic critique, ecclesial solidarity with the poor, and structural transformation grounded in the gospel (Gutiérrez 2023, 125). He maintained that authentic Christian discipleship demands solidarity with the poor and active, but non-violent, resistance to unjust state structures, framing

such engagement as participation in God's liberating mission. By affirming that "to preach the universal love of the Father is inevitably to go against all injustice, privilege, oppression, or narrow nationalism" (2023, 220), Gutiérrez is arguing that because the gospel possesses inherent political dimensions, silence or complicity stands in direct contradiction to its message (2023, 204-210, 225-226). As such, he advocates an understanding of the salvation offered by Christ as integral, encompassing political liberation, the ongoing liberation of humanity within history, and ultimate liberation from sin that restores communion with God (2023, 159-160, 169).

In contemporary contexts, nationalism frequently exerts a significant influence on Christian identity. The blending of religious conviction with political loyalty has sparked debates about whether allegiance to the nation compromises fidelity to Christ. In some contexts, dominant cultural or religious nationalisms place pressure on Christian communities. In others, governments regulate religious practice to ensure conformity with state priorities. Elsewhere, historic ties between church and nation shape identity in ways that blur the line between discipleship and citizenship (see Perry and Whitehead 2020; Cavanaugh 2011; Gorski 2019). Across these diverse settings, Christians face the ongoing challenge of resisting civic claims to ultimate authority while engaging responsibly in public life (see Volf 2011; Yoder 2007). In post-colonial societies, nation-states constructed around territorial sovereignty often encompass diverse communities in terms of religion, ethnicity, and culture. The project of nation-building typically requires forging a unified civic identity, yet this effort frequently masks underlying fractures and hierarchies of power. Talal Asad argues that modern secular states do not merely separate religion from politics; they actively regulate religious life by disciplining it into privatized, depoliticized forms that appear compatible with the state's definition of citizenship and national belonging (2003, 25-27). Through laws, education systems, and public discourse, religion is redefined as a matter of personal conscience rather than a communal, public, or political reality.

For Christians, this dynamic creates both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, religious freedom in many pluralistic contexts enables the church to make a positive contribution to the common good through education, healthcare, and social services. On the other hand, the reduction of faith to private belief risks silencing Christianity's prophetic and communal dimensions, especially its critiques of injustice and its alternative vision of social life under the reign of God. The challenge, therefore, is to navigate public witness in ways that affirm civic responsibility while avoiding the merger of discipleship and citizenship. Faithful presence requires Christians to inhabit their societies with integrity, indiscriminately serving neighbors, promoting justice, and seeking peace, without surrendering the transcendent claims of the gospel to the immanent demands of the state.

Navigating Citizenship and Discipleship Today

Reflections on Church-State Relations

The relationship between the state and the church is marked by constant tension, which Otniel Muza summarizes as follows:

> The history of the Church and countries with a majority Christian population is dotted about with good or bad opinions on the role of the Church in relation to the government or the State. Sometimes the Church is accused of interfering with the government or local authorities over issues that should be only under the State jurisdiction. Some Christians would consider it a normality because they see God as a supreme King over the whole world, and therefore his will stated in the Bible should be made law and prevail in every country. On the other hand, secular people oppose such ideas and try to exclude any ties of the Church in politics, economics, and social life. (2021, 89)

As such, the relationship between the church and the state is a prominent feature in modern political and theological discourse (Cole 2019, xxv). Far from being a fixed principle, the concept has proven to be historically contingent, philosophically contested, and complex in practice. Scholars have approached this issue from cultural, theological, and socio-political perspectives, each contributing insights that shape contemporary understandings of how Christians engage the public sphere.

Carol Greenhouse argues that the American notion of church–state separation differs from the French concept of *laïcité* because it functions as a cultural framework that shapes political legitimacy. In her analysis, she highlights that American political culture perceives local religious and moral communities as both the source of federal sovereignty

and the foundation of its moral authority. This dual role allows moral communities to exist outside the state while still influencing it through democratic participation. Greenhouse suggests this relationship explains why American public life remains "church-minded" despite constitutional separation, reflecting ongoing tensions between moral legitimacy and democratic governance (2006, 493-504). Similarly, William Clohesy argues that while the separation of church and state is a fundamental principle of the United States Constitution, grounded in reason rather than divine authority, this separation can be overstated. For him, this separation should not be interpreted to mean that there are, or should be, no connections, mutual interests, or collaborative efforts between government and religion (2009, 50). This separation protects both spheres: it prevents government from imposing or privileging any religion (p. 53) and prevents religious groups from gaining political "dominion" over others (pp. 49-50). He envisions a democracy in which secular government preserves liberty and equality, while religious citizens contribute morally grounded opinions within a shared civic framework (pp. 62-63). Both Greenhouse and Clohesy remind Christians that church-state separation is not a rigid formula, but a dynamic arrangement in which believers engage in public life morally and responsibly, while resisting any fusion of religious authority with state power.

Other scholars examine the separation question through a theological lens, exploring the responsibility of Christians in democratic societies. Gutiérrez calls the church to become an "*institution of social criticism*" (2023, 208, emphasis in the original), arguing that

> To assert that there is a direct, immediate relationship between faith and political action encourages one to seek from faith norms and criteria for particular political options. . . . On the other hand, to assert that faith and political action have nothing to say to each other is simply that they move on juxtaposed and unrelated planes. If one accepts this assertion, either he will have to engage in verbal gymnastics to show—without succeeding—how faith should express itself in a commitment to a more just society; or the result is that faith comes to coexist, in a most opportunistic manner, with any political option. (225-226)

In a related vein, Samuel Calhoun argues that constitutional law does not require Christians to refrain from bringing their faith-based convictions into public debates (2018, 565-598). Instead, he suggests that the more pressing question is whether Christian doctrine itself requires limits on political engagement, thereby shifting the focus from legal boundaries to theological ethics. Daniel Haines takes this further by arguing that strict separation is impractical in modern democracies, since religious convictions inevitably shape political discourse. For him, the real task is not to insist on an impossible neutrality but to cultivate a model of balanced engagement that respects pluralism while affirming the legitimacy of faith in the public sphere (2024, 1-14). These contributions underscore the theological complexity of the church-state separation principle and highlight the dual citizenship Christians must navigate between their earthly responsibilities and their allegiance to the heavenly kingdom.

Beyond questions of law and theology, scholars have also investigated the socio-political effects of church-state relations. John Huber and Piero Stanig posit that the degree of separation has measurable consequences for redistribution and welfare policy. In contexts where church and state are closely aligned, religious institutions often serve as conduits for social services; conversely, greater separation places the responsibility for welfare more directly in the hands of the state (2011, 828-836). Robert Weclew (1960, 1-26) also argues that although the principle of church-state separation is essential for protecting religious liberty, complete or absolute separation is not feasible. Surveying constitutional history and legal cases, he shows that the relationship between church and state in the United States has always been permeable, with cooperation occurring in areas such as health benefits, education, public funding, and social welfare. He emphasizes that separation must be interpreted flexibly because the state inevitably engages religion in its efforts to promote public welfare, uphold individual rights such as access to education and health, and, in some ways, accommodate the spiritual needs of citizens. Thus, rather than full separation, he advocates a model in which the state maintains neutrality regarding religion while permitting interaction when justified by public or individual benefit (19).

Viewed through a socio-political lens, these developments illustrate how the state's regulatory power intersects with religious identity and public witness. In *An Eerdmans Reader in Contemporary*

Political Theology, the perspectives of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (2012, 286-302) and Karl Barth (2012, 303-315) on the relationship between church and state are presented consecutively, perhaps because of their shared opposition to the totalitarian claims of the state and their resolute insistence on the lordship of Christ. At a foundational level, they agree far more than they differ. Both affirm that God is sovereign over church and state; that the state possesses a legitimate but limited mandate to secure justice, order, and peace; that the church owes its highest allegiance to Christ and must therefore remain independent of political control; and that whenever the state exceeds its proper bounds, the church is obligated to respond with prophetic critique. To grasp their subtle difference in emphasis, it is essential to recognize that the divergence lies not in theology but in context and application. Writing in the early 1930s as the Nazi regime was consolidating power, Barth emphasized the independence of the church from state interference and firmly rejected any form of theology that might allow nationalism to co-opt Christian faith. His concern was theological clarity: Christ alone is Lord, not the Führer. Bonhoeffer, writing later under the full weight of Nazi tyranny, stressed the church's prophetic responsibility in times of crisis. For him, it was not enough to assert independence; the church was called to act, even at high personal and institutional cost, to defend the oppressed and confront injustice. Their perspectives converge on a common conviction: the church must engage public life responsibly without ever compromising its allegiance to Christ. Barth draws the theological boundaries that safeguard the church's freedom. Bonhoeffer underscores the urgency of active witness when those boundaries are violated. Both point beyond the state to God's kingdom of justice and peace. In other words, while the church must use its prophetic voice to denounce unjust societal structures, it is also called to proclaim what is not yet but will be.

The above perspectives suggest that the separation of church and state functions less as a settled principle and more as a continual process of negotiation and adaptation. From cultural reinterpretations (Greenhouse; Clohesy), to theological and ethical responsibilities (Calhoun; Haines), to socio-political consequences (Huber and Stanig; Weclew), the concept emerges as multidimensional and contextually influenced. For Christian theology and mission, these insights are particularly relevant. They caution against simplistic readings of separation, invite careful theological reflection on civic engagement, and highlight the social stakes of church-state arrangements. The literature thus provides a framework that connects identity, theology, law, and justice, offering resources for reimagining Christian public witness in a pluralistic world.

Implications for Citizenship and Discipleship

The tension between the duty to honor governing authorities and the necessity of giving ultimate allegiance only to God still constitutes a defining challenge for Christians in the twenty-first century. Issues related to globalization, migration, pluralism, and the resurgence of nationalisms intensify the tension, making discernment essential for believers. If believers are to live faithfully as both citizens and disciples, they must navigate these realities with theological clarity and practical wisdom. They must acknowledge that their allegiance to Christ should not be confused with a nationalistic or ethnically defined form of Christianity. Instead, their citizenship must be perceived as an arena for bearing biblically faithful and contextually relevant witness to God and His never-changing Word.

A biblical resource for navigating the tension between citizenship and discipleship can be found in the First Epistle of Peter. Addressed to "exiles of the Dispersion" scattered across Asia Minor (1 Pet. 1:1), the letter situates Christian identity within the experience of social marginalization. Peter exhorts believers to stand firm in the "true grace of God" (1 Pet. 5:12), even when faithfulness leads to social scorn, humiliation, or persecution. This counsel provides a vital paradigm for Christians today who find themselves viewed with suspicion or pushed to the margins in plural societies. Like Peter's audience, contemporary Christians are called to remain steadfast in loyalty to God while inhabiting political communities that may not share their ultimate commitments. Central to Peter's exhortation is the identity of Christians as "aliens and exiles" (1 Pet. 2:11). This description underscores that believers participate in civic life yet do so as those whose ultimate belonging lies elsewhere. For Christians negotiating citizenship in modern contexts, 1 Peter insists that their baptismal identity relativizes national belonging, orienting their loyalty to Christ above all other claims. At the same time, 1 Peter does not advocate withdrawal from civic responsibility. The letter instructs believers to "honor everyone, love the

family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor" (1 Pet. 2:17). This formulation holds civic respect and ultimate allegiance in careful tension: Christians are to respect rulers, but fear (a posture of ultimate devotion) is reserved for God alone. First Peter's exhortation mirrors Romans 13's call to civic obedience while underscoring the need to resist idolatrous authority. Its message is clear: Christians may participate as responsible citizens, but they must resist any demand that elevates civic loyalty above discipleship. Finally, Peter reframes suffering not as defeat but as participation in Christ's own path: "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example" (1 Pet. 2:21). Endurance under social scorn becomes a form of public witness, demonstrating that Christians live by a different set of loyalties. In contexts where nationalism, secularism, or state regulation pressures Christians to assimilate, 1 Peter equips believers to embrace steadfast faith as their most powerful testimony (Sanou 2024, 52-55). The epistle thus complements the witness of Romans 13, offering a vision of faithful presence marked by respect, discernment, and perseverance in the face of marginalization.

In pluralistic societies, Christians often find themselves navigating multiple identities: ethnic, national, and religious. However, baptismal identity transcends all others (Gal. 3:28), anchoring believers in a community defined not by nationality but by the body of Christ. This theological grounding empowers Christians to engage pluralistic societies without reducing discipleship to citizenship. Lamin Sanneh highlights the "translatability" of Christianity as evidence of its supranational character. For him, "the circumstances that gave birth to the church as a divine office rather than a political institution, enabling the church to flourish in spite of every attempt by the state to suppress it," also point to the fact that the gospel can take root in diverse cultures without being captive to any one political order (2003, 9, 130).

Several implications for Christian discipleship can be drawn from reflecting on the biblical and theological tensions regarding the state, along with insights from social scientists into the nature of the modern state:

First, discipleship requires discernment about ultimate loyalty. The state is not merely a neutral backdrop but a powerful actor that shapes identity, commands loyalty, and at times competes with the claims of Christ. While it is indispensable for maintaining order, mediating conflict, and securing public goods, in some contexts, its authority often verges on the totalizing, demanding allegiances that rival divine sovereignty. Christians must therefore carefully discern the difference between civic obedience and obedience to God. A faithful perspective must navigate this duality by affirming the state as part of God's provision for social order (Rom. 13:1-7), while resisting its pretensions to ultimacy (Acts 5:29). In *With: Reimagining the Way You Relate to God,* Skye Jethani (2011) suggests that at its core, Christian discipleship is about being *with* Jesus. He presents four ways most people relate to God: Life *under* God, Life *over* God, Life *from* God, and Life *for* God (23-116). He notes that these four ways are each motivated by fear and a desire for control, and therefore distort the true intention of Christian discipleship. Life *under* God sees blessing and protection as rewards for obedience, reducing faith to a cause-and-effect moral bargain with divine rules. Life *over* God replaces trust in God with reliance on proven principles, management, or technique, treating God as unnecessary once we have mastered the right systems. Life *from* God treats God as a supplier of blessings or consumer benefits, seeking his gifts but not his presence. Life *for* God appears noble, emphasizing mission, service, and significance, but it still uses God to secure meaning, often leading to burnout, pride, or spiritual emptiness. By contrast, Jethani argues in favor of a fifth posture: Life *with* God. He points out that the Bible's story begins and ends with God dwelling *with* his people, revealing that the ultimate goal of Christian discipleship is not control, usefulness, or even impact, but communion with God himself. He insists that only "Life *with* God" satisfies the deepest longings of the soul because God becomes the treasure, not a means to something else. John Mark Comer adds that *being with* Jesus should lead to *becoming like* him and *doing as* he did (2024, 32-155). Such an apprenticeship to Jesus recenters one's identity around Christ rather than the cultural forces that seek to define them.

Second, discipleship must resist the sacralization of the state. States often employ symbols, rituals, and narratives such as flags, anthems, and pledges to cultivate a sense of belonging and devotion. Because cultural rituals function as formative practices with liturgical power, they shape citizens' loves and identities often more deeply than is consciously recognized. Repeated through imitation and embodied practice, they cultivate second-nature orientations that guide desire and action almost

instinctively. When national rituals operate as secular liturgies, they can therefore rival the worship owed to God (Smith 2016, 19-22, 37-39). Faithful discipleship requires believers to critically exegete the rituals in which they are immersed to discern whether they reflect the character of Christ and to cultivate intentional, biblically faithful counter-formative practices that foster a deep hunger for God and break the power of rival liturgies. Such practices include: 1) regular engagement with Scripture to allow its truth to reshape distorted images of God; 2) the practice of spiritual disciplines (e.g., prayer, fasting, repentance, worship) to retrain the heart's automatic responses to sin and cultivate attentiveness to the intuitions of the Spirit; 3) active participation in a supportive and accountable community, where believers are encouraged, corrected, and sustained in their walk with Christ; 4) intentional openness to the Spirit's ongoing transformative work in one's life; 5) perseverance in the journey of discipleship**,** recognizing that Christlikeness unfolds gradually over time rather than instantaneously; 6) learning to remain open to God amid pain, trials, and suffering**,** trusting that God is present and at work even in seasons of struggle; and 7) the practice of altruistic service, marked by the relinquishment of self-centered ambition and the cultivation of attentiveness to the wellbeing of others (Comer 2024, 101-114; Foster 2018; Dybdahl 2015).

Third, discipleship is lived in contested spaces. Since the state is not a fixed reality but one that is socially and historically constructed, the practice of discipleship will inevitably take different forms across contexts. Christians are called to follow Christ faithfully within various cultural currents, even in environments where the state regulates, reshapes, or openly opposes religious life. Such circumstances demand contextual wisdom and missional flexibility, rather than blind conformity to civic expectations. In this, Jesus remains the prototype in "making space for the gospel," "preaching the gospel," and "demonstrating the gospel" (Comer 2024, 124-155).

Fourth, discipleship involves prophetic critique of injustice. Social science reminds us that states have often used consolidated power to commit atrocities, suppress dissent, and violate human rights. Because participation in Christ necessarily leads to participation in God's restorative mission and prophetic confrontation of injustice (Gorman 2015, 18, 104, 139; Steuernagel 2008, 62-76; Haddad 2008, 77-83), genuine apprenticeship to Jesus includes learning to embody kingdom righteousness publicly and contributing to systems that value human life made in God's image. Since biblical principles are relevant not only to the life of the church but also to secular societies, Christian discipleship cannot be reduced to personal piety or private morality. Rightly understood, holiness is integral to both the church's missional identity and the personal sanctification of individual members (Wright 2010, 30). Christopher Wright observes that

> Holiness in Leviticus 19 involves: respect within the family and community (vv. 3a, 32); exclusive loyalty to YHWH as God; proper treatment of sacrifices (vv. 4, 5–8); economic generosity in agriculture (vv. 9–10); observing the commandments regarding social relationships (vv. 11–12); economic justice in employment rights (v. 13); social compassion to the disabled (v. 14); judicial integrity in the legal system (vv. 12, 15); neighbourly attitudes and behaviour; loving one's neighbour as oneself (vv. 16–18); preserving the symbolic tokens of religious distinctiveness (v. 19); sexual integrity (vv. 20–22, 29); rejection of practices connected with idolatrous or occult religion (vv. 26–31); no ill-treatment of ethnic minorities, but rather racial equality before the law and practical love for the alien as for oneself (vv. 33–34); commercial honesty in all trading transactions (vv. 35–36). (2010, 125)

Because Scripture draws no dichotomy between believers' private and public lives, between the sacred and the secular, between who they are at work and who they are in corporate worship, between what they profess and what they practice (Wright 2010, 236), discipleship, therefore, necessarily calls for engagement with social and political structures that perpetuate injustice. To ignore unjust social and political structures is to render discipleship not only incomplete but socially irrelevant (Sider 2012, 77-99; 2015, 219-223; Stearns 2010, 2, 22-23, 36-39, 298-299).

Fifth, discipleship requires a re-examination of citizenship. Because the state constructs and reconstructs citizenship rights (civil, political, social, or religious), Christians must carefully evaluate how these rights align with or conflict against their higher calling as citizens of God's kingdom. Being with Jesus, becoming like him, and doing as he did involves reordering one's identity so that loyalty to him supersedes every other civic or cultural identity. In this way, faithful discipleship redefines belonging, placing Christians within God's family first and foremost.

Sixth, discipleship commits believers to vigilance against co-opted faith. Smith's account of cultural formation warns that Christians can be unconsciously shaped by political liturgies that redirect their loves toward national ideals rather than God's kingdom. Since states often regulate and reshape religious communities in ways that make them conform to national identity, Christians must remain vigilant against the danger of partisan co-optation of faith, where discipleship is domesticated to serve political or national agendas rather than being oriented toward God's mission. Like Sider and Stearns, Jim Wallis contends that authentic Christian faith is inherently public and political, calling believers to engage the political sphere prophetically. He argues that

> Since politics is ultimately about ordering our communal life together, it is far too important an aspect of human life to be considered outside of God's care and attention. God has a "political perspective," one might say, rooted in God's identity as Creator and expressed in the Bible. However, God's politics always challenges our politics. We too easily pursue ideological agendas that serve our own interest. God's politics is never ideological, but always intends to benefit human well-being. In particular, God reminds us of our obligations to the persons we often neglect—the poor, the vulnerable, and those otherwise on the margins. (2006b, 1)

As such, Willis cautions that Christians' political engagement must resist being co-opted by partisan politics, insisting instead that Christian political witness be rooted in the values of God's kingdom rather than in ideological alignment (2006a, xiv–xvii; 72-84; 151, 157; 2006b, 1-12). In line with Wallis' emphasis on the prophetic posture of Christian engagement, Nicholas Wolterstorff provides a complementary normative framework by clarifying the moral criteria by which such engagement is to be evaluated. His account of justice centers on the protection of inherent rights grounded in the worth of persons, a worth rooted in their creation in the image of God. He argues that political authority is morally legitimate only insofar as it respects and protects these rights, particularly those of the vulnerable, and becomes unjust when it violates them through law, policy, or neglect. Such a vision reinforces the claim that Christian obedience to the state is necessarily conditional and discerning rather than absolute. Discipleship, therefore, involves more than patient endurance or selective resistance. It calls Christians to participate constructively in public life by advocating for justice, holding institutions accountable, and resisting social and political arrangements that wrong persons by denying their God-given dignity. In this sense, faithful presence includes active engagement aimed at shaping political structures toward justice for all (Wolterstorff 2008, x-xii; 81-82, 94-96; 109-131, 342-361).

The above implications also extend to Christians who serve within the state's structures as public officials, civil servants, or in positions of governmental authority (Wolterstorff 2008, 80-81). Discipleship commits such believers to exercising authority with moral integrity, resisting unjust policies from within, and shaping institutions toward justice and the common good (Sider 2015, 25, 221, 226-227; Murza 2021, 95). Their dual location intensifies rather than resolves the tension between citizenship and discipleship, requiring heightened discernment, humility, and accountability.

Conclusion

A biblically and theologically informed perspective on the church's engagement with society carries significant implications for how believers understand both citizenship and discipleship. While Christians live as citizens of earthly states, the Bible affirms that their ultimate allegiance belongs to Christ and his kingdom. This reorders civic loyalty, making obedience to God the highest priority and setting clear limits on the claims of political authority. Government has a legitimate and God-given role in maintaining order, promoting justice, and restraining evil, but it must not intrude into matters of faith and conscience. When it does, the church cannot remain silent. Instead, it is called to prophetic witness by speaking truth to power, defending the vulnerable, and resisting the idolatrous tendencies of nationalism and unchecked political authority. Discipleship, therefore, cannot be reduced to private devotion but must be lived out in public faithfulness, even when this demands costly obedience. Following Christ may at times mean confronting injustice, bearing suffering, or sacrificing comfort and security for the sake of truth. The church, as a community distinct from the state, embodies alternative values that point beyond earthly power structures to the justice, peace, and reconciliation of God's kingdom. In this way, citizenship and discipleship converge: Christians engage public life responsibly, honoring legitimate authority, yet always

remembering that their highest loyalty is to Christ and their truest citizenship is in the kingdom of God. The task before the church, then, is to navigate the tension between civic responsibility and discipleship with wisdom and courage. This tension will not disappear, but it provides an opportunity for faithful witness. By participating constructively where possible, submitting where appropriate, resisting where necessary, and enduring where inevitable, Christians expose the limits of earthly power and bear testimony to a higher kingdom where justice, peace, and reconciliation are not the achievement of any state but the gift of God through Jesus Christ.

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Walking Through "Death Alley": Churches on Vermont Avenue and Narratives of Life

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This article explores the intersection between religion and the city as they appear on sidewalk life. According to the urban planner Jane Jacobs, the sidewalk becomes both the infrastructure that governs and influences city life, and a space that reflects the vibrancy of human life. This article takes as its focus a particular street in the Los Angeles area known as Vermont Avenue. This street was described in the *LA Times* (Cruz & Schwencke) by a detective in 2014 as "death alley" due to the high homicide rates that had taken place in it since 2007. Such a phrase is close to the biblical term "death valley," which can be seen in expressions like: "the valley of the shadow of death" (Psa. 23:4, English Standard Version). At times, within such biblical passages that refer to death, there is also mentioned a *passing through*, or a transformation from death to life. On Vermont Avenue, or 'death alley,' its sidewalks and streets became spaces where death occurred. But is there a way to redefine these sidewalks and streets? To question such narratives of death this article uses walking methods and visual sociology—including photography and spatial semiotics as explored by Roman Jakobson—to explore religion on the streets and to consider how Vermont Avenue can be reframed as a street or road possessing narratives of life. The psalmist said: "I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," thus, the valley is meant to be passed through; death is a reality, but it is not a static narrative. Through the process of walking through this street, I consider how urban churches and religion on the streets embody what I term an *urban gospel poetics*, which reminds us of how such urban churches draw on Christian themes to fight against death and urban violence.

Streets tell stories. If you look closely enough into a street's details—its buildings, roads, street signs, sidewalks, foot-traffic and its conditions—you may begin to learn a fragment of its tale. As I headed north on Vermont Avenue in South Central Los Angeles, I began near the Vermont/Athens Metro Train Station. Near the freeway, there was waste—shopping carts, mattresses, and trash scattered about on the floor. As I listened to cars pass swiftly on the I-105 freeway, I turned my attention to the train station underneath the large concrete bridge constructed over the freeway. A large design of a tree on one of the large pillars caught my eye. It was made up of green, black and white square tiles. The different hues of green and black caused the tree to take on a more realistic shape—yet the titles were apparent. Metro train stations in the urban spaces of Los Angeles often have unique images of nature and LA culture. It reminds us of the city's attempt to beautify the streets with scenes of life. I began to walk down Vermont Avenue and spotted other forms of life that come from the religious communities that are situated on this street. On this Saturday morning, Vermont Avenue was quiet and empty, yet with time, people slowly appeared and the avenue trickled with more life. Walking from one street to the next, I noticed several remnants of religion on the sidewalk: signs with short evangelical phrases (i.e. "Jesus, The Way, The Truth, The Life, John 14:6"), multiple storefront churches on one block with biblical messages on their walls, tiles of Christian iconography, and murals that depict religious imagery or echo its sentiments. As I walked a bit further, I then saw a black boy's face on a large yellow wall of a mechanic-shop with a text that read: "DOB 7/30/01" and "DOD 2/4/18." It was a mural that memorialized a life that was too short. The boy's name was AJ

(Anthony "AJ" Weber). While the mural remembers AJ's life, it also reminds us of the cold realities of urban violence that have torn across streets like Vermont Avenue. Between the worlds of urban violence and urban religion, in my walk, I continued to search for gleanings of life.

Introduction

In the city of Angels, from north to south, is a large main street called Vermont Avenue. Like many streets in the historically marginalized parts of Los Angeles, this street has a history of urban violence among black and brown communities. Vermont Avenue was described by a detective in 2014 as "death alley" due to the high homicide rates that had taken place in it since 2007 (Cruz and Schwencke 2014). I grew up in South Los Angeles in a small neighborhood called Watts, and indeed, the streets are filled with their fair share of urban troubles, street violence and crime. Yet, as I often walked throughout the streets, I also discovered a Los Angeles that is filled with moments of vibrant religious life that poured out into the sidewalks. To use Robert Orsi's idea, since I was a young boy, I've always seen theology or religion on the streets (Orsi 1985). The streets could be filled with the sounds of gospel music or energetic preaching coming out the doors of African American and Hispanic storefront churches. In South Los Angeles, multiple urban churches appear in every street corner and remind us of the communities that are searching for narratives outside and beyond death. An urban Christian materiality of the common people (McDannell 1995) fills these streets. The written text and symbols of the Bible run across church walls and signs. Some walls bear paintings and images that suggest themes of *life*—in human, spiritual, and religious ways.

To revisit my childhood-streets, in the summer of 2022 I decided to walk around the streets of Vermont or 'death alley,' and to remember *life*. Like a classic urban ethnographer and street photographer, I took up a creative walking methodology to help me understand how religion, religious histories, and religious materiality, narratives and themes can begin to alter the overarching narratives that can be placed on communities and which become "labels." In these neighborhoods, parents, families and communities mourn for the loss of their black and brown children, and indeed we should remember and mourn with them. Yet, we should also remember the ways such communities commit themselves in their quest of faith and hope of life. In my walk through Vermont Avenue, I walked to remember the lives taken on the streets, and the black and brown Christian communities that attempt to resist death, bringing and creating narratives of life back into the streets.

The history and character of Vermont Avenue, along with theories of sidewalks as generators of city life, visual sociologies, and urban anthropological approaches to walking allow us to engage "death alley" in nuanced ways. In this essay, while I draw from scholars in these areas, I particularly focus on their reflections of urban space in *poetic terms* and in my exploration center on Christianity. In this street's walls and buildings, at times one can see direct themes about human and spiritual life, and at other times, the ancestors' "old time religion"—the beliefs and familiar scriptures that brought them out of death or bondage (Hinson 2000, 106-107).[1] In my view, churches on the streets like African American and Latinx storefronts, embody an *urban gospel poetics* which echo the Christian themes that fight against death. Centering on urban Christianity, sidewalks as both the infrastructure that governs and influences city life and as a space that reflects the vibrancy of human life, contains narratives of life from a religious viewpoint that reframe the "death" narrative.

Such a study engaging the urban street and religious life follows the work of scholars like Katie Day. In her work *Faith on the Avenue, Religion on a City Street,* Day explores various religious expressions on Germantown Avenue in Philadelphia and notes how both "place" and "faith" matter in "shaping the diverse and dynamic urban corridor[s]"(Day 2014, 8). Relevant to this article, Day references one example of how a church community directly brought "life" back into the city street. A congregation, Brand New Life, was looking for a new meeting place and discovered an old funeral home. Many of the congregants felt that

[1] Hinson explores "old time religion" mainly in connection to spirituals and songs, yet a significant point that he draws out is that traditions continue to live on as church goers draw help from the faith of their ancestors and scriptural heritage. While Hinson is focusing on African American churches and sanctified churches, in principle, many Protestant groups find value in the same way. "Old time religion" becomes the invaluable spiritual lessons that are passed on from generation to generation.

their presence in this funeral home transformed this place, once known for death, into a place of life (49). In my view, the role of storefront churches and religion on the streets in communities ridden with violence should be considered in a similar way.

Vermont Street Defined as 'Death Alley'

In 2014, in a news article by the *LA Times* entitled "South Vermont Avenue: L.A. County's 'death alley'," Nicole Santa Cruz and Ken Schwencke wrote about the high homicide rates on Vermont Ave near the South Los Angeles area since 2007 (Cruz and Schwencke 2014). This article appears under "The Homicide Report" section, and provides a statistical account of the deaths in this area. Cruz had been a part of a large project to document homicides in historically marginalized communities akin to this area.[2]

In this article on Vermont, Cruz and Schwencke specifically highlighted a two-mile stretch which a detective renamed "death alley." Providing a detailed geographical map of the homicide locations, the news article states next to this image: beginning from 2007, 61 people had been killed in this two miles between Manchester and Imperial Highway. In addition to the homicides on Vermont Avenue, "100 people—nearly all of them male—have been killed in the 1.8 square miles wedged between the city of Los Angeles and Inglewood." Vermont Vista, towards the east near "death alley" had only half the number of homicides. The article records that Westmont's homicides were highest overall, highlighting its amount of gang activity, drugs, and violence. Although the level of violence has decreased over time, violence is still "an everyday fact of life."

Documenting the national and local statistics of the areas' African American and Latinx communities, the authors of this article further state: "Men account for nearly 85% of homicide victims. One of every three males killed is between the ages of 17 and 25. Latinos, about half of the county's population, account for nearly half of all killings since 2007." Regarding the African American population, 8% of the country's population are inordinately impacted, amounting to 32% of homicides. They elaborated on this detail, writing: "Last year, black people in L.A. County were killed at more than seven times the rate of all other racial and ethnic groups combined." In another place they also noted: "Blacks in Westmont are killed at four times the rate as Latinos, although each group makes up about half of the 30,000 residents." Though the Homicide Report had plummeted from 941 in 2007 to 594 the prior year, the homicide rates for the African American community remained obstinately high. The violence in Westmont "provide[d] a window into chronic issues facing urban communities" since homicides were occurring more in this neighborhood than in others.[3]

One of the interviewees, Caver, had lived on Vermont for more than a decade. Cruz and Schwencke document that, "Two years ago, [Caver] was shot seven times inside his car. He lifted up a red Buccaneers jersey to reveal a thick, jagged scar that runs down his stomach." Caver's only response was: "It's just Vermont . . . It's one of the most dangerous places in LA." This small account is a window into such realities of violence.

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[2]"Nicole Santa Cruz." *ProPublica.* Accessed November 11, 2025. https://www.propublica.org/people/nicole-santa-cruz. The website *ProPublica* highlights that Cruz moved to ProPublica, yet, originally, she worked in the LA Times for twelve years as a staff writer. The website notes: Cruz took the lead as "[a] lead reporter on the Times' Homicide Report, a groundbreaking public service project that documents every homicide victim in Los Angeles County . . . [and] reported on the lives of hundreds of people, highlighting neighborhoods that were disproportionately affected by violence and uncovering trends, including an increase in women being killed even as officials hailed a decline in murders." These reports worked within a larger project to document and inform the public of the number of deaths in marginalized communities.

[3]In this article, Cruz and Schwencke also captured the actual structures on the street, the social class, and various forms of violence. They record that these two miles "north from Imperial Highway are home to churches, liquor stores, mortuaries, and one of the highest rates of homicide in L.A. County." Describing the class status, Cruz and Schwencke further state that few residents have a college education and that in this area residents are generally poor, with 40% living in conditions below poverty. The article provides several descriptions of violence and illegal activity; to name a few: death on front doors, drive-bys, shoot-outs, weapons and drug-use, public-beatings, house break-ins, ongoing gunshots, domestic violence, graffiti, and lastly, children living in fear.

Now on Vermont there is a middle island with park trails in the middle of the street.[4] While I was there, I saw only one person walking on it. And, as I stood on the center island, I had only a sense of isolation and separation. Perhaps, urban planning cannot always fix these issues. This island signaled more of a separation than a useful infrastructural organ or artery. Design is only one side of urban planning, and perhaps, the communities there have a significant role.

Jane Jacobs & Sidewalks as Means for Generating Life and Community

In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities,* Jane Jacobs criticizes the "principles and aims that have shaped modern, orthodox city planning and rebuilding" (Jacobs 1961, 5). In her book she offers other or "different" principles that take into account "how cities work in real life," which she contends have often been ignored in the process of city planning (5, 9). For Jacobs sidewalks become places that encourage safety, contact, and the assimilation of children. Sidewalks can be used as forms of security as peoples' eyes view and survey the street (38-47). Sidewalks can be a means of balanced contact of public and private life (77-78). And they can be places for assimilating children, and where children can play (105-106). Jacobs highlights these three aspects of sidewalks as crucial for spontaneously fostering forms of vibrant life and community. In a simple way, where there are sidewalks, with sidewalk life and business, more opportunity for public contact is available (108).

In the first chapter, Jacobs poetically uses the metaphor of a ballet or a dance to explain—along with the networks of usage that could possibly take place—the ordinary movements that already take place on the sidewalk (70). Dance becomes a metaphorical expression of the vibrant life on sidewalks. She goes on to describe the details on Hudson Street that make up the "intricate sidewalk ballet" (66). The dance of pedestrians becomes the expression of the unique movements and changes of life of the individual yet interconnected citizens. The dance becomes the "animated city streets" or the streets full of life (71-72).

Jacobs' goals for the use of sidewalks have very practical concerns, yet for a moment she sees a poetic dance taking place across the sidewalks, which metaphorically for her represents forms of vibrant life and community. In Christian thought dancing is the antithesis of mourning. It reminds us how religion can alter experience; as the psalmist said: "Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing" (Psa. 30:11, KJV). This also reminds us of how many African American and Latinx churches in urban areas embrace the ritual of dancing as a form of praise (Gonzales 1996, 20-23).[5] Yet, the transformation or process from mourning to dancing, or death to life, is what is significant. In a similar way, other classic Psalms remind us that the Lord as the Shepherd walks with His people through the valley of the shadow of death (Psa. 23:4), and how He makes the valley of weeping into a place of streams (Psa. 84:6). In my reading, sidewalks on Vermont Avenue become sights that echo such *urban gospel poetics* into the streets.

Approach for Research: Visual Sociology, Photography and Spatial Semiotics

Centering on religion in urban space, Roman R. Williams and Timothy Shortell advocate for the need for "visual social science to properly understand and engage religion and spirituality in cities" (Williams and Shortell 2021, 49). The authors specifically encourage the incorporation of photography in the study of religion and cities. The images are then analyzed using spatial semiotics. They explain: "Spatial semiotics is an attempt to integrate quotidian mobility practices (walking, riding the bus, etc.), interactionism, and image-making (photography or video) in order to analyze the range of interpretations of what can be seen in public spaces and what it reveals about the patterns of social life" (54). Focusing on the spatial structure of images, they note the Russian linguist, Roman Jakobson's "structural approach to contrast different communicative practices regarding signs of identity." Jakobson defines six approaches to the process of

[4]In the same article, it is noted: "The street was once two way, but in 1996, the Sheriff's Department requested that it be changed to a one way to help with crime-fighting efforts."

[5]For example, Justo Gonzales reminds us that worship for Hispanic communities is like a fiesta, which is "characterized by movement and by sensuality" (23). In these churches, movement to rhythm is as important as singing.

signification with particular functions: (1) referential, (2) expressive, (3) conative, (4) phatic, (5) poetic, (6) and reflexive (Williams and Shortell 1921, 55). These will be expanded upon further, but a key point is identity, and specifically how religious-ethnic identities are created and perceived in these spaces.

Each of these signs contains a particular function (55-56). For example, the (1) referential sign contains a "message [which] calls attention to the context of communication." The most "obvious referential function for religious identity" in urban settings are intended or unintended religious structures. The (2) expressive function "emphasizes the motives of the producer of identity signs." These signs become forms of agency in urban settings. Often icons function as "expressive signs of religious identity," and ordinary people in urban settings adopt such icons to "personalize their space, fixed or mobile." Additionally, religious dress can have an expressive function. The (3) conative function is to influence other people. William and Shortell write: "When our understanding of an identity sign focuses on the cognitive or affective state of the audience of a sign, we are using the conative function." The audience of such a group would be ones who "share [a] particular space with the signs" even if they were not present in the construction of the signs. "Concentration" in the conative function, in relation to space, becomes important. For example, when there are multiple signs in a space which we identify with a particular religious group, we consider such space as "theirs." The authors highlight that this often happens with religious, ethnic, or linguistic minorities. The (4) phatic function is defined as "signs that are oriented to contact." Phatic signs can operate to "facilitate social interaction" between in-group members. Due to a "shared culture," insider-status can be verified; usually religious attire or other practices can have this function.

The (5) poetic function, highlights specifically the use of "street art" and "murals," which will appear throughout this essay in many forms. The authors define the function in the following way:

> [The] poetic language draws attention to itself as a form of expression, rather than primarily as the medium of a message. Visual signs in public space may emphasize the aesthetic dimension of identity, or they may simply call our attention to the identity as the message. Street art is one common type of poetic sign of identity. (Williams and Shortell 2021, 56)

There were many murals, paintings, and objects of street art on this two-mile stretch that bring to mind questions of identity.

The (6) reflexive function takes note of the "code of communication." This function can be seen in signage that is in a foreign language (particularly towards the majority). When people see such signage, for example in "non-Latin alphabets," they understand that those messages are not for them regardless of the message. Similarly, religious practices can operate in this way. If a religious practice like prayer or meditation takes place in a public setting, one may come into contact with this religious practice, that is not their own, yet still be partially aware of its religious dimension (56). Those around, see such signage, and though they do not fully comprehend it, they know at least it is not for them.

Using these signs with their functions, I attempt to analyze how religion and spirituality is perceived on the sidewalk. Images of Latinx and African American urban churches become reread to understand their role in streets like Vermont Avenue. As the authors note, researchers can use "Visual data to understand social processes and to communicate them" (60). Additionally, these visual methods carry a "qualitative" dimension and aid the process of thick description. Through such "image-making," I try to capture on the sidewalk the convergence of cities and religion and use spatial semiotics here as an attempt to "analyze the range of interpretations" (60) as revealed in this street. Using Jakobson's structural approach and signs, I examine 23 photos that I took on Vermont Avenue. In total, I took close to 40 photos, which captured the religious elements of life and community on this two-mile stretch. The main questions I bring to these photos are: do these photos bear signs that redefine, reframe, re-describe this avenue? Can we reimagine "death alley" and find traces of life and community on the sidewalk? Can we change overarching narratives made by the news's headlines about this street? Jacobs has shown us that sidewalks are spaces of vibrant life and community. In connection to Christianity, is there some way to capture such spaces?

In my use of photos, another scholar this study follows is Martin Krieger's *Urban Tomographies.* For Krieger, "Urban tomography is about multiple aspects or slices of a presumed whole" (Krieger 2011, xv). He uses different mediums to capture this "whole" relying heavily on images. He adds: "we appreciate that whole from those concrete aspectival images. We shall say technically, there is 'an identity (a place, an object, a

phenomenon) in a manifold, presentation of profiles'" (xv). Notably, Krieger went on to identify and focus on religion as a subject on the urban streets of Los Angeles as well. While traversing the streets, he casually noticed many storefront churches. He then decided to seriously document them. In the process he acquired a plethora of images. He notes that these images could be understood "theologically [in context] and as historical artifacts" (71). For example, noting both areas of study, he writes: "When we examine hundreds of these churches, in light of Scripture and the source of Pentecostalism, actually, being in Los Angeles[,] . . . there is much to be seen from the street. The city itself is an archive" (71). Krieger explains how different textual references on the churches could be observed and studied, such as "ethnicity, language, religious denomination or sect, and theological stance" (73). Through such references, one can discover unorthodox religious perspectives representative of cultures in the urban city. Krieger explains:

> How those references are to be understood might well be *unorthodox*, given the systems of authority and education for many of those who participate in and lead storefront houses of worship. Yet these interpretations are in effect commonplace in this culture, not at all esoteric, and may *reflect a new orthodoxy*. Of course, for storefront houses of worship of denominations other than Pentecostal, or other religions, one might expect different scriptural themes, drawn from different scriptures. (Krieger 2011, 88)

Krieger reminds us of the ubiquitousness of urban churches on the streets of Los Angeles and that their very presence tells of different things: modern religious histories, ethnic and religious cultures, urban theologies and specific beliefs. In a similar way, in the textures of these walls, I tried to identify narratives of life as reflected in these new orthodoxies.

Michel De Certeau and "Walking in the City"

How can one engage the space that one is studying? And can that approach bear any meaning? Walking in an urban space, that is, immersing oneself in it, becomes an important part of this study. Several scholars have used walking methodologies to explore urban space noting how it can be used in various ways: for example, to record one's understanding of place and histories of place while "on the move" (O'Neill & Roberts 2019); and to explore an entire city or place in proximity (Helmreich 2013). In his classic work, Michel De Certeau's "Walking in the City" from his book *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) similarly reminds scholars of the importance of studying things from the ground. "Walking" for De Certeau is an approach that questions the "visual, panoptic, [and] theoretical constructions" from above that categorize spaces, and suggests the practice of "walking" "down below" to capture how ordinary people or "practitioners" make use of spaces that cannot always be seen (93). Michel De Certeau, like Jacobs, similarly saw the importance of the practice of ordinary life in cities. In his book he notes that everyday practices must be taken into account, and that practices as "tactics" cannot always be contained within sociological models, or what he calls "strategies" (59). For De Certeau, strategies are used to implement particular structures or "strategic models"; however, practices in the form of "tactics" seek "opportunities" to reuse and resist these structures for their own benefit (xix).

His chapter on "Walking in the City" presents these two views in a visual way: one from an overarching and overpowering panoptic view, and the other from a view down below (91-93).[6] From a high tower above one can see the city as a whole and becomes an all-seeing eye. Whereas, from down below, one walks the streets and uses them in unintended ways: "[t]hese practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen" by the panoptic, all-seeing eye (93). Religion on the sidewalk of Vermont leaves traces of how its users reuse the sidewalk to express their religious and spiritual lives. In my view, they become the religious "poetic and mythic" experiences that resist, reshape and redefine death (93). As I walked on the ground, visual sociology along with spatial semiotics, was used to capture such re-usages of street spaces.

[6]The beginning of his chapter begins above from "Manhattan from the 110th floor of the World Trade Center" looking down on the city (91) which creates an "immense texturology spread out before one's eyes" (92). This view from above is like an informative and well defined map.

From the Tower to the Ground

In Cruz and Schwencke's article "South Vermont Avenue: LA County's Death Alley," there is an image which contains an aerial view of the street landscape, documenting 61 deaths since 2007 in this two-mile stretch.[7] I decided to take a walk on this street and to view "death alley" from the bottom view. For De Certeau, when one looks down on the city, they "[totalize] the most immoderate of human texts" (1984, 92). When one treads the ground, they escape "the imaginary totalizations" and enter other spaces. We leave the geographical and enter "an 'anthropological,' poetic and mythic experience of space" (93).

Arriving at Vermont Avenue

Driving over to South Los Angeles from the Inland Empire, I took a couple freeways and eventually was on the 105 heading west. My exit was Vermont Avenue. I pulled off the freeway, made one right, and then one more right, and parked on 115th Street near some run-down apartments, a mechanic shop and cars that maybe have been on the street for months, or even years.[8]

Since I grew up around this area, these streets brought me back to the days of my childhood. On 115th street, I was right next to Imperial Ave—the very street where I once lived for a decade. Imperial Avenue is full of warehouses, factories, liquor stores, worn out apartments, and of course urban churches. Sometimes the small streets near Imperial looked a little intimidating to walk down. The large factories and warehouse buildings often covered the corners of these streets and overshadowed the pavement. Whenever you entered such small streets, it felt like you initially walked into a shadow. But if you kept walking, you would see a few people sitting in their front yards and ordinary houses picketed off with fences. That's what I saw that day.

On 115th street and Vermont there was some peace and quiet. I looked down at Vermont and got ready to head towards Manchester. Immediately, the hustle and bustle of the road got louder and louder. As I walked on the street, car engines bustled, gangster rap and *corridos* blasted out of car stereos, small foot traffic went about, and the faces of browns and blacks colored the street. Some were selling things (i.e. clothes, fruits, tacos, miscellaneous objects) on the sidewalks; some were walking into stores to buy something maybe to eat and drink; some were walking to a destination using their phone; and some were just roaming the street due to homelessness. The sidewalks, street corners and vacant lots on Vermont Avenue were at times covered with waste, yet here and there religion permeated into the street. I began my walk through 'death alley' looking for gleanings of life.

Walking on Vermont Avenue & Finding Narratives of Life

Moving forward, I will cover topics thematically to help the structure of this article. The photos cover different themes, with some overlap, such as social injustice, religious symbolism, religious signs with evangelistic purposes, religious schedule of services, and lastly, murals with religious significance.

As noted above, the first photos to consider are related to a young African American boy named Anthony "AJ" Weber, who was shot and killed by a Los Angeles sheriff on February 4, 2018 just a mile from his home (Solis 2020). The online article—and there are not that many—states that AJ was shot 16 times. The police said that he had a gun on his waistband, however at the scene they did not find a gun. The mural of AJ (Figure 1), painted by an artist named Pasacio, is a large painting on the wall of a Hispanic auto parts store called Manuel's Auto Parts. One sign operating here is the poetic sign. It functions to express an "aesthetic dimension of identity" (Williams and Shortell 2021, 56). Simultaneously, because this is a portrait of AJ, his identity—including

[7] Please find the aerial image here: https://homicide.latimes.com/post/westmont-homicides/

[8] See "Mapping Religion among Vermont Avenue." *Fowler Museum at UCLA,* accessed November 11, 2025. https://fowler.ucla.edu/mapping-religion-along-vermont-avenue/. Notably, this study is also in conversation with the Fowler Museum at UCLA and their project entitled "Mapping Religion among Vermont Avenue." Patrick Polk (curator of Latin American and Caribbean Popular Arts) and Amy Landau (Director of Education and Interpretations) have also been documenting religion on Vermont Avenue, creating a "spatial database of sites of religiosity" that covers a 22-miles stretch. Their aim is to capture a "true composition, representation, and modes of religious activity in Los Angeles."

his race and age—becomes its very message. The mural expresses the identity of an African American life that was lived too short. In aesthetic form it memorializes him. It echoes into the streets racial injustice issues at large. Religion can be seen here if one views this mural as a memorial—a positive remembrance of AJ, which simultaneously mourns the loss of his life. As noted on the lower left of the mural, he lived from 7/30/2001–2/4/2018.

Figure 1[9]
Mural of AJ, Los Angeles

Earlier on the street, before I reached this mural, I saw a small sign that read "Justice for AJ" (Figure 2) and wondered who this was referring to? A few blocks later, I learned a little bit more about AJ. His mother Demetra, is now a voice for police accountability.[10]

The public mural and message ("Justice for AJ") can be seen as a poetic sign reflecting aesthetic forms of identity, particularly of the marginalized African American community. This mural also reminds us of Vermont Avenue's history of homicides and title ('death alley'), yet it begins to problematize this narrative as it points to a remembering and honoring of human life.

Figure 2
Justice for AJ

The poetic sign and other signs were seen on other mural paintings near the sidewalks of Vermont Avenue. There are religious implications in these other murals, particularly, themes of life that stand in direct contrast to death. In relation to identity, the mural below (Figure 3) contains a strong

[9] This, and all other photos in this article, are my own photography.

[10]The same article states that AJ's family attempted to sue the police. The investigation that took place generated over 700 pages, yet mainly focused on questions that revolved around whether AJ had any gang affiliation, and if he had a gun before the event (Solis, 2020). The information about AJ's involvement remained unclear due to the lack of witnesses. The public only knows that he became a target, which his mother protests for unjustifiable reasons. While the sheriff's department has said they would provide transparency, Demetra has felt they have done otherwise. The article records: "Demetra says, 'It was a lie. It was a complete lie that he [sheriff official Alex Villanueva] was going to be transparent. It's been two years since AJ was killed and we just got those reports. Other than the officer's original statement there was no investigation into that officer'" (paras. 10). Adding the global pandemic into the article, the author writes that Demetra wanted to participate in the recent Black Lives Matters protests, however, was unable to do so due to sickness. The author documents that on May 28, 2020, 20 officers raided Demetra's home with no mask and without providing a warrant. The source indicates that "[a]ccording to a complaint filed on behalf of the family by the American Civil Liberties Union, LAPD officers said they were looking for a suspect with a gun" (paras. 18-19). After the raid, Demetra caught the virus. This article's details contextualize this mural and AJ's life within a moment of crisis—including both the global pandemic crisis and racial issues in society.

representation of ethnic identity, reflecting both the African American and Latinx communities in South Los Angeles, their histories and shared struggle. In this mural, there are historical figures (MLK, Cesar Chavez, etc.) depicted within these paintings recalling important landmarks in the history of social progress. Many symbols depict minority identities and their historical struggles connected to social injustice (the raised fist, protest signs with slogans and figures, depictions of labor workers, etc.). Such symbols or "icons" contain elements of the expressive function as seen in the icon of the raised closed fist associated with the empowerment of marginalized ethnic groups; additionally, the poetic function again is seen in relation to identity, aesthetically representing minority identities. The expressive function (aided by the poetic function) in these murals demonstrate the forms of agency minority groups employ to "personalize their space" (Williams and Shortell 2021, 55).

Figure 3
Mural Wall on Vermont and 88th

In relation to religion, in the center of this mural on social justice (Figure 3) is a tree and written over it are the words "Tree of Life" in English and Spanish, recalling the biblical story of the garden of Eden and the tree of life in the story in Genesis. With the roads leaning towards the tree in the middle, the theme of life seems to be at the center of this mural. The weaving of religion and social justice echo religion's role and influence on social movements in general. In the same mural, as it stretches around the 88th & Vermont Apartments, the mural emphasizes further themes that express human life and forms of religious and spiritual life.

The image of an embryo (Figure 4), immediately points to the beginning of life—the antithesis to death. Across this mural wrapped around the apartments, several themes of life emerged into the city streets.

Figure 4
Embryo on Vermont and 88th, Los Angeles

There was also an image of a blue bird (Figure 5), which relates to another specific religious symbol that reappeared on Vermont Avenue—the dove.

Figure 5
Blue Bird on Vermont and 88th

The symbol of the dove was one that reappeared as I walked through Vermont Ave. The classic symbol of the cross reappeared as well, yet I will focus on the dove. The dove, in the Christian religious imagination, signifies the Holy Spirit, who is associated with life in the New Testament. George Ferguson has noted the symbol of the dove as appearing in the scene of Noah's ark after the flood as a symbol of peace. Additionally, as a symbol of purity when viewed in its sacrificial usage. But he states its most important use in Christian art is "as a symbol of the Holy Spirit. The symbolism first appears in the story of the baptism of Christ. 'And John bare record, saying, I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him' (John 1:32). The dove, symbolic of the Holy Ghost, is present in representations of the Trinity, the baptism, and the annunciation to Mary" (Ferguson 1966, 15-16). All of these, especially in connection to baptism, remind us that the dove represents life and the beginning of spiritual life. Further, the dove as a symbol can operate as an expressive sign to express one's religious identity; however as different churches adopt the symbol we are reminded of the connotative function. That is, particular signs for ethnic groups remind us of a "concentration" of ethnic identity in such places (Williams and Shortell 2021, 56). Across ethnic groups, I noticed that different church groups contain the similar symbol of a dove, reminding us of the expressive function of this religious symbol. However, some of the titles on these churches are specifically in Spanish (Figure 6) and thus immediately communicate to Spanish-speakers in these communities. The other groups communicated to English speakers. Further study would be needed to understand the usage of the same symbol along with the multicultural dynamics of this space.

Figure 6
Dove on "El Buen Samaritano"

Furthermore, the dove appears in a very particular way on two other church buildings on Vermont Avenue. One church named "Do Right Christian Church" upholds two large painted doves on the front wall of its building directly facing each other (Figure 7).

Figure 7
Two Doves on Do Right Church

While another group contains multiple tiles on its outer wall with a dove descending (Figure 8) and actual

text which identifies the symbol with its biblical interpretation. The dove here is directly connected to the Holy Spirit.

Figure 8
Tile of Dove

The second picture of the dove descending was actually from a church building (Southside Christian Palace Church) near the intersection of Vermont Avenue and Imperial. The building (Figure 9) embodies the referential sign due to the large logo that reads "SOUTHSIDE" running across the side of the building. Immediately, it stands out, yet it breaks away from the normal style of typical church buildings. The referential function causes the eye to focus on the building like cathedrals or other large religious structures normally do, yet there remains a distinction (Williams and Shortell 2021, 55).

Figure 9
Southside Church

As one approaches the building more closely, one begins to see the religious dimensions more clearly. The building's wall near the sidewalk is filled with many tiles that reflect a mosaic style. Four of them (Figures 10-13) contain symbols which connect them to the four gospels of the New Testament. The images become the gospel narrative spilled out into the streets. The symbol of the king, ox, man, and eagle are identified with the four gospels accordingly.

Figure 10. Tile of Crown *(top left)*
Figure 11. Tile of Ox (*top right*)
Figure 12. Tile of Man (*bottom left*)
Figure 13. Tile of Eagle (*bottom right*)

The other tiles on the wall represent more items of religious belief within Christianity, as in symbols of the Bible, the birth, healing, the cross (Figures 14-17) and the epistles, which is not depicted. These tiles contain the expressive function. While some tiles possess a more iconographic use than others, they reassert a religious identity upon this space. These titles capture what Krieger describes as the "scriptural themes" that pour out into the streets, and specifically center on the New Testament's account of Christ's incarnation, human living, crucifixion, and resurrection.

Figure 14. Tile of the Bible (*top left*)
Figure 15. Tile of the Birth (*top right*)
Figure 16. Tile of Healing (*bottom left*)
Figure 17. Tile of the Cross (*bottom right*)

Perhaps some people would not be able to fully make the connection between the text and the symbols. Maybe some symbols, such as the ox, man, and eagle, would require more background knowledge than others (cross, bible, etc.). Thus, some of these symbols, like phatic signs, are perhaps only understood among a "shared [religious] culture," which makes their meanings more accessible to those with more insider knowledge (Williams and Shortell 2021, 56). The biblical symbols can also function as reflexive signs, since some symbols are identifiable to outsiders while others are not. They may know these are religious symbols because of some level of exposure to them, but still may not pay too much attention to them.

On Vermont Avenue, another religious element that was commonly seen was religious verses or messages on the sidewalk. Religious verses and messages operate as expressive signs. They recall the motives of their producers and work as identity signs with evangelistic purposes. Like Omar M. McRoberts has indicated, such forms of evangelism, reminds us of how churches in urban neighborhoods perceive and engage the streets as "recruiting grounds" (McRoberts 2003, 86). Furthermore, the creation of religious signs also allows residents to establish a sense of agency in their urban space. The message of salvation in these signs contain divine promises to its readers concerning eternal life and salvation through receiving Jesus Christ as one's Lord and Savior. Most of the signs reference Bible verses and directly quote them—attempting to sacralize the street with the written word. Typically, these signs are all over cities and usually appear on freeway bridges, city walls, church buildings, fences, street poles, etc. The photo with a white poster (Figure 18) was placed on a fence that was covering a construction site. The message on this poster is related to the act of confession. Citing Romans 10:9-10, the religious message expresses: through the act of believing in Jesus Christ's substitutionary death and resurrection, and through verbal confession, one becomes saved. Thus, the purpose of these signs—operating as expressive signs—contains the religious mission of salvation. Those who posted them on Vermont Ave did so with this intention.

Figure 18
White Sign on Sidewalk

Additionally, I noticed the dimensions of time (Figure 19) and assistance (or help) on the streets. To my disadvantage, there are hardly any pictures I took that capture the amount of actual foot-traffic on Vermont Avenue in relation to religious activity. There was foot traffic for ordinary events (shopping on the

street, traveling, etc.). However, the actual religious activity of people was not captured on the sidewalk. I considered how I could reimagine such activity? Can anything help to understand the movement of traffic, or life on the sidewalk? The only thing I could think of was the schedules advertised on these structures that indicated when their religious services took place. On set times, especially Sunday mornings, the traffic of footsteps on sidewalks is on high and many shuffle in and out of these church doors.

Figure 19
Order of Service

These signs function as invitations and as means of promotion, recalling the expressive sign since there are particular "motives" behind their usage (Williams and Shortell 2021, 55). The conative function is also at work for the times of these services on these various church buildings magnifies moments of concentration, both religiously and ethnically if one considers the aspect of language (Figures 20-21).

Figure 20
Iglesia Cristiana and Schedule

Figure 21
Iglesia Juan 3:16 and Schedule

Conceptually, these signs became windows of foot traffic and capture what Jane Jacobs would call the vibrant life or "daily ballet" on the sidewalks (Jacobs 1961, 70). Jacobs also frames the ballet as happening at different times of the day. Reiterating the conative function, additionally in Figure 21, there is a direct reference to a classic scriptural verse (John 3:16) written in Spanish, which reminds us of the gospel message of eternal life being communicated to the Hispanic community.

Lastly, as I walked through streets, murals filled with religious imagery and sentiments were painted across walls. In fact, in the two mile stretch where I walked once existed the famous painting of Jesus with his hands extended by the muralist Kent Twitchell—yet it was removed and painted over. The painting reminds us of the ubiquitous number of images of the Passion in urban streets and the acceptance of religiosity in black and brown communities (Vergara 2015).[11] Another mural by *SMART* painted down the street conveys a gesture of help (Figure 22), but in a more poetic and visual way.

Figure 22
Mural of Two Hands Holding

Near this mural, on the side of the same building, an image with more religious connotations is painted. It captures a woman in the act of bowing, possibly praying, and holding a small cup (Figure 23). This woman's act expresses the reflexive function, since many know she is bowing or praying, but are not fully aware of all the religious dimensions operating. In the mural, located on the front of the building, the hand from above contains clouds on the wrist, and echoes religious symbolic interpretations.

Figure 23
Bowing (praying?)

George Ferguson writes: "In the early days of Christian art, Christians hesitated to depict the countenance of their God, but the presence of the Almighty was frequently indicated by a hand issuing from a cloud that hid the awe-inspiring and glorious majesty of God, which 'no man could behold and live' (Exodus 33:20). The origin of this symbol rests in the frequent scriptural references to the hand and the arm of the Lord, symbols of His almighty power and will" (Ferguson 1966, 47). The hand, in this religious interpretation, as descending from a cloud contains supernatural references. Yet this painting still reflects the more human side of help and compassion, as seen in the hand's normal skin and features. The depiction of a hand reaching out to help, reminds us of religions' tendency on sidewalks to reach out and to be factors of life in urban communities. In these murals (Figures 22, 23), though religious interpretations can be made, they contain ideas of ordinary human acts as well. Helping on Vermont Ave. is spiritual, but it is also practical. It is not limited to the religious dimension, though religion has its role. The mural of the hand reaching for another hand (Figure 22) functions as a poetic sign to represent forms of religious and social life on Vermont Avenue. This act of help is realized in both the religious centers offering spiritual and practical help, and in community centers like the local YMCA supporting the needs of the youth. Here, communities

[11] Here you will find Kent Twitchell's mural along with other murals of Jesus in urban neighborhoods by different artists. There are a significant number in the Los Angeles area.

work together so that human life can thrive and urban churches, in their own ways, remain a part of that story.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to show that on the ground there are narratives of life across the textures of the sidewalks on Vermont Avenue. These images along with spatial semiotics have provided me with a glance at how "death alley" is not only a site with a narrative of death. On the ground, near its sidewalks there are forms of life which appear in many forms. The sidewalks become a place that tells stories. Though some sidewalks have been sites of pain and loss, sidewalks on this street also express life and community, as seen in works of art, religious structures and imagery, and community organizations on Vermont Avenue. This walking method, in conversation with photography and spatial semiotics is merely an entry into understanding urban religious life. Of course, more work could be done and is needed in direct conversation with community voices. Yet, through walking, this article tries to uncover stories of religion already written across the urban fabric.

In a limited way, the vibrancy of life can be documented to some degree through these photos. Through walking these streets of my childhood, I attempted to redefine the narratives of death placed on Vermont. These photos try to capture those forms of religious life that are a part of resisting such accounts of death, and in their own ways, inscribe life onto the streets. Like many streets in Los Angeles—urban churches and religious imagery are a part of the city's fabric. They not only represent "theologies of the streets," and unique materializations of Christianity, but an *urban gospel poetics* which in the hands of Latinx and African Americans have been used to change situations ridden with death into moments that celebrate life.

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Witchcraft and the Theology of Development in Malawi: A Case Study of Youths' Involvement in Witchcraft Accusations and Violence

Timothy Kabulunga Nyasulu

The article examines the involvement of youths in witchcraft accusations and violence and its impact on development. Youths are the largest sector of the population in Malawi, estimated at half of Malawi's population. If strategically harnessed, this demographic dividend could help the nation achieve its ambitious development aspirations (UNICEF–Malawi Youth 2020). The implementation of the vision "Malawi 2063" is largely reliant on energetic young people to achieve the development aspirations of the nation (Resolution Malawi 2063). Unfortunately, there are impediments such as witchcraft related issues that distract youths' focus on development. Young people's involvement in perpetrating witchcraft accusations and violence in the country has affected the development of the country.

This article aims to critically examine youths' involvement in witchcraft related accusations and violence and its effects on development. Witchcraft accusations and violence sabotage the development conscience of the people of God. They also provide a fertile ground for passing on witchcraft beliefs and accusations to the next generations, thereby weakening dependence on the power of God. The article advocates guiding and empowering young people in transformative engagements which would not only provide a conducive environment for economic development in society but also build a society of responsible and accountable citizens. The article is a theological contribution to the debate and discussion of the importance of churches' involvement in eradicating witchcraft related accusations and violence. It will suggest ways of dealing with this vice.

A case study situates the typical behaviour of young people in many societies in Malawi, and generally in Africa, when it comes to witchcraft-related issues. For privacy and security purposes, I call the late chief GVH Chim'bwabwa. The accused is named Chinyama. The two are the key characters in the scene. This is qualitative research based on interviews and observations at the scene. Section one of the article is an introduction to the situation. It presents the importance of supporting the potential of young people in society. It also expands the problem statement and the research methodology that was used. Section two is about witchcraft and theology. This section draws attention to theological teachings on witchcraft and the importance of youths in society, demonstrating that they can be of value to society. Section three is the presentation and analysis of the events of the case study that happened in Rumphi district. The last section is about the conclusions and the way forward.

1. The Importance of Engaging Youths in Responsible Citizenship And Development

A true church is concerned with the affairs of its members in church and society. Participation in dealing with witchcraft issues affects the growth of the church and the development of the country. The vulnerable, such as youths are the most affected. Yet the majority of the society that are negatively affected by witchcraft issues are the youths, who could be energetic leaders of our communities. They need guidance. Sometimes their curiosity to know and discover things by themselves entangles them in situations that may easily induce them to indulge

themselves in activities that jeopardize their focus. Things like drug abuse, violence, and addictions among youths are influenced by their desire to explore through peer pressure and lack of proper guidance as they grow.

If well focused, youths have the potential to bring about positive change and make a significant contribution to society. The need to give them opportunity to participate in productive decision-making discussions, have their voices heard, and empower them to become active citizens to shape the future of their country cannot be over emphasized (Mandalu 2023). Youth's participation in development in any country is pivotal. To a large extent the Malawi government rests its hope on the youth to implement Malawi Vision 2063. At the workshop organized by the National Planning Commission (NPC) of Malawi at Mponera, Dowa in 2021 this was clearly emphasized under the theme, "How can the youth be involved in the implementation of the Malawi Vision 2063" (UNICEF 2021). At the end of the workshop, strategies of how youths might be engaged in supporting and implementing Malawi Vision 2063 were drafted.

It becomes a great concern when youths are left alone, abused, overlooked, undermined and sometimes indulge in acts that demean their God-given responsibility in society. The gain that would be realized from this largest and strongest sector of the population would be enormous in both church and state. They are a vibrant human capital. If well guided and empowered, they can help the nation achieve its ambitious development aspirations. The United Nations experts state that Africa's young people, who are over seventy percent of the population, have the potential to be key to Africa's sustainable development. Guarding them against peer pressure, drug abuse, vandalism, violence, and some traditional beliefs and customs that distract them to build their conscience and to develop their lives might be necessary.

Youths' involvement in perpetrating witchcraft accusations and violence has recently become strangely rampant in Malawi. Church leaders like Bishop Martin Mtumbuka (Nation Publication 2019, 2023, 2024), have lamented that youths' participation in witchcraft accusations and violence in Karonga Diocese distracts young people from concentrating on their future development and education. He ascribes this problem to ignorance and illiteracy, and he encourages young people to concentrate on education. If we are to achieve and implement vision "Malawi 2063", youths, who are in the majority, have to be guided into right paths of behaviour (Resolution Malawi 2063). The youths' involvement in perpetrating witchcraft thoughts, accusations and violence is a serious retrogression and stumbling block to Malawi's development. It has been noted with concern that many youths are absent from school when there are incidences of witchcraft accusations. Young people are easily swayed away from their focus if not well guided. They are more interested in participating in witchcraft related matters than their studies. In the case study discussed below, young people spent almost two weeks and some days at the scene. Some would even avoid classes just because they wanted to be part of the talks surrounding the event.

The purpose here is to examine youth's involvement in witchcraft related thoughts and accusations, and to learn from the case study and find ways of preventing the kinds of acts that sabotage people's development conscience. Witchcraft related anxieties and accusations are agents of poverty because they hamper the vision of self-development. They doubt the abilities and possibilities of self-development. Above all they undermine the trust and power of God. To bring up our youths in a witchcraft anxiety and accusation-free environment, the church, apart from preaching from the pulpit, has to work hand in hand with other stakeholders including the government law enforcers that protect the vulnerable like the youths. Ruiz (2011) writing from a western point of view, also believes that the church can work with intellectuals to speak against witchcraft accusations in society.

It is possible for African nations to borrow a leaf from the western world. In Europe, witchcraft accusations, trials and punishment stopped as early as the 17th century when the clergy and the intellectuals started to speak against the trials.[1] At that time the region lost a lot of people who were tried and murdered because of having been accused of practicing witchcraft (Ruiz 2011). Europe is a good

[1] Discussions with Prof Paul McKenna from Lancaster University (UK) during dinner in March 2024 when I visited the University for African Research and Innovation Partnership (ARIP). Part of Lancaster campus was a place where witches were murdered.

example not only of how people managed to handle witchcraft issues by sabotaging the stories about witch-accusations and punishments but also by unanimously looking at it as an enemy of human rights and mostly caused by poverty and ignorance (Levack 2015). I think that instead of focusing their attention on accusing others, people should start focusing on improving their social economic situation. In Europe, religiously witches, if they existed, were regarded like any other sinner, therefore left for God himself to judge. The church continued preaching against witchcraft like against any other sin without the actual prosecution and killing of the accused.

In the examining the case study before us, we are reflecting on how the involvement of the youths in witchcraft accusations and violence can be eradicated. In the case study in Rumphi district we want to learn that failure to bring up and empower young people in transformative engagements when they are still young breeds bad behaviour. Instead of fearing the Lord they fear witchcraft. Instead of focusing on building their own future they spend time thinking about witchcraft. Instead of developing themselves they spend their time dealing with their fears of witches in their neighborhood. In this case young people are not able to plan and invest in their future because of such fears. As a theological contribution the article persuades young people to stop engaging in witchcraft related stories, accusations and violence. In other words, the case study chosen about the disappearance and the death of a *Fumu ya Muzi* (group village headman) provides one of the typical scenarios of the behavioural dynamics displayed by young people, which if properly studied can help us to determine the causes of such behaviour and find ways of helping them.

A qualitative research method is very suitable. Scholars like William Reid, Anne Fortune, and Robert Muller Jr. describe qualitative research as being able to provide a textured view of social context and systems that may not be possible with quantitative methods. Plus, it may also suggest new lines of inquiry for social work research.[2] Witchcraft accusations and violence are made against and among humanity. That being the case, the method drives us to investigate the depth of the matter as it affects humanity, along with providing guidelines that are achievable.

The insufficient participation of the church in eradicating witchcraft accusations and violence among the youths has been part of the problem. Interestingly, this deficiency is also found in other parts of Africa. In Soweto of South Africa where witchcraft accusations are also accompanied by a majority of angry and violent young people taking the lead in accusing the old people in their communities, the Anglican Church and Zionists have also failed to do well. It is reported that the Anglican Church in the area offered little comfort and protection to the accused. The Zionists only insisted on providing a healing ministry over the person who is accused of being a witch without any deliberate effort to help young people not to indulge in violence (Ashforth 2005).

The failure of the church in Soweto was that it mainly demonized the accused. The accuser looked good. Researchers have described such situations where young people indulge themselves in violent acts due to peer pressure, drug abuse and the spirit of violence. It is not uncommon, if youths have nothing to do in their various places, to indulge themselves in bad behaviour. Social events in the community attract the attention of the youths and may provide fertile ground for bad behaviour among some youths. It also happens that where witchcraft accusations have emerged young people get interested in joining the mob and can even participate in beating or harassing the accused. This kind of behaviour informs us that if youths are engaged in meaningful preoccupations and activities such as skills training, jobs, entrepreneurship, or businesses, their lives would be positively different.

2. Witchcraft and Theology

The literature on witchcraft in Africa is massive, with diverse approaches, based on African traditional religions. This article does not have space to adequately cover matters on witchcraft and traditional religions in African. To maintain my focus on the topic, this section is briefly looking at witchcraft and theology so that we are able see what the Bible says about witchcraft and how God expects us to treat witchcraft related matters.

To assist the youths to avoid indulging themselves in witchcraft accusations and violence, one has to sensitize them to the power of God and to the importance of their own potential according to the Bible. They need to know and understand the vanity of relying on belief in witchcraft powers and the accusations and violence leveled against other people. Youths are very important to God. God takes care of

[2] https://onlinesocialwork.vcu.edu, August 2022, and also see Quality Research Work by Anne E. Fortune.

them as well all members of the society. This section provides a biblical theological study of witchcraft by looking at some verses that have to do with witchcraft in the Bible, and also what young people can learn from it. The main purpose is show that the Bible condemns the practice of witchcraft and to warn people against relying on divination and witch hunting.

The Old Testament is full of practices of divination, sorcery and soothsaying (Schofield 2003). Such practices are strongly discouraged and are regarded as unnecessary for those who believe and trust in the God of Israel. God is the one who will perform wonders for his people and who will reveal to them what they need to know. According to Amos 3:7, the words "Surely the Lord God does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets" is good evidence. God's purpose of revealing himself is that people may know him and follow him accordingly. According to Schofield, "God can be trusted to watch over his people, to bypass the chosen channels of his grace and guidance by occult means is a sure sign of faithlessness" (Schofield 2003).

If a man equates himself with God, he is wasting time. God does not share his glory with any humanity. God is more powerful than all powers including all spirits, real and imagined, and he delivers people from fear of them. For Paul Hiebert (Hiebert and Meneses 1995, 172), He is God whose power cannot by compared with any human beings' acts and the church should present the biblical views of the power and the greatness of God to people in order to deal with witchcraft fears. However, the Bible also acknowledges that through the influence of the devil, Lucifer (Isaiah 14:12-15), there are people who can claim to have powers like those of God. These verses capture the impact of the Fall of Lucifer on humanity in the Garden of Eden on earth. Since then, the kingdom of darkness has had some force with which to stand against the power of God. The Bible recognizes the existence of witchcraft from creation. This cannot be a big surprise to people who know and believe in the devil's existence. At the same time since the fall of humanity, church people have come to recognize the force that stands against Yahweh and his followers, and this force intends to divert and separate humanity from God.

However, the story of God's calling of Abraham in Genesis chapter 12 is a sigh of relief. It is a new start in which God is preparing to mend the relationship between humanity and himself. Through Abraham, God is creating a covenantal relationship (Vanhoozer 2005, 135). To Noah, in Genesis 9:15, God promised not to destroy his people again through the deluge. But with Abraham God established a covenant. Through Abraham he announced he would save his people and be their God. They would be his people if they followed Abraham. God's words to Abraham (Gen. 12) are very clear that he will make a great nation and bless them with everything they need. He repeats the same sentiments to Moses (Exod. 6:7), David (2 Sam. 7:13), and to almost all the prophets (Isa. 5:5; Jer. 30:18).

Some missiologists have taken these covenantal verses to be strong missiological statements. God is committed to saving his people from all evils including witchcraft. Those believing and trusting in him are supposed to propagate this commitment of God to his people. This God is willing not only to create a new relationship with people but also provide protection (Psalm 23). This Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is the Almighty God. His might can never be conquered. Trusting in the God of Abraham requires a total surrender and submission which demands the follower to lay down all other arms that one may find and trust on earth. There is no other power above him; all other ground is sinking sand. When one relies on God, God provides everything that individual needs.

One of the outstanding sins that witchcraft causes in people is the practice of idolatry. Yet the Old Testament condemns idolatry strongly. Divination and witchcraft hunting are very close to idolatry. The practice of idolatry is condemned because it is likened to the behaviour of harlotry in the life of Jezebel who encouraged the worship of many gods (2Kings 9:22). Instead of people focusing their eyes on God as their source of protection, they turn to people and objects as their source of protection and power to conquer evil. In 1 Samuel 15:23, the prophet Samuel gives us a good story of how people can be tempted to turn their trust to divination instead of turning to God in times of difficulties. The prophet associates this behaviour with rebellion against God and rejection of his will. For Samuel, rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance is like the devil of idolatry. In this respect divination is a serious sin in the sense that it is like idolatry whereby the trust and dependence shift to human beings instead of God. In Isaiah 2:6 judgment is pronounced against the house of Jacob "because they are full of diviners from the east and soothsayers like the Philistines." On the same subject, Micah warns elsewhere "You shall have no more soothsayers."

It is clear that witchcraft, magic, sorcery, occult, and anything related to these are prohibited in the Bible. In Leviticus 19-20 there are very firm proscriptions, "You shall not practice augury or witchcraft . . . do not turn to mediums or wizards, do not seek them out to be defiled by them[3] . . . a man or a woman who is a medium or a wizard shall be put to death, they shall be stoned with stones, their blood shall be upon them." God cannot prohibit something that does not exist, so clearly they must exist. He even knows how such things work or happen because he is the "all knowing God" with a total knowledge of all things—past, present, and future, actual and possible—in a single, eternal act, with no need to learn or forget.[4] Anyone who disobeyed these proscriptions was regarded as an enemy of God. This is evident when Saul visited the witch of Endor and condemned Manasseh the son of Hezekiah who "burned his son as an offering, and practiced soothsaying and augury, and dealt with mediums and with wizards (1 Kings 17:6, 18; 21:16). According to Rodney Schofield (2003), divination is not simply a matter of disobedience for the people of Yahweh: it is actually futile whenever and wherever practiced. The other reason why divination is condemned is that soothsayers and diviners treat people as if they are gods. The practice undermines the sovereignty of God. People consulting them shift their allegiance from God as they just look at their present situation and look for the immediate solution forgetting that God is sovereign. Everything that people do is under his control, as he says in Isaiah 44:24-26, "I am the Lord, who made all things, who stretched out the heavens alone, who spread out the earth alone—who was with me? I am the one who frustrates the omens of liars and makes fools of diviners and the one who confirms the words of his servants and performs the counsel of his messengers." Here we can see that soothsayers and diviners are nothing and are futile before God. In the New Testament when Paul lists acts of the flesh he includes idolatry when he says that "those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God." In Ephesians they are principalities and powers of the darkness.

Churches that condemn and discourage their church members from indulging themselves in divination and soothsaying are doing well (Nyasulu 2021). They regard divination and soothsaying as some of the ways of promoting witchcraft accusation among church members as well as in society. However, they need to do more. Just focusing much on disciplining their church members without closer engagement with them at a personal or family level is not enough. If they engaged more in discussions with their church members to remove fears of witchcraft it would be good pastoral care given to the members. Also, there is little that is taught to change the life of a person so that after having been helped they find something to change their social and economic life. In charismatic churches church discipline is not rigorous. They and some other Pentecostal churches just emphasize conversion and exorcism and prayers of healing because they teach and believe witchcraft related issues are demonic (Munyenyembe 2012, 211). They have not taught much about social development or on what should be done in life next. The Church should assist in both dealing with witchcraft itself and also changing the socio-economic life of the people it serves.

The power of witchcraft does not supersede that of God, and those who trust God are secured. The youths' involvement in witchcraft accusations and violence is detrimental to themselves, the church, and society. Parents should stop involving their children in witchcraft accusation matters. In Soweto of South Africa where boys and young men are considered to be inherently aggressive and prone to fighting it has been very difficult to discipline them (Ashforth, 2005). Witchcraft accusations and violence have found a fertile ground in the violence often exacerbated by the volatility of intoxication, coupled with the limited availability of state resources. These have caused harm and destruction in society. Soweto has become a place of danger and fear. Similarly, taking from his research and experience in Bolivia, Robert Priest (2013) noted that witchcraft accusations are mainly ascribed to jealousy, unemployment, unfair distribution of resources, a form of stealing other people's property, etc. In Malawi, most of these violent acts are ascribed to need and greed, the high unemployment rate, unfair distribution of resources, and also as a form of theft so that they acquire what they want by force.

Still, a person who practices witchcraft is doing evil. He claims to have power over fellow human beings. Also, divination is evil. Such people do cheat

[3] Compare Exodus 22:18, a verse invoked in European witch-hunts at Salem, Massachusetts.

[4] For better understanding read Wayne Grudem's definitions of God's omniscience (1994).

people. Their practice too undermines the power and sovereignty of God. Also, the person who goes about to seek help from diviners or soothsayers or witchdoctors is also doing evil because he fears powers of the darkness. The accuser too is doing evil because he employs suspicions and allegations which might be wrong unless proved, or if a person accepts them. Through study of the Bible we see that the power of God is above all powers. It is this power that human beings have to trust in their lives. Spending time thinking about the dangers and fears of witchcraft is detrimental. God himself is in control of everything. Young people have to know this early while they are still young.

3. A Case Study: The Disappearance and Death of a Group Village Headman in Rumphi District

To understand the youth's engagement in witchcraft accusation and violence and find ways of helping them to not indulge themselves in such bad behaviour, one has to be part and parcel of the community. Benjamin Ray confirms this. For him, a person's presence at the scene of long-time sickness, family calamities, and funerals create opportunities where stories of causes or sources of such misfortunes are shared. Generally, such stories about misfortunes and social instability are ascribed to the work of evil men who practice witchcraft (Ray 1976; Onyina 2012).

This section presents a story of a calamity at which I was present. It is a situation in which youths were part and parcel of witch-hunting over the disappearance and the death of a chief in one of the villages in Rumphi. The incident is relevant to what happens in many societies in Malawi and beyond.

Mr. Chim'bwabwa, a Group Village Headman disappeared in the night between the 6th and 7th of March, 2024. The following day, Friday the 9th of March, I joined the village people who were searching for him. When I arrived in the morning, I was informed that Group Village Headman (GHV) Chim'bwabwa had come home drunk at around 8:00 in the evening. In the morning of March 7th, he was nowhere to be seen, the house was empty. In the morning of Friday the 8th one of the young men found his hut hanging on one of the poles of the cattle kraal, about 100 meters away from the late Chim'bwabwa's house.

As someone who is interested in witchcraft research, I decided to have this story written. Many research scholars agree that in social epistemology[5] a researcher can employ questions to probe into issues in depth (Fuller 1959; Goldman 2024). Those people going for missionary work are encouraged to employ both questions and observations so that they get a better understanding of the culture of the people they evangelize (Warren 2006; Priest 2008). That is why I decided to get more information for better analysis by probing into the issues at hand.

I wanted to find out what happened before the day the dead person disappeared. I asked the closest family members about what happened before the actual disappearance of Mr. Chim'bwabwa. It was shared that on Sunday afternoon after coming back from church, Chim'bwabwa was seen drinking at one of the beer shops near his house. On the morning of Monday, he went to the maize mill on his bicycle. On the same Monday afternoon, he went and talked to his cousin Chinyama in his garden.[6] Chim'bwabwa told Chinyama that 2024 was his last year to cultivate that piece of land because it belonged to Chim'bwabwa's sister who was staying in Rumphi boma (headquarters). This news did not please Chinyama. Later that day Chinyama went to his friends at the drinking place and told them that he was not happy with what GVH Chim'bwabwa told him at the garden. To abort what Chim'bwabwa planned to do against him, Chinyama said he was going to deal with him because he did not want to leave the garden. On Tuesday, the following day as usual, Chim'bwabwa went to spend his day drinking with friends. He continued talking to his peers about his intention to grab the land from Chinyama to give it to his sister who was staying in Rumphi. The tension between the two grew because of the landownership dispute, and many people in the village knew about it. Culturally, the words of Chinyama were dangerous because the words, "I will deal with him," have the connotation of the intention to kill. As such these words were believed by many to mean that Chinyama wanted to inflict harm on Chim'bwabwa. Indeed, Chinyama was later accused of having been the one to have caused the death of Chim'bwabwa.

[5] Social epistemology refers to a broad set of approaches that can be taken to construe human knowledge as a collective achievement. This includes the evaluation of the social dimensions/scopes of knowledge or information.

[6] Chinyama and Chim'bwabwa were brought up together in the same house, although Chim'bwabwa was older than Chinyama.

Witchcraft accusations can emanate from jealousy and fighting over chieftainship. I remembered this when it was shared that Chim'bwabwa was also a chief, a group village headman (GVH). As a chief he was not in good relationship with his relatives and his fellow chiefs. It was said that his relatives, who also wanted the same position, started to be jealous and to hate him. At one point the senior chief, who crowned Chim'bwabwa to be a chief, told the relatives that he did not like the way Chim'bwabwa was behaving. It was said that there were times when Chim'bwabwa was not respectful to his relatives and to him, the senior chief. Most of the time he came to meetings late and drunk. So, the senior chief requested that the village give him another name from their clan to replace Chim'bwabwa. In January 2024, three relatives went to meet with the senior chief and submitted the name of the new chief to replace Chim'bwabwa. The fight over chieftainships brought in suspicions that those who wanted to be chiefs played a role in getting rid of Chim'bwabwa.

Upon hearing that, Chim'bwabwa went to the District Commissioner (DC), to seek advice. The District Commissioner advised Chim'bwabwa that he was still the chief of the village until death unless otherwise. Chim'bwabwa took the DC's message to his relatives and made a public statement at the funeral ceremony that nobody was going to take the chieftaincy from him. Apparently, it was alleged that the message did not go over well with those who went to see the senior chief and submitted the new name. So two things dominate the story about the death of Chim'bwabwa: a land dispute and the chieftaincy.

I asked who saw Chim'bwabwa last before he disappeared? We were informed that the tenant was the last to see Chim'bwabwa in the evening when he was collecting his phone which he had left on the solar powered charge on 7th March. On this day Chim'bwabwa was alone. His wife had gone to her home after a quarrel. Another young man added that on the 6th, when he was coming from the maize meal and stopped at the bar, Chim'bwabwa had a swollen face. The young man suspected that he might have had a fight with someone and had been beaten at the beer place (although he did not disclose it).

I enquired further if the matter had been reported to the police. We were informed that they had not reported the matter to the police. I proposed that we go to the police. So, we went to report to the police in Rumphi. After informing the police of what happened we were advised to go back and continue searching. Each evening after searching, when we were away, family members were consulting *asing'anga* (witchdoctors) to seek help to know what happened to Chim'bwabwa. The *asing'anga's* (diviners) role was to help them to trace where Chim'bwabwa was. The *asing'anga* were telling people that Chim'bwabwa was still alive in the bush alleging that someone had put him there through magic. Those that had hidden him were planning to kill him or make him disappear mysteriously to use him for their business. The *Asing'anga* also said that the missing man had been bewitched so he was not able to know what was happening to him. He left the house by himself through *kusonthola*[7]. Interestingly, it was the elders who were sending youths to pick the *asing'anga* to assist the village to do witch-hunting.

During divination, a number of names were mentioned. The person that Chim'bwabwa talked with at the garden and the names of his friends with whom he shared the story at the beer shop about his garden also came out. His wife too was mentioned. Those who went to show to the senior chief who should replace Chim'bwabwa were also mentioned. The *asing'angas* further alleged that the young man Chim'bwabwa talked with at the garden was not just an ordinary man, he was a businessman who made his wealth through witchcraft and magic.

On Tuesday 13 February, Chim'bwabwa was found dead along the riverbank, with some body tissue removed. It was reported to the police. The police and hospital people conducted an investigation and the postmortem. The report showed that the dead body might have stayed in the river for a long time and that some body parts might have been eaten by animals. The police report was that there was no evidence that Chim'bwabwa was taken by person from his house. He might have left the house unknowingly under the influence of alcohol. The police advised that the dead body of GVH Chim'bwabwa should be buried immediately.

The majority of young people were furious and alleged that someone had deliberately killed the person and removed the body parts. They were also angry at the police and the hospital's people because (1) some of the suspects had run away soon after the

[7] *Kusonthola* is the Tumbuka word that is used to mean that, through magic, a person can leave the house and follow the magician unknowingly. Some say either by calling or using a cloth, you blow it at his face

police arrived. Chinyama with his wife had run to the police for safety fearing that they might be killed by the mob. (2) They questioned why the police had to protect Chinyama, the witch businessman and the murderer although they lacked evidence. But the people around did not mention that diviners had come and told them this. (3) They did not trust the report from the police and the hospital people. On Wednesday the 14th of February, before the burial, we went to the police with some of the angry people. We were told that the report compiled by the police and the hospital had to be adhered to. The police warned that no person should cause havoc in the village. There was nothing to do with witchcraft involved in the disappearance and death of GVH Chim'bwabwa. He was drunk so he might have left the house and gone out under the influence of alcohol. But the community, including the youths, could not believe this. For them some magic had been involved especially from his cousin Chinyama who quarreled him in the garden.

While we were at the police station, young people went about destroying the crop fields of all suspects. Chinyama was the key suspect. As we conducted the burial service at the village, rumours and gossiping continued. At the burial, strong and angry speeches from chiefs, clergy and youths were made, praising the goodness of Chim'bwabwa and condemning the practice of hiding and killing people in the area. After the burial, the youths continued destroying the property of the suspects as vengeance. The preacher preached against false accusations levelled against each other, urged the community to encourage their children to go to school, and urged the community to focus on self-development in life. However, we left the graveyard without a clear answer on whether Chim'bwabwa disappeared by himself, or it was *kusonthola* (magic). People left the place wondering whether some of the body parts of the late Chim'bwabwa had been eaten by the animals, as per the hospital report, or indeed removed by the suspects. This remained a mystery.

While at home, gossip continued circulating. One of the *asing'anga* said that there was a certain businessman from Burundi who had given money worth fifty-six million (K56,000,000) allegedly to the oldest man of the six people to kill Chim'bwabwa to use parts for his business. This infuriated the young men more. They went again to all the suspects and destroyed their property, gardens and houses.

After the burial, family members went to the police to give a full account of what really happened as per the police requirement. Some of the questions the police were asking the family members included whether they were able to mention the person who saw Mr. Chim'bwabwa leaving his house at night when he disappeared. The police also demanded evidence from them whether body parts were actually cut, since they denied the hospital report. The police said Chim'bwabwa could do anything under the influence of alcohol, including leaving the house and walking to the river. The police condemned the violent actions of destroying houses and maize fields. Chinyama was later released from custody as a free person.

In sum, people believed that the tension between Chim'bwabwa and Chinyama, his cousin, contributed to the demise of Chim'bwabwa. Also, the tension between those relatives who went to the senior chief with the name of another person to replace Chim'bwabwa and Chim'bwabwa himself who wanted to keep his chief position, also contributed to the death of Chim'bwabwa. Those who were suspected, and some who ran away, and some who had their crops destroyed, were close relatives of Chim'bwabwa. Even after the burial people continued not to accept the credibility of the report of the police. To them Chim'bwabwa was killed by his relatives who saw him as a stumbling block to many, i.e. regarding the garden and the chieftainship issues.

The question we need to be deeply considered about is, why would people with a majority of youths in the community, be obsessed with witchcraft stories in the village? Some informants told us that this was not the first incident. A number of deaths happened in a very similar manner. Looking at the theological discussion and the case study above, we can say that it is worthwhile to study youths participating in witchcraft accusations and violence in our societies. From observation and enquiry, this community was rich with young people, most of them between their teens and forties. There were many primary and secondary school children, especially boys. The accused person who ran to the police for rescue was in his 30s. Those who went to submit the name of a new chief were in their 30s and 40s and those cutting crops of the accused were age mates of the accused, some even younger. Most youths during this week did not go to school. It being a rainy season, the whole village did not go to the gardens to do farming activities. It was evident that most of the youths in this area indulged in the habit of beer drinking, smoking, and all sorts of

drug abuse. While at the scene, some youths were seen drunk, carrying and drinking alcohol, which might have caused their violent behaviour.

But God would like these youths to be useful, and He wants to elevate them to a significant noble task and responsibility as Paul writes:

> Don't let anyone look down on you, because you are young, but set an example for believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of scripture, to preaching and to teaching" (1 Timothy 4:11-15)

Paul saw leadership qualities in the young Timothy. He encouraged him not to despise himself, but to lead by example. The text teaches how a young person ought to behave. Youths are not supposed to despise themselves. They are not supposed to be looked down upon. Instead, they should set good examples to people. They should do the work of God. Paul was teaching that people should appreciate the leadership of young people. Paul also urged Timothy to mind the noble task of his calling. Youths should understand and appreciate their importance and be willing to take up leadership positions.

To know who young people are is important. Although the word 'young man' in the Bible has a wide semantic range, in the text 1 Timothy 4:11-15, Timothy was actually a young man. We should be aware that in the Greco-Roman world's culture someone could be a youth *(neotes*) until they were up to forty years old. According to Irenaeus, many people of his time thought that the youth ranged from 30 to 40 years. He said, "Thirty is the first stage of a young man's age, and extends to forty, as all admit." Josephus calls a 40-year-old man a youth (Antiquities 18). People like Earle comment that young age ends at 40 years old. He writes, "The word youth is *neotes, . . .* [a] grown up military age, extending to the 40th year." Timothy was called when he was in his late twenties or early thirties. He can properly be compared to many young people in many countries, institutions and communities of today. In most Presbyterian churches in Malawi members of Christian Youth Fellowship (CYF) are between 12 and 35 years old.[8] In Malawi the National Youth Policy defines youth as people between the ages of 10 and 35 years regardless of their sex, education, culture, religion, economic, marital and physical statuses (Manyozo, 2020). Some people in Malawi who are members of parliament are between 30 and 40 years old. The United Nations Millennium Development Goals III (MDGS III) considers youth to be a cross-cutting issue with no specific youth indicators, an approach that has been criticized by some because it provides room for youth issues to be buried in this crosscutting adventure (Manyozo 2020).

However, MDGS III makes specific mentions of empowerment of youths in the areas of education, skills training, agriculture, health and population. Youth empowerment also includes improved quality, access and equality in education at all levels through the provision of targeted scholarships for needy students in both secondary and tertiary education, linking up training institutions to companies for hands on training and establishment of cooperatives; ownership and control of productive resources; agricultural education and technical training and promotion of access to affordable credit facilities for youth as a way of developing a skilled and empowered youth population. Most importantly, MDGS III stated that between 2017 and 2022 the government and various stakeholders would focus on increasing youth representation in decision making structures and politics. This would include the increase in youth participation in the economy through development initiatives at all levels (Manyozo 2018).

If this is indeed the case, we can learn from the above text that young people are not only important before God and humanity, but also they should be given important tasks to serve the community and the country where they live. The country's policy is not in contradiction with our heavenly God's policy unless clearly otherwise. They both recognize that the future of any society is in the young people. In Psalm 127 the psalmist teaches about the relationship that exists between parents and children. While children are precious gifts in the family, parents have the responsibility of teaching them good manners so that they are not put to shame by their behaviour. Paul's household code is full of such instructions. Children are supposed to obey their parents in the Lord for this is right, and parents are supposed teach and treat their children well by bringing them up in the training and instruction of the Lord (Ephesians 6:2; Colossians 5:2).

The question we may ask our communities from this case study is what do parents teach their children? It is likely that the youths in the village of our case study based their accusations on gossip they encountered in

[8] Read Christian Youth Fellowship (CYF) Constitution for CCAP Synod of Livingstonia.

the village from their parents. As many people said that there had been similar incidences before, one is tempted to assume that the area is not only obsessed with witchcraft accusations, but also that witchcraft stories are passed on from generation to generation. In fact, the diviners that were called to help to find where Chim'bwabwa was, did not come from very far. After all it was members of the family that went to pick up the diviners from their homes. It is possible that these young people were influenced by the prevalence of gossip and asing'anga in the village.

4. Conclusion and the Way Forward

It has been established that young people are important to the development of the country, socially, economically, and morally. This resonates well with the Youths' Commitment Statement in Malawi's Vision 2063 where they recognize the great role that has been bestowed upon them to be champions and be at the forefront of the implementation and realization of the vision (Malawi 2063). There is a great need to support such initiatives to promote youths' activeness in society. The church can work hand in hand with the state and other stakeholders to promote youth power.

The youth's involvement in witchcraft accusations and violence is very detrimental to themselves and to society. There is nothing that is achieved from such acts. With the conducive environment of having youths in their worship services, the churches are well positioned to assist young people in guiding them in proper ways of using their time. Youths can be engaged in discussions, encouraged to join clubs, and even provided with platforms from which they can display and showcase their leadership skills.

Therefore, besides preaching from the pulpit against witchcraft, schools need to be flooded with Christian literature that has to do with witchcraft eradication. Churches should be concerned with how young people use their time and energy. The following might be important matters to consider when working with young people:

1. God is More Powerful than all the Powers in the World.

The lack of a well-developed biblical approach to reaching those Malawians who practice and believe in witchcraft and magic has crippled the development of most Malawian societies. This article has unearthed some of the reasons why people indulge themselves in witchcraft accusations and violence, including fear, jealousy, poverty, and also having nothing to do. Young people should know the word of God because God has power over the universe. With the power of God, people should be able to deal with their fears of witchcraft attacks.

Christian leaders today should take a different approach than that of the missionaries who just condemned the beliefs without careful study. The fact that God ruthlessly condemns the belief and practice of magic as noted above, does not mean that we can let it go without properly teaching village people. We need to go beyond the mere condemning of the belief. As a matter of emphasis, the church should make literature available showing that God is more powerful than all spirits, real and imagined, and that he delivers his people from fear of them. The church should be encouraged to pray for those who are sick, possessed, fearful, and insecure and help them find refuge in the God of the Bible.

2. Educate the Young People about Their Life Development Starting from their Homes

The church should advocate for good education among its people in all places. The incident in the case study chosen took place in the rural place of Rumphi district. Nyasulu's research in 2010 noted that belief in witchcraft and witch accusations is more common in rural areas among the less educated people than in urban areas among the more educated people. The argument that education is essential to most social, economic, and psychological development in life is very correct. Although all along the Presbyterian Livingstonia Mission has believed education to be the key to all the good things to which one might aspire in life, in this area it has demonstrated the opposite. Unfortunately, there seems to be little emphasis in theological seminaries on witchcraft, the Church and the society. The Church should encourage the teachers in theological seminaries to have this subject in their schools. The church should also teach people responsibility, stewardship, and hard work in life. People tend to avoid talking about issues like poverty, laziness, ignorance, diseases, failure to take care of the environment, etc. Instead, they should find ways of dealing with these problems. There should be a deliberate arrangement by the church and theological schools to address these things openly rather than trying to hide them.

3. Render Support and Service to Both the Accuser and the Accused.

True religion that God accepts is that one takes care of the vulnerable, orphans, widows and the marginalized (James 1:27). As salt of the earth, the church has to embrace people and serve them. Both the accuser and the accused need help from the church. The accuser needs to know that witchcraft accusations do not provide answers to the problems society faces. In the case study above, there wasn't any proof that the chief was bewitched. The *asing'anga* who claimed to have the knowledge of what happened to the missing chief just brought havoc to the village. People of this kind need serious instruction, and perhaps counseling, that will make them understand the vanity of their speculations. As such they should be told categorically that whether witchcraft exists or not, what is important is to know that the power of God is supreme and above all powers. The powers of darkness have been conquered by the power of Jesus. A practical holistic action to include service rendered to those caught up in the webs of fear, suspicion, and accusations associated with belief in witches must be taken. The accused people need to be cared for. They should not only be received but also supported. The accused may be living in fear for their lives. The church must have a listening and examining ear before they believe anyone who accuses another of witchcraft.

4. Sowing Seeds of Peace, Unity and Love in Young People

Nearly 500 years ago, St. Ignatius of Loyola emphasized inner tranquility through God's will, serving others, and finding calm amidst life's struggles. To him what was paramount was to be at peace with oneself, with the world and understanding that true peace comes from serving God's greater glory even amidst suffering. He taught that desolation (sadness, anxiety) is not from God but a trial to grow in faith, urging perseverance and not losing heart.[9]

Witchcraft accusations and violence destabilize peace and harmony in society and families. Violence emanates from the spirit of anger, hate, and bad relationships. These are what people are to guard against if they want to live in harmony with other people. The church is well placed to handle immoral practices because of its divine mandate. Fortunately, it has a majority of young people. The word of God teaches us that if we train children when they are still young, they will grow in a manner that is pleasing before God (Proverbs 22:6). According to Bishop Mtumbuka (Nation Publication, 2023; Malawi Nyasa Times, 2024) if the world is to do well, the church has to teach its members peace, unity and love. He said, "The church is determined to continue sowing seeds of peace, unity and love among its faithfuls as a way of fulfilling the biblical scriptures." He believes this can influence good behaviour in people, especially the youths.

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NEWS & OPINIONS

Beyond ''Guesthood": "Translation," "Traveling," and "Neighboring" as Animators of Authentic Christian Development

Lindy Backues

Introduction[1]

Christian engagement in grassroots, community development has long been marked by a tension between conviction and caution: between the desire to act faithfully out of a thick theological tradition and the fear that doing so will reproduce domination, exclusion, or cultural imposition. In response, many faith-based organizations have gravitated toward intentionally modest, ambiguous, or minimalist theological self-descriptions—postures meant to soften power, protect relationships, and preserve openness across difference. I truly respect such an impulse. Yet this very restraint raises a persistent question: can Christian development practice remain genuinely Christian if its governing theological imagination remains diffuse, tacit, or underarticulated? This essay takes up that question through a close engagement with Philip Fountain's ethnography of *Mennonite Central Committee*'s work in Indonesia, *The Service of Faith: An Ethnography of Mennonites and Development,* arguing that the issue is not whether theology should guide practice, but how it does so. Drawing on the idea of focal images or guiding motifs, I suggest that certain biblically grounded images—particularly those of translation, traveling, and neighboring—offer a more faithful and generative way of inhabiting the ethical ambiguities of development work than the increasingly recommended notion of "guesthood." Read together, these motifs provide a theological grammar capable of holding power, vulnerability, movement, and belonging in productive tension, while remaining accountable to the distinctive narrative of the Christian faith

Against this backdrop, it might be helpful to clarify the interpretive posture that informs my own reading and review of, and interaction with, Fountain's book. What follows, then, is not only an engagement with Fountain's ethnography itself, but also an account of the lenses—formed through lived experience, disciplinary training, and sustained cross-cultural practice—through which I approach his analysis.

For nearly two decades, I lived in West Java, Indonesia, where I was deeply involved in grassroots community development and missional witness. During that time, I helped found three local, community-based nonprofit organizations and later served as an early responder to the tsunami in Aceh, North Sumatra, remaining engaged in relief and recovery efforts for more than two years. Alongside—and surrounding—this field experience, I pursued graduate study at both the master's and doctoral levels in theology, missiology, and economic development.

These experiences have shaped the way I approach cultural and theological interpretation. Over the years, they have informed not only how I read sacred texts, but also how I attend to the cultural settings in which faith is embodied and practiced. Two interwoven strands characterize this interpretive approach. Each is

[1] This article is an expanded essay based on a review I did entitled, "Translation, Incarnation, and the Ethics of Faith-Based Development: Review Article on Phillip Fountain's *The Service of Faith: An Ethnography of Mennonites and Development*" (2026).

important in its own right, but taken together they work symbiotically, sharpening and deepening one another.

The first strand is shaped by my attention to deliberately recurring elements within texts and contexts—elements that function as interpretive anchors, binding purposeful action to covenantal identity and substantive theological claims.[2] What I have increasingly sought are bounded and relatively stable themes within cultural and theological discourses, interpretive features akin to what New Testament scholar Richard B. Hays describes as "focal images" (Hays 1996). For Hays, focal images are concrete, imagistic patterns that accumulate moral and interpretive force through their recurrence across diverse texts and contexts. They function as interpretive portals, offering the "meaning translator" (note: more on that just below) glimpses into what is most significant in each situation. Rather than functioning as narrowly referential rules or principles, focal images shape the ethical imagination of those seeking self-understanding, operating as hermeneutically generative archetypes—thick, evocative representations that acquire normative force through their repeated and resonant reappearance. Accordingly, in the analysis that follows, I draw on this notion of thematic emphasis as I evaluate and appraise Fountain's book. My analysis focuses on identifying themes that emerge at the intersection of the Indonesian context that Fountain describes and the biblical scriptures that inform Mennonite theological interpretation.

The second strand of my approach grows directly out of this way of reading and understanding—one that attempts to remain attentive to motifs and focal images that shape moral imagination, rather than merely prescribe behavior. Many of the New Testament's most formative images place power and vulnerability at the center of faithful discipleship: the crucified Messiah, the self-emptying Christ, the body composed of weaker members, and the neighbor encountered on the roadside. Read in this light, it becomes clear that theologically important focal images do not hover abstractly above social life; they are learned from and inhabited within particular locations. This strand therefore foregrounds questions of power and vulnerability, privileging the perspectives of those who live at the margins in a manner consonant with the Roman Catholic tradition's articulation of a "preferential option for the poor."

As one moves into the neighborhood and learns to live locally, another New Testament motif begins to surface, one that Fountain himself highlights and to which I return below—the motif of *translation*. I believe the incarnation itself may be read as an act of divine translation (see Backues 2003 and 2017b), as the Word is rendered into flesh, place, and practice. In this sense, translation—understood both literally and figuratively—becomes a critical skill of faithful neighboring, shaping how difference should be negotiated and meaning discerned. This notion of *neighborly translation* functions, in my reading, as a focal image of particular importance for development practice, and features prominently in my appraisal of what Fountain uncovers and advances in his work.

A Summary of Philip Fountain's Analysis

First, it must be stated that Dr. Fountain's fine study provides for us a rich ethnographic account of how the *Mennonite Central Committee* (MCC) in Central Java in the 90s and 2000s wove together faith, peoplehood, and development practice in Indonesia in the early twenty-first century. As someone who lived and worked in Indonesia during that same period, I find his analysis resonant and insightful. He first situates MCC historically, showing that since its founding in 1920 amid the Russian Mennonite crisis, the organization has functioned not merely as a relief agency but as an expression of Mennonite peoplehood—shaped by persecution, migration, mutual aid, and an ongoing moral "pilgrimage." Yet this identity has long been marked by internal tensions and evolving definitions of what it means to be Mennonite.

Fountain then examines how MCC's service ethos was "translated" in Indonesia (he helpfully highlights in this chapter the idea of "translation" as a notion ripe with potential for understanding this process). Rather than importing a North American model intact, MCC personnel renegotiated service within Indonesia's religious, cultural, and bureaucratic landscape, generating hybrid practices that transformed both Mennonite and Indonesian expectations.

Subsequent chapters trace how MCC's work became embedded in development and peacebuilding

[2] For a detailed methodological exposition of the approach I have developed—one that integrates these strands through motifs, themes, and guiding images—see Backues 2019.

frameworks. Although mission shifted from evangelism to neighbor-oriented service, donor pressures, theological assumptions, and organizational culture continued to shape practice. Fountain highlights enduring tensions around partnership, power, and dependency.

He further argues that Mennonite theology and development practice mutually shaped one another, producing a lived "theology of development." Ideals of peace also met the frictions of post-conflict realities and interfaith engagement, tensions that could nonetheless be generative. Later chapters explore MCC workers' complex posture of "guesthood" and the everyday practices—meals, greetings, office rhythms—through which service was quietly enacted. In these ordinary interactions, Fountain locates the fragile yet formative heart of MCC's work in Indonesia at the time.

Engaging Fountain's Analysis: Motifs, Translation, and Traveling

In much of my own writing and research (2003; 2009a; 2009b; 2015; 2017a; 2017b; 2019; 2020), I have tried to point out that theologically integrated development work should take on something far richer than an "Oxfam with Hymns"[3] posture, one that amounts to little more than lego-snapping faith remnants onto acts of service virtually uninformed by what it is we say we believe. Rather, development, Christianly-undertaken in a deep grammar manner—one that takes seriously the thematic approach I highlighted earlier—will surely produce an entirely different way of looking at the fundamental factors we discover in our life-world: they should influence us as to how we see work, humans, land, money, happiness, and the good life.[4]

Philosopher and Christian theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff made a closely related point some time ago. He urged Christian development theorists and practitioners to resist defining themselves primarily as *homo economicus*, or *homo faber*, or even as *homo sapiens*. Instead, drawing on the work of Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann, Wolterstorff proposed that Christian development workers might best be served by grounding their identity in the notion of *homo adorans*—humans understood, first and foremost, as those who worship. Wolterstorff is quick to anticipate a key difficulty if we take *homo adorans* as our driving image:

> I expect that some of my readers who are Christian will already be feeling acutely disappointed and uneasy. You were hoping that I would mention something important, something significant, something that you could point to without embarrassment when engaged in discussion with, for example, the Marxist, and say: "here, on this important point of practice we differ." But you would feel embarrassed to mention to the Marxist participation in the liturgy of the church as an important distinctive, because you know that he or she would dismiss it with a wave of the hand as unworthy of consideration by an adult.
>
> One question that ought to be raised here is this: Why should you let the Marxists (or anyone else) determine *your* scale of importance? Why say to them, "You tell me what you think is important, and then I'll see if I can find a difference between us that fits *your* standard of importance." Perhaps one significant difference between you and them lies in different standards of importance. (1983, 147)

Wolterstorff's challenge, then, moves beyond questions of identity language to the more fundamental issue of evaluative authority: who determines what counts as "important" in development practice. When Christian engagement begins by yielding those standards to secular, technocratic, or ideological frameworks, faith is inevitably reduced to an ornamental add-on—tolerated at best and dismissed at worst. But when worship—together with being and identity—is taken seriously as a formative, world-disclosing practice, it cannot remain peripheral to development work; it reshapes our understanding of value, purpose, and success at the most basic level. In this sense, *homo adorans* (or, more broadly, an explicitly Christian theological approach) is not an embarrassment to be managed or defended, but a normative center from which alternative visions of work, justice, and human flourishing may genuinely emerge. The real question, then, is not whether such a

[3] This helpful phrase comes from the former director of *Christian Aid* in the UK, Michael Taylor (Taylor 1995).

[4] I have long found inspiration from economist EF Schumacher's famous essay "Buddhist Economics" (Schumacher 1969) in this regard.

posture will appear implausible to others, but whether Christian development is prepared to be governed by its own deepest convictions rather than by borrowed standards of relevance.

To his credit, Fountain makes a point rather like Wolterstorff's in several places in his book. He observes that, although MCC's work often reflected a rich interplay of theology, identity, and practice, it might have been deeper still had those elements been more explicitly and intentionally grounded in clearly articulated faith commitments. By way of illustration, he points to the following exchange:

> When I posed the question: "What is MCC's theology of service?" to MCCers in Indonesia, I anticipated a straightforward answer. My expectation was entirely misplaced. In their responses to my question various MCCers confessed to not knowing what "the answer" was or should be. Others divulged that, although they once thought they knew what MCC's theology of service was, now that they were actually on assignment they were much less sure. Still others informed me that MCC had never actually articulated a theology of service. (135)

Fountain observes that MCC's main office seemed very reticent to contrast theological remnants from their past with present-day, amorphously defined practices that had little in common with those notions MCC had embraced in the past. This left both MCCers and Fountain himself confused in respect to how MCC saw its own missional focus.

Moreover, Fountain was struck by the possibility that this confusion—this blurriness—was intentionally cultivated. He observes that when Nancy Heisey, a scholar with deep Anabaptist roots and extensive experience within MCC, attempted in the 1990s to draft a theological and missiological statement for the organization, her work ultimately "was never published" and failed to "garner wide readership" (139). This was so even though she submitted four separate draft manuscripts, each accompanied by careful and sophisticated theological critique! As a result,

> The project of constructing a missiological statement was abandoned amid fading enthusiasm among all involved. Rather than articulating a theological identity, this is an instance of disarticulation of a theology of service. It was a proactive avoidance of the production of a clear public statement about MCC's theological identity. (139)

Even so, Fountain felt it would be a mistake to conclude that MCC was shaking off all theology or "theological imaginations" (153). Instead, he implies the way they framed things caused missional focus to be *intentionally* blurry, sometimes confusing, and *deliberately* debatable, to the point it prompted some Anabaptist leaders to urge MCC to fashion a "clear theology that guides why and how they do development so that both word and deed promote a consistent witness" (154).

Fountain sees this acceptance of missional ambiguity to be the result of MCC's "push and pull" nature, with their missional core transformed and molded by local encounters and by tangible service—a dynamic he characterizes as a type of "translation" process, in opposition to a fixed program implemented and guided by an outside, imported missional core. And Fountain also found that MCC continued to exhibit missionary shadows left over from its long history, whether ones couched in donor-agency imprints, faith-based language of transformation, or assumptions about what "help" must look like, all these rooted implicitly in the sending community's deeply Anabaptist identity in flavor. As Fountain says,

> Mennonite Christian theology, spirituality, and ethics permeate the organization. They constitute a crucial dimension of the habitus within which MCCers carry out their work. (153)

Still, there existed strong impulses either to deny these shadows were there, or, once discovered, to claim that, by definition, they must be oppressive, meaning the more their impact could be dampened, the better. Such a quandary prompts one to ask what type of missional focus a Christian development agency should have at its center, a question that deserves more attention than it normally receives. Fountain's book helps resolve the quandary, while still leaving some dilemmas for us to ponder as we close our analysis.

I understand what Fountain's concern highlights, and to a degree I agree with his analysis. Dogmatically detailing missional focus or a strict alignment with outside prescriptions is a sure recipe for erecting oppressive edifices that do anything but liberate. The impulse toward recommending "translation" as a motif designed to counter this tendency is also an excellent

move, one I utilized repeatedly in my work in West Java, in Bali, and in Aceh between 1989 and 2007.[5]

But what should this translation look like? Are we free to have it say whatever we wish? Can it turn into anything a local person wants it to become?[6] If so, which local person(s) are permitted this liberty (for local communities on the margins are themselves not monoliths in terms of voices heard or power wielded)?

In several of my own writings, I have argued for a carefully oriented interpretive posture—one that resists rigid missional blueprints imposed from outside, while also avoiding the kind of vague, "anything goes" stance that aims at nothing and inevitably hits it.[7] The reflections that follow are intentionally shaped by this commitment, and they are offered as an attempt to work consistently from within such an approach.

More specifically, as noted at the outset, I am drawn to approaches that are distinctively motif-oriented in character—methods that are imagistic and picture-driven, and that lean deliberately on metaphor, recurring themes, and guiding images. Such images must be sufficiently specific to offer genuine clarity, yet sufficiently narrative to demand ongoing interpretation within particular communal and cultural settings. It should already be apparent how this sensibility aligns closely with—and may even be indistinguishable from—approaches that place "translation" at their center.[8] I return to this point below.

In advocating for image-based missional emphases, I am not alone. I have already noted above that New Testament scholar Richard B. Hays (1996) has argued strongly for such an approach; Christian ethicists Donald Gushee and Glen Stassen (2016) have done likewise. Once again, what these scholars commend are interpretive styles that emphasize the identification of *master narrative images.* As I have noted, Hays calls these "focal images" that disclose what faithful discipleship looks like in practice. These motif-rich emphases are drawn from close engagement with the New Testament taken as a whole and are then taken up communally, often in new contexts or sites of action (such as Central Java in Indonesia).

This approach offers a promising way through the present impasse. It allows for the retention of prophetic and boundary-drawing commitments—commitments that, in practice, can never be entirely set aside—without collapsing these into rigid, a priori theological prescriptions that predefine missional faithfulness and invite the policing of orthodoxy by gatekeepers.[9] In this sense, when Philip Fountain foregrounds motifs such as traveling or translation—motifs to which I will return below, since I agree with Fountain that they are especially fruitful—he advances imaginative frameworks that hold genuine promise for helping MCC move beyond the indeterminacy that has resulted from its efforts to avoid all theological specificity.

But it is important to realize that the story of Jesus has long been a given narrative; it is not infinitely malleable. It comes to us as a received tradition with its own internal grammar, narrative arc, and moral claims, rather than as raw material to be endlessly reconfigured in service of contemporary projects. To treat it otherwise is not an act of contextual faithfulness but a form of quiet domestication, in which the story's capacity to judge, disrupt, and reorient our practices is gradually lost.

At the same time, it is a richly layered story, emerging from a distant historical and cultural context, whose resonance has extended across languages,

[5] This *translation motif* is not a new one; missiologist Charles Kraft of Fuller Seminary recommended a "dynamic equivalence" model for missiological engagement (contra a "formal correspondence" model), borrowing from translation and linguistic theory for his inspiration. See Kraft 1980. Kraft borrowed from pioneering missionary linguists like William Smalley and Eugene Nida for his conceptual funding; see Smalley 1991, and Nida 1961 and 1964.

[6] As a development theorist, I am reminded of the caution against "romanticizing the local," a move that can be almost as patronizing and belittling as it is to demonize the local.

[7] As I have outlined elsewhere (Backues 2009, 68-69), since there is no "value-free" place for anyone to stand, when we advocate for missional blurriness and "ethical neutrality," such a position always results in culturally and politically dominant "value-free" liberal values to tacitly sneak in, Trojan horse-like. This helps explain why we hear Fountain highlight long-standing MCC imported values—often theologically-inspired—still holding sway in MCC; these persisted, but in a form less colored by theological justification, and still outside in nature. Nature simply abhors a vacuum.

[8] See Backues 2003 and Backues 2009.

[9] The process I endorse has much in common with what is described in Bevans 2002.

societies, and centuries. Precisely because of this depth and durability, the story has proven capable of speaking meaningfully into vastly different settings without losing its recognizable shape. As such, it necessarily admits a degree of interpretive latitude—not the freedom to make it say anything whatsoever, but the responsibility to discern how its enduring themes, images, and claims take form within times and places. Faithful interpretation, then, is less a matter of inventing new meanings than of attending carefully to how this received narrative continues to address ever-changing human circumstances. By learning to interpret the image of Jesus found in the New Testament in a more collective and genuinely intercultural manner, we can loosen our grip on prescriptive impulses while also avoiding the cul-de-sacs of vagueness that offer no real guidance—and that risk allowing unnamed and even anti-Christian themes to slip in unexamined.

It is interesting to note that MCC seems to have caught a glimpse of the metaphor or image focus themselves, as hinted at by their own words, cited by Fountain:

> Vagueness is not . . . an unfortunate outcome of development vocabulary that can be countered through ever more precise and refined definitions. It is, rather, a requisite and inherent feature of development discourse. Successful policy "generates mobilising metaphors . . . . [*sic*] whose vagueness, ambiguity, and lack of conceptual precision required to conceal ideological differences so as to allow compromise and the enrolment of different interests." Development policy fails if it is too specific and prescriptive to the point at which it excludes key constituents. (140-141)

This raises a deeper question: Are mobilizing metaphors merely rhetorical instruments used to soften ideological differences or avoid excluding key constituencies? Or might such master metaphors also function prescriptively—metaphorically, prophetically, and narratively—chosen to shape practice in ways that keep us from defaulting to unexamined assumptions and inherited master narratives, often rooted in secularized, Enlightenment frameworks?[10] In MCC's case, the danger of such drift appears to have materialized, as program evaluation increasingly came to be filtered through ostensibly "universal" and "generic" categories like *witness*, *peace*, *community*, or donor-driven metrics. The meanings carried by these terms depend on the narratives that underwrite them—and those narratives may not easily align with carefully articulated theological commitments. To neglect the identification of missional themes, then, is to risk aiming at what is convenient or familiar rather than at what is central to the theological narrative one claims to inhabit.

Focal Images for Faithful Development Practice: Learning to Dwell, Speak, and Journey Well

It is against this backdrop that three further observations come into sharper focus. Each follow directly from the emphasis on master metaphors and guiding motifs I have been advancing and all three help clarify what is at stake in Fountain's analysis.

Translation: Faith across Difference

As noted earlier, Fountain underscores—rightly and with evident appreciation—the motif of *translation* that MCC–Indonesia adopted as a guiding impulse. As mentioned above, this theme has long informed my own thinking and practice, and I regard Fountain's sustained attention to it as one of the book's most constructive contributions.

Yet Fountain might have pressed this theme further, particularly by engaging more fully the work of a thinker who long ago commended *translation* as a central motif for understanding the Christian faith and what it means to participate in its lived expression. Somewhat surprisingly, early on Fountain references Lamin Sanneh, but only once, and only in passing.

Sanneh (2009) warrants far more sustained engagement, particularly given the Indonesian (predominantly Muslim) context in which Fountain is working and the missional processes he seeks to evaluate. Greater attention to the implications of Sanneh's thought would, in my view, have strengthened Fountain's treatment of *translation* and reinforced the claims he advances around it. By way of illustration, I offer here a brief passage from my own earlier reflections on this theme:

[10] This focus on the theologically problematic nature of Western secular culture reminds me of the insightful (yet now largely forgotten) essay penned by futurist and Christian theorist Tom Sine, entitled "Development: Its Secular Past and Its Uncertain Future" (1980).

> As we [have] heard Sanneh emphasize, . . . deep within the Christian motif is the linguistic notion of *translation* (as opposed to *dissemination*). This feature is well illustrated by the biblical image of the Tower of Babel as dramatic plot challenge (see Genesis 11) that finds its New Testament resolution in the polyglot scene of Pentecost (see Acts 2.) As the story goes, long, long ago at Babel, by way of judgment and censure, one language became many. It seems only natural to think that to reverse this "curse," these many languages (this hermeneutical cacophony) would need to be blended into one again, an image that would make sense in terms of the deep structure of scriptural Islam. . . . In Islam, God's language (Arabic) is put forward as the linguistic fulcrum and the Prophet's city (Mecca) is (re-)positioned as the world's global, topographical epicenter . . . recreating unity at the expense of diversity. In contrast, . . . the biblical narrative depicts communication and interrelationship as incarnationally translated forward (in contrast to being textually disseminated outward yet anchored to a fixed hub), contextualizing from one culture to the next in a manner necessitating humble, interpersonal communication and encounter—a process evincing significant consistency with the deep grammar of the incarnational motif. (2017b, 116)

If Sanneh is right—and I am persuaded he is—then *translation* is not merely a helpful interpretive motif for navigating new development contexts; it lies at the very heart of the deep grammar of the biblical narrative itself. At its core, translation names the way readers participate in the discernment of theological meaning. Indeed, the essence of what is at stake—not only in development practice, but also in grasping the biblical witness and the portrait of Jesus it presents—is bound up with this logic of translation. Fountain leaves significant interpretive potential unexplored by engaging Sanneh's thought only briefly. There is considerably more that could have been brought to bear in strengthening his analysis.

Traveling: Faithfulness as a Sojourn

I turn next to an additional image that Fountain highlights—one mentioned briefly above—the depiction of Christian development workers as "travelers" or "sojourners." Rather than presenting this as an abstract theoretical construct, Fountain derives the notion from MCC's own institutional culture and their everyday self-descriptions, as he encountered these in his ethnographic work. MCC workers commonly described themselves as visitors or guests, as people "on the way" rather than settled, and as practitioners whose presence was understood to be temporary and provisional. This language resonates with Anabaptist traditions of pilgrimage, sojourning, and non-belonging, even when those theological roots were not explicitly articulated. Fountain further situates the motif within broader anthropological and ethical discussions of mobility, displacement, and the moral ambiguities of transnational development. In this way, the image of traveling emerges at the intersection of MCC's lived practice, Anabaptist sensibilities that construe faithfulness as movement rather than mastery, and anthropological concern for the responsibilities entailed in crossing boundaries.

In my own writings and ponderings, I too have previously made significant use of this motif. As I have tried to describe it, "traveling" or "sojourning" for the missionally-oriented development practitioner is best understood as a theologically charged posture—one that holds together movement, participation, and restraint rather than resolving their tensions prematurely. While incarnational engagement rightly emphasizes concrete embodiment, presence, and "being with," this cannot be reduced to static immersion or the insulation of local communities from all outside influence. Instead, faithfulness requires a form of traveling participation that remains mobile, provisional, and responsive to context.

I previously have differentiated between two different kinds of traveling:

> First there is the inevitable travelling [sic] through time as a people, something which is fated by mere existence and biology, though it is not necessarily willingly embraced by all involved. The picture of the children of Israel in the Pentateuch is a good example of this sort of travelling. In metaphoric terms, this can be seen as a moving from idolatry to the truth, from one approximation to a closer one—though it can just as easily involve movements in the opposite direction. Thus, while it surely includes the normal pilgrimage of life, it is also at times taken up heroically by those who would live life intentionally in service to others. Such travelling is unavoidable, but it can be done with varying degrees of quality. As we live our lives next to others—irrespective of place

> or time—we must choose to travel toward them and with them in a manner which takes upon us a fidelity of relationship and a fealty of kinship. (2003, 124-125)

But there is a second type of traveling, a variety perhaps less common, one that can be avoided altogether (in contrast to the first type), a form that aligns quite well with the picture we have of Jesus as the kenotic savior,

> A sojourn taken up as an act of free choice, from one domain to another, easily rejected and thus costly in its selection. . . . This sort of choosing embraces certain afflictions in order to open up additional possibilities for the future. This is travelling which requires endurance, which summons strength and vision and a recognition of the worth of self-denial for the sake of a hopeful future—both for self and for others. This was the variety that Jesus referred to when he challenged his followers to "deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24 NRSV; cf. Matt. 10:38; Mark 8:34; Luke 9:23; 14:27). (2003, 125)

While both forms of traveling entail sacrifice and difficulty, it is this second that gives decisive weight to a costly, chosen mode of itineration that is modeled on the picture of the "emptying" picture of Jesus himself—one that willingly embraces vulnerability, endurance, and surrender to open new possibilities for life together. In development practice, such a posture enables outsiders to contribute precisely *as* outsiders who nonetheless seek belonging: offering perspective without domination, counsel without coercion, and accompaniment without control. When practiced well, traveling becomes a disciplined way of inhabiting the tensions between insider and outsider, concreteness and movement, humility and responsibility—making genuine participation possible while resisting mastery, permanence, and the false promise of final arrival.

Taken together, the traveling motif names a distinctively Christian way of inhabiting the ambiguities of missional development work. The traveler or sojourner is pictured, not as a figure of indecision or theological evasion, but as one whose faithfulness is expressed precisely through willingness to remain "on the way," accountable to others and open to transformation. Read in this light, Fountain's emphasis on traveling proves especially fruitful: it takes this motif from MCC themselves and asserts it as an image capable of holding together theological conviction and contextual humility, presence and movement, identity and openness—without collapsing into either rigid prescription or indeterminate vagueness. Traveling, then, functions not as an escape from theological seriousness, but as a demanding form of it, one that locates Christian development practice firmly within the costly, unfinished journey of faith itself. In its distinctively Christian form, this sort of traveling draws its coherence and its authority from the narrative image of Jesus, which alone supplies conceptual grounding and enacted force. Echoing Wolterstorff words above, this demanding image of traveling offers to Christian development practitioners a distinct standard of importance by which we might discern what Christian missional faithfulness entails. I am glad that Fountain underscored its importance in his analysis.

Neighboring: Incarnation as Shared Life

Finally, in Chapter 6 of his book, Fountain introduces one more intriguing image—a notion that, upon closer examination, also raises important questions and invites us toward careful scrutiny. The motif in question here is *"guesthood,"* an image whose theological and practical implications end up being less straightforward than they might initially appear.

As Fountain explains, MCC personnel in Indonesia gradually came to understand themselves not as experts, but as "guests"—a self-conception that draws heavily on Mennonite traditions of hospitality and pilgrimage. This motif of *guesthood* called for humility and attentiveness, yet it was also complicated by interactions with local customs, by engagement in Muslim-majority settings, and by the dynamics of donor expectations. The ethnographic vignettes Fountain presents reveal persistent tensions: between welcome and intrusion, support and patronage, and identity and adaptation. In this way, *guesthood* emerged as a space in which MCC personnel could negotiate new meanings, embrace personal vulnerability, and engage local communities through sustained relational presence.

At first glance, the motif of *"guesthood"* appears deeply appealing. It seems to offer a gentle and ethically attractive alternative to historically dominant images that have often accompanied harm on the global stage—figures such as *implementers*, *planners*, *developers*, or even *missionaries*. In contrast to these more technocratic or domineering roles, *guesthood* promises humility, restraint, and relational

attentiveness. Yet upon closer examination, it becomes less clear that this image can bear the ethical weight it initially appears to carry.

To begin with, the host–guest relationship is far less symmetrical—and far less disempowering for the guest—than the metaphor suggests. Guests are the ones who arrive, they decide how long to stay, and they determine when to leave; in this sense, *they* retain a decisive measure of control. In many cultural settings, the moral burden falls on the host to accommodate, serve, and entertain, while social convention makes it difficult to ask a guest to depart. Even when guests are deferential or self-effacing, they remain the recipients of hospitality rather than those bound by its terms. The result is that guesthood often leaves underlying power dynamics intact: humility may be performed, yet authority and mobility can remain firmly with the visitor—something I witnessed repeatedly over nearly twenty years in Indonesia. The imbalance is sharpened by the fact guests are present by choice rather than necessity—they may leave at will, yet they may also choose not to, a fact that obligates hosts to sustain hospitality, even when doing that becomes burdensome or unwanted.

Moreover, by definition, guests remain outsiders, occupying a position not unlike that of a tourist. For readers familiar with classic literature on grassroots development, this might immediately call to mind the work of participatory theorist Robert Chambers, particularly his critique of development practitioners as "tourists." Chambers offers a searing analysis of the "rural development tourist," identifying a set of deeply entrenched biases that accompany this posture—biases he carefully unpacks and critiques (1983, 13-23; cf. also Backues 2003, 141-142).

Finally—and in direct contrast to the image of the rural development tourist—there is already a focal image at hand, one often overlooked yet deeply rooted in the biblical narrative, and one I noted right at the outset of this piece: the image of the *neighbor*. This image, I suggest, flows directly from the theological center of the Christian story, which is decisively shaped by the Incarnation—the claim that God comes to dwell among us. Seen in this light, the contrast with *guesthood* becomes clear. A neighbor belongs to the community and shares in its risks and vulnerabilities; a guest does not. Guests are, by definition, temporary. They retain the option of departure and thus have limited investment in the long-term consequences of communal life, whereas neighbors remain, commit themselves, and are bound to what unfolds.

For these reasons, I suggest that had Fountain centered his analysis more explicitly on the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation—and on its portrayal of God as *neighbor*, as attested in the gospel itself—he would have been better positioned to offer a deeper and more theologically grounded evaluation of MCC–Indonesia's work. Such a focus would have allowed for greater clarity in assessing both forms of missional *blurriness*: the kind that is necessary and faithful in complex contexts, and the kind that becomes problematic by obscuring purpose and direction. It also would have illuminated the weight of institutional baggage, since neighbors, unlike guests, learn to live locally—with bags unpacked, commitments deepened, and vulnerability exposed to real, local consequences. By contrast, the motif of *guesthood* lacks sufficient theological robustness, especially when the paradigmatic image of neighborliness is already embedded in the figure of Jesus himself.

It is noteworthy that Fountain recognizes tensions within the motif of *guesthood*. He observes that MCC, even while embracing this self-understanding, enters its fields of service equipped with financial resources, professional staff, and organized projects—so that, paradoxically, it often finds itself *hosting* while claiming to be a guest. On closer reflection, however, this paradox should not be a surprise. As noted above, guests—especially wealthy and powerful ones—frequently wield considerable influence, even when they adopt a posture of humility. Fountain carefully traces this oscillation between power and vulnerability, showing how *guesthood* requires constant recalibration of authority. Yet I would suggest that had he counterposed this motif more explicitly with the image of *neighborliness*, readers would have been better served. The image of the neighbor is more fitting to the ethical vision his book ultimately advances, offering a clearer and more theologically coherent framework for understanding responsibility, power, and presence in development practice.

Put simply, guests remain outsiders and, as such, typically enjoy significant privilege; they are not required to belong. They are present only temporarily and expect to be hosted. Neighbors, by contrast, must settle in as neighbors: they learn the local vernacular, adopt the forms of interaction preferred by the community, share in vulnerability, and become proximally accountable for their daily lives. Read through this lens, it is telling that MCC–Indonesia meetings were conducted almost exclusively in English, and that a key qualification for local staff

working alongside foreign personnel was their ability to communicate fluently in that language. It is likewise significant that MCC's offices were located in Salatiga—a cool mountain city long associated with Dutch colonial administration—chosen in large part so that the children of foreign staff could attend the Christian international school based there. These arrangements underscore how *guesthood* quietly preserves distance and privilege, even when accompanied by humility of intent. By contrast, the image of *neighboring* resonates more fully with the focal images of the biblical text itself and aligns more closely with historic Mennonite commitments to simplicity, communal engagement, and incarnational presence.

For these reasons, I favor *neighboring*—understood through the lens of *translation*—as a better guiding metaphor for theologically informed development work than *guesthood*, because it provides ethical and theological depth that *guesthood* cannot adequately offer.

Conclusion

Fountain's ethnography stands as a valuable and illuminating contribution to the study of faith-infused development practice. He offers a careful and textured account of how MCC's work in Indonesia generated theological, institutional, and interpersonal tensions that shaped both practice and identity, and he attends with particular care to the fragility and complexity of missional self-understanding. Read alongside the interpretive posture outlined at the outset of this essay—one attentive to focal images, power asymmetries, and the moral imagination they cultivate—Fountain's work presses toward a deeper question still: the articulation of guiding theological motifs capable of grounding Mennonite development practice in a distinctly Christian way of being in the world. Such motifs must do more than manage difference or soften power; they must reorder presence, accountability, and belonging in light of the narrative of a God who moved toward humanity, dwelt among neighbors, and journeyed vulnerably through the world. For my part, the Incarnation—read through the interrelated images of traveling, translation, and neighboring—offers a more compelling theological center than the motif of guesthood alone. Traveling names the provisional, costly movement of faith that resists both mastery and stasis; translation names the patient, dialogical labor of learning languages, meanings, and moral worlds; and neighboring names the commitment to shared life, accountability, and local belonging. Held together as focal images, these motifs resonate deeply with the theological grammar of Scripture and with historic Mennonite commitments to simplicity, communal engagement, and incarnational presence. Joined in this way, they offer a narrative, ethical, and practical anchor capable of sustaining a genuinely Christian service of faith—one faithful both to the story Christians inhabit and to the neighbors among whom they live and journey.

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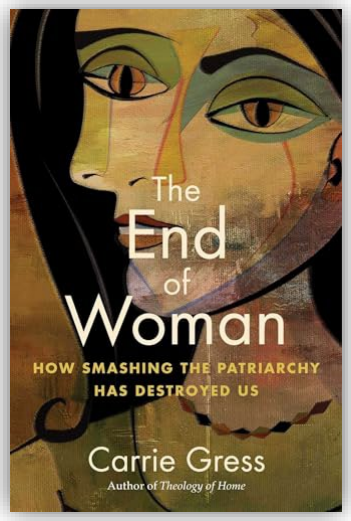
BOOK REVIEW

The End of Woman: How Smashing The Patriarchy Has Destroyed Us

By Carrie Gress

Reviewed by Diane Washburn



Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing
2023

The End of Woman: How Smashing The Patriarchy Has Destroyed Us, by Carrie Gress, a Catholic mother of five with a doctorate in philosophy, offers a rare examination of the historical ideologies that have shaped feminism and the ways those ideas have undermined the flourishing of women as women (xxi). Gress's book stands apart from most contemporary feminist scholarship by challenging its foundational assumptions, offering a counter-narrative that reframes the history of feminism through a critique of its ideological roots, and addressing a gap in the literature by drawing attention to the costs of a movement that has largely ignored women's actual problems and experiences, and turned womanhood into a costume, or role at best, as opposed to an embodied experience (xxiv). I did not expect to be shocked and horrified by a book about feminism; I was.

Gress situates her work squarely against the dominant currents of modern feminist theory, arguing—contrary to mainstream academic discourse—that true liberation for women cannot come from adopting masculine norms of autonomy and power, but from recovering an embodied, relational, and distinctly feminine experience that contemporary scholarship has largely abandoned. Building on this stance, she traces how modern feminism emerged from a flawed lineage of free-love radicals, Marxists, and women who rejected the constraints of family, faith, and embodied womanhood, ultimately teaching women that the only path to fulfillment was to imitate men (and, as she points out, often the worst kinds of men). Throughout the book, Gress contends that this movement has not elevated women but has dismantled the very concept of womanhood itself, leaving women more vulnerable, isolated, and detached from the maternal identity, spiritual frameworks, and relational forms of belonging that once gave their lives coherence and purpose, replacing them with a solitary, masculine ideal of autonomy. Her core argument is that women's flourishing depends not on becoming men, or erasing sexual difference, but on recovering a distinctly feminine account of human flourishing, exclusive to biological women, that modern Western culture has devalued: embracing motherhood.

Besides being well-researched and well-referenced, one of the book's greatest strengths is Gress's willingness to speak plainly about the darker side of the free-love tradition and its modern legacy. She pulls no punches when tracing how sexual "liberation" consistently produces unwanted children, unstable homes, and a cultural imagination that treats the unborn with shocking disregard. Her clarity here is refreshing, especially in a scholarly climate that often sanitizes these consequences or hides them behind euphemisms. Gress's directness is not sensationalist; it

is a moral argument grounded in the historical record, and it forces the reader to confront the human cost of ideologies that privilege autonomy over responsibility. In this way, the book's courage and clarity form its most compelling contribution.

The contrast she draws across history is particularly striking. Many women she profiles—women who lived centuries ago and would have been considered feminists in their own time—grieved the loss of their children with a depth that reveals a mother's enduring, formative love as well as the shared cultural understanding of the child's inherent worth (33-34). Today, by contrast, an embryo may be described as a "toxin thing" in a woman's womb, and the deliberate ending of an unborn life has been framed at times as an occasion for ironic celebration, complete with disturbing "dead-fetus" themed cupcakes (127, 91). Gress uses this contrast not for shock value but to expose how far the cultural logic of free love and radical autonomy has shifted our moral imagination, distancing women from their own bodies and from the instinct to love and protect the vulnerable lives entrusted to them.

Yet the book in not without limitations. One of the book's missing elements—which I see as both intentional and still worth critiquing—is its limited engagement with contemporary feminist scholarship. Gress's refusal to integrate modern feminist theory is part of her point: she believes the current academic consensus is misguided and therefore an unreliable partner in the conversation; I understand that she is pushing against the mainstream feminist ideology, which operates from a fundamentally different ontological perspective—one that cannot affirm the account of womanhood she proposes. But, by following only one genealogical thread—the radical, free-love, anti-religious lineage—she risks presenting this stream as if it were *the* feminist tradition. This leaves little room for the more moderate, reform-oriented feminist approaches that shaped women's suffrage, which were focused on legal equality rather than on dismantling the family or erasing embodied womanhood. Gress briefly acknowledges this difference, but the book doesn't fully develop how suffrage-era feminism diverged from the ideological radicals she critiques. As a result, the reader is left without a clear sense of how these competing visions interacted, overlapped, or diverged over time, which would have enriched the argument and sharpened the distinction she seeks to make between healthy reform and destructive ideology.

In addition, Gress often writes as if her reader is already informed in Christian doctrine. As a result, some parts of the book might not fully explain themselves. A secular reader may not grasp that, from a Christian perspective, early feminist reworkings of Eve and the serpent are not neutral symbols but profoundly distorted and troubling retellings (28, 46, 52). Her argument remains compelling, but the way some points are presented may confuse a reader who lacks the same theological background.

Even so, Gress's work resonates deeply with a Christian, faith-infused approach to understanding human experience because she refuses to treat culture, gender, and embodiment as value-neutral. Her critique of free love, her attention to the moral imagination surrounding unborn life, and her insistence that women are created with purpose and relational meaning all point toward a teleological account of personhood—one grounded in divine design rather than self-invention. By exposing the spiritual and cultural forces that shape women's lives, she demonstrates how theological insight can illuminate patterns of human flourishing and human harm that secular frameworks often overlook. In this way, the book opens space for a distinctly faith-shaped anthropology, one that takes seriously the realities of embodiment, moral responsibility, and the hope that redemption offers to human communities; we are not stuck here, as sin and suffering do not have the final word. Yet, there is room for secular readers to engage its reflections on culture, embodiment, and human purpose, even if they approach these questions from a different starting point.

In the end, this book is a jagged "red pill"—unpleasant to swallow, sharp in its moral clarity, and impossible to ignore once taken. Like the moment in *The Matrix* when waking up shatters the illusion, Gress forces the reader to see the cultural narratives around womanhood for what they are, not what we have been conditioned to believe. The shock of this awakening was reinforced as I recognized how closely my internal narratives follow the patterns and values outlined for American women by early communist thinkers. The revelations presented are uncomfortable, disorienting, and at times painful, but also necessary. By exposing the human cost of ideologies that promise liberation while dismantling the very structures that allow women to flourish, Gress offers, not an easy read, but an honest one—and its very discomfort is what makes it so urgent.

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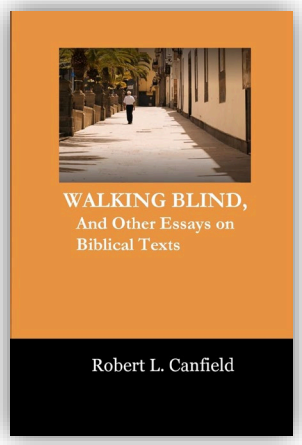
BOOK REVIEW

Walking Blind, and Other Essays on Biblical Texts

By Robert L. Canfield

Reviewed by Brooke Boyd



Clayshire Imprints[1]
2016

Robert L. Canfield's book, *Walking Blind, and Other Essays on Biblical Texts*, is a compilation of essays that challenge the reader to consider the cultural context of the Spirit-led prophets of the Old Testament and Christ-following stories of the gospel and to see the Spirit-led responses that reformed nations and transformed the hearts of His followers. In doing so, Canfield exposes the modern church's tendency to settle for an interpretation and application of scripture that is relatively comfortable, requiring minimal sacrifice, transformation or investment. The risk, Canfield argues, is a self-reliant, culture-justifying faith leading to lukewarm churches and relationships. The encouragement from Canfield is to apply Christ's teachings to our lives wholly, recognizing Holy Scripture as wholly set apart from all other writings with a presented worldview unlike any other. In seeing the scriptures as set apart, the reader is inspired to pursue a way of living that is set apart, continually becoming more holy through a transformed being that demonstrates the gospel in our daily encounters.

Perhaps the strongest case Canfield makes to the modern church is to focus on *becoming* the holy word. He rightly points to a modern world, full of information, but unable to engage in the act of "becoming" rather than consuming and presenting information. Holiness applied cannot be anticipated by those in the center of the modern world, it must appear wholly other to them. The present cultural context, set of circumstances, or norms we find ourselves in cannot inform us on how to respond. The word of God, active and alive in the heart of believers, must be the key to our own narrative.

Canfield makes the point, through various historical figures in the scriptures, that following the laws is never sufficient. It is the believer's walk and heart posture that the Lord seeks to transform by the power of His Spirit. Evidence of such a life, Canfield writes, is seen in Moses following the cloud, "he learned to follow and obey as God led and directed, without prior notice, with little preparation, little indication of what to expect next, armed with nothing more substantive than God's promise" (88). In another example, the commonly sited parable of the Good Samaritan is summarized. The opportunity to show evidence of a Christ-filled life is presented in the three men who had an opportunity to act on the spur of the moment. Readers of this parable can ask the reflective question, "How does one act, as it were, spontaneously, creatively, in circumstances that are unforeseen?" (41). Again, the laws are not sufficient, for they do not always give insight into the daily

[1] A revised and expanded edition of this book has been published in 2025 by Wipf and Stock, entitled, *Walking Blind: Essays on Faith*.

unforeseen circumstances that arise. Some would have applauded the men that did not respond to the man beaten on the side of the road because they remained committed to their plan of following the law. The Spirit, who is described in John 3:8 as spontaneous, spurs the human heart to act in the moment like Christ. No law could inform us of this culture. "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." The modern world does not need vessels that are only full of the knowledge of God, rather it needs vessels full of the Spirit of God, ready to act on the spur of the moment, in an unforeseen space, to act in favor of all people, in order for God's love to be tangible.

Canfield argues that "A feature of the modern world seems to be a fragility of meaningful relationships, an impermanence of social context and an uncertain sense of place in the world" (65). Without a sense of belonging, people struggle to be active agents in the world. Canfield inserts a verse from Isaiah,

> And I will lead the blind in a way that they know not, in paths that they have not known I will guide them. I will turn darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I will do, and I will not forsake them. Isaiah 42:16

He notes that this promise is given to a people in confusion. The criteria for receiving God's promise here is that you must be blind. This should encourage the modern world, if they are sensitive enough to the Spirit to confess being blind, they will be guided on unknown paths. Again, it is not about using the law to be sure of a path coming up, but dependence on the Spirit to lighten the path as it is walked in faith. Canfield uses the example of the Hebrews, to whom these words were originally spoken when they were in exile. "The Hebrews, in their suffering, are an archetype of every one of us in a state of alienation and exile" (68). It was in their exile that they started to consider their actions and the person of God that they were missing. They previously assumed that their ethnicity would spare them God' s wrath and that they had outgrown God's way. Instead, they find a God who calls them blind. In other words, God shows them that he knows who they are at their core—with all layers of their cultural context and circumstances stripped down—and he promises to not leave them. Following laws does not expose a person to a holy God. Rather, the context of loneliness and isolation heightens our experience of being found by God. When all else has been removed, and He calls us "blind" in the context of our loneliness and isolation, no longer hiding behind a neat facade, we hear his promise to never leave us and are able to get up and become vessels of love, spurred spontaneously by the Spirit of God.

Canfield's solution to some of his criticism of the modern church is to become vessels of love. He writes, " This generation has no excuse: Access to the text of scripture is easier now than ever before" (49). As a result, "How great the responsibility of those of us who have heard" (59). But this statement can be distinguished from claiming a generation is without excuse. Our access to the gospel has increased, as well as access to every other kind of information. The plethora of information, as well as the people who are allowed to create the information, is ever expanding. It may be more helpful to kingdom building to say that with incredible access to information, more intentional time must be dedicated to culture building, emotional intelligence, and context awareness. We can agree that the eyeglasses of information overstate a sure path intended for the faithfully blind to navigate in the moment.

The challenge is for Christians to take up the responsibility of culture building. There is no time for finding where Jesus' ways might fit into our existing lives. Jesus lays out the life he desires for Christians to have with Him. In a world with tremendous technological advances and nations conflicted with globalization versus protecting national interests, we should consider where worldly culture hinders the gospel. A cure to this modern struggle is articulated by Canfield, "This is the Christian sense of martyrdom: letting the body, in this world, express another kind of commitment, another standard of virtue, one that participates in another kind of economy, in which value is made by giving and serving, turning our bodies into vessels of God's love" (50). Being a vessel of God's love is no easy task, let alone becoming a vessel of such perfection. The gutting that must take place to make room for the Spirit is severe. The scripture does not suggest that one transforms immediately to a vessel of love. It suggests that ongoing hardship and interaction with the hardships of others is what will continually rid the vessel of self and make room for the Spirit to move freely in those unforeseen, spur-of-the-moment times, when "the believer is to display in the disparate contexts of everyday life the love of God" (45). The modern world is more efficient than the church in its pursuit of wealth and health through the

use of the accessibility and quantity of information. However, the lack of spiritual formation in the modern church suggests that the accessibility of information has also overwhelmed the Christian mind leading to false comfort and inaction.

Canfield's main argument is that life presents unforeseen circumstances, moments we hardly know how to bear, including conflicts in our global policy surrounding topics that make us frightened by other image bearers. In such circumstances, the mark of the believer is not those who figured out how to follow the rules best. The mark is of those who, in the moments of unpredicted turmoil, acted in such a way that the fruit of the Spirit was poured out, and all those around were free to eat of it—that the immediate neighbor was fed in the midst of a famine by a person who was not worried about how much there was to give away, and who did not discriminate against anyone who was at the table. For this again puts aside law and leans into the movement of the Spirit, "God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right" (58).

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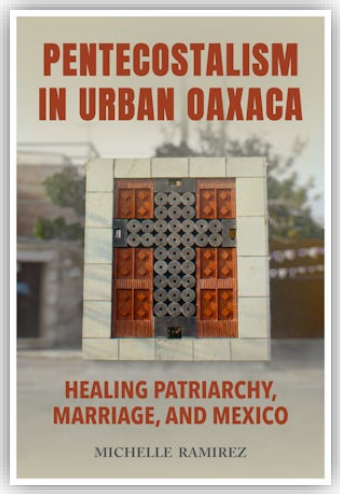
BOOK REVIEW

Pentecostalism in Urban Oaxaca: Healing, Patriarchy, Marriage and Mexico

By Michelle Ramirez

Reviewed by Christopher Valencia



Tuscaloosa AL: The University of Alabama Press
2024

Pentecostalism in Urban Oaxaca by Michelle Ramirez, is a feminist ethnographic work that explores forms of charismatic Christianity in Oaxaca, Mexico. Drawing from eight years of field work, which initially started with a partner, in this ethnographic study Ramirez contributes to the academic conversations concerning secular and religious forms of healing in the Latin American context, the significance of "foundational testimonies," the power dynamics of gender and Pentecostalism in relation to concepts like *machismo* and *machista*, and Pentecostalism's influence on marriage issues in Mexico. As a work of medical anthropology, Ramirez weaves a narrative that captures how Latin Americans in Oaxaca practice Pentecostalism, the social complexities tied to both modern and religious institutions and their practices of medicine, and the family unit in this region.

The study takes place in Oaxaca, which is the largest state in southeastern Mexico (11). The main church Ramirez explores is called the Divine Light Church (DLC). Briefly, the first chapter of the book identifies the diverse forms of medicine—traditional and non-traditional—in order to set the stage for how Pentecostal practices of "faith healing" are situated within the broader landscape. Drawing from medical anthropology, in the next two chapters Ramirez underscores how Oaxaca Pentecostals describe the effectiveness of their healing practices. Chapter 2 focuses on details of the Pentecostal revival in the "context of [the] Mexico ethnomedical system" and chapter 3 underscores how Pentecostalism's work of "gender reform" operates in a way that addresses the pressing issue of alcohol abuse by males and its consequences on families. Chapter 4 explores the relationship of "companionate marriage" and Pentecostalism, and the discourses that influenced practitioners to change the hierarchical systems that they have adopted in their marriages which are reflective of their Mexican traditions. The last chapter explores how "multilevel marketing" and evangelical Christianity have similar commitments in regard to "shaping a spiritual neoliberal subject" (19-20).

What is most insightful in chapter 1 is how Ramirez suggests that while Pentecostalism and biomedicine are often perceived as discouraging ties with "indigenous ontologies of health and healing" (22), urban Oaxacan Pentecostals are not necessarily distant from understanding emotions in terms of a "more magical and spiritual plane." Rather they operate in what Heriberto Aguilar de la Cruz describes as a "transmodern logic," a logic that is seen as "magical, religious and scientific." Thus, questioning notions of modern religion and progress, Ramirez's work points out how Pentecostalism in this context has contradictory meanings: on one hand, allegedly

refuting its past—specifically curanderos (traditional healers) and *medicina tradicional*—and aligning itself with missions to modernize Mexico (27), but, on the other hand, never leaving its spiritual touch among the pluralistic medical landscape which includes non-traditional medicine. One of the key examples that Ramirez explores is "faith healing" (37). Expanding on this, she writes, "Pentecostals share a cultural understanding that strong emotions can negatively *affect health* and therefore teach congregants that the only proper way to manage unruly emotions is via spiritual means. Emotions are strong, but God is stronger" (37, my italics).

In chapter 2, Ramirez continues to explore how Pentecostalism's healing practices look in this pluralistic medical landscape, placing it in conversation with other "symbolic/religious/shamanic [forms of] healing" (45). Ramirez reminds us how religious traditions can be therapeutic and offer spiritual and religious help in relation to emotions, while at the same time acknowledging that psychiatric professionals are also a way for individuals to find assistance with their emotional problems. Ramirez asks: "are there in fact differences between a psychological mind and a spiritual mind?" (48). We can try to separate them, but traditional forms of medicine often reconcile them, and "emphasize equilibrium" between body, mind, spirit and environment (48). Thus, Ramirez pushes against the distinctions made between Pentecostalism and *medicina tradicional* and instead focuses on "parallel ontologies," which are in touch with early Mexican psycho-religious experiences. These parallels ultimately cause Ramirez to suggest that Pentecostalism is effective because, like many of Mexico's traditions, it offers a way to deal with emotions in terms of the supernatural (55). At the same time, Ramirez still thinks that Pentecostalism and biomedicine are working together to create a new Mexican "transmodern citizenship," which allegedly works to break away from its past. However, unlike modern and scientific progress, Pentecostalism would fashion its own identity in terms of a "transmodern religious citizenship" that understands the world "as magical, religious, and scientific" (57).

Chapter 3 discusses a "foundational testimony," that focuses on the life of one person named Don Pedro, a man who was a severe alcoholic, abusive and who practiced infidelity—all which are male behaviors often associated with *machismo* (60). The transformation of Don Pedro's life through his conversion becomes a narrative that challenges these behaviors in others. Furthermore, the "foundational testimony" reminds us of the power of a story to circulate amongst a group and its ability to impress others who can relate to it. But the idea of "foundational testimonies" can also be problematic. Though single stories can be powerful, not every story is the same. What happens when stories take unconventional paths? Other scholars of Latin America that study *testimonios* would remind us that not every *machismo* story in Mexico is a success. In Chapter 4, Ramirez explores Pentecostalism's usage of "companionate marriage," that is marriage that works to maintain trust and intimacy, and how it becomes a means to deal with the negative attributes of *machismo*. In this chapter, engaging Mexico's religious and traditional past, Ramirez explains how she seeks to understand how DLC uses the idea of a "companionate marriage" as a means to "heal the curse of what many evangelicals consider to be a Catholic-Mexican machismo and other 'unmodern' gender legacies" (75).

Lastly, in Chapter 5, Ramirez examines another issue related to the "prosperity gospel" and the interrelationships between finances, poverty and health. During her field work, Ramirez encountered a health business called Omnilife (OM) which she realized shared many similarities to what was being advertised by the prosperity gospel: It was "a system of prosperity in many areas—health, economic, and emotional well-being. It was an integral system of prosperity for those with aspirations who wanted to improve things in their lives" (99). Interestingly, Ramirez relates the history of OM, which was founded by Jorge Vergara; Vergara once worked for the multilevel marketing company Herbalife which was based out in Los Angeles and which also sold nutritional supplements (101). Yet in time, he felt that Herbalife exploited the Mexican Market, and wanted to create his own health industry that benefited Mexicans (102). By examining these issues, Ramirez picks apart the tensions between the American driven ideas of the "individualistic pursuit of economic gain" and points towards a possible "cultural moral ethic of care" embodied in ideas like *familismo* (103-104).

Unlike many ethnographies on Christianity, Ramirez's work is clear and intimate, and places together strong theoretical ideas and detailed field work in insightful ways. She adds another layer to issues being explored in Pentecostalism, namely an investigation of Pentecostalism's interactions with other forms of traditional and non-traditional

medicinal practices. In the process, she questions an alleged break with a "Mexican past." Her work reminds us that many religions and forms of spirituality can operate therapeutically and thus have medical relevance.

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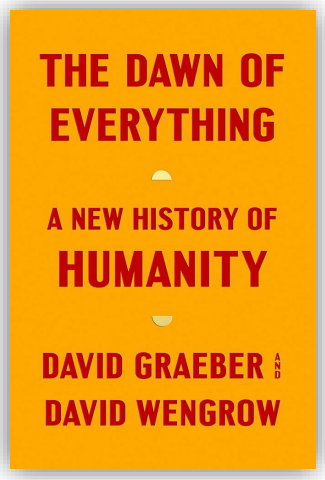
BOOK REVIEW

The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity

By David Graeber and David Wengrow

Reviewed by Elizabeth M. Joransen



New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux
2021

The New York Times bestseller, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*, was a long-term project, originally intended as an experiment. Eventually, the experiment became a heartfelt project of David Graeber and David Wengrow, a work that would pierce the expectation and interpretation of the early history of our human race.

Graeber (an anthropologist) and Wengrow (an archaeologist) aimed to challenge the conventional presentation of our knowledge regarding humanity. They presented humanity as being complex from the beginning, rather than slowly evolving from simpler systems, as is taught in educational settings. The usual progression can be summarized as follows: people start as hunter-gatherers, then progress towards farming, eventually farmers create cities, the cities become states, and the states lead humanity to where we are now (you can find the general summary of this notion in chapter eleven). The authors' view, however, is that there was a sense of freedom throughout early history when it came to setting up societies. Humanity did not begin in a primitive or "savage" state and then slowly evolve toward civilization, but rather had various advanced groups that demonstrated a wealth of thought and knowledge regarding systematic societal structures and hierarchies. There was not a shift in the human brain that led them slowly through an evolutionary track, but rather a brain that chose. Some chose an advanced systematic structure, while others chose basic hunter-gatherer realities.

From my perspective, this popular text ultimately challenges the social evolution that we are typically taught. The authors do not agree with the idea of society starting from an egalitarian structure, making its way slowly towards the complex structure that produces hierarchy and division. They focus on the idea of freedom being a part of the human experience from the very beginning. They believe that humanity has always had the freedom to choose its societal and governmental structures, which contradicts the notion of the savage mentality that many historians and anthropologists assume was present in the early human race. Their case studies suggest that there were different advanced groups that were not egalitarian in nature.

The case studies are effective and extensive, but I do not believe that they hold enough tangible evidence. I found myself questioning the validity of their purpose. Since they are not connecting the dots to create a full picture of a hierarchically and advanced-focused world, the audience is still left questioning how we came to be at this point. I felt as though there were too many gaps in a text that was meant to give a full picture.

Graeber and Wengrow's views align well with a Christian worldview, though they leave the human story almost as if it were an experiment, or left up to the fate of the individuals. In a Christian perspective, humanity is a reflection of God. But this text points towards humans as being the main characters of Earth's story, not focused on a greater purpose. They believe

that good and evil are the choices of humanity, whereas a Christian or an individual of a different religion will focus on the reality of divine presence as being the beacon that guides societies in certain ways.

This book is an inspirational piece and leaves one thinking about the historical start of humanity. It made me look through a new pair of glasses. With that being said, though, the book does not fully succeed in making its case. It broadens one's perspective, but leaves one guessing a lot. As a Christian, the biggest turnaway is the lack of a role for divine intervention, in which the majority of humanity believes. I believe that this text has many correct elements, but misses the overall reason and divine nature that humanity embodies. Though life is held in high esteem by the authors, I was left with the idea that there is little real purpose for humanity.

Still, overall, the book is a worthwhile read. New perspectives and perceptions are critical when studying our world. This book provides an extensive new train of thought that will leave the reader with a better sense of what to question regarding the start of humanity. The text was truly an interesting read, and would be one I would recommend to anyone who is interested in early human history.

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