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Photo: Jonathan Castellino

From the Editor's Desk

One of the most fascinating things about the Christianity and Culture programme is the variety of the interdisciplinary perspectives of which it is studied. Each perspective yields a multitude of remarkable insights and incredibly diverse discoveries.

In this issue, we have chosen undergraduate essays that reflect both the versatility and diversity of the Christianity and Culture programme, as well as the current on-going dialogue and debate that circulate within this saeculum. Through these carefully selected essays, we invite our readers to engage with the images of the Pieta, to journey through a nuanced Trinitarian reading of *The Dream and the Rood*, to ponder the need for unity between Liberation Theology and Eco-Cosmology, and finally to explore the challenge that New Religious Movements pose to an

open theology of religion. This second issue would not be possible without the support of the wider university community from which *Saeculum* emerges. We would like to extend our gratitude to the University of St. Michael's College, the Rabanus Project, and the faculty of the Christianity and Culture Programme for their continuous encouragement and support. The creation of this fall issue has been a fruitful and rewarding experience.

This issue is truly a collaborative effort between *Saeculum's* Editorial Board and

undergraduate students. Our Editorial Board is composed of dedicated individuals committed to furthering the intellectual discourse examining the interaction between Christianity and Culture, and the following undergraduate students have exemplified this through the academic integrity of their written work. We hope these discussions will encourage further reflection in the academic field of Christianity and Culture and all that lies beyond it.

*Leila Wong-Ko-Nang,
Editor-in-Chief,
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Christianity, Arts and Letters

The Call of the Roettgen
Pietà

Natalie Merglesky

The origin of the *Roettgen Pietà*-- a wooden sculpture of Mary holding the dead body of Christ-- has been traced back to the Rhineland, locating it within the historical period of the fourteenth century. The artist is unknown and the majority of academic scholarship concerning Pietàs does not specifically discuss the *Roettgen*. Yet, this devotional image is emblematic of a spiritual revolution. Essentially, the *Roettgen* is a personification of the thirteenth and fourteenth-centuries' European religious community's desire to experience Christ and his Passion in a more personal and direct manner. By inviting the viewer into a relationship with itself, the *Roettgen* facilitates one's interaction with a "re-interpretation" of the Passion. Through intellectual, emotional and physical exchanges, the *Roettgen Pietà* exposes the viewer to a "Passion moment" that calls for his or her active participation both in that moment and the larger Passion event.

Understanding the ways in which the original viewers of the *Roettgen Pietà* would have been encouraged to engage intellectually with the sculpture requires a brief overview of the ideological environment of the

religious community in which it originated. The European Christian tradition of the thirteenth and fourteenth-centuries witnessed a rather dramatic change in the way the religious populace began to think about Christian practices. The hierarchy of the Church began to give way to the authority of the individual and this shift generated an intense desire to experience a more personal and unmediated relationship with Christ.¹ While this central desire manifested itself in a variety of ways, perhaps the most striking example of how it began to redefine the tradition is the way in which it profoundly changed the religious community's interaction with the Bible.

When the mystics began recording their visions in this time period, their documents started a new literary genre that authenticated itself as the Bible did: through claiming to be "divinely inspired."² In his book entitled, *The Image and Its Public in the Middle Ages*, Hans Belting describes how this claim expanded the canon of Christian literature, enabling it to incorporate not only records of mystical visions but also devotional poetry and Passion plays.³ Belting emphasizes how these new expressions of divine truth competed with the Bible in narrating the Passion stating,

They reformulated the Bible in an extensive wealth of episodes and an intensive wealth of emotion, so that they could offer the reading

public a different, sensible presentation of the Bible and consequently a different way of seeing.⁴

Evidently, these extra-biblical compositions appealed to the members of a public who were in the process of re-defining what the Passion meant to them individually. Moreover, this new literary genre both enabled and required the individual to participate in re-interpreting the Christian story.

The Bible became the "raw material" that storytellers used to create their own personal reworking(s) of biblical events.⁵ Authors of Passion plays and devotional poetry looked to the biblical accounts of Christ's death and elaborated upon specific themes or aspects of these Passion narratives within their own compositions. In particular, the image of *Christus patiens*, the suffering Christ, came to dominate religious works of the thirteenth and fourteenth-centuries as individuals sought to re-establish a more personable connection to Jesus by way of sympathizing with the more human elements of his character.⁶ By extension of this desire, the Virgin Mary became the narrational focalizer through which many authors gave expression to their personal feelings of sorrow.⁷ Many of the Passion plays, for instance, feature extensive laments of Mary that highlight the extremity of the emotions she must have felt in response to Christ's crucifixion

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while articulating the author's own sense of grief. Belting explains how these meditations upon the suffering of Mary and Christ were able to extend beyond the realm of literature and into the medium of art:

This literary depiction furnished the public with a stock of mental images and provided a basis for an attitude of expectation with regard to the Passion. Images reacted to both with a new 'pictorial language.'⁸

Among the more prominent artistic illustrations of this "new pictorial language" is the Pietà. Notably, the first Pietàs, of which the *Roettgen* is a part, originate alongside the "mental images" described in the works of Christian mystics of the thirteenth and fourteenth-centuries.⁹ Many of the visions documented within these works, include references to having seen the Virgin holding the dead body of Christ across her lap.¹⁰ Though scholars are unable to ascertain which came first, the Pietà or the vision, the fact that the subject matter of the Pietà engages with the visionary material of the mystics to give expression to a specific type of sorrow left largely unexplored by the biblical narrative is undeniable.

In his article entitled, "Medieval Statues of the Pietà in the Museum," William H. Forsyth goes as far to say that, "the earliest German Pietàs [. . .]

. . .] are a direct translation into sculpture of the mystics' clear vision of Christ's martyrdom and his mother's sorrow."¹¹ While this statement prioritizes the extra-biblical component of the Pietà's "language," it is necessary to acknowledge the "raw biblical material" also inherent in that language if one is to properly understand what the Pietà is communicating and how its message is being expressed.¹²

The Pietà is traditionally regarded as an exposition of Lamentations 1:2¹³ and Luke 2:34-35.¹⁴ These passages of scripture prove useful in educating the viewer on how to engage in a contemplation of what the Pietà depicts.¹⁵ As Belting notes, these references (along with relevant extra-biblical materials) are the closest that we can get to hearing the true language of the image.¹⁶ Through contemplating how this body of thought behind the sculpture is built upon and "given a face" through the Pietà, one is able intellectually to participate in the Pietà's unique re-creation of a "Passion moment." In other words, by engaging in a dialogue with the Pietà and interpreting how it renders "invisible" realities of the Passion visible, one becomes an interpreter of the faith.

Both literature and art responded to this belief by providing the individual with a means of identifying with their work. Through graphic and intense portrayals of Christ's suffering, art and literature strove to evoke a profound sense of affective piety within the viewer.¹⁷ Similarly, both mediums' various

renditions of the *Mamma pietosa* (the Mother of Piety) provided the viewer/reader with a model that one could imitate in an effort to respond to Christ's Passion with the ultimate expression of emotional piety.¹⁸ Mary's sorrow evoked a response of sympathy within the individual that in turn, led to a devotional response to God.¹⁹ Within the realm of art, the "devotional image" was created specifically to facilitate this movement and perhaps one of the best illustrations of how it accomplished this emotional exchange between the viewer and the image is the *Roettgen Pietà*.²⁰

Fundamental to understanding the importance of the emotional exchange between the *Roettgen* and the viewer is the realization that the Virgin's pain at seeing her son and Saviour crucified was commonly believed to have equaled the agony experienced by Christ on the cross.²¹ Consequently, viewers believed that by partaking in Mary's Compassion, they also co-experienced Christ's Passion.²² When one combines this with the belief that sharing in Christ's suffering meant sharing in his Resurrection, the emotional exchange that the Pietà's Mary offers the viewer becomes significant to the individual's ability to connect with Christ. Her display of emotion serves as a vehicle through which the viewer is able to enter into an emotional exchange and salvific experience with Jesus.

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Each Pietà depicts Mary in its own unique way. Specifically, the *Roettgen* presents a Mary that is utterly devastated and overwhelmed with grief. The enlargement of her face intensifies the sorrow portrayed in its features and the way in which she holds the body of Christ presents the viewer with the horrible realities of his crucifixion. The position of her right hand draws one's attention to the enormous wound in his side. Her relatively upright posture only emphasizes the extremely angular line formed by Christ's reclining head and the sense of weight that this line affords him showcases his utterly emaciated frame. The bones and veins in his arms protrude from underneath his skin while the gushing wounds in combination with his gapping mouth effectively convey the reality of his death. Such a frank and grotesque rendition of suffering successfully communicates the extraordinary emotional pain of the Virgin while impressing the gravity of Christ's sacrifice upon the viewer.

Interesting examples of how individuals have chosen to respond to this scene of devastation can be seen in the Pietà's interaction with the nuns and female mystics of the thirteenth and fourteenth-centuries. In her book entitled *Sculpture of Compassion...*, Joanna E. Ziegler discusses how the Pietà's "mother imagery" in particular, worked to develop an emotional, maternal response in the Beguine nuns. She begins by noting that the first

generation of Pietàs often featured a Christ that was substantially smaller than Mary, which she interprets as the artists' intentional allusion to Christ's infancy.²³ Certainly, one can see how this is suggested in the *Roettgen Pietà*.

The fragility of Jesus' frame and the way in which Mary cradles him hearkens back to what would have been a scene from his childhood and yet, the way in which the reality of his death dominates the sculpture complicates the emotions being portrayed and suggested. In his article, Forsyth mentions that the size and lifelessness of Christ's body places an emphasis on the emotional distress of Mary and Ziegler concurs with this notion.²⁴

Ziegler classifies the Pietà as being representational of the Virgin's inner psychology.²⁵ She expands upon this theory when she asserts that the Pietà expresses Mary's attempt to fulfill her wish to return to the time when her son was alive and she was able to protect him.²⁶

For St. Bernard of Clairvaux, this display of maternal instinct and grief "revealed her sympathy for the lot of humanity, making her the ideal intercessor between man and God" and, as Ziegler notes, it is this all-encompassing sympathy that the Beguine nuns sought to reflect in their lives.²⁷ For them, the Pietà was a practical illustration of the way in which *they* were meant to "mother" humanity.²⁸ By identifying with Mary's compassion in this way,

they ultimately participated in the sacrificial love of Christ by responding to his Passion with acts of community service.²⁹

Evidently, the sorrow expressed by Mary in the Pietà has played an instrumental role in its ability to establish a relationship with the viewer; yet, the image of an emotionally distressed Mary has been the subject of ongoing criticism. In his article, entitled "Notes on the *Avignon Pietà*," Don Denny suggests that an emotionally reserved Mary is more theologically accurate than the visibly distraught Mary of "most earlier Pietàs," such as the *Roettgen*. He goes on to assert that the unfaltering faith that she was commonly believed to have had throughout the Passion is best captured in the calm and prayerful Mary of the *Avignon Pietà*.³⁰ In an attempt to support this claim, Denny appeals to the popular conception that Mary was the "sole keeper of the faith" after the disciples had abandoned Jesus.³¹

His use of this theological argument is troubling, however, in its failure to account for the loyalty of Mary Magdalene and John. This omission leaves a significant gap in interpreting the *Avignon* given that both figures are prominently featured in the work. Moreover, the claim that, as "sole keeper of the faith," Mary would respond to the Passion with a minimal amount of emotion implies that the highly emotional Mary of the *Roettgen* is without

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value simply because it is not a “theologically accurate” image.

In a society that acknowledged the re-interpretation of biblical events as being valid, a Pietà’s worth cannot be based solely on theological accuracy. If one insists on doing so, the image’s value in its entirety becomes questionable, as the subject of the Pietà is not found anywhere within the biblical narratives. Consequently, the assumption that one who responds to Christ’s Passion in a highly emotional manner must also be simultaneously exhibiting a lack of faith is a dangerous one to make.

A mother’s expression of extreme grief and sadness over the death of her son (and Saviour) does not appear to be as surprising as her expression of peace in the *Avignon*. Despite Mary’s exceptional devotion to God, her proclamation of faith as seen through the *Avignon’s* depiction of her calm posture of prayer presents a rather surprising and arguably, unrealistic initial response to Christ’s death. When one combines this with the fact that she does not even touch Jesus, such an image can even become slightly alienating. For instance, a grieving viewer coming to identify emotionally with the compassion of Mary may find that connection difficult to make within the context of the *Avignon Pietà*.

Having seen what a highly emotional Mary meant to the Beguine nuns, a Pietà lacking in the “appalling realism” of the *Roettgen Pietà*, raises a number of important

questions regarding a Pietà’s depiction of Christ’s suffering.³² For example, Michelangelo’s *The Rome Pietà* is arguably one of the best and most popular models of the way in which the suffering of the crucified Christ is beautified. While exhibiting an extremely sensitive illustration of the intimacy between Mary and Christ, the horrors of his Passion are somewhat undermined.

His body, for instance, is beautifully proportioned and the wounds from his crucifixion are largely understated. Mary also contributes to this understatement through her lack of emotion. Her uplifted hand communicates her resignation to the situation and her calm facial expression works to diminish the profound torment that Christ experienced throughout the Passion.³³ In his address entitled “The Feeling of Things, The Contemplation of Beauty,” Cardinal Ratzinger cautions against these somewhat unrealistic depictions of Christ’s Passion saying,

[One] knows that beauty is truth and truth beauty; but in the suffering Christ he also learns that the beauty of truth also embraces offence, pain and even the dark mystery of death, and that this can only be found in accepting suffering, not ignoring it.³⁴

Does one take this statement to mean then, that Michelangelo’s *The Rome Pietà* or the *Avignon*

Pietà for that matter, somehow misrepresent the “beauty of truth” and the Passion? To be honest, I am not completely sure. It is not the intention of this essay to belittle other Pietàs, as undoubtedly they are able to offer their viewers a new and meaningful experience of Christ and his Passion. I do, however, feel it important to at least question what works like the *Avignon* and *The Rome Pietà* potentially fail to capture when they minimize the element of suffering inherent in the Passion event.

In continuing to think about the ways in which Pietàs work to involve the viewer in their “Passion moment,” one is struck by the *Roettgen Pietà’s* ability to enter into a physical exchange with the viewer. The *Roettgen* is isolated in terms of time and space.³⁵ While its subject is partially derived from a few select verses of Scripture, as previously noted, it is important to remember that the Pietà’s re-invention or reconsideration of the suffering of Mary and Christ within the Passion narratives enables it to remain relatively independent of these literary texts. For example, the subject of the Pietà is illustrating a moment that would have taken place within the historical period of Christ’s Passion. However, because this “Passion moment” is not documented in the Bible, one’s ability to accurately identify the specifics surrounding it, such as what time of day it took

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place or against what location in Jerusalem it is set, are ultimately complicated. The implications that this has on one's experience of the *Roettgen* are significant. Because the *Roettgen* is a sculpture of Mary and Christ only, it presents the lamenting Mary and the suffering Christ as being "frozen in time" and completely devoid of landscape.³⁶ Consequently, the *Roettgen* becomes a universally accessible image due to its inherently ambiguous treatment of temporal and spatial context.

Transcending every constraint of space and time, it naturally adopts the viewer's geographical landscape and historical period, facilitating a direct and personal experience of its "Passion moment." The viewer is ushered into the presence of Mary and Christ, physically entering a realm that bridges their own personal environment with that of the sculpture's. Notably, this enables the contemporary viewer to interact physically with the *Roettgen* just as its original viewers would have done. By extension of this similarity, each time the contemporary viewer engages in this exchange, she simultaneously participates in an experience grounded in tradition.

It is important to note how this sets the *Roettgen Pietà* apart from several others. The figures illustrated within the *Avignon*, for example, are placed against a backdrop of a specific countryside. The church

depicted in the background along with the presence of the donor, anachronistically reinforces the space and time that the *Avignon* asserts. Though the donor effectively expresses the viewer's desire to become present at the site of the Passion by being "physically" inserted into the piece of art, he also complicates another's ability to do so. One could argue that his presence only increases the transcendental power of the *Avignon*, enabling the contemporary viewer to interact not only with the Passion mourners but also with a specific generation of Christians.

However, his presence also renders the *Avignon* incapable of fully embracing the viewer as the *Pietà* that is able to remain temporally and spatially autonomous does. Because of its inability to adequately adopt the viewer's space and time, the *Avignon* forces viewers to fit themselves into *its* time and space which causes the immediacy of the physical exchange to break down. For example, the *Avignon's* French countryside at sunset potentially isolates the viewer living in an African or North American landscape who happens to be viewing the image in the middle of the afternoon or late in the evening.

A *Pietà's* ability to physically invite the viewer into the scene that it depicts also depends on the medium that it adopts. As Ziegler points out, the *Pietà* was originally created for an intimate

relationship with the viewer and part of achieving this meant that it had to be able to do two things: present the figures of Mary and Christ realistically (in three-dimensional form) and enable the viewer to engage with those figures in a tactile and physical way.³⁷ Notably, any painting of the *Pietà*, such as the *Avignon*, cannot fulfill these requirements simply because of the limitations that are inherent in its medium. However, a sculpture "carved in the round," such as the *Roettgen Pietà*, is able to sufficiently and effectively meet these demands. Its three-dimensional form allows for a tactile experience of the sculpture that the *Avignon* does not. One can hold onto the pierced and bleeding hand of the *Roettgen's* Jesus or help Mary support his lifeless frame by holding his head.

Similarly, the *Roettgen's* Mary, unlike the Virgin featured in the *Avignon Pietà* or Michelangelo's *The Rome Pietà*, encourages a physical exchange by the way she maintains eye contact with the viewer. When the viewer realizes that she is the object of Mary's gaze, that viewer receives Mary's physical acknowledgement of her presence.³⁸ Although this acknowledgement is not dependent on one's awareness of Mary's focus, when the viewer reciprocates her gaze an "exchange of gazes" occurs and a relationship is created.³⁹

Belting highlights the importance of this interaction when he cites

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A. Neumeier's history of the first Dominicans: "In their cells they had before their eyes images of [Mary] and of her crucified Son so that while reading, praying, and sleeping, they could look upon them and be looked upon by them, with the eyes of compassion."⁴⁰

Evidently, the Dominicans' sense of relationship with the images was acutely felt and this inevitably translated into their viewing themselves as being intimately part of the images.⁴¹ In applying this notion to the *Roettgen*, one finds that the viewer's presence is not only acknowledged through Mary's gaze but, more importantly, is anticipated. She is forever focused on or looking for the viewer. Traditionally, the "gaze of the Virgin" falls upon the most important part of the work and if one is to apply this to the *Roettgen*, the viewer becomes the integral and necessary element of the sculpture.⁴²

This is not to say that the viewer, along with Mary and Christ, is meant to be revered nor is it an expression of a desire to inflate the viewer's role in viewing the *Roettgen*. It is merely an attempt to demonstrate what Ziegler said so succinctly: "The Pietà is not a story about Christ and Mary but rather, about a relationship between Christ, Mary and the viewer."⁴³ Together, the viewer, Mary, and Christ combine to make the *Roettgen Pietà*. They are its true language, message and essence, its way of communicating

to onlookers that the Passion seeks a witness in every generation. By engaging in this "exchange of gazes," the viewer becomes a participant in the Passion and an attendant at the site of the *Roettgen's* "Passion moment."

By providing a portal through which the viewer can gain access to Christ's Passion, the *Roettgen Pietà* invites the viewer personally and directly to experience various realities of the Passion. Notably, the ways in which this is accomplished are not solely dictated by tradition. They also require the individual's own contemplations and emotional reactions to the sculpture, the seeds of one's own Christian imagination that work to make the experience that is the *Roettgen Pietà* one's own.

In this way, the sculpture becomes more than just the viewer's interaction with an artist's re-interpretation of a Passion moment. The *Roettgen Pietà* becomes an opportunity to find one's place in the Christian narrative of salvation. Through the intellectual, emotional and physical exchanges that one engages in with the sculpture, the individual participates in the Passion event. Perhaps what is most surprising about this experience is the feeling that this process of "writing" oneself into the Christian story through one's relationship with the *Roettgen Pietà*, is not only encouraged but, anticipated.

* Accompanying this essay are 3 photos of the 3 artwork pieces discussed. They can be viewed by visiting the Saeculum website : www.utoronto.ca/stmikes/saeculum

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- Luke 2:34-35 states, "Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, [Jesus'] mother: 'This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.'"
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A Trinitarian Reading of
The Dream of the Rood:
The Blurring of Identities
and its Religious Implica-
tions

Christine Choi

The Dream of the Rood is a complex and unique retelling of the Passion, whose full meaning relies upon the fusion of the three principal characters' identities. The poem, composed approximately during the last one hundred and fifty years of the Anglo-Saxon period, was the product of a culture in which the Christ-Story was widespread among a people who still retained customs and memories of their pre-Christian past. These various influences are evident in *The Dream of the Rood* itself; the poet achieves many layers of meaning by constructing the poem with intricate perspectives, powerful symbolism, and cultural as well as biblical allusions. These combine to create a multi-faceted poetic vision that addresses both the poet's contemporary Anglo-Saxon audiences and future audiences. The Christ, the Cross and the Dreamer are analogous to the persons of the Trinity; they are all separate "characters," and yet the poet blurs the boundaries of their identities to make them one and the same. As a result of this blurring of identities, the poem holds multiple theological

meanings simultaneously, enabling the poet to lead his audience to a personal and complex understanding of the Christ-Story and speak of its universal implications.

At its most literal level, *The Dream of the Rood* transforms the Gospel account of the Passion and resurrection of Christ by placing it within a Germanic battle context, in which the poet fuses identities of Christ, the Cross and the Dreamer collectively as "warriors-heroes."¹ Carol Jean Wolf attributes this Germanic context to the need for "the Anglo-Saxon scop . . . to express within his songs the novel subjects and themes brought to his island by Christianity."² Wolf claims,

"Of the extant Old English verses, few offer greater testimony to the ability of these poets to effect a fruitful wedding of their heroic tradition to a Christian subject than those describing the crucifixion of Christ in *The Dream of the Rood*."³

The heroic tradition, at the centre of which was the comitatus code between lord and thane (i.e., retainer), was part of the very fabric of Anglo-Saxon warrior culture. In his *Germania*, Tacitus reveals that "to leave a battle alive after their chief has fallen means lifelong infamy and shame" for the retainers.⁴ He then expands upon their code of honour: "To defend and protect [the lord], and to let him get credit for their own acts of heroism, are the most solemn obligations of their allegiance."⁵ On the surface, the reader can see

that the relationship between Christ and Cross depicted in this poem is quite clearly that of "lord and thane".⁶ In his narrative, the Cross states, "I raised up the / powerful King, Lord of the heavens," (43-44)⁷ and his desire to revere and serve him is evident. Likewise, the Dreamer becomes the thane of the Cross in the second half of the poem,⁸ and he expresses the desire to honour it: "It is now my hope of life that I be allowed to / approach the tree of victory alone more often than all / other people, and honour it abundantly" (125-27). Thus far, the analogy between the Passion and the Germanic comitatus code appears straightforward. Indeed, Dorothy Whitelock notes that "the Christian Church did not come into conflict with the Germanic principle of loyalty to the lord. It added its sanctity to the oath of allegiance".⁹ The poet stresses this analogy by referring to Christ, the Cross and the Dreamer with a variation of the term "warrior," including the Old English "þa geong hæleþ," "beorn," and "hæleþ min se leofa." However, the poet goes beyond blurring the identities of the three principal characters by paralleling them as warrior-figures in this comitatus context; he fuses their identities in a more complex manner by subverting the comitatus code itself. Whitelock asserts that "the relationship of lord and follower involved the duty of vengeance by the survivor if either were slain",¹⁰ and the poet shows that Christ is the lord-figure

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by referring to him with such appellations as “Lord of mankind” (33) and “Prince” (57). However, the Cross, Christ’s retainer neither protects his lord nor wreaks vengeance upon his enemies, despite his ability and desire to do so: “I quaked then, / when the man embraced me; nonetheless I did not dare to / collapse to the ground and fall to the surfaces of the earth, but I / had to stand fast” (40-43). This refusal to cut down the enemies at the crucifixion scene “is consistent with what the Gospels say of Christ himself.”¹¹ Thus, the heroism of both Christ and the Cross in this scene arises from their submission to their enemies, rather than engaging with them in battle. Through this subversion of the norms of the *comitatus* code, the poet conveys the impression that Christ achieved heroism and true victory through necessary submission. Moreover, although Tacitus notes that “the chiefs fight for victory, the followers for their chief,”¹² Christ does not “fight for victory” for its own sake in this poem, but rather, he sees victory in terms of fighting for his followers: “He / climbed upon the despised gallows, courageous under the / scrutiny of many, since he willed to redeem mankind” (38-40). The Cross reinforces this idea when he says, “The Lord rose again with his mighty power, to the benefit of / men” (99-100); furthermore, the Dreamer invokes the Lord’s help in the end: “May the Lord be a friend to me, who here on earth

once / suffered on the gallows-tree for the sins of men” (144-45). In the context of this poem, therefore, the lord and his retainers share a reciprocal relationship in which this friend of mankind does not merely provide his retainers with gifts as a secular lord would in the *comitatus* system, but also takes it upon himself to fight *for* them and to protect them. Both of these responsibilities were typically associated with the retainers in the norms of the *comitatus* system. The poet therefore blurs the lines between Christ as lord and Cross as retainer, which perhaps allows the poet to make the statement that Christ is a countercultural figure and had a servant-like attitude. Using and subverting this “heroic tradition”¹³ is an effective means of appropriating the Christian story within the Anglo-Saxon’s cultural consciousness, thereby allowing the poem’s contemporary audience to come to a greater understanding of the character of Christ, the Christian Lord.

The poet also blurs the identities of the characters in order to explore the reality of Christ’s incarnation, and his paradoxically dual nature as both a human and divine being. The poet consciously juxtaposes these two opposites throughout the poem.¹⁴ Although the identities of the Cross and Christ become blurred in the *comitatus* context, they still maintain their integrity as individual characters. The Rood indicates that they are indeed separate entities when

he states, “They humiliated us both together” (47). The poet reinforces their separateness by having the Cross say, “I saw the God of hosts violently racked” (52), indicating that although the Cross is suffering with Christ, it is simultaneously watching him. This clear separation of identities relates to the separation of Christ as human and divine. The poet appears to attribute the Cross with all the physical, and therefore *human*, aspects of Christ’s dual nature during the crucifixion, while attributing the figure of Christ in the poem with all his *divine* aspects. During the crucifixion scene, it is the Cross who bears all the burden of Christ’s human suffering. Although on one level, Christ is depicted as a Germanic hero undergoing the crucifixion as a battle, all the explicit, violent depictions of physical torture are directed toward the Cross rather than the body of Christ. For example, it is the Cross whom the enemies drive through with “dark nails” (47), who sports the “wounds” (47), and is described as being “all soaked / with blood issuing from the man’s side” (49-50). By contrast, the poet depicts Christ as a majestic lord, “strong and unflinching” (38), who disrobes himself and expresses the desire to climb up on the Rood, emphasizing the completely voluntary nature of his sacrifice. Wolf notes that the poet “minimizes the agonies endured by Christ” and thus “prepares the way for his

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presentation of the crucifixion as a victory”;¹⁵ however, she does not place enough emphasis on the very symbolic, yet graphic description of the Cross’s suffering, which shows that Christ’s agonies are not “minimized,” but *transferred* to the Cross. It therefore seems more likely that the poet desires to present both the corporeal or human and divine aspects of Christ simultaneously, but is reluctant to expose the audience to the sight of Christ’s holy body being physically mangled by the enemies in any way. However, the poignant image of Christ embracing the Cross conveys the idea that the human and divine aspects are inextricably linked. The poet represents this dichotomy in the Cross and the Dreamer as well: he portrays the resurrection not of Christ’s body, but that of the Rood instead, alluding to the discovery of the “true cross” by St. Helen in the early fourth century: “We were dug down into / a deep pit. However, the Lord’s servants, friends, found out I / was there and adorned me with gold and with silver” (75-77). The Cross then achieves a divinized state, fulfilling its function as a sign¹⁶ pointing the way to Christ. From the Dreamer’s perspective, the lines “I was stained with / sins, wounded by evil deeds” (13-14) evoke the image of his being physically marked by the spiritual presence of sin, thereby fusing the physical with the spiritual, and once again reinforcing the

link between the two. The Cross and the Dreamer therefore reflect Christ’s paradoxical nature, which is human and divine simultaneously. The nature of *The Dream of the Rood* itself is analogous to the Incarnation: the poem fuses the identities of the principal characters, enabling it to transcend its literal nature, and encompass and convey multiple levels of meaning.

Finally, the three identities of Christ, Rood, and dreamer are ultimately fused through their participation in parallel transformative movements from defeat and despair, which the poet aligns with a state of passivity, to victory and spiritual revival, which he aligns with a state of activity. Louis Leiter picks out “the three identical dramas that form the poem,” which are “the defeat and paradoxical victory of Christ, the hewing down and raising up of the Cross, and the sleep and awakening of the stained and sinful Dreamer.”¹⁷ He states that this “series of three almost identical dramatic metaphors . . . reinforce each other contrapuntally” (93-94). In the beginning of the poem, the Dreamer declares, “I was / altogether oppressed with anxieties” (18-9), and remains watching the vision of the Cross in his dream-vision, passively; indeed, he is physically asleep, “lying there a long while” (23). As he gazes at the Cross, he despairs at being “stained with / sins” (13-4); however, following

his vision, and hearing the Cross’s sermon-like commentary, the Dreamer joyfully declares, “Then, in a happy spirit and with much fortitude I worshipped that tree” (122-23), and he is then able to pray to the Rood, and look forward to the day when he may dwell in glory. Similarly, the poet takes the Rood itself from the crisis of guilt and passive spectatorship to spiritual empowerment. When “urgent people from afar came there to the prince” (57), the Cross says, “All this I witnessed. I was sorely oppressed with anxieties” (58), echoing the Dreamer’s opening lament over his initial condition. After this spiritual ordeal of suffering and redemption, the Cross then actively addresses the Dreamer and urges him “to the onward way” (124). As for Christ himself, he willingly submits to being mocked by the enemies, raised on the Cross, killed, and buried, and carries the burden of the sins of mankind. However, after resting awhile, his spirit actively engages in the harrowing of hell, and finally ascends to his homeland with the host of spirits that he has released.¹⁸ Thus, the Dreamer, the Cross and Christ all progress through the poem from a defeated, fallen state, to one of spiritual activity and ascent to divinity.¹⁹ Leiter summarizes this paralleling, ascending movement thus: “The Dreamer . . . must be provoked into the metamorphic experience, into a radical change from stained and fallen man into a spiritualized

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being. . . . His transformation imitates and profoundly participates in the metaphor of war traced with the Cross and Christ.”²⁰ He goes on to say,

“Moving inward from the outer frame, we meet, first the defeated Dreamer, then the defeated tree, and at the heart of the poem, the defeated Christ. . . . Moving outward, then, from that transcendent center, we experience, first, the victory of Christ, then the victory of the Cross, and finally the victory of the Dreamer, who has been spiritualized by having lived through, while vicariously participating in, the vivid drama of that numinous center and its immediate frame.”²¹

The poet furthermore sets up distinct parallels between the narratives of the Dreamer and the Cross, which reinforce the commonalities of their shared experience. Each of them recounts a vision of the crucifixion, and subsequently provides an interpretive commentary about the meaning of this vision, “imputing significance to the historical event.”²² The verbal and imagistic echoes in the poem reinforce this linkage: certain phrases and images that occur in one character’s narrative sections reappear in the narrative sections of the other. Most notably, the Dreamer describes the “beautiful sight” (20) in which the Cross begins to bleed on the right side (18); moreover, “at times it was soaked with wetness, / drenched

by the coursing of blood, at times adorned with / treasure” (21-23)

The poet subsequently takes up these images in the Cross’s narrative and *completes* them, clearing up their former ambiguity, revealing that the blood is from Christ’s right side, and that the jewels represent the treasure with which the Lord’s followers adorn the Cross. Other “echoing elements” include the act of seeking the Cross to honour it, and the conviction of being set apart by God for a special purpose. Through these recurring phrases and images, the poet conveys the impression that the death and resurrection of Christ are being played out in the Cross and the Dreamer’s lives, in a cyclical manner: “By suffering with the Cross and Christ in a similar transformational experience, the Dreamer undergoes an identical metamorphosis and elevation of the spirit.”²³ Thus, by carefully constructing the poem with this complex, echoing narrative structure, the poet conveys the sense that the Christian life, led by Christ’s followers, continually imitates and embodies his death and resurrection; every Christian individual experiences this spiritual ascent which is set into motion by an awakening vision, and progresses from a state of passivity, guilt and shame, to an eventual transcendence of this ephemeral life. In this process, the “archetypal experience”²⁴ of Christ repeats itself and comes to life once more. The poem

therefore shows “the significance to all men of the Dreamer’s transformational experience.”²⁵ The process of spiritual awakening is analogous to the death and resurrection of Christ himself, which the poet makes doubly poignant by voicing the experience through the mouth of the Cross and by having the Dreamer, the everyman, take up the narrative in turn. The Christian Story essentially becomes *his* story, and through his direct address to the audience in his own commentary, the audience has the opportunity make it its own story as well.

In fact, the Rood and the Dreamer are linked with the audience as well by the act of *seeing*. “‘Seeing’ in the rhythm of the transformation drama,” Leiter notes, “has become a metaphorical way of expressing involvement in suffering, death, burial, and resurrection.”²⁶ It is through the Dreamer’s act of beholding and contemplating the image of the Rood in his vision that he is spiritually transformed; likewise, the poet of *The Dream of the Rood* draws the audience into the Christian Story and into a similar process of spiritual awakening as they acquire a greater understanding of the common Christian identity. The identities of the Dreamer and each member of the audience are therefore fused in this final, dynamic movement of the poem. In its narrative of the crucifixion, the Cross says, “the wounds are visible / upon me” (45), using the present tense of

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the verb “to be,” which indicates that the wounds that he acquired as he suffered with Christ are still significant today. Moreover, in the final lines of his address to the Dreamer, the Cross presents an eschatological vision of the future, with a description of the Day of Judgment, and immediately after the Cross’ address, the Dreamer takes up the commentary and addresses the audience directly with his hopes for his own personal salvation: “I hope each day for the time / when the Cross of the Lord, which I once gazed upon here on / earth, will fetch me from this transitory life and then bring me / to where there is great happiness, joy in heaven” (132-35). Thus, the Cross and the Dreamer’s narratives draw the members of the audience into the gospel history and present them with the opportunity to participate in this Christian Story. In fact, the poem *requires* the audience’s participation in order to complete this final movement toward universal relevance.

Through their participation in the experience of spiritual awakening, the identities of the audience members fuse with those of the Cross and the Dreamer. In jointly identifying themselves with Christ’s experience of death and resurrection, they serve as a kind of “beacen,” a sign that points to Christ in the world. *The Dream of the Rood*, therefore, is ultimately a complex and resonant reworking of the Great Commission, with which the biblical book of Matthew

ends: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”²⁷

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“Ogoni is the Land; Ogoni is the People”: A Case Study Demonstrating the Need for Unity Between Liberation Theology and Eco-Cosmology

Annamaria Enenajor

Liberation theology and eco-cosmology are unique theological perspectives developed out of the lived experience of the intersection of Christianity and culture. As such, they present radical new methodologies for engaging with broader society. They offer alternative worldviews that hold justice and stewardship as paramount ideals and as a result, offer scathing and relevant critiques of current political, economic and social structures that serve to oppress both people and the environment. For theologians like Leonardo Boff, however, it is not enough to merely acknowledge the area where these two theological perspectives overlap in their criticism. He presents that through theological reflection, it is possible to establish causal links between them, since, as he articulates: “The very same logic of the prevailing system of accumulation and social organization that leads to the exploitation of the workers also leads to the plundering of nature.”¹ The following case study attempts

to reconfirm this thesis and to further suggest that the solution for both social justice concerns and ecological exploitations must also come from the overlap of these two perspectives.

For the Ogoni people of south-eastern Nigeria, the struggle to protect their land has always been a struggle to protect themselves. While it has often been remarked that both struggles are likely to come from injustice,² it is especially evident in the case of the Ogoni land and people that the effects of poverty, oppression and ecological devastation stem from the same root cause. An overarching cosmology of reckless exploitation, oppression of the weak and consumerist greed was readily adopted by both Nigeria’s military government and the international corporations looking for oil, and led to the indiscriminate dual oppression of the land and people. This overarching cosmology has supplanted both social justice and ecological concerns. A need to view this situation as an issue of both social and ecological justice is made clear by the brief but haunting statement of the first president of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, G. B. Lenton: “Ogoni is bleeding.”³ He makes no distinction between land and people because as victims, they are one. In liberation, this paper argues, they must also be one. The Ogoni struggle points to the need for a synthesis of social justice and ecological discourse in order to create an all-encompassing

cosmology of communion powerful enough to challenge the source of the two bleeding wounds.

Unity in Oppression

The history of the Ogoni people is intertwined with the history of their land in a pattern of oppression and exploitation by government and corporate powers. The Ogoni people are a “microminority”⁴ in Nigeria. They are a distinct ethnic group with a population of 500 000 in a country of 100 million people. They occupy only 1046 square kilometers of land in the agriculturally fertile and oil rich Niger Delta region.⁵ The Ogoni have a strong connection to the land that nurtures them spiritually and is worshipped as a god.⁶ Apart from being an ethnic minority, the Ogoni were further marginalized by unjust political structures when Nigeria was divided into twelve states in 1970. During this process, the Ogoni and other minority groups were denied the right to create their own state. This made it easy for them to be ignored by the majority groups in their states and to be denied revenue from anything taken from their land, as the political structures favoured more populous ethnic groups.⁷ They were considered “non-persons” who could be discarded and due to a lack of representation in government, their cry for justice fell on deaf ears. The regionalism created by this state structure further exaggerated the gap between the southern Delta region that produced the country’s oil

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wealth and the politically powerful northern regions that were largely responsible for squandering it.⁸ For the rest of the century, political power in Nigeria remained highly centralized and tightly grasped by the northern military elite.⁹

The Biafra War in Nigeria was yet another example of the government's worldview that resulted in the oppression of both the Ogoni land and people a normal and acceptable state of affairs. When the Eastern region of Nigeria seceded in 1967 and called itself the new republic of Biafra, the Ogoni land and people, who were part of the region, suffered incalculable losses in the resulting civil war.¹⁰ The federal forces adopted a strategy similar to a "scorched earth" policy. In an attempt to destroy the oil production capacity of Biafra, federal warplanes arbitrarily bombed the Ogoni land where most of the oil installations were. The result was death, injury, and the destruction of countless homes and farming areas. In total, an estimated thirty thousand, or ten per cent of the Ogoni people died during the Biafran war.¹¹ One can conclude from the method by which this was carried out as well as the number of resulting casualties that the Nigerian government gave little value to the lives of the Ogoni, essentially viewing them as disposable. The words of Ken Saro-Wiwa, founder of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People draw this

conclusion far more dramatically:

When my book was published twenty-one years after the end of the war and this fact [that an estimated thirty thousand Ogonis died in the war] was released for the first time to the Nigerian public, it made no impression whatsoever on Nigerian officials or people. The only conclusion that can be drawn there from is that the Ogoni live in a nation which is determined to exterminate them and that Ogoni lives mean nothing whatsoever to Nigeria and other Nigerians, and, I dare to add, the murderous country would be pleased to see Ogoni territory rid of all its inhabitants so that its oil resources can fall freely into "Nigerian" hands.¹²

As a witness to the plight of his land and people, Saro-Wiwa was able to identify the root of their oppression. It was an overarching cosmology of greed and exploitation that the government used to justify their vision of the poor as expendable and exterminable and the land as exploitable in order to further national policy.

Further political marginalization took the form of exploitation of Ogoni land without compensation. Despite the destruction of their land and livelihood as fishers and farmers, the Ogoni were paid less than 1.5 % of the enormous revenue generated by oil mining.¹³ The rest of the income flowed

into the pockets of the already affluent ruling elite. This destiny of impoverishment was further supported by the state structure when in 1979 the constitution of the second republic formally appropriated all land and mining rights to the government.¹⁴ No profits were returned to the communities in the form of infrastructure developments like roads, water supply, schooling, housing and hospitals. This only exacerbated the political oppression of the Ogoni people.

The marginalisation and exploitation of Ogoni land and people also came from another source. In 1958, commercial quantities of oil were discovered in the Ogoni land and the Shell Petroleum Development Corporation¹⁵ began extracting oil from the Niger Delta.¹⁶ The carelessness with which this was done and the resulting damage made it clear that like the government, Shell operated under the perception that Ogoni land and people were commodities to be bought, sold for profit and disposed of. Shell built pipelines connecting flow stations and laid them crisscrossing villages, farming settlements and creeks, making it impossible for farmers to use their land.¹⁷ Shell haphazardly constructed roads often making drainage impossible. As a result, for thirty years some families faced the annual ritual of leaving their homes during the rainy season and squatting in other places.¹⁸

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In 1995, the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation estimated that a total of approximately 2300 cubic meters of oil was being spilt in three hundred separate incidents annually.¹⁹ These oil spills destroyed natural habitats leading to the disappearance of local flora and fauna. It also meant the contamination of water source and the destruction of food sources such as local fish and palm oil.²⁰ Beginning in 1968 major spillages and blowouts with the capacity to destroy both large rural settlements and fertile farmland were an annual occurrence.²¹

Shell's reaction to these oil spills further illustrates the company's overarching cosmology of profit at all cost resulting in the dual oppression of land and people. Shell insisted on continuing a policy of adherence to regional standards rather than a single international standard of environmental safety.²² As a result, Shell was winning awards in Europe for environmental protection, while it continued to use outdated but cheaper technology in Nigeria, increasing the likelihood of hazardous spills.²³ In addition, Shell's official response when confronted with its record was to say "...when mistakes have been made, we try to make amends by paying compensation."²⁴ Tragically, much of the damage done was beyond repair and no effort was made at preventing further suffering.

Human Rights Watch and other

non-governmental organizations have been monitoring Shell's activities in Nigeria since the 1970s and often produce sobering reports not only of the devastating environmental effects of careless mining and outdated equipment, but also of the effects of oil mining on the Ogoni people. In addition to oil spills and gas line ruptures leading to birth defects, retardation and death from contaminated water, oil exploration and production has ruptured the Ogoni community and broken their sacred and reciprocal relationship with the land. The discovery of oil brought to the Ogoni community an influx of comparatively rich male workers from the well-paid oil industry elite. Combined with the desperate poverty of many women who had lost their land-based livelihood, this led to increased prostitution in the previously isolated and stable Ogoni communities.²⁵

In addition to this increasing commoditization of women, the Ogoni community experienced further hardship as their land was exploited by Shell. This connection between the violence against the land and the ensuing victimization of its inhabitants is addressed by Christopher Williams from the University of Cambridge. He explains that since anthropogenic environmental changes can rarely be resisted, they can be perceived as acts of violence.²⁶ While some cultures like the Ogoni view the land as victim, in most cases, the

community closely tied to the land also exhibits a general "victim syndrome" characterized by economic demise, a breakdown of traditional structures, loss of confidence in social institutions and reduced employment and marriage prospects.²⁷ The decrease in the number of marriages in the Ogoni community was indeed documented by Ukoha Ukiwo in a report for the Northern Institute for Environmental and Minority Law.²⁸ In the Ogoni community, even simple communication between people was effected. In 1970, a youth wrote, "There is a perpetual high-pitched noise emanating from gas burning, trucks, rig heads... The deafening effects of the communicative frequencies of all such noise can be very serious. We have become shouters, hooter and howlers, not speakers."²⁹ By the time Shell withdrew from the Ogoni land in 1993, the air was fouled by decades of flaring natural gas, the land was poisoned by spills and blow-outs, and drinking and fishing water was polluted from land spills.³⁰ The environmental degradation of the Ogoni land by Shell not only had environmental implications, but also devastating effects on the Ogoni community.

The struggle of the Ogoni land and people demonstrates that the root of the problem at hand is not simply the lack of environmental or social justice. It is, rather, an overarching cosmology that both oppresses and pollutes. It is a pervasive attitude that affects

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both government and corporate policy and victimizes both land and people. While incredibly powerful, neither social justice movements nor ecological discourse are individually wide enough in scope to supplant this destructive cosmology. What is needed is something to engage and transform the human consciousness about the human community and the natural world. This call for an organic vision can also be heard internationally. In 1987, the United Nations Brundtland Commission wrote, "We have the power to reconcile human affairs with natural law and to thrive in the process. In this, our cultural and spiritual heritages can reinforce our economic interest and survival imperatives."³¹

The following section points towards such a synthesis of social justice and ecological concerns in the development of this new global paradigm.

Unity in Liberation

The radical interdependence of the Ogoni land and people demonstrates not only that both are united in victimization, but also that the new vision required to supplant the consumerist cosmology must address both social and ecological justice. It is futile to fight for one without fighting for the other.

To defend the rights of the Ogoni people, one must defend the rights of their land. As fishermen and farmers, the Ogoni depend on

their land for their livelihood.³² More deeply, however, it can be said that all Ogoni life, cultural, spiritual, moral and philosophical worldview depends on the land.³³ The land is at once a site of worship, production, and reverence for ancestors. For example, the planting season is not merely a period of agricultural activity; it is a spiritual, religious and social occasion and the fruits of the land are honoured in festival.³⁴ The Ogoni culture is strongly tied to the land. Even the word "tradition" in local tongue means "the honoring of the land."³⁵ On a psychic-spiritual level, the Ogoni are dependent on the land for a conceptualization of the sacred. They viewed the land as god and worshipped it as such. To them, rivers and streams did not only provide water for life and fish for food; they were also sacred and essential to the life of the community. The Ogoni nation also contained animals, which in some cases were deified.³⁶ The Ogoni cultural identity and spiritual inheritance is based on the land, and so the fight to protect the Ogoni people and their culture is intrinsically linked with the fight to protect their land.

Reciprocally, to save the Ogoni land, one must fight for the rights of the Ogoni people. This is foremost a practical conclusion, as the Ogoni presence and dependence on the land have made them its most vocal defenders. The Ogoni were the first group

to organize against what they called "ecological genocide" perpetrated by oil companies such as Shell and Chevron.³⁷ In 1990 they formed the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), a grassroots group formed for the purpose of mobilizing protest against the dual oppression of people and land.³⁸

Secondly, the ecological devastation of the Ogoni land can be seen as a symptom of a larger worldview that commoditizes the natural world for the purpose of seeking profit. It is seen as merely a collection of objects to be bought, sold and disposed of. To promote ecological justice, it is necessary to develop an opposing cosmology. The reflective consciousness necessary to accomplish this task is present only in the diversity of the human species. The Ogoni, like many indigenous peoples have developed within their culture a type of relationality with the natural world that the cosmology of consumerism lacks. For example, the Ogoni see the forest as not merely a collection of trees and an abode of animals, but also, and more significantly, a sacred possession. Trees could not be cut indiscriminately without regard for their sacrosanctity and their influence on the well-being of the entire community and the land.³⁹ Both the activities of MOSOP and Ogoni religious values reveal an interconnection between political liberation and ecology. The Ogoni people, through their vision of the

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sacredness of the earth, offer one way of challenging the perception of the Ogoni land as a collection of objects. Sadly, as Ogoni children die before their time, as men and women are killed for demanding justice, as culture is suppressed and a sense of community lost, the land is also losing a group of people with a worldview that defends its intrinsic value. The diversity of ways to envision a new cosmic community is diminishing. Consequently, the Ogoni experience demonstrates that the fight for ecological justice necessitates the fight for social justice as well.

The struggle for the liberation of the Ogoni land and people is far from over. They continue to be unified as victims of an overarching cosmology of consumerism and commoditization. At the same time, their radical interdependence demonstrates the need to synthesize social and environmental justice demands to create a new cosmology that encompasses a vision of communion between humans and the natural world. Social and environmental justice can no longer afford to be separated. Simply running parallel to one another is not enough. They must be integrated. The unity of the Ogoni case demonstrates that visions of social and ecological justice must confront each other and together evolve into an overarching cosmology that must have as its first principle the undeniable

interconnectedness of humans and the natural world. Only when this new cosmology becomes powerful enough to supplant the mythos of consumerism and exploitation will the Ogoni—land and people—finally have justice.

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- 4 Marion Cambell, *Witnessing Death: Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Ogoni Crisis. Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2002), p. 40.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- 6 Ken Saro-Wiwa, *Genocide in Nigeria: The Ogoni Tragedy* (Port Harcourt, Nigeria: Saros International Publishers, 1992), p. 12.
- 7 Northern Institute for Environmental and Minority Law, p. 60.
- 8 Marion Cambell, p. 40.
- 9 Claude Welch Jr., *The Ogoni and Self Determination: Increasing Violence in Nigeria. The Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (1995), p. 635.
- 10 Northern Institute for Environmental and Minority Law, p. 12.
- 11 Ken Saro-Wiwa, p. 43.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 43
- 13 Marion Cambell, p. 40.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 40
- 15 Henceforth referred to as Shell.
- 16 Marion Cambell, p. 40.
- 17 Northern Institute for Environmental and Minority Law, p. 9.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 9
- 19 Human Rights Watch, *The Price of Oil: Corporate Responsibility*

- and Human Rights Violations in Nigeria's Oil Producing Communities*, (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999), p. 59.
- 20 Northern Institute for Environmental and Minority Law, p. 50.
 - 21 Northern Institute for Environmental and Minority Law, p. 13.
 - 22 Human Rights Watch, p. 57.
 - 23 Ken Saro-Wiwa, p. 82.
 - 24 Northern Institute for Environmental and Minority Law, p. 10.
 - 25 Human Rights Watch, p. 69.
 - 26 Christopher Williams, *Environmental Victimization and Violence. Aggression and Violent Behavior*; Vol. 1, No. 3 (1996), p. 192.
 - 27 *Ibid.*, p. 197.
 - 28 Northern Institute for Environmental and Minority Law, p. 52.
 - 29 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
 - 30 Claude Welch Jr., p. 636.
 - 31 World Commission on Environment and Development. *Our Common Future*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 1.
 - 32 Ken Saro-Wiwa, p. 12.
 - 33 Northern Institute for Environmental and Minority Law, p. 48.
 - 34 Ken Saro-Wiwa, p. 12.
 - 35 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
 - 36 Ken Saro-Wiwa, p. 13.
 - 37 Mary Harvan, *The Gods of the Delta: Ken Saro-Wiwa and the Literature of the Ogoni Struggle*. In *Mapping the Sacred: Religion, Geography and Postcolonial Literatures*, ed. Jamie S. Scott and Paul Simpson-Housley, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), p. 242.
 - 38 MOSOP was one of the main reasons Shell withdrew from the Ogoni region in Nigeria in 1993. *Ibid.*, p. 242.
 - 39 Ken Saro-Wiwa, p. 12.

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The Challenge New Religious Movements Pose to an Open Theology of Religions

Julia Lauwers

For as long as it has existed, Christianity has contended with the religious other. Over the centuries, Christianity has developed theological resources to address the challenges presented by this “other.” One can discern a general movement in theology from exclusivism to greater openness toward other religions. This perspective of greater openness is particularly strong in the development of an “open” theology of religions. Rather than viewing the revelation contained in other religious traditions as intelligible only when explicitly related to the Christian proclamation of the Christ event as the fullness of revelation [1], an open theology of religions raises the possibility that other religious traditions might also bear within them unique, particular revelations from God [2]. An open theology of religions is usually directed towards the main historical religions. However, its efforts are interestingly challenged by twentieth century developments in religion, namely the rise of New Religious Movements (NRM’s).

John Saliba, a prolific writer on the topic of theology and NRM’s, poses a pertinent question:

“Can the work of theologians investigating the relationship between Christianity and the great religions also include the new religions?”[3] *Dialogue and Proclamation*, a statement on the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions says no; it refuses to contend with the question of NRM’s “due to the diversity of situations that these movements present and the need for discernment on the human and religious values each contains.”[4] Typically, NRM’s are not regarded as religions due to a belief that they are merely cultural (human inventions) or syncretistic (blending together already existing religions) [5]. However, in the context of the interrelationship of culture, history and revelation put forth by an open theology of religions, these factors present themselves as reasons to take NRM’s into account when constructing any theology of religions. Some important bridges have been built in the open theology of religions with the aim of broadening the Christian view of other religious traditions by considering the possibility of divinely inspired truth outside of the Christian faith. This paper will contend that an evaluation of NRM’s in the context of these bridges ultimately calls for deeper interaction between general theological claims and specific historical and cultural manifestations of religious beliefs, both when attempting to

understand particular religious traditions and when constructing theologies like the open theology of religions. This is illustrated by a discussion of the NRM’s claims to be genuine revelation, particularly as they relate to the open theology of religion’s notions of the continuous, culturally mediated history of revelation and the personalist nature of divine revelation. It is also illustrated by an examination of the implications of the NRM’s for the project of constructing an open theology of religions.

Many theologians who propose an open theology of religions recognize the validity of the claims to revelation on behalf of the significant figures of the world religions [6]. They also respect and uphold the dignity of the historical religions’ sacred or inspired texts. Like the historical religions, all of the NRM’s assert themselves as products of legitimate revelation [7]. One’s assessment of the NRM’s hinges on how one views the prophetic figures and claims to revelation that are made on their behalf: are they merely human inventions, or is there a divine force at work? The Vatican’s criticisms of NRM’s have centered on both the content and the method of the revelation claimed by NRM’s, calling them dangerous because they claim divine legitimacy for certain persons, texts, goals, or beliefs that are neither coherent nor truthful. Pope John Paul II stated,

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In their syncretistic and immanent outlook, these parareligious movements pay little heed to revelation, and instead try to come to God through knowledge and experience based on elements borrowed from Eastern spirituality or from psychological techniques. They tend to relativize religious doctrine in favour of a vague worldview expressed as a system of myths and symbols dressed in religious language [8].

What are the claims made by NRM's to which the Pope is referring?

There is an immense diversity of NRM's, and so one encounters many types of claims to revelation. For instance, the New Age self-consciously draws from elements of primal religions, which are believed to contain truth [9]. Another mode of revelation is "channeling," in which spiritual masters give advice to human beings [10]. One particular product of channeling is the text entitled *A Course in Miracles* by Helen Schucman, who claims that it came to her from divine instruction [11]. Other NRM's also claim to have sacred literature, such as the Unification Church, which believes the *Divine Principle* is an inspired text [12].

Some NRM's self-consciously situate themselves in relation to the history of revelation as understood in the historical religions, operating under the auspices of a leader or prophet. One such leader

is the Guru Srila Prabhupada, who founded the Hare Krishna movement in 1966 claiming to be from a line of spiritual teachers and disciples dating back to a fifteenth century saint who was a direct incarnation of Krishna [13]. Similarly, the Baha'i movement claims to originate from an experience of revelation granted to its founder, Baha'u'llah. He is aligned with religious figures of the past, as another among many Divine Messengers [14]. The Unification Church's founder Rev. Sun Myung Moon claims to be the recipient of a vision of Christ in the Korean mountains in 1953 that bestowed upon him messianic qualities, the ability to remove sin, and the mission to unite the human race into one family [15]. What distinguishes Srila Prabhupada, Rev. Sun Myung Moon, or Baha'u'llah from Muhammad or from the Buddha in the eyes of the Christian church? Many of these claims differ from the claims of the historical religions only insofar as they occurred later in human history.

When evaluating the historical religions' claims to revelation, an open theology of religions mandates that each religion is taken on its own terms. Many theologians will grant that genuine revelation can take place outside the boundaries of Christianity. Jacques Dupuis is willing to say that divine self-manifestation can occur within religious traditions themselves, writing, "[t]he Spirit is

present and active in all authentic experience of God, whatever be the manner in which human beings are situated in salvation history or the particular stage of history to which they belong" [16]. Dupuis here indicates that revelation is ongoing in history and that therefore God's self-disclosures in various times and places are not less authentic depending on the time period in which they take place. This idea, which originally applies to religions such as Judaism, Islam, or Hinduism, becomes significant when one is faced with new religions founded on personal divine revelations. The question is begged: how does one responsibly identify and evaluate an "authentic experience of God" and the resulting religious behaviour, including the founding of new religions?

Keith Ward speaks of a continuous history of revelation by tracing the understanding of revelation throughout primal religions to the present day [17]. Ward ultimately argues that an open and comparative theology of religion must pay attention to the cultural, historical, and linguistic aspects of claims to divine revelation as they occur within various time periods [18]. The interrelation of religion and culture elucidates the origin of diverse religions and also the way revelation comes to be interpreted and manifested in specific doctrines and practices. As Ward points out, "[c]ultures

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have very different sets of ideals, very different histories, and very different sets of values and priorities... one would naturally expect there to be different forms of religious belief and practice, roughly corresponding to different cultures” [19]. According to Ward’s standards, one must view NRM’s in the same way that one would approach other religions: as the product of people exercising their religious impulses in the context of their cultures, which in turn gives rise to belief systems and accompanying rituals [20]. One must therefore resist the temptation to dismiss NRM’s as merely cultural at the exclusion of their identity as religions.

Ward continually points out that truth or revelation might be contained in strange packaging. In his discussion of revelation in primal religions, he notes that their understanding of the spiritual realm was unsystematized and highly symbolic, as would be expected considering their cultural and historical context. While the primal beliefs carried important theological concepts hidden within them, they “lacked the rational coherence and moral discrimination which might protect such symbolic systems from destructive misuse” [21]. Just as Ward’s open theology allows a role for revelation to shamans and a divine presence throughout human history, it must allow for certain aspects of the New Age movement and other NRM’s to

contain genuine divine revelation. However, the claims made by NRM’s must be understood in the same way the primal and historical religions are understood: in the context of history, culture, and other claims to revelation [22].

This method of evaluation is also promoted by the Catholic Church in documents stemming from Vatican II, which indicate that God’s self-disclosure happens throughout history, in both “universal” and “sacred” history. In the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate*, the council indicated that “from ancient times there has existed among diverse peoples a perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human life” [23]. The open theology of religions goes one step further, evident in the words of Dupuis, who says “world history and salvation history coincide and are coextensive; moreover, since human history is, from the start and throughout, the story of God-with-humankind, it must likewise be said to imply from the outside and at all times both divine-self-revelation and salvation” [24]. An open theology of religions creates an opportunity for the Church’s understanding of the history of revelation to be applied to more recent religious traditions. Do NRM’s count among these religious traditions? If they do, is every NRM equal in this sense? Before conclusions such as these can be drawn based

on the proposals of theologians like Ward and Dupuis, the content of NRM’s must be subjected to critical analysis using theological tools. The perspective taken toward revelation across religious boundaries by an open theology of religions that applies to the primal and historical religious should be applied to the NRM’s.

Dupuis and Ward each discuss ways in which revelation occurs not only in specific cultural contexts throughout history, but also personally to particular individuals within these contexts. Dupuis states: “[t]heologically we must hold that wherever and whenever human beings turn toward an Absolute that addresses them and bestows itself upon them, an attitude of supernatural faith is thereby at work, in response to a personal divine revelation” [25]. Both this observation and Ward’s deeply cultural understanding of revelation can be applied to the issue of various “prophets” or figures with conflicting messages in both the historical religions and NRM’s. Ward notes, “Islam, Baha’i, Ramakrishna, Moon, and Joseph Smith all contend for the title of the true religion. We might ignore them; but we cannot say that they are all quite obviously not from God” [26]. Ward specifically draws this issue back to every person’s cultural and linguistic limitations. He notes that, “[a]s God acts in the world, so God acts on human minds to inspire their visionary capacities. But rarely,

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one might think, does God find a mind which is attuned to the Divine reality in such a way as to communicate Divine purposes adequately... God does not put thoughts into a vacant mind. God shapes the thoughts which are there" [27]. The prophetic claims of particular leaders of NRM's might arise out of a true experience of revelation interpreted in a specific linguistic, cultural, and symbolic system [28].

As Ward, Dupuis, and others realize, it is difficult to separate specific truth claims and the religious experiences from which they stem [29]. A perspective which focuses specifically on the reception of divine revelation by human experience is evident in more traditional Christian theological understandings of revelation. For instance, theologian Dermott Lane contends that Vatican II put forth a personalist, experiential vision of the way God's revelation is communicated to human beings. He states, "[e]very revelatory experience... is always alloyed with human and historical elements which provide the ambiance of contact between God and man. Thus revelation is always indirect" [30]. Lane goes on to say that, "[t]he revelation of God in experience is something that cries out for interpretation in linguistic symbols... where experience ends and interpretation begins is extremely difficult to delineate" [31]. The personalist interpretation of revelation is

normally advanced with the ultimate belief that no revelation is distinct or independent from the fullness of revelation in the person of Christ. The open theology of religions moves theology away from this point and therefore creates opportunities for the personalist interpretation to be used in ways not originally intended. Once an open theology of religions sets the groundwork for respecting NRM's as religions, then theologies of revelation that focus on the personalist aspects of God's involvement with humankind are more coherently applied to the NRM's themselves. Thus, application of the perspective of the open theology of religions to the question of NRM's is not only significant for the open theology of religions and for NRM's, but also for a theological understanding of revelation and for Christianity's own conception of its tradition.

It is evident, then, that the claims of NRM's cannot be disregarded without being considered. The ideas about revelation suggested by Ward and Dupuis open the door to valuing the content of the NRM's as both divinely inspired and culturally constructed. Viewed in this light, the growth and spread of alternative religions has implications for the development of an open theology of religions. One important implication of the degree to which the open theology of religions allows the recognition of a certain level of divine action in various NRM's is that it raises

the question of conversion. The potential for conversion exists whenever another religion is encountered. However, the NRM's are a growing phenomenon whose existence depends on conversion out of existing religions [32]. If the NRM's do contain aspects of truth or positive spiritual elements for their members and can therefore be examined in a more favourable light, what does this say about those who convert out of Christianity or any historical religion to join NRM's? An open theology of religions risks facilitating a situation in which one's religious affiliation is subordinated to one's cultural needs, goals, attitudes, and activities [33]. An open theology of religions often positively assesses other religions with the understanding that its members have grown up in a particular tradition and have known no other. What happens when an open theology of religions is confronted by a phenomenon like an NRM which seems to cohere with its overall claims about the relationship of all religions, but is constituted by people who have actively chosen against Christianity? Some particularly conservative views on the rise of NRM's present very firm statements on this matter, directly stating that, "A person may be ethically and morally 'good' by human standards, but if he sets his face against Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, and rejects Him, his fruit is corrupt and he is rejected

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as counterfeit" [34]. Does this statement apply to NRM members more than it would seem to apply to members of other religions? This question cannot be ignored and is an important implication of considering NRM's to be religions.

Another implication for an open theology of religions in taking NRM's seriously relates to their syncretistic nature. Many NRM's align themselves with the history of revelation by manifesting themselves as potential "ends" of the theology of religions, interreligious dialogue, and all religious difference. This is evident in the NRM claim to be the option that most effectively combines the truths of all religions into one. For instance, the founder of the Baha'i religion, Baha'u'llah, believed that his divine mission was the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth through the conflation of diverging religious beliefs and practices into one unified religion [35]. Some NRM's say that people can belong to them without renouncing their Christian faith [36]. This syncretistic vision has implications for the open theology of religions, which might be interpreted as saying the same thing: that Christianity and NRM's are not incompatible. Dupuis says that, "the religious traditions contribute, in a mysterious way, to the building of the Reign of God among their followers and in the world. They exercise, for their own members, a certain mediation of the Kingdom" [37]. The danger is that

through an uncritical application of general principles contained in an open theology of religions, all distinctions between religions will be lost. This is a similar danger that exists in the context of some very open NRM's, such as Baha'i or the New Age [38]. This tangible vision of what happens when all religions are given equal status provides a warning to the open theology of religions to carefully discern its own ends. This particular theological approach must ensure that it retains a vision of the uniqueness of each religion and the importance of maintaining a confessional stance in the face of various revelations. The goal of the theology of religions must not be the Baha'i faith, though, through an open theology of religions, the Baha'i faith can be seen to contain aspects of revelation. Saliba enlists the danger of syncretism as a reason for giving careful study and respect to the NRM's. He notes that the World Council of Churches indicates the need to "protect the rights of new religious movements to go about their activities, even if we radically disagree with their beliefs and world views," because this fosters diversity and respect for a confessional stance [39].

An open theology of religions has much to offer to a theological and cultural understanding of the place of NRM's in relation to the historical religions. Of special significance, however, is how much NRM's have to offer to the theology of religions. The issues

raised by the relationship of culture to revelation in NRM's calls for a more contextual theology of religions to be formed. The idea of revelation presented by the open theology of religions holds in tension the possibility of divine interaction in various traditions, and the need to discern the truth of these claimed interactions carefully. An open theology of religions cannot exist in a theoretical vacuum; what seems to be true for Christianity's relationship with one religion may not apply as easily or as coherently to another. The diversity of NRM's requires a careful study of each individually [40]. Similarly, any discussion of the distinctive claims made by religions, whether by traditional theology or by an open theology of religions, must always keep particular cultural contexts in mind. The Vatican is correct in saying there needs to be careful discernment; whether it is also correct in dismissing NRM's is an open question [41].

Endnotes:

^[1] A characteristic Catholic perspective on revelation, articulated by Dermott Lane, is that: "The universal interaction that takes place between God and man reaches a definitive and final point in Christ... To that extent Christian revelation is normative for a proper understanding of the ongoing universal revelation in the world today" (44). Furthermore, "the universal revelation of God to mankind continues to take place in the world; it is discerned and interpreted through the lenses of Christian revelation which is normative for the followers of Jesus" (47-48).

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Dermott Lane, "The Nature of Revelation" in *The Experience of God: An Invitation to Do Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1971).

[2] This perspective is characterized by the words of Jacques Dupuis, who states, "A theology of religious pluralism elaborated on the foundation of the Trinitarian economy will have to combine and to hold in constructive tension the central character of the punctual historical event of Jesus Christ and the universal action and dynamic influence of the Spirit of God. It will thus be able to account for God's self-manifestation and self-gift in human cultures and religious traditions outside the influence of the Christian message... a genuine recognition of the identity of other faith-communities as constituting different aspects of the self-revelation of the Absolute Mystery." *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), 94.

[3] John Saliba, "The Christian Church and the New Religious Movements: Toward Theological Understanding," *Theological Studies* 50 (1992): 475-476.

[4] Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue. *Dialogue and Proclamation*, June 20 1991, no 13.

[5] Jack Finnegan. "The New Age Movement – a New Religion?" *The Furrow* 43 (1992): 354

[6] Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, 115.

[7] John Saliba. *Perspectives on New Religious Movements*. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), 13.

[8] John Paul II's Papal Address to the Bishops of Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska on the *Ad Limina* Visit May 28, 1993, found in *Sects and New Religious Movements: An Anthology of Texts from the Catholic Church*, edited by The Working Group on New Religious Movements. (Vatican City: United States Catholic Conference, 1995).

[9] Pontifical Council for Culture and the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. "Jesus Christ the Bearer of the Water of Life." February 3, 2003, 2.1.

[10] John P. Newport, *The New Age Movement and the Biblical Worldview: Conflict and Dialogue* (Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1998), 11.

[11] *Ibid.*, 9.

[12] Saliba, *Perspectives on New Religious Movements*, 13.

[13] International Society for Krishna Consciousness. "About." <<http://www.iskcon.com/about/index.html>> (Accessed

March 29, 2005).

[14] "The Official Website of the Baha'is of the United States." <<http://www.bahai.us/content/section/9/38/>> (Accessed March 29, 2005).

[15] The Unification Church. <<http://www.unification.org/>> (Accessed March 29 2005).

[16] Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, 125.

[17] Keith Ward, *Religion and Revelation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 15-16, 93.

[18] Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, 95-99.

It is difficult to understand NRM's if they are isolated from the cultural surroundings in which they are packaged. As Amitham states: "If religious beliefs are moved out of their "religio-cultural milieu," the religion in question becomes "diluted and perverted." (Samuel Amitham, "The Challenge of New Religions to Christian Theological Thought," *International Review of Mission* 67.268 (October): 400).

[19] *Ibid.*, 14.

[20] Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1985), 16.

[21] Ward, *Reason and Revelation*, 84.

[22] Amirtham, "The Challenge of New Religions," 405.

[23] Nostra Aetate, No. 2. In his discussion of the Christian understanding of the relationship between universal and salvation history, Dermott Lane comments on Nostra Aetate, saying, "The universal interaction that takes place between God and man reaches a definitive and final point in Christ" (Lane, "Theory of Revelation," 43-44).

[24] Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, 99.

[25] *Ibid.*, 122.

[26] Ward, *Religion and Revelation*, 22.

[27] *Ibid.*, 89.

[28] *Ibid.*, 315.

[29] Amirtham, "The Challenge of New Religions," 401.

[30] Lane, "The Nature of Revelation," 35.

[31] *Ibid.*, 36.

[32] John Drane, *What is the New Age Still Saying to the Church?* (Great Britain: Marshall Pickering, 1999), 178.

[33] Saliba, "New Religious Movements" in *Theological Studies*, 481

[34] Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 15.

[35] *Ibid.*, 271.

[36] Saliba, "Dialogue with the New Religious Movements," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 67.

[37] Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions*, 202.

[38] Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, 14.

[39] Saliba, *Perspectives on the New Religious Movements*, 186.

[40] Saliba, "Dialogue with New Religious Movements," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 77.

[41] See note 4, above.

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