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Alternative Theologies of Christianity

Influencing the Christian Church from Within

Paul Bratt

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The Christian Church today is made up of three distinct denominational bodies: the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and the Protestant Church. The Orthodox Church broke off from the Catholic Church roughly a millennia ago.¹ The Reformation was the split between the Protestant and the Catholic Church.² After these schisms, which were caused primarily because of theological differences, the Orthodox and Protestant Churches would both divide further into subgroups,³ but these two instances represent the most significant rifts within the Christian Church.⁴ While the theological differences that were at the forefront of these fractures are certainly present yet today, these three bodies nevertheless maintain theologies that are similar enough that they represent a “mainstream” Christianity. The existence of a mainstream Christian theology does not preclude alternative theologies, however.

Alternative theologies make up an entire spectrum of Christian thought, with varying perspectives, emphases, and interpretations. As *Christian* theologies, it is inevitable that many alternative theologies are defined by and large by their Christology; a different interpretation of Jesus Christ or his teachings is the most common way in which this characteristic is seen. Other theologies do not place their weight on Christ, and instead use elements of the Christian faith to directly confront sociocultural issues through theology. To go a step further, some alternative theologies that self-identify as Christian may be criticized by mainstream elements of the faith for a false use of such a title. As with, for example, the Protestant Church, these alternative theologies are rarely homogenous, falling under an umbrella term that encompasses competing

¹ Donald A. Boccardi and Thomas J. Hoffman. “The movement for church unity in Christianity: contributing factors.” *The Social Science Journal*, vol. 34, no. 2, 1997: 159, (accessed October 25, 2013). URL: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0362331997900483>

² Ibid.

³ Vatican II Council. “Decree on Ecumenism: *Unitatis Redintegratio*.” The Vatican. (accessed October 24, 2013). URL: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html

⁴ Boccardi and Hoffman, “The movement for church unity,” 159.

theologies within itself. A survey of these theologies is a useful tool in understanding the shape of the Christian Church today, and the potential theologies that could play a role in shaping the Church of the future.

Mainstream Christianity has remained relatively consistent over several centuries, with particular elements remaining consistent for over two millennia. Nevertheless, while the core tenets have remained true and consistent, the theology exists dynamically. The environment surrounding Christianity can, and has, had a powerful impact upon the theology. The scientific evolution created a new paradigm of human thought in the West; existentialism altered philosophical structures that the theology functioned in; even the early Christian Church, several of the apostles and early theologians, including Paul, adapted to and utilized elements of Hellenistic thought.⁵ Christianity is not a direct product of its environment, yet it is nevertheless dynamic. Why, then, cannot it not be influenced by itself?

Alternative theologies of Christianity offer unique perspectives of the faith that the Church can certainly benefit from. In these alternatives, there is a diversity of interpretations of Christ, of morality, of human action. It is representative of the vitality of the Christian faith that new interpretations and thought systems are continually formulated, as men and women the world over seek new understandings of and new relationships with God. The alternatives are by no means necessarily radical; indeed, many represent a return to an orthodoxy that has quite simply faded, such as a rejection of an anthropomorphized divine. Existing dynamically, the Christian tradition can discover a rejuvenating approach to its faith tradition by exploring and familiarizing in greater detail with alternative theologies. Responding to all manner of issues,

⁵ William Johnston. "Buddhists and Christians meet." *Eastern Buddhist* 3, no. 1 (June 1, 1970): 139. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed November 26, 2013). URL: <http://web.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.gvsu.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=3b0ac2e9-dba1-4551-9da6-bac314c2b101%40sessionmgr115&vid=8&hid=113>

such as secularism, sexism, economic oppression, and so forth, alternative theologies can reorient Christianity in such a way that it is more aptly equipped to address these issues. This does not need to occur as an initial reaction to a perceived event or injustice; rather, the framework is already in place within an alternative theology. As such, a greater understanding of these theologies is necessary for their positive elements to be realized, opening the door for the end of their existence as specifically “alternative” and instead function as elements of the dynamic constellation of the Christian faith.

Christian Zen:

Christian Zen has grown out of the increasing contact between the East and the West, with the inevitably of a more heightened influence exchanged between Buddhism and Christianity.⁶ Christian Zen is not a Buddhist version of Christianity; rather, it is a Christianity that has reappropriated its core principles and understandings by the mutual influence of Buddhism. For instance, the Buddha did not describe nirvana, he only pointed the way. In Christianity, this can represent a recognition of the fact that dogma and truths are inevitably imperfect and only point to the perfection of God but are not, in themselves, perfect.⁷ Through the Buddhist interpretation, the anthropomorphized aspects of God, that were so common in the Old Testament, must be rejected in light of the utter unknowability of God. God’s unknowability can also be identified in scripture, from the Old Testament Jew’s prohibition of images, which could not represent a divine such as Yahweh, or John’s recognition that God is love.⁸

⁶ Ibid, 140.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

Christian Zen recognizes the emptiness, in Buddhist terms, of the unknowability of God, which demands that words and images are put aside.⁹ Words are only capable of pointing to the divine, and Christian Zen identifies Western Christianity as one that clings too strongly to words to the point that it becomes a unique form of idolatry that distracts Christians from the real vision of and the real, unknowable Christ.¹⁰ Images of Christ in themselves are not a negative thing, but they are restricted to the historical, human Christ, rather than the risen, cosmic, and eternal Christ that is beyond human comprehension, thus images are restricted as incomplete representations of Christ.¹¹ This is the danger of fundamentalist and literalist approaches to scripture: the narrow understanding can lead to an overly-anthropomorphized understanding and concept of God and Christ; the transcendent and abstract nature of God, which is difficult to represent in words and literature, is therefore neglected.¹²

Christian Zen returns to a more mystical approach to theology, the *theologia negativa*, which approaches an understanding of God as knowing more about what God is *not* than what God *is*. The recognition of the unknowability of God is strikingly similar to the Buddhist approach to nothingness and emptiness.¹³ Indeed, as William Johnston wrote, words cannot capture the aspect of what God is because “in the presence of Divinity, the most learned words are like the stammering of infants.”¹⁴ The Buddhist belief in *amatta*, or the non-self, is a similar concept that early Christian theologians and New Testament writers frequently discussed, namely the idea that the self must die if the man or woman is to truly live.¹⁵ In Christianity, the non-self is not realized by an I-Thou dualism between humanity and God. Rather, it is the

⁹ William Johnston. *Christian Zen*. Fordham Univ. Press, 1997. 48.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 50.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 52.

¹² Johnston, “Buddhists and Christians meet,” 141.

¹³ *Ibid*.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 142.

realization that God lives within us, that we are clothed in Christ himself, and our true selves are thereby lost; in Buddhist terms, the small self, *shoga*, is destroyed for the big self, *taiga*.¹⁶

Christian Zen is not a radically different Christianity. It is simply a Christianity that has a new understanding of God and Christ, an understanding that recognizes the limitations of words, images, and even human understanding. The Christian Zen process demands that Christians recognize that their lives are hidden within Christ in God. Through this, the self is hidden and we cease to be conscious of it in the midst of an enlightenment that recognizes the unknowability of God, calling out “Abba, Father,” when the self is finally lost.¹⁷ Prayer and meditation in Christian Zen is not a dialogue with a personal God, but rather a prayer without a subject; silence pervades before the mystery of God that is nameless. The self is forgotten in the relation of God and the silence that accompanies the deep repose brought about by the unknowability of God.¹⁸

Christian Anarchism:

Christian Anarchism is a theology that cites the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy as one of its central theorists. Indeed, Tolstoy believed that Christianity ultimately puts an end to the state, and that this is the very reason Jesus Christ was crucified: his teachings meant an end to the state.¹⁹ To understand this conclusion, it is important to understand the Tolstoyan ethic. Tolstoy took Jesus’ teachings quite literally and viewed the Sermon on the Mount as the central teaching of Jesus that is to guide Christian behavior.²⁰ This means that the Christian should only ever act

¹⁶ Ibid, 143, 144.

¹⁷ Johnston, *Christian Zen*, 56.

¹⁸ Johnson, “Buddhists and Christians meet,” 145.

¹⁹ Alexandre Christoyannopoulos. “Christian Anarchism.” *Imprint*, Exeter. *A Christian Anarchist Critique of Violence: 2*. (accessed October 4, 2013). URL: http://134.173.117.152/anarchist_archives/Christiananarchism.pdf

²⁰ Alexandre Christoyannopoulos. “Turning the Other Cheek to Terrorism: Reflections on the Contemporary Significance of Leo Tolstoy’s Exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount.” *Politics and Religion* 1, no. 1 (March, 2008). (accessed October 4, 2013). doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1755048308000035>

in love and peace and never in violence.²¹ As a result of this, the Christian will inevitably have to submit themselves to suffering by not resisting evil with force, by “turning the other cheek.”²²

This is where the role of the state enters Tolstoy’s theology. Rather than preserving order as the representative of a civil state, Tolstoy argued, the state actually perpetuates violence that is akin to the state of nature.²³ To enforce laws, the state utilizes coercion and the threat of violence.²⁴ The state is therefore based on the use of legitimate violence,²⁵ which is granted solely to the state via modern political theory.²⁶ According to Tolstoy, military forces, the police, the judicial system, and other elements of the state are based on violence, which is entirely antithetical to the pacifistic, loving nature of Christianity.²⁷ Under Christ’s call to act only in love and peace, it is therefore the responsibility of the Christian to reject the institution of the violent state.²⁸ The Christian life has its primacy in love and non-violence, so in this theology, the individual Christian must be “fanatically committed to Christian love.”²⁹ Therefore, when confronted with evil and violence, the Christian response must only be in love, forgiveness, even to the risk of death, as demonstrated by Christ’s crucifixion.³⁰ While this emphasis on love and non-violence may seem attributable to mainstream Christianity, Tolstoy extended his attack on the state to the institution of the Christian Church as well.

Since Constantine’s conversion, Tolstoy argued, the Christian Church was directly tied to the state, and at this onset, there was an element of militancy through the Roman army’s ties to

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Christoyannopoulos, “Christian Anarchism,” 3.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid, 4

²⁶ Ibid, 5.

²⁷ Christoyannopoulos, “Turning the Other Cheek.”

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Christoyannopoulos, “Christian Anarchism,” 13.

³⁰ Ibid, 5.

Constantine's new faith.³¹ This connection has carried through history, leading to such events as the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the various wars of religion that plagued European history.³² As such, the Christian Church itself has even become an institution of violence. "Pride, violence, self-assertion, stagnation, death" have become characteristics of the Christian Church, as opposed to the "meekness, penitence, humility, progress, life" that are characteristic of Christianity itself.³³ The institution of the Church has supplanted the very religion itself, namely the teachings of Jesus Christ, as the guiding force in Christian life.³⁴ Therefore, Tolstoy argued, the Christian must reject both institutions: the state and the church, in favor of pure Christianity guided by love.

Although Tolstoy's argument is well established, he lacked any real political theory in terms of the implications of his theology. Instead, he imagined a Christian anarchist utopia, in which the constant love and care would prevent violence, in turn eliminating any reason for hate.³⁵ Indeed, he believed that there was a new doctrine to pursue.³⁶ This doctrine was oriented toward inward perfection through Christ, thereby finding the inevitable Kingdom of God within oneself.³⁷ Tolstoy believed that through human history, a progress could be identified. First, humanity loved itself. This love then extended to the family, society, and eventually one's own nation. These loves were simply extensions of the first, of the self.³⁸ There was no motive to love all of humanity genuinely, except in Christianity, which possesses an infinite extension of love.³⁹ By overcoming the limitations of the self, Tolstoy believed that humanity could progress to

³¹ Ibid, 10.

³² Ibid.

³³ Leo Tolstoy. *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. Project Gutenberg (public domain), 2003. Ebook: 58. URL: <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4602>

³⁴ Ibid, 48.

³⁵ Christoyannopoulos, "Turning the Other Cheek."

³⁶ Tolstoy, "The Kingdom of God," 44.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid, 84.

³⁹ Ibid, 84-85.

divine perfection and unite with God's own will.⁴⁰ This unity would create the utopia that Tolstoy envisioned, and would be a perfect expression of human love.

Religionless Christianity:

Religionless Christianity is a theology that German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer began to formulate. Unfortunately it was never completely articulated due to his execution by the Nazis. Much of the theology is understood from his letters from prison and has also been articulated by his friend, the recipient of the letters, Eberhard Bethge. Bethge took the effort to produce many of Bonhoeffer's letters from prison, which are a primary source in understanding Bonhoeffer's Religionless Christianity.

To put the theology into context, Bonhoeffer believed that the time of religion is over, that people can no longer be told what to believe as they have done as religious individuals for so long.⁴¹ People, especially Christian theologians, had historically assumed the "religious *a priori*" of humanity; Bonhoeffer believed that this was not necessarily true, which drastically changes the basis of understanding Christianity's place in the world.⁴² This means that a new concept of Christianity must be created as presuppositions of metaphysics and so forth are shattered. For Bonhoeffer, this meant a "Religionless" Christianity.⁴³

In a distinction from his Lutheranism, Bonhoeffer argued that religion and faith were not as similar as they had so often been treated.⁴⁴ Religion came from the flesh, and faith from the

⁴⁰ Ibid, 79-80.

⁴¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *Letters and Papers from Prison; The Enlarged Edition*. New York: Touchstone, 1997, 279.

⁴² Ibid, 280.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Eberhard Bethge. "Bonhoeffer's Christology and his "Religionless Christianity." *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 23, no. 1 (1967): 66. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost. (accessed September 17, 2013) URL: <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=afa36443-830d-400f-a965-4c189273a259%40sessionmgr110&vid=5&hid=127>

spirit.⁴⁵ Under the assumption of the religious *a priori* of mankind, religion had become a precondition for faith, while they were in fact wholly different things.⁴⁶ Indeed, Bonhoeffer looked to Paul's argument in his letter to the Romans, in which Paul stated that circumcision is not a necessary trait to be justified in God; Bonhoeffer equated circumcision with the institution of religion,⁴⁷ a relation more easily understood given his belief that religion is of the flesh. Therefore, "religion" is not needed for justification. Faith, however, still is.

The basis of a Religionless Christianity is a faith in Christ. This was very important to Bonhoeffer, whose thought was always connected to his Christology.⁴⁸ Important to this faith is a rediscovery of the real Christ, rather than a patronizing and feudalistic Christ that the Christian institutions have historically falsely created.⁴⁹ The real Christ is the one who surrendered his power to be a powerless, defenseless servant that preached the revolutionary Sermon on the Mount and died on the cross.⁵⁰ Rather than a religious institution existing as the church, Christ himself exists as the church, as a fellowship of faithful believers,⁵¹ who are sustained by Christ, the center of all human existence.⁵²

Jesus Christ transforms all life precisely because his very existence is only to serve others.⁵³ Indeed, his act of "being there for others" is, in itself, "the experience of transcendence."⁵⁴ Faith is participating in this being, which is how one relates to God by

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 281.

⁴⁸ Bethge, "Bonhoeffer's Christology," 62.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 67.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 67, 69.

⁵¹ Ibid, 73

⁵² Ibid, 74.

⁵³ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 381.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

experiencing transcendence by helping our neighbors.⁵⁵ The Christian is not called to be “religious.” Instead, the Christian is called to participate in messianic suffering, to share in others’ suffering.⁵⁶ That is faith and *metanoia*, or repentance. Coupled with that is an emphasis on this world. Bonhoeffer said that the Christian must live profoundly in this world, living “unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities.”⁵⁷ This is how the Christian brings about the kingdom of God on earth, not by a narrow focus on personal salvation, but on restoring the righteousness of God through the alleviation of others’ suffering.⁵⁸

Religionless Christianity does not exist in a religious institution; it exists in the faithful community of believers that are strengthened and sustained by the weakness and suffering of Christ that is relived by believers being there for each other.⁵⁹ This is a direct response and confrontation to the world today. Since the thirteenth century, Bonhoeffer argued, humanity has been slowly approaching its own autonomy, by discovering the laws of the world that explain the sciences, society, politics, art, and so forth.⁶⁰ God is left only at the boundaries in topics that humanity is yet to fully comprehend that can only be understood through a divine, such as questions of death and guilt.⁶¹ God becomes a *deus ex machina*, an answer to the unanswerable.⁶² Because of this, Christianity has survived largely on the “ultimate questions” that have been left to God at the boundaries.⁶³

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 362.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 370.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 286.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 361.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 325.

⁶¹ Ibid, 282.

⁶² Bethge, “Bonhoeffer’s Christology,” 77.

⁶³ Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 326.

Christianity should not respond by attacking the “adulthood” of the world, nor should it allow the world to dictate Christ’s place in the world, as liberal theology did.⁶⁴ Rather than leaving God in what humanity does not know, Bonhoeffer wrote that Christianity must identify God in what *is* known, in the solved problems, rather than the unsolved.⁶⁵ Importantly, Christ did not come to solve questions,⁶⁶ and the resurrection is not a “solution” to the problem of death.⁶⁷ Rather, Christ and his resurrection are the manifestations of how the Christian is called to live. The transcendental nature of God is not to be found in the incomprehensible beyond, but rather, “God is beyond in the midst of our lives.”⁶⁸ Here, the concept of a Religionless Christianity returns. By focusing on the suffering nature of God, and the experience of transcendence, Religionless Christianity finds God within itself, among the faithful. This pulls God away from the boundaries and back to the center of our lives, in what we know and in what we do. Unfortunately, a more adequate explanation of these concepts was not completed by Bonhoeffer because of his execution, but he nevertheless laid the foundations of an interesting and strong theology.

Liberation Theology:

Central to Liberation Theology is the realization of the kingdom of God *on earth*, which Bonhoeffer believed could be done by reliving the Christ event. For Liberation Theology, the means of realizing the kingdom can vary from social equality to ecological sustainability.⁶⁹ The common thread that unites Liberation Theology is precisely that: bringing about the kingdom of

⁶⁴ Ibid, 327.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 311.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 312.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 282.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 282.

⁶⁹ George Furniss. "Hope for a global future: toward a North American liberation theology." *Journal Of Pastoral Theology* 17, no. 1 (March 1, 2007): 1. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed November 21, 2013). URL: <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=d36513a6-39d0-4adf-97f4-74c5e85b0714%40sessionmgr113&vid=4&hid=120>

God on earth, which liberates humans from societal, sexist, economical, or ecological oppression. The central branch of Liberation Theology, however, lies in the economic and social focus of Latin American theologians.

A critical characteristic of Latin American Liberation Theology is its emphasis on the base communities, on the lay-people who are able to analyze their lives and situations in the context of Christianity, in turn forming a theology or contributing to the thought process of theologians that are a part of the base community.⁷⁰ The liberating nature of God is seen more clearly by the poor and economic oppressed,⁷¹ and is even more amplified in areas such as those in Latin America that have been the victim of economic exploitation.⁷² Liberation Theology, then, demands social change. It rejects the secular and capitalist solution of “development,” and views true liberation as the answer,⁷³ and is based on the liberation from sin through Christ.⁷⁴

Gustavo Gutiérrez, one of the foremost theologians of Liberation Theology, argued that throughout human history, the trend has been for humanity to be emancipated from slavery in all its forms. The human being is a creative subject who, through emancipation and liberation, obtains more control over his or her own destiny.⁷⁵ The poor and oppressed of the world do not have control over their own destinies. Importantly, they do not seek development as the pathway to this control; they seek liberation.⁷⁶ Poverty degrades humanity and is affront to God.

⁷⁰ James Tunstead Burtchaell. “How Authentically Christian is Liberation Theology?” *The Review of Politics* 50, no. 2 (Spring, 1988): 266. (accessed October 10, 2013). URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1407650>

⁷¹ Furniss, “Hope for a global future,” 3.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁷³ Gustavo Gutierrez. “Notes for a theology of liberation.” *Theological Studies* 31, no. 2 (1970): 243. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost. (accessed October 15, 2013). (accessed September 15, 2013) URL: <http://web.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.gvsu.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=6a35c4ee-50f8-48b4-a0b2-fe2c811532f4%40sessionmgr114&vid=7&hid=114>

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 247.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

Therefore, there must be radical change to liberate individuals from poverty. To do so, the Christian Church must sever all connections that it holds to the present unjust order.⁷⁷

The shape of this theology is in radical change working to liberate the poor. The Church, then, must play its role in establishing a new order by issuing social criticisms of the exploitative system currently in place.⁷⁸ The poor have been ceaselessly marginalized,⁷⁹ and the Church must resist this because Jesus himself consistently preached against injustice.⁸⁰ Historically, Liberation Theology has viewed wealthier nations as the oppressors, yet more recent commentary has extended the theology to these nations as well; rather than liberation from injustice and exploitation, they require liberation from their own materialism, individualism, and hopelessness.⁸¹ Indeed, Gutiérrez considered Liberation Theology to be a theology of hope that is oriented toward the future.⁸²

As a forward thinking theology, Liberation Theology's eschatology, the study of the end times, is a central aspect of the theology. The kingdom of God is incompatible with injustice and misery; when these are ended, the kingdom of God will come to earth.⁸³ Social revolution is the path that Gutiérrez believed would lead to the kingdom.⁸⁴ Important to this eschatology is the fact that Jesus Christ promised both eternal life and a new world order.⁸⁵ This new world is characterized by its communal nature, in which the kingdom of God brings out the "fulfillment

⁷⁷ Ibid, 260.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 259

⁷⁹ Burtchaell, "How Authentically Christian," 269.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 267.

⁸¹ Furniss, "Hope for a global future," 2.

⁸² Gutiérrez, "Notes for a theology," 258.

⁸³ Ibid, 256.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 253.

⁸⁵ Furniss, "Hope for a global future," 6.

of the human being.”⁸⁶ A new man and woman will be created by an active reflection of the salvific work of Jesus Christ, as the sin that Christ liberated humanity from is the very root of injustice.⁸⁷

Feminist Theology:

Certain elements of Feminist Theology can certainly be considered an offshoot of Liberation Theology, as the central focus on the oppression of the poor is shifted to the oppression of women.⁸⁸ Rather than economic and social exploitation, oppression exists in patriarchy.⁸⁹ Rosemary Radford Ruether is one of the leading voices in this vein of Feminist Theology. She argued that the oppression of women is the oldest form of oppression in human history, and it is therefore paradigmatic to other oppressions.⁹⁰ Nevertheless, this does not mean that women’s oppression is more important than other oppressions, because that in itself is a form of oppression.⁹¹ The salvific nature of Christianity allows for wholeness, unity, and self-actualization, which are ideals that are prevented by sin.⁹² This interpretation of sin and salvation departs from traditional understandings of sin as opposing God and salvation as deliverance by God.⁹³

⁸⁶ Chris Rowland, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 33.

⁸⁷ Gutiérrez, “Notes for a theology,” 257.

⁸⁸ Wanda W. Berry. “Images of sin and salvation in feminist theology.” *Anglican Theological Review* 60, no. 1 (1978): 35. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed October 26, 2013). URL: <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=14&sid=a79da3d4-29fa-4daf-925b-ec20b1d9776f%40sessionmgr113&hid=120>

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 32.

⁹⁰ Carter Heyward. “Speaking and sparking, building and burning: Ruether and Daly, theologians.” *Christianity and Crisis* 39, no. 5 (1979): 70. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost. (accessed November 5, 2013) URL: <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=a79da3d4-29fa-4daf-925b-ec20b1d9776f%40sessionmgr113&vid=8&hid=120>

⁹¹ *Ibid*.

⁹² Berry, “Images of sin,” 28.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 26.

An important characteristic of Feminist Theology is that the theology reinterprets and reappropriates core elements of Christianity. Mary is the epitome of this reappropriation.⁹⁴ Feminist Theologians argue that Mary's apparent subjection and obedience to God have been used in the patriarchal institution of the Church to restrict women's roles and participation.⁹⁵ In parallel, God has been hyper-masculinized, leaving Mary with the typical feminine traits, such as a nurturing and warm nature, compassionate love, and a life-giving nature.⁹⁶ Feminist theologians argue that symbolic nature of Mary must be reduced, so her human qualities can be rediscovered and these feminine characteristics can be return unabashedly to God.⁹⁷ Mary can then be interpreted not as an obedient servant, but as a partner with God in bringing Jesus Christ into the world.⁹⁸

In this way, Mary ceases to be an unobtainable female ideal and instead is evidentiary to the friendship and cooperation God seeks with humanity.⁹⁹ The reappropriation of Mary tears down centuries of patriarchal bias within the Christian Church, and brings about the potential liberation of women. Not only can a new woman be created, but also a new man; men are freed from the "eternal masculine" ideal¹⁰⁰ of the John Wayne style hero or the pompous, militaristic

⁹⁴ Mary Daly. "Church and women: an interview with Mary Daly." *Theology Today* 28, no. 3 (1971): 350. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed October 10, 2013). URL: <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=a79da3d4-29fa-4daf-925b-ec20b1d9776f%40sessionmgr113&vid=8&hid=120>

⁹⁵ Joy Ann McDougall. "Keeping feminist faith with Christian traditions: a look at Christian feminist theology today." *Modern Theology* 24, no. 1 (January 1, 2008): 106. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed October 6, 2013). URL: <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=4&sid=a79da3d4-29fa-4daf-925b-ec20b1d9776f%40sessionmgr113&hid=120>

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁰⁰ Daly, "Church and women," 351.

leader.¹⁰¹ In the Christian context, liberation is the means to salvation, or wholeness.¹⁰²

Wholeness means harmony with the self, the universe, and God.¹⁰³

Ecological Theology:

As with Feminist Theology, Ecological Theology can also fall under the umbrella of Liberation Theology. This is because ecological efforts represent caring for all humans, and liberating them from negative environmental impacts.¹⁰⁴ One line of thinking in Ecological Theology, the eco-justice ethic, is closely aligned with Liberation Theology because it believes that injustice, inequalities, and our current economic systems have led to the environmental crisis, and that social justice through a liberating God is the proper response.¹⁰⁵ Through economic and social justice and environmental sustainability, the kingdom of God can be realized on earth.¹⁰⁶

Christian environmentalism has grown rapidly since the mid-1980's, after, as one historian said, it began to realize that it "bears a huge burden of guilt" for the ecological crisis.¹⁰⁷ This guilt grew because the Church failed to address ecological concerns, which allowed it to become a secular matter. The failure to address the problem was because, in part, many members of the Christian Church are waiting for a new heaven and a new earth, so the current earth is not deemed a necessary concern.¹⁰⁸ Ironically, it is in the very nature of Christianity to be creation

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 352.

¹⁰² Berry, "Images of sin," 33.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 34.

¹⁰⁴ Rowland, *The Cambridge Companion*, 35.

¹⁰⁵ Laurel Kearns. "Saving the Creation: Christian Environmentalism in the United States." *Sociology of Religion* 57, no. 1 (Spring, 1996): 56. (accessed November 2, 2013). URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3712004>

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 57.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 55.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

affirming, yet that element has seemingly been lost.¹⁰⁹ Within the United States especially, a rift has been created between the democratic ideal, which has been corrupted by individualism and self-interest,¹¹⁰ the religious traditions, and the ecological movement.¹¹¹ These three bodies should be allies in the environmental movement, yet they often treat each other to the contrary.¹¹² Ecological Theology has been working to repair the relations between Christianity and the ecological movement.

There are three core lines of thought that make up Ecological Theology. First is the aforementioned eco-justice ethic that is closely related to Liberation Theology. Second is the Christian stewardship ethic, which emphasizes that humans are to be caretakers of God's creation, and that Biblical commands should balance with biology in approaching the ecological crisis. Finally, there is the creation spirituality ethic, which emphasizes God's immanence and his existence as a panentheistic being present in all of nature, which humanity has been alienated from.¹¹³

A combination of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, right belief and right practice, are paramount to all three of these ethics.¹¹⁴ In much of Christian history, theologians viewed the natural sciences as tools to understanding God and his creation; these views have recently been rejuvenated.¹¹⁵ The emphasis on other-worldliness was one of the key factors that led to this neglect of nature and the natural sciences. Ecological Theology largely believes that right belief involves the integration of science with religion to address the environmental crisis in right

¹⁰⁹ J. Ronald Engel. "The Earth Charter as a New Covenant for Democracy," *Just Ecological Integrity: The Ethics of Maintaining Planetary Life*, eds. Peter Miller and Laura Westra. New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002, 218.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 220.

¹¹¹ Ibid, 222.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Kearns, "Saving the creation," 56.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 63.

¹¹⁵ Engel, "The Earth Charter," 227.

practice.¹¹⁶ In this way, churches should shift to a more active role in protecting creation.¹¹⁷ The core emphasis of Ecological Theology lies in the stewardship that God commands in the Bible, especially for the long-term benefit and justice for our fellow humans.

Radical Orthodoxy:

Radical Orthodoxy is a very recent theological construct, dating to little over a decade ago. Because of this, Radical Orthodoxy lacks homogeneity among its theologians, yet a general concept can nevertheless be identified.¹¹⁸ Radical Orthodoxy looks at the current world and finds that secularism is failing; materialism has been revealed to be “soulless, aggressive, nonchalant, and nihilistic.”¹¹⁹ The sciences and empiricism have been historically accepted as a neutral means of discovering truth, with theology pushed aside.¹²⁰ Radical Orthodoxy does not object to empiricism, simply the argument that it is wholly neutral. The argument is that empiricism naively relies on facts; these facts are originated from observations; observations are underlain by theories; theories possess pre-theoretical roots that are quite similar to religion, or faith.¹²¹ Therefore, all theory is based on a religious commitment of some kind, even when it claims to be purely scientific. Secularity, therefore, is not truly neutral, especially given the exclusion of Christianity and other religious thought. *All* things are sacred, even Richard Dawkins’ scientific atheism, so Christianity must have its own fair place in the scientific community.¹²²

¹¹⁶ Kearns, “Saving the creation,” 58, 60.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 60.

¹¹⁸ David Grummett. “Radical Orthodoxy.” *The Expository Times*, 122 (March, 2011): 270. (accessed October 15, 2013) doi: 10.1177/0014524610394523

¹¹⁹ John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward. *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*. London: Routledge. October, 1998.

¹²⁰ James KA Smith and P. J. Watson. "Interview with James KA Smith.: Radical Orthodoxy, Secularity, and the “Roots” of a Christian Psychology." *EDIFICATION* (2007): 68-72. (accessed October 10, 2013) URL: http://christianpsych.org/wp_scp/wp-content/uploads/edification-journal-113.pdf#page=68

¹²¹ Ibid, 70.

¹²² Ibid.

Radical Orthodoxy's theological focus is in a reinterpretation of the world within a specifically theological framework, involving the Trinity, a defined Christology, the Church, and so forth.¹²³ This is marked by a return to creedal Christianity, and truths that began to fade in the Middle Ages. Augustine viewed knowledge as divine illumination, as opposed to the enlightenment's severance of faith and reason, or grace and nature.¹²⁴ Knowledge, then, is a revelation of the infinite within the finite confines of the world. This revelation is not absent of reason; rather, it is its intensification.¹²⁵ In addition, the material cannot be affirmed without a recognition of the transcendent, yet the integrity of the material is maintained.¹²⁶ Without the presence of God in all disciplines, Radical Orthodoxy argues, the disciplines inevitably crumble into nihilism.¹²⁷

The goal of Radical Orthodoxy is not the dismantling of secularism. Nor is it the labeling of secularism as inherently bad, elevating Christianity as the one and only method of inquiry. The goal is a pluralistic space where Christian ideas and arguments are allowed and treated fairly.¹²⁸ Again, the theological aspect of Radical Orthodoxy lies in its reinterpretation of the world through Christian truths and understandings of knowledge.¹²⁹ Criticisms of Radical Orthodoxy are that it is more of a critical and linguistic philosophy than a Christian theology based on scripture,¹³⁰ yet that argument may not stand the test of time as Radical Orthodoxy has only begun its development as a theological framework.

Process Theology:

¹²³ Milbank, Pitstock, and Ward, "Radical Orthodoxy," 1.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 2.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 5.

¹²⁶ Smith and Watson, "Interview with James KA Smith," 71.

¹²⁷ Milbank, Pitstock, and Ward, "Radical Orthodoxy," 2.

¹²⁸ Smith and Watson, "Interview with James KA Smith," 72.

¹²⁹ Milbank, Pitstock, and Ward, "Radical Orthodoxy," 2.

¹³⁰ Grummet, "Radical Orthodoxy," 264.

Process Theology is an experiential and philosophical theology that is founded upon the ideas of Alfred North Whitehead.¹³¹ It is quite different from classical theism in that God is not considered infinite, yet God is also not finite. His infinite nature exists in a way different than typical Western understandings.¹³² God's dynamic nature is eternal and everlasting but also exists in dialogue with the universe itself.¹³³ God exists within himself, separate from creation, but also has a temporal presence within, and that is affected by, creation.¹³⁴ God and the world exist interdependently, but, importantly, Process Theology is not pantheist; although the world exists as part of God, God does not exist as part of the world.¹³⁵ The future is not predetermined, because God exists temporally, and experiences new things similarly to humanity.¹³⁶ This is the result of God granting humanity additional freedom out of the desire for humanity to maximize its creative possibility.¹³⁷

In Process Theology, God does not exist as a divine individual, but instead as a Creative Process that exists prior to actual being. Other definitions of God range from "the Growth of Qualitative Meaning" to "Creative Energy" to Whitehead's own "the Eros of the Universe."¹³⁸ The creation of the universe occurred in the midst of chaos, and God existed as condensed chaos and was able to direct the process, and continues to do likewise today.¹³⁹ Humans are invited to live as co-creators in the creative process that evolves constantly in the universe; all experiences

¹³¹ Donald G. Bloesch. "Process theology in Reformed perspective." *Reformed Journal* 29, no. 10 (1979): 19. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost. (accessed September 16, 2013). URL: <http://web.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=7&sid=5343b3c5-4cb9-465b-8566-9ecc04c0541a%40sessionmgr111&hid=120>

¹³² Charles Hartshorne. "Redefining God." *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 22, no. 2 (May, 2001): 107. (accessed October 30, 2013) URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27944141>

¹³³ Bruce G. Epperly. *Process Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: Continuum International Publishing, April, 2011: 21.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, 111.

¹³⁵ Bloesch, "Process Theology," 20.

¹³⁶ Epperly, *Process Theology*, 21.

¹³⁷ *Ibid*, 27.

¹³⁸ Bloesch, "Process Theology," 20.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*.

are underlain by creativity, with artistic beauty found in the intricacies of each moment.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, creativity is in itself self-actualization,¹⁴¹ and God is the very source of novelty that is involved in all creativity.¹⁴² In this process of co-creation, God exists as companion and friend.¹⁴³

Jesus Christ in Process Theology is the incarnation of God existing as the supreme ideal and symbol of human fulfillment and triumphant love.¹⁴⁴ Important to Christ's nature is his transformation, which represents the fulfillment of creativity and beauty.¹⁴⁵ Jesus was God's saving presence directly in the world, and was the incarnation of God's creative love.¹⁴⁶ However, there is not a metaphysical oneness between God and Jesus.¹⁴⁷ The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus did not serve as a liberating ransom or as an appeasement of God's wrath, but instead functioned as the paradigm of the human potential of co-creating with God in the world.¹⁴⁸

Humanity is not to seek salvation, instead they are to co-create and discover beauty and self-actualization. Worship is characterized by the desire of union and perfection in God, the Creative Process.¹⁴⁹ As God exists as this process, then we are not to pray *to* God, but rather *in* God, while meditating on the beauty of life and creation.¹⁵⁰ Indeed, God's central aim for humanity and other creatures is their own enjoyment in the beauty around them and in the

¹⁴⁰ Epperly, *Process Theology*, 26.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁴³ Engel, "The Earth Charter," 226.

¹⁴⁴ Bloesch, "Process Theology," 22.

¹⁴⁵ Epperly, *Process Theology*, 62.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 65, 68.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁴⁹ Bloesch, "Process Theology," 22.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

creative process.¹⁵¹ Sin is part of the chaotic nature that exists, and evil is, as Whitehead said, the “inertia of nature.”¹⁵² Thus, Process Theology’s eschatology exists as the overcoming of the chaotic creation and realizing the kingdom of God.¹⁵³

Christian Atheism:

Christian Atheism falls under the greater umbrella of Death of God Theology, which was an ecumenical line of thought that grew in the mid-twentieth century.¹⁵⁴ Death of God Theology has two central arms to it: the theistic non-literal arm, which believes that God is only dead in the sense of no longer being present in the world, and the atheistic non-literal, which believes that God never was.¹⁵⁵ Thomas Altizer’s theology makes up a less common third arm, and that is the atheistic literal interpretation, termed Christian Atheism.¹⁵⁶ Altizer argued that God historically and cosmically died in the Christ event. This death is irrevocable.¹⁵⁷

To Altizer, this willful self-annihilation of God was a redemptive event.¹⁵⁸ The absolute darkness and apocalypse that results from the death of God allows for an ultimate liberation of humanity;¹⁵⁹ to greet this apocalypse is an ultimate act of affirmation and joy,¹⁶⁰ and is in itself a confession of faith.¹⁶¹ The definitive self-emptying of God transfigures the Godhead from total

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid, 21.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Colin Lyas. “On the Coherence of Christian Atheism.” *Philosophy* 45, no. 171 (January, 1970): 1. (accessed October 26, 2013). URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3749520>

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 2.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, 3.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Thomas J.J. Altizer. *New Gospel of Christian Atheism*. Aurora, CO: The Davies Group, Publishers. January, 2002. PDF e-book. (accessed October 8, 2013): 97. URL: <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/gvsu/docDetail.action?docID=10031881>

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 151.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 151-152.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 97.

transcendence to total immanence,¹⁶² as Jesus, the “Universal Humanity,” is now present in all people through their sufferings and joys, as well as at the center of the absolute darkness that was created in the death of God.¹⁶³

Altizer’s theology is limited to this-world, yet is often vague as to how humans are to respond to the death of God.¹⁶⁴ For Altizer, God willfully annihilated himself out of love of humanity, and granted them complete liberation.¹⁶⁵ Without fear of a transcendent being, humans are able to maximize their potential in this world without restriction.¹⁶⁶ Altizer does not expand further upon this argument, and many of the statements he does make are incomplete and obscure.¹⁶⁷ This limits the theology and leaves it incomplete.

Conclusion:

There are a wide array of theologies within Christianity. Christian Zen is a reinterpretation of the understanding of God under a Buddhist-influenced Christianity. Christian Anarchism and Religionless Christianity place a strong emphasis on living a life that is radically reflective of Christ’s love and sacrifice. Liberation Theologies confront societal and economic oppression through new interpretations of Christianity; the most common form of Liberation Theology emphasizes the realization of the kingdom of God on earth through the liberation of the oppressed poor; Feminist Theology believes this can be actualized by removing all oppression, but by starting with the oldest oppression, that of sexism; Ecological Theology believes that the kingdom of God can be brought about by an active and redemptive effort at restoring creation for the good of all. Radical Orthodoxy puts forth a convincing argument

¹⁶² Ibid, 57.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 44.

¹⁶⁴ Lyas, “On the Coherence,”6.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 5.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 4.

against the neutrality of secular empiricism and for Christianity to have its place at the table of inquiry. Process Theology views God as a creative process that is affected by time in the midst of a co-creative humanity. And finally, Christian Atheism believes that God willfully died on the cross, which creates a full potential for living.

These theologies, for the most part, remain on the outskirts of mainstream Christianity. However, mainstream Christianity could certainly benefit by including them to a degree, especially certain characteristics. For instance, Christian Zen calls for an understanding of God that is bereft of the limitations of words and conceptualization that has come to be the standard in the Western Church, and a return to the utter mystery and unknowability of God that leaves Christians in meditative awe. The radical love present in Tolstoy and Bonhoeffer's theologies could serve humanity boundlessly. By aggressively targeting all oppression, of the poor, of women, or of any marginalized group, the Christian Church could more fully approach the love of Christ that was demonstrated in his teachings that is emphasized in Liberation Theology. An ecological focus is also of critical importance in our current world as climate change is quite literally altering landscapes. Active engagement, rather than retreat, from secular empiricism in Radical Orthodoxy is key in maintaining a place for Christianity, or religion in general for that matter, in society. The quest for beauty and harmony through co-creation in Process Theology creates an interesting and fresh take on the day-to-day lives and activities of a Christian. And even Christian Atheism, which may seem quite antithetical to basic tenets of Christianity, can remind mainstream Christianity of what should be its active role in ensuring God's presence in this world, and the fundamental liberation that comes from Christ's crucifixion.

The Christian Church has been influenced by a number of factors in its two-thousand year history. From Hellenism in the early church to the Enlightenment in more recent history,

Christianity has altered and adapted itself and its place in society. The Church can also look inwardly for influence for change, however. Alternative theologies of the faith offer stimulating and intriguing interpretations and emphases that are all too often absent from mainstream Christianity, and an exploration of these could certainly be invigorating for the Church because they encourage contemplation and a deeper understanding of one's relationship with God. For example, the God and Jesus of Christian Zen demand a deep meditation in the mystery of the cosmic and eternal divine, as opposed to an overly simplistic relation. Liberation Theologies offer the faith the specific tools to address injustices and oppression directly when they may otherwise go unnoticed. Many of the theologies call for a more active faith, especially Bonhoeffer's Religionless Christianity, which interpreted the act of being there for others in their suffering as a transcendent experience. An active faith such as this would easily invigorate the health of the faith. Such are the opportunities for mainstream Christianity that lie in the boundaries of the faith, waiting to be explored.

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