Sacred violence, sacred bodies: A Girard-ian analysis of violence among women of color

Richard Thomas

Abstract

René Girard (1972), in his seminal work, *Violence and the Sacred*, provides one of the most comprehensive discussions on the nature of violence in contemporary literature. He also offers a solution to the destructive nature of violence, inherent to human nature, through his understanding of Christology; however, Girard does not explicitly discuss this theme in relation to women of color. Thus, a theological perspective situated amongst the varied experiences of women of color can aid in a descriptive move toward creating a more inclusive anthropology of violence, while simultaneously making a proscriptive move to enhance Girard's notion of Christology. This article explains Girard's philosophies of sacrifice and scapegoat mechanisms as the cause of violence, and then explains how marginalized women of color, as victims of domestic violence, fit these concepts. He describes a Christology where Christ breaks the system of violence and scapegoating. The final move of this article is to use theologies, from the lens of women of color, to expand Girard's Christology so that it is more inclusive of all women.

Keywords

Christology, Girard, women of color, violence, sacrifice, scapegoat, religion

Introduction

Domestic Violence is an issue that transcends race, class, and continental boundaries; however, an overwhelming number of victims of domestic violence are women. According to the World Health Organization, -approximately 35 percent of women globally have been victims of domestic abuse. The link between race, class, and gender is often overlooked when considering domestic violence, and contrary to popular belief, the notion of universal risk by all women is simply not true. Poor women of color are among the groups that are at the highest risk because of their social position, and for society not to recognize the effects domestic violence has on poor women of color jeopardizes the validity of any peace or justice movement towards global harmony. This holds true for religious communities such as Christianity. If Christian practices and social teachings are to remain relevant in a contemporary context, they must address the multi-faceted concerns of their community, including the issue of gender violence towards women of color.

René Girard (1972), in his seminal work *Violence and the Sacred,* provides one of the most comprehensive discussions of the nature of violence in contemporary literature. He also offers a solution to the destructive nature of violence, inherent to human na-

ture, through his understanding of Christology. However, he does not explicitly discuss this theme in relation to women of color. Thus, a theological perspective situated amongst the varied experiences of women of color can aid in a descriptive move towards creating a more inclusive anthropology of violence, while simultaneously making a proscriptive move to enhance Girard's notion of Christology. This paper explains Girard's notions of sacrifice and scapegoat mechanisms as the cause of violence, and then explains how marginalized women of color as victims of domestic violence fit these concepts. He describes a Christology where Christ breaks the system of violence and scapegoating. The final move of this paper is to use theologies from the lens of women of color to expand Girard's Christology so that it is more inclusive.

The Meaning of Sacrifice and the Scapegoat

Many poor women of color have been used as sacrifices to allow the continued perpetuation of structural violence to maintain order socially, politically, and judicially. Natalie J. Sokoloff and Ida Dupont (2005), discuss the oppressive and interlocking forms that these women experience in their article, "Domestic Violence at the Intersection of Race, Class and Gender: Challenges and Contributions to Understanding Violence Against Marginalized Women in Diverse Communities." Namely, the categories of race, class, and gender add dimensions to the forms of violence that women experience. This truth is apparent when examining the connection between domestic violence, tripartite experiences, and power. Margaret Anderson and Patricia H. Collins (2001), make some helpful observations about the connection between race, class, and gender,

in *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, arguing:

> "Analyzing race, class, and gender as they shape different groups experiences also involves the issues of power, privilege, and equity. This means more than just knowing the cultures of an array of human groups. It means recognizing and analyzing the hierarchies and systems of domination that permeate society and that systematically exploit and control people."

Anderson and Collin's (2001) statement has implications for views of domestic violence with respect to the experiences of marginalized women of color. Many definitions of domestic violence do not include the concerns of women with different cultural backgrounds. The term domestic violence does not have to be relativized so it only has meaning in a particular framework; however, it should imply that gender violence cannot be categorized by one cultural experience. Mieko Yoshihama (1999), suggests in his article, "Domestic Violence Against Women of Japanese descent in Los Angeles: Two Methods of Estimating Prevalence," that any description of domestic violence should be informed by the multifarious gender experiences globally. In Michele Bograd's (1999) article, "Strengthening Domestic Violence Theories: Intersection of Race, Class, Sexual Orientation, and Gender," she explains that these descriptions are shaped by points of intersection such as: race, class, and gender, which have a distinct impact on how domestic violence is experienced by the individual and community. Power relationships are deeply connected with these points of intersection. It is no secret that patriarchal, social, and political structures have dominated most societies. If social order is to be maintained through patriarchy then violence towards women, both directly and indirectly, is necessary. Violence towards women serves to reinforce male domination as well as fe-

male subordination. It allows patriarchy to reign socially, politically, and economically through coercive forces, and should not be limited to violence through physical force and intimidation (Bograd 1999). Marginalized women of color experience domestic violence through their lack of access to various benefits such as: social service programs, public housing, medical insurance, other resources related to adequate health care, and occupational hazards as a result of working in male dominated industries. These all constitute structural forms of violence by which these women are sacrificed to continue dominant socio-cultural paradigms involving the privileging of paternalistic structures globally.

Sophia Chirongoma (2006), explains, in *Women, Religion and Health: Essays in Honour of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye*, the way domestic violence has affected poor Zimbabwean women through the lack of access to important medical resources. She describes the plight of women from the Masvingo province. In this province, although women are responsible for most of the processing and production of food crops, men control virtually every aspect of this production. As Sarojini Nadar and Isabel A. Phiri (2005) explain, in *African Women, Religion, and Health*, the men of these communities control the land, cattle, reproduction, as well as, the means of production. This has resulted in the lack of financial security, and inability to pay for health care for the affected women. They are forced to work grueling fifteen hour days, while their male counterparts, by comparison, work eight to nine hour days. The work they perform forces them to live in rural areas, away from access to cherished resources such as: transportation, hospitals, stores, and other valued businesses. The urban habitations that the women live in are dominated by men that have

better living conditions, transport systems, and sanitation. All of the health and medical facilities are concentrated in areas that these women have limited or no access to. There are approximately 500,000 women that live on the rural lands, and none have adequate access to healthcare (Nadar & Phiri, 2006). Consequently, these poor women of color that bare many of the burdens of their communities, are separated from the resources that they need the most. Institutional structures have been put in place that allow women to be used as sacrifices to empower the patriarchal socio-cultural structures.

Chirongoma (2006) goes on to explain the specific ways in which women's health has been one of the most destructive forms of domestic violence that the Masvingo community has ever faced. Initially, in the 1980's, great progress was made to address some of the concerns of women's health. The government invested heavily in education and health, and healthcare expanded to fit the rural and urban poor areas. Health infrastructure was constructed which allowed more access to healthcare facilities. However, all of this changed after HIV/AIDS and the World Bank/ IMF imposed structural adjustments. They made major cuts in the budget in both healthcare and welfare services. This combined with decreased household income allowed the Zimbabwean community to revert back to its structure prior to the reforms of the 1980s. At the peak of the reform, the Ministry of Health was providing over 70 percent of health expenditures, however, by 1994, they were only able to finance around 29 percent of the related expenditures.

These changes have caused a dramatic effect on the lives of women living in the communities of the Masvingo province. The healthcare systems transformed so that those who do not have sufficient resources simply

do not survive. These women are then placed at a distinct disadvantage because of their lack of access to valuable resources. In one gruesome example, Chirongoma (2006), explains how mothers have been held hostage by maternity wards if they are not able to pay to be released from hospitals. Through her analysis, she describes the consequences of having a lack of budgetary resources by the Zimbabwean government. As the budget shrinks, women and girls starve themselves so that they can afford to feed the males in their families; these women sacrifice their health and wellbeing for the nourishment of the males. Even for those women that are lucky enough to marry into a family with health insurance, the males get first priority. It is clear from this that the value of these women's lives is not a concern for most of their households. As a result, many women are denied medical resources that they desperately need; unless, they somehow manage to make enough income to pay for medical expenses themselves (Phiri 2003). According to Chirongoma (2006), women sacrifice themselves in the fields taking on the most dangerous jobs, all the while enduring illness without seeking medication until they are deathly ill. They are again forced to sacrifice their own health to maintain the dominant metanarrative that reinforces supremacy of male bodies in patriarchal societal structures.

Similar to notions of sacrifice, Girardian scapegoats can also be used to describe the plight of marginalized women of color. Scapegoat mechanisms describe the process of violence from the viewpoint of human interactions and its resulting effects on communities. Many African scholars provide ways to analyze the various methods in which marginalized women of color have been used as scapegoats. Bernard Debre (1997), in *Lillusion Humanitaire*, notes that in many African countries the birth of a female child is considered bad luck. This theme still exists because of the enduring notions of sexism that pervade many African cultures. African women long since have been the most marginalized group many African societies. They fit the mold for the Girardian scapegoat because of their varying vulnerabilities. These women are singled out because of distinctive features that separate them from their male counterparts. These features then serve as the basis for their continued ostracism.

When examining the marginalization of African women, it is impossible not to be drawn to the impact of the HIV/AIDS virus on the continent, and more specifically on the female population. These women have been used as scapegoats for this increasingly destructive epidemic. In fact, scholars have argued that perhaps the most damaging effect of the HIV/AIDS epidemic is the way that it has stigmatized poor women of color. In *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity*, Erving Goffman (1963) defines stigma as: "an attribute that significantly discredits a person and that, in the eyes of society reduces the dignity of the person who possess it." Furthermore, he explains that this person lives a life with an "undesirable difference" that is often understood as deviance (Goffman 1963). For African women, this notion of stigma can be nuanced in several ways. First, stigma, in the context of HIV/AIDS, is not a fixed idea, rather it is deeply embedded in the system of power differentials in many African communities. Stigma is passed down from those in power to those without power. Peter Aggleton and Richard Parker (2002), in *HIV and AIDS-related Stigma and Discrimination: A Conceptual Framework and Implications for Actions*, explain that HIV/AIDS related stigmas are strongly associated with class, gender, race, and sexual orientation divisions.

This is especially true for the African women of color, in which gender and social inequality are pivotal in the ways that they are stigmatized. Stigmas do not arise in a social vacuum; they are profoundly shaped by the context from which they are formed.

When marginalized, African, women of color become stigmatized by the HIV/AIDS virus they are believed to have received the virus because of their moral faults. Then, they are characterized by these faults, and shunned by other members of their community. Their moral depravity, much like the Girardian scapegoat, is viewed as the primary cause of chaos and disorder, and rather than being considered the victim of an illness, they are viewed as the necessary sacrifice to restore order. Most African women are infected with the HIV/AIDS virus by their male partners, who have control over the female body because of the patriarchal structures that permeate through their communities (Aggleton & Parker, 2002). Although the African men are most often the cause of the spread of HIV/AIDS to the women, they do not suffer the same stigmatization. Rather than attributing the spread of HIV/AIDS to males, the women are blamed for their presumed sexual promiscuity. Girard's notion of scapegoat fits well here because the scapegoat is often viewed as sexually deviant. The presumed sexual promiscuity of the poor African women of color serves to justify their use as scapegoats for HIV/AIDS. In much the same way that scapegoats are ostracized from society because of their differences, so too are the women infected with the HIV/AIDS virus (Aggleton & Parker, 2002). The women that are infected are forced out of many occupations, and often into reclusion. The women usually cannot afford the medical treatment that they so desperately desire, furthermore; those who have the power to make medical treatment economically feasible, simply choose not to, because the women are believed to be the main cause for their own suffering. Finally, the death of both the scapegoat and the poor African women of color allow the restoration of moral order back into society. Peace is obtained once the scapegoat has been sacrificed on behalf of the community. Similarly, the sacrifice of the poor women of color, in certain African countries, restores order to those societies. When these women are not allowed to have access to necessary medical provisions that could save their lives in favor of continuing patriarchal systemic order; in effect, they are being sacrificed like scapegoats. Although Africa has been used as the example to analyze Girardian violence in relation to lives of poor women of color, this phenomenon is not limited to the African continent. Women across the globe are harmed by violent socio-political structures that favor patriarchy. Indeed, this system of sacrificial violence leaves much room for despair, however; Girard does provide a solution to this conundrum. He believes religious communities, particularly Christianity, can provide an adequate response to this system of sacrificial violence. For Girard, the example of Christ as the ultimate scapegoat provides the necessary response to the inescapable system of sacrifice.

Girardian Christology

René Girard has well-diagnosed the problem among humans as violence. According to his mimetic theory, Christ serves as the cure to the system of perpetual violence. Christ is able to defeat the system of scapegoat mechanisms because he was able to reveal profound insights into humanity that could not be found anywhere else. Per Bjornar Grande (2010), in *Mimesis and Desire*, states that through Christ's willingness to be

the sacrifice, he was able to reveal the innocence of the scapegoat. Every other written narrative perpetuates the system of violence by allowing from either the silence or alluding to the complicity of the scapegoat in the never-ending system of sacrificial violence. However, the narrative of Christ explains the innocence of the one who suffers, and furthermore, tells of the ultimate triumph of the scapegoat. Also, a part of this narrative is that Christ is able to recognize the most vulnerable member of society, and overturn the system of violence through both his actions, during his life and his culminating death on the cross. Girard's description of the ways that Jesus defeats scapegoat mechanisms is deeply connected to his notion of Christology.

Girard's career as a literary critic is evident through the way he articulates Christology. For him, Christology is fundamentally a hermeneutical task meant to connect Jesus, from literary history, with present day conceptualizations of Christ. Hence, any perception of Jesus must be reconciled with patterns of history discovered through literary texts. This revelation is presented through the gospel narratives. It is important for Girard's theological framework to emphasize the humanness of Christ. Accordingly, it is only through Christ's humanness that Christ can develop a close and intimate bond with humanity to serve as the ultimate sacrifice. It is through this capacity that Christ is capable of defeating scapegoat mechanisms (Grande 2010). Christ's deep connection with humanity allows him to clearly understand human history. The first instance of the violent nature of scapegoating is with the story of Cain and Abel -specifically, Girard describes this as the first instance of mimetic rivalry

which also helps to perpetuate the violence inherent in scapegoat mechanisms. This particular incident sets up the very foundation for the rest of Biblical history. Christ shows his recognition of the violent scapegoat mechanism not only through his words, but also through his actions.

Through becoming a victim of violence and exposing himself to the murderous tendencies of his own culture, Jesus is able to provide a universal revelation for all of humankind. This revelation dispels the entire system of sacrificial violence, which is predicated on not recognizing the victim as innocent. Although Christ is condemned to be crucified, it was by no means a unanimous decision. Jesus had opened the eyes of some to the innocence of the victim[1]. When Christ is sent to be crucified, it appears that Christ has succumbed to the system of retributive violence and scapegoat mechanisms. However, through Christ's resurrection, the attempt to use Christ as the scapegoat has failed. Therefore, Christ in the resurrection narrative emerges victorious over scapegoat's mechanisms.

One of the essential aspects of Girard's Christological framework is that it condemns all traditional notions of sacrificial Christology. Christ does not fit within any of the previous interpretations of a sacrifice. Traditional interpretations believe that Christ's sacrifice served as both a regulating mechanism, and to convince people that it was willed by God. Girard does not dispute the claim that the murder of Jesus was an example of sacrificial violence; rather, he argues that the presentation of Jesus as the sacrifice in the Gospels is depicted in a non-sacrificial way. Girard concludes that Christ's death on the cross was not the will of God. With this

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[1] See Matthews 27: 11-23 In this story Jesus is sent before Pontius Pilate leaves it up to the Jewish crowd to decide who will be saved and the crowd chooses Barabbas. However, Pontius Pilate does something that had never been done in history up to that point. He recognized the innocence of Jesus as the scapegoat. As a result he reluctantly delivers Jesus over to be dealt with by the Jews and confesses his belief in Jesus' righteousness and innocence.

theological claim, he attempted to deconstruct an entire history of theology founded on the principle of sacrifice. He contends that sacrificial systems are in opposition to God's kingdom. He rereads the resurrection narrative not as a story about God sacrificing God's only son, but about God's only son that is sacrificed because he attempted to represent the Kingdom of God. In doing so, he revealed the violent nature of sacrificial systems that are present within all societies. Jesus replaced a system predicated on violence with a system of non-violence and everlasting love.

Although Christ's humanity is a point of great emphasis, Girard still believes in Christ's divinity as well. Christ is divine, in that he represents the non-violent and loving nature of God. It is through Christ's divinity that he is set apart from, and pivotal in, the disruption of the seemingly endless cycle of sacrificial violence. Christ also serves as the mediation from violent imitations of humanity, towards a non-violent God. Per Bjornar Grande states of Christ's divinity: "Christ represented God; He gives people the possibility of peering into a realm of non-violent and life-giving existence and, finally, a way to build a human culture where violence is not the dominant force" (Grande 2010). For Grande, Christ is able to give humanity a glimpse of a society free from violence, and to provide a new paradigm on which to base all human interactions. Although Girard's Christology is insightful towards remedying the problem of violence, it has decidedly androcentric undertones. Girard does not give special attention to the various groups that are most affected by the system of sacrificial violence. He does provide helpful ways to reimagine the system of sacrifice that can be beneficial, but I contend that his perspective can be enhanced through including key attributes from the theological perspective of women of color.

Christologies from Women of Color

Given the current issues related to domestic violence that many marginalized women of color face, it is difficult for these women to accept any notion of Jesus with patriarchal overtones. Consequentially, it becomes theologically imperative for these women to re-imagine a Christological figure that they can identify with. With this assumption in mind, there are two distinct aspects that I believe women of color can add to Girardian Christology so that it better fits the contexts of the many women across the globe that are victims of domestic violence. First, they critically examine Girard's low Christology; and secondly, they create a more inclusive vision of the Kingdom of God.

Girard uses a low Christology to explain Christ's deep connection to humanity. For him, it is only through the deep insights that he gains from the connection to humanity that Christ is able to defeat the system of violence that has been so prevalent throughout human history. However, through emphasizing Christ's humanness, he has intentionally or unintentionally emphasized Jesus' maleness. All too often, women have been subjugated by the male Christ figure. Thus, for many women of color a Christology that emphasizes Christ's humanity is irredeemable. For them, Christ must transcend hegemonic patriarchal narratives that are created from this theology. Kwok Pui-Lan (2005), offers an alternative to a Christology that emphasizes Christ's humanity in *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, she suggests several different views of Christ, including the use of a hybrid conceptualization of Jesus/Christ.

According to Rita N. Brock's (1997) article, "Interstitial Integrity: Reflections

towards an Asian American Woman's Theology," hybridity can be described as a Christological framework that destabilizes the points of reference as binary opposites. It serves to critique rigid boundaries while simultaneously challenging the construction of the center and periphery. This means that hybridity has the ability to challenge the stringent boundaries between Christ's humanity and his divinity. Pui-Lan (2005) describes the space between Jesus, the human figure, and Christ, the divine figure, as fluid. She insists that it resists easy categorization and closure. She believes there is an invitation in the space of liminality between human and divine for Christian communities to explore the possibilities of meaning-making for each unique context. She calls this space the "contact zone" or "borderland" (2005). The vibrancy of the Christian community is jeopardized whenever the distinction between Christ and Jesus are static. Furthermore, Christology conceived in this way is not only more vital for communities of women of color; it is also more vital to the biblical portrait of Christ. In *The Jesus of Faith: A Christological Contribution to an Ecumenical Third World*, the biblical scholar, George Soares- Prabhu (1994), notes:

> "New Testament Christology is inclusive and pluriform. Every community evolves its own understanding of Jesus responding to its own cry for life. And because life changes christologies change too. The New Testament preserves all these christologies, without opting exclusively for any one among them, because it does not wish to offer us (as dogmatic theology pretends to do) a finished product to be accepted unquestionably by all. Rather its pluralism indicates a Christological open-endedness, inviting us to discover our own particular Christology."

Allowing a more fluid understanding of the relationship between Christ and Jesus is more vital for women of color across the globe. These women who live in diverse cultural contexts are able to have a vision of Christ that fits the realities of their lived experiences. They are not limited by constraints of high or low Christology. They have the ability to conceive of Christ's divinity and humanity in a way that is meaningful for them.

Girard also argues that Christ is the representation of the Kingdom of God. The sacrificial system is contrary to God's vision of a kingdom where peace and equality are the dominant paradigms. The Kingdom of God is the replacement of sacrifices and prohibitions by love. While his emphasis on Christ's ability to be the mediator of peace on Earth, his linguistic use of the term kingdom is fundamentally androcentric. According to Namsoon Kang (2013), in *Cosmopolitan Theology: Reconstituting Planetary Hospitality, Neighbor-Love, and Solidarity in an Uneven World*, the term kingdom is both inherently patriarchal as well as hierarchical. It presupposes a hierarchy between a king and his subordinates. This naturalizes the male-King as the center of power (Kang 2013). A recent challenge to this notion has come from various scholars, including women of color. They opt to use the word kindom of God as opposed to the traditional phrase of kingdom of God.

Robert Yaw Owusu (2006), provides a helpful description on how to conceive of the term kindom in the article, "Kwame Nkrumah's Liberation Thought: A Paradigm for Religious Advocacy in Contemporary Ghanan Society." It is used to describe the relationship between humans, their relationship to one another, and their relationship to the rest of creation. He specifies that the rest of creation includes all things created on Earth. It describes the cosmos, or realm of human beings, as brothers and sisters in relation to their spiritual and physical environment (2006). Aware of the similar connota-

tions that kin have, in relation to maleness, Owusu (2006), provides a unique description of how to articulate the term, kin. It is alternately interpreted as "fellow-feeling." Kindom living is anti-classism, anti-domination, anti-exploitation, and it is egalitarian. The Kindom of God is not tribal, although it does recognize racial and cultural differences. The Kindom of God affirms homogeneity as interdependent creatures, while also supporting diversity and multiplicity. It is open to everyone and addresses the many social concerns faced by contemporary society such as; racism, classism, colonialism, heteronormativity, and most explicitly, the domination of patriarchy.

Women of color have used the concept of Jesus, who brings the Kindom of God to Earth, as an imperative so that all of creation is included in the divine earthly deliverance. Namsoon Kang (2013), analyzes this imperative. She writes that through tracing the history of specific movements such as the women's movement, civil rights movement, anti-apartheid movements, or any other form of liberative movement; they have all worked towards the goal of creating a "world-to-come"In aiming toward this imagined world, it is essential to stimulate and motivate people into solidarity with one another. For women of color to bring about the "world-to-come" is to bring about the Kindom of God. Kang explains the Christological figure as the "Cosmic Christ." The "Cosmic Christ" is free from all monolithic interpretations, it creates an ethic of mutual responsibility for all of humanity. Furthermore, it encourages us to begin a great work to live in and to build the Kindom of God. (Kang 2013 p.182-5).When this happens, theology, and more specifically Christology, is no longer limited to the realm of academia. It enters the wider realm of socio-political contexts of existing communities. It

is able to transform the daily lives of all of God's people. Thus, the struggle for justice and equality find new meaning from this view. It is able to address major socio-political issues such as: power differentials, class/race/gender inequality, and heteronormativity. Put differently , this view of Christology embraces Jesus' ability to both restore hope to the hopeless, and to be the remedy for broken systems.

Conclusion

In *Violence and the Sacred,* René Girard (1972), details a provocative description of violence as a sacred ritualized event that has transcended all cultural and historical contexts. Although his writing does not explicitly address the difficulties that women face through domestic violence, it can be nuanced to be applicable to their lives. Women of color can find particular meaning to apply to their own lives. His work forcefully attacks the typical myths of domestic violence. Violence is not limited to physical violence or to an individual; it permeates all institutional, social, and political structures. Furthermore, violence is intimately connected with issues of power and economic relationships. More compelling than Girard's analysis of violence, however, is his solution to a violent world. It is this solution that Christian religious communities can find most helpful when deriving a theological response to violent structures. Girard's Christological framework provides a helpful conception of the role of Jesus in dismantling violent structures. Jesus represents the ultimate cure from an ailing world. Through destabilizing boundaries, Jesus mends a broken system predicated on violence. This view of Jesus can be expanded to the pluralistic contexts of women of color. For them, Jesus provides the necessary imperative to dismantle hierarchical, patri-

archal, and heteronormative violent systems for poor women of color. The end result of this effort is to bring to Earth the Kindom of God. This endeavor also results in a way for women to reclaim their bodies from the proverbial sacrifice to scapegoat mechanism. Women of color, by reclaiming their bodies as a part of the Kindom of God, desacralize them as well. Just as Girard imagines Jesus as the figure that can restore broken systems, marginalized women of color can imagine Jesus as the One restores broken bodies. ∎

Address correspondence to:

Richard A. Thomas, Graduate Student, Texas Christian University, Brite Divinity School at TCU, Email: randrew.thomas@tcu.edu

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