Drew University

Limits to Attempted Remedies of the Problem of Exclusion in Christian Discourse: Divine Choice as a Case Study

A Dissertation Submitted to

The Faculty of the Graduate Division of Religion

In Candidacy for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Michael J. Oliver

Madison, New Jersey

August 2016

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

Using the locus of divine choice (traditionally understood as "divine election") as a case study, this dissertation will explore the problem of exclusion—as well as the attempt to remedy said problem—through a reading of Derridean deconstruction, liberationist discourses, and the Christian theological tradition. Given the fact that there appears to be a widespread consensus in the contemporary, academic study of religion about the problematic nature of exclusion, I examine the problem of exclusion through one of Christianity's most exclusive notions, namely a notion of divine choice. In this dissertation, I show that a theological concept of divine choosing not only provides a concrete representation of the problem of Judaeo-Christian exclusivity, but it also epitomizes the difficulties of attempting to remedy this problem. Drawing on the insights of Derridean deconstruction, I will argue that removing or avoiding exclusion might not be possible; therefore the contemporary, progressive theologian's task shifts from avoiding exclusion to discerning between *which* exclusion(s). Through the lens of liberation discourses, I will demonstrate how a certain kind of exclusivity might still be necessary—even if/when problematic—in order to adequately attain liberation; therefore, liberationists who are wary of the exclusionary nature of God's preference for one oppressed group should also struggle to find ways to address and be transparent about how liberation might only be possible through some form of exclusivity, and thus discern *whose* liberation to pursue and *which* injustice to focus on. Exploring a more rigorously theological investigation of divine choice, I will argue that when it is assumed that it is the theologian's work to elect or choose whether or not to affirm a God who chooses,

then God is reduced to an object of the theologian's choice; therefore, theologians concerned about exclusive (divine) election should also recognize the way(s) in which any such remedy to the problem entails a version of exclusive (human) election, and thus discern between *which* exclusionary election and *whose* choice is it. Ultimately, this dissertation argues that previous attempts to remedy or navigate the preeminent problem of divine exclusion by avoiding it or merely reducing its exclusivity are inadequate, revealing the problem to be more complex than it initially appears, and the need to revisit this problem with an even greater vigilance.

For my two sons, Trace and William, in an attempt to start a new tradition.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This degree, in its various stages, was not only completed in the midst of a great cloud of witnesses, past and present, but deeply influenced by their presence and voices. Academically, I have had the distinct pleasure of working with—and learning from—many brilliant scholars and teachers during my time as both a Master's and Doctoral student at Drew Theological School. Any sound, theo-ethical instincts that I possess have their fingerprints all over them. At the top of that list is Chris Boesel, my doctoral advisor and dissertation committee chair, whose rigorous pursuit of perfection fueled my own, consistently refining and sharpening my thoughts and words in every stage of this process, and tapping into a potential that I did not know existed. Additionally, our similar approach, sensibilities, and ethical desires with regards to these issues and ideas helped me find my own voice in these discourses. I also want to especially thank Catherine Keller, whose voice in my head always urged me to consider an-other approach, an alternative position, a different way, urging me to a novelty I could not envision on my own. Thank you to all my students, at Drew, Rutgers, Seton Hall, Caldwell, Monmouth, and Raritan Valley, who helped me think even harder and deeper about these issues, endured my tirades and antics, and who were helping me write and rewrite this dissertation, even when they did not realize it.

Personally, no endeavor worthy of such effort can be accomplished without the love, support, and encouragement of friends and family. Heartfelt thanks and love to *mia famiglia*, my two sons, mother, brother, sister (in-law), father, aunt, and cousins who always supported and encouraged me, even when they could not understand. A special thanks to those family members whose memory and presence in my life has shaped me

into the person I am: Joseph Fiorellino, Chandler Oliver, Thomas Parello, Salvatore Parello, Andrea Fotia-Brown, and Angelina Fiorellino; even though they are not present to share this accomplishment with me, they are forever in my heart. Thank you to my friends who kept me grounded in the "real world," when I would often lose touch, especially Thomas Meredith and Vincent Imbrosciano, whose friendships are invaluable to me, and who each provided precious insight based on their unique worldviews. I feel fortunate to have been loved, supported, and encouraged through various stages of this process, and I am especially grateful for the particular presence of Christy Cobb, Damian Elias, William Noble, and Kimberly Scobie.

INTRODUCTION:

Divine Choice as a Case Study for the Problem of Exclusion and Its Attempted Remedies

> *If there were a devil, he would not be the one who decided against God, but he, that in all eternity, did not decide.*
>
> —Martin Buber, *I and Thou*

Divine election has always been considered inherently problematic; even John Calvin himself—the preeminent figure in the history of the doctrine—called the doctrine of divine election the *decretum horribile*.[1] In Christian theology, divine election is often understood in terms of "predestination," and has been critiqued from many different angles, including its emphasis on individual salvation, its tendency to focus on the "afterlife," and its complete reliance upon God for salvation, righteousness, and goodness.[2] In contemporary, progressive theological contexts, however, one of the most pervasive critiques is aimed at the exclusive nature of divine election. In terms of predestination, such a critique targets the fact that *some* are chosen and *others* are not. But the critique of exclusivity does not only apply to divine election as predestination, because divine election—understood more broadly as any form of divine choice—is inherently exclusive (to some extent, as I intend to demonstrate), no matter what the

[1] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. John Allen, vol. II (Philadelphia: Presbyterian board of Christian education, 1936), 207.

[2] Margit Ernst-Habib, "'Chosen by Grace': Reconsidering the Doctrine of Predestination," in *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 77.

object of God's choice is: individual, people, group, desire for the world, etc. Simply put: God's choosing (this) excludes (that).

It is the issue of exclusion as rationale for the contemporary critique of a Christian doctrine of divine election that this dissertation will focus on. The critique of divine election's exclusivity echoes a larger, more widespread consensus in the contemporary, academic study of religion about the problematic nature of exclusion, where it seems as if there is an unquestioned yet intentional avoidance of what Jacques Derrida has referred to as "the decision that *cuts*": the necessary exclusion inherent in every choice.[3] In short, progressive theologies and ethics tend to avoid any form of exclusion because exclusion is often considered to be one of chief poisons that must be remedied. *Ethically*, exclusion "names what permeates a good many of sins we commit against our neighbors"[4] and therefore the focus has been on the "struggle to do away with faith structures of exclusion" that continue to privilege white, male, Western, Euro-centric, anthropocentric images, symbols, and perspectives to the exclusion of all others.[5] *Theologically,* contemporary, progressive theologians have also critically examined the preeminent instantiation of Christian exclusivity, namely Christo-centric claims about Christ as the exclusive path to salvation. Such "conservative exclusivistic claims for 'one and only'" no longer seem tenable given the reality of, and growing appreciation for, contemporary

---

[3] Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, eds. Drucilla Cornell et al. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 24.
[4] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 72.
[5] Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 65-66.

religious pluralism.[6] As philosopher Martin Hägglund puts it, the conclusion, it seems, among contemporary scholars of religion, is that "'good' religion…welcomes others and 'bad' religion…excludes," and thus the focus should be on avoiding or remedying exclusion as much as possible.[7]

What I intend to show in this dissertation is that not only does a theological concept of divine election—again, framed more broadly as "divine choice"[8]—provide a concrete representation of the problem of Judaeo-Christian exclusivity, but it also epitomizes the difficulties of attempting to remedy this problem. Given the fact that exclusion is a primary concern for much contemporary theology—for which the goal is to remove and/or limit Christian theology's exclusionary elements—a notion of divine election (i.e. God's choosing), with its explicit form of exclusion, is often avoided, which might explain why there is a dearth of progressive, contemporary theological voices explicitly engaging this topic.[9] The few who do attempt to engage divine election have identified its problematic exclusivity, pointing out that we must be wary of the ways divine election "justifies the exclusion and domination of others."[10] In the end, the problem of exclusionary divine election leaves many asking "why should a feminist

---

[6] S. Mark Heim, "Differential Pluralism and Trinitarian Theologies of Religion," in *Divine Multiplicity: Trinities, Diversities, and the Nature of Relation*, eds. Chris Boesel and S. Wesley Ariarajah (New York: Fordham, 2014), 122.

[7] Martin Hägglund, "The Radical Evil of Deconstruction: A Reply to John Caputo," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 11, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 127.

[8] Henceforth, the use of "divine election" should be understood in this broader context.

[9] There are *some* theological voices still engaging the doctrine of election, however they are not as (explicitly) concerned about exclusion and election's problematic exclusionary nature. See: Sam Storms, *Chosen for Life: The Case for Divine Election* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007). There are also a number of contemporary scholars who continue to focus on the impact of Karl Barth's revision of the doctrine of election.

[10] Letty M. Russell, "Postcolonial Challenges and the Practice of Hospitality," in *A Just & True Love: Feminism at the Frontiers of Theological Ethics: Essays in Honor of Margaret A. Farley*, ed. Maura A. Ryan and Brian F. Linnane (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 118.

theologian"—or anyone with progressive ethical intentions—"spend time and energy re-discovering this doctrine…why not deposit it on the dumping ground of those theological doctrines that have proved to be destructive?"[11]

This dissertation intends to address the "why" of the above question by arguing that contemporary, progressive theologians *should* spend time and energy rediscovering, revisiting, reengaging exclusive divine choice because the problem might be more complex than it seems and thus not so easily remedied. Consequently, this dissertation argues that previous attempts to remedy or navigate the preeminent problem of exclusive divine election by avoiding it and/or merely reducing its exclusivity are inadequate. Engaging divine election's problematic exclusivity is needed in order for Christian theology to be more rigorous and transparent about identifying and engaging the depth of the problem, in all its complexity and thorniness. Taking a lead from theologian Chris Boesel, I am framing the goal of this engagement as an attempt to "get some clarity on the complexity of the limits" of different theo-ethical approaches to the problem of exclusion, especially as manifested in divine election—including both traditional approaches to divine election that constitute a paradigmatic instance of problematic exclusivity as well as theological attempts to remedy that problem—"such that our decisions…become more informed, more responsible, and more difficult."[12] As a result of this investigation, the theologian will be challenged to recognize that the problem of exclusive divine election is more problematic than—and thus not as easily remedied as—it might appear. Again, following Boesel, the theologian finds him/herself faced with the

---

[11] Ernst-Habib, "Chosen by Grace," 80.

[12] Chris Boesel, "Divine Relationality and (the Methodological Constraints of) the Gospel as Piece of News: Tracing the Limits of Trinitarian Ethics," in *Divine Multiplicity: Trinities, Diversities, and the Nature of Relation*, eds. Chris Boesel and S. Wesley Ariarajah (New York: Fordham, 2014), 257.

predicament in which he/she will need to discern between two versions of the same problem, as opposed to a clear identification of the problem (exclusive divine election) with a clear solution.

The tension of navigating the problem of exclusion, using divine election as a case study, will be explored through three layers. In the *first* layer, drawing on the insights of Derridean deconstruction, I will focus on the structural *inescapability* of exclusion by highlighting the *impossibility* of avoiding or remedying it; therefore the task shifts from avoiding exclusion to discerning between *which* exclusion(s). *Second*, through the lens of liberation discourses, I will argue that a certain kind of exclusivity might still be necessary—even if/when problematic—in order to adequately attain liberation; therefore, liberationists who are wary of the exclusionary nature of God's preference for one oppressed group should also struggle to find ways to address and be transparent about how liberation might only be possible through some form of exclusivity, and thus discern *whose* liberation to pursue and *which* injustice to focus on. *Thirdly*, exploring a more rigorously theological investigation of divine election, I will argue that a fundamental issue arises in *divine* election, namely *whose* choice is it? When it is assumed that it is the theologian's work—and the work of theology—to elect or choose whether or not to affirm a God who chooses, and what or who that God should elect, then God is reduced to an object of the theologian's choice; therefore, theologians concerned about exclusive (divine) election should also recognize the way(s) in which any such remedy to the problem entails a version of exclusive (human) election, and thus discern between *which* exclusionary election and *whose* choice is it.

The overall goal and thesis of this dissertation, the cumulative effect of exploring these three layers and exposing the complexity of the problem of exclusive divine election, can be framed as a kind of "deconstructive" project. In each layer I will highlight how the remedy to the problem identified entails some version of that which it has tried to remedy, revealing an *inescapability* (of said problem), as well as an *impossibility* (to avoid or remedy it). In the words of Derrida, throughout this dissertation I will invite the reader on a journey wherein we "will be guided by a question that I will in the end leave in suspense," because part of the work of this dissertation is to reveal a greater depth and complexity to the problem of exclusion, especially as manifested in exclusive divine election, without a clear remedy.[13] My thesis, therefore, is that the theologically and ethically responsible approach to divine election, as exclusive, is to discern between elections and exclusions, i.e. *which* exclusion, *whose* election. Again, the goal of this dissertation is not to render the problem unproblematic, nor to make a case *for* exclusion or any kind of exclusive divine election, but to raise the stakes about just how problematic they are by revealing the limits of any attempt to remedy the problem(s). As such, this dissertation might be framed as highlighting "the limits of inclusion."[14] Following Derrida yet again, I suggest: "In saying this I am not advocating that such violence be unleashed or simply accepted. I am above all asking that we try to recognize and analyze it *as best we can* in its various forms…And if, as I believe, violence remains (almost) ineradicable, its analysis and the most refined ingenious

---

[13] Jacques Derrida, "A Word of Welcome," in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, 1 edition (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1999), 19.
[14] Linn Marie Tonstad, "The Limits of Inclusion: Queer Theology and Its Others," *Theology and Sexuality* 21, no. 1 (2015): 1–19.

account of its conditions will be the least violent gestures, perhaps even nonviolent."[15] Thus the real aim is to be as "least violent" as possible in relation to the problem of exclusive divine election, which includes being transparent about its *inescapability* and *impossibility*, in order to be as rigorous as possible about discerning between "better" and "worse" forms of it.

Layout of Chapters and Logic of Argument

In order to highlight its problematic exclusivity, we will begin in the Introduction by framing divine election in terms of God's choice and exploring the various objects of God's choosing (i.e. who or what is chosen) through several prominent figures and models in the history of this doctrine. As will become evident throughout this dissertation, however, I will be framing divine election more broadly than traditional "doctrines" of divine election, by focusing on theological notions of divine "choosing" or "choice." Framing divine election in terms of (any) divine choice, and not *just* in terms of one's eternal destiny (e.g. predestination), helps highlight the inherent, structural exclusivity of theological understandings of divine election—i.e. the inescapable, necessary exclusion in every choice/decision (a point that will be further developed in Chapter One)—because it reveals its "this/that" nature: God's choosing *this*, excludes *that.*

---

[15] Jacques Derrida, "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion," in *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff; trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 112 (emphasis mine).

For Augustine and Calvin, the object of divine election is the individual human being who is chosen by God as an object of mercy that reveals God's grace, or as an object of divine judgment (directly for Calvin, indirectly for Augustine) for the deserved penalty of sin—the exclusive nature being the fact that one must be chosen to receive God's grace and mercy as all are guilty of sin. The Introduction will also explore God's choice for a particular group of people, including: Jewish biological descendants of Abraham (Wyschogrod), the poor and oppressed in Latin America (Gutiérrez), and African Americans (Cone). Lastly, the object of divine choice has been understood as divine self-election (wherein God elects *who* to be): in process theology God's choice to work out God's aesthetic vision for the world through creaturely reality as co-creator with the world in its becoming (Bowman); or, in Barth's theology, God's choice to be the electing God—where Jesus Christ represents God's choice to be *this* (person, act, event, etc.)—and God's choice of Jesus Christ as elected human being, which represents the object of God's choice as the human being chosen for fellowship with God. The Introduction closes by exploring some contemporary negotiations of divine election that critique and attempt to avoid, minimize, and/or limit its exclusivity.

Chapter One begins the constructive work of highlighting a greater depth and complexity of the problem of exclusive divine election and its attendant remedies though three layers. Here, in the first layer, I will explore the structural problem of exclusion through the lens of deconstruction. The foremost theological interpreter of Jacques Derrida's work, John D. Caputo, reads deconstruction as affirming the (ethically) problematic nature of exclusion, and understands deconstruction as an attempt to avoid and/or remedy said problem. What I will present, however, is an alternative reading of

deconstruction that problematizes Caputo's use of deconstruction for such theo-ethical ends, by arguing that deconstruction reveals that any such avoidance or remedy of exclusion is *impossible*, because exclusion is structurally *inescapable*. Although I agree with Caputo's *ethical* desire to remedy exclusion, deconstruction cannot affirm said desire or be used for those ends, at least in my reading. Quite the contrary, deconstruction *deconstructs* any attempt to do so (ethical or otherwise), revealing a predicament wherein we are always already navigating some form of exclusion, and thus the limits of any attempt or effort to avoid or remedy it. Engaging deconstruction, therefore, can reveal the limits of our ethical desire about the problematic nature of exclusion, which highlights a depth to the problem of exclusive divine election not yet realized. In other words the "best" way to engage the problem of exclusion, as found in divine election, might mean recognizing the ways in which it is a problem not so easily solved as simply avoiding—or excluding—exclusion. Such deconstructive insight should shift our emphasis from avoiding exclusion—in this case divine exclusive choice—to discerning between various kinds of exclusion entailed in the inescapability of decision.

Building on the theme of structurally problematic but necessary decision and the accompanying inevitable exclusion, Chapter Two explores the second layer to the problem by focusing on the ways in which exclusive divine choice (or preference) might also prove to be necessary, yet problematic for liberationist work, through a deeper exploration of the divine preferential option. Although God's preferential option has been most recently critiqued because of its exclusive nature, this chapter argues that a certain kind of exclusivity might still be necessary—even if/when problematic—in order to adequately attain liberation. Liberation theology's insistence that God deals with the

problem of exclusion by *choosing* those who have been excluded ensures that those who are excluded will always be God's chosen, while those who are oppressing others are not. Therefore, minimizing divine exclusivity for the oppressed does not adequately deal with oppression and thus becomes a tacit preference for the oppressor by keeping the status quo in place; consequently, the only way to attain liberation is through *exclusive* preference for particular oppressed groups. Those theologians and ethicists whose work is directed at liberation from injustice and oppression must therefore recognize the problematic way in which a kind of strategic exclusivity might be necessary for attaining liberation—and, more importantly, how such work cannot account for all forms of injustice and oppression. Such a recognition should therefore shift our focus from attempting to avoid exclusion to discerning *whose* liberation to pursue or *which* injustice to focus on. In terms of exclusive divine election, this chapter also argues that navigating its problematic nature might not be as easy as identifying exclusivity as the problem, especially when some version of it might be necessary for liberation.

Chapter Three explores a more rigorously *theological* layer to the problem of exclusive divine election by exposing the deconstructive "impossibility" *divine* election presents. For the theologian who is concerned about the exclusivity of divine election, or even a notion of a "God" who chooses (at all), this chapter argues that *divine* election reveals a precarious predicament for any attempt to remedy, avoid, or exclude it. Simply put, if the remedy to exclusive divine election is that the *theologian* chooses, or decides the kind of "God" who chooses (or not), what such choice might be, etc., then said remedy is trafficking in the very thing it has attempted to avoid or remedy, namely exclusive election, choice, decision. Furthermore, for the theologian who is concerned

about human mastery and control over "divinity," the remedy to *divine* election also reveals an impossibility to avoid that which is problematic. At the same time, for the theologian who chooses to confess, declare, or include some notion of *divine* election, he/she must also acknowledge the impossibility of collapsing it into merely *human* election, which is the very thing he/she is trying to avoid, because there is no avoiding the human aspect of confessing—or choosing to confess—such. What divine election reveals, therefore, is a kind of deconstructive "impossibility" (that always already carries an inescapability, as I will demonstrate in Chapter One) for the task of theology. There is both a kind of *impossibility* for the human theologian to confess or include it, yet also an *impossiblity* to avoid or exclude it (in other words an *inescapablility*). Thus this chapter explores how a genuine, radical understanding of *divine* election "deconstructs" theology, revealing an aporetic double-bind, the rupture of impossible yet necessary, necessary yet impossible. In short, *divine* election presents a situation wherein the theologian cannot avoid the problem, but must discern between *which* exclusionary election and *whose* choice is it.

Having explored these three layers to the problem of exclusive divine election, the dissertation concludes by naming the implications of such an exploration and offering possible theological options in response to the problem, now that a fuller appreciation of its complexity is recognized. First, for the contemporary, progressive scholar of religion, theologian, or ethicist concerned about exclusion, we must recognize its inescapability and the impossibility of excluding it altogether; therefore, rather than assume that we can arrive a solution, the more difficult task becomes discerning between different kinds of exclusion. Secondly, liberationists whose work is directed at liberation from injustice and

oppression must recognize the problematic way in which a certain kind of strategic exclusivity might be necessary for attaining liberation; therefore, the work becomes attempting to navigate the problem of exclusive liberation for one people/group and the awareness that without such exclusivity liberation might not be possible. Thirdly, theologians concerned about exclusive (divine) election must recognize that any attempt to remedy or avoid it entails exclusive (human) election, and must discern between these different forms of exclusive election. Additionally, if there is any concern about human mastery over divine mystery, the theologian who avoids, rejects, limits, or excludes *divine* election must also recognize that in said remedy "God" has been reduced to an object of human mastery and control, a "God" of his/her choosing. In the end, the theologian cannot *both* remedy exclusive (divine) election *and* avoid human mastery over divine mystery, as well as some form of exclusive (human) election, and must discern what is the "least violent" option.

Divine Choosing as Inherently Exclusive, and Thus Problematic: The Objects of God's Choice

Although the primary locus for our exploration of the problem of exclusion is divine election, this dissertation does not intend to give a comprehensive overview or exposition of the history of the doctrine. Rather, its goal is to show the way that divine election, as a theological concept, offers a prime example or representation of the problem of exclusion. Therefore, we begin by framing divine election more broadly as God's choice—again, signaling a distinct move away from traditional understandings of divine election that inevitably signifies an absolute decision about the eternal salvation

for some and not others—and highlight the various objects of divine election through several prominent figures and models in the history of its understanding. These elected objects include individuals, groups, God's self, and Jesus Christ. The object of divine choice is an important aspect of divine election, especially for this dissertation, because it helps reveal the structural "this/that" nature that is inherent in election: that God's choosing "this" means an exclusion of "that." In some cases, the exclusion is made explicit: God chooses this and rejects that. Since exclusion is the primary concern, beginning with the objects of election highlights what is at stake in divine election by bringing these issues out of the realm of the abstract and putting flesh and blood—sometimes literally—on these objects of divine choice.

Individual Election: "Predestination"

Many Christian theologians have traditionally understood divine election in terms of predestination: the election (or rejection) of individuals. There are two influential, historical figures in Christian theology that are foundational for any discussion of divine election: Augustine of Hippo and John Calvin. Both understood divine election in terms of predestination.

It is not surprising that we find in Augustine, the "Doctor of Grace," an understanding of divine election that hinges upon a foundational doctrine of grace. For Augustine, humanity is contaminated by sin to the extent that its only hope of salvation is the grace of God. Since grace, however, is not given to all, there are some who will not be saved. Divine election—or as Augustine understood it, predestination—is a

theological recognition that only those who receive the divine gift of grace will be saved. The shadow of this, of course, is also the recognition that God withholds the means of salvation for those who are not elected. However, Augustine tends to emphasize the *positive* and *active* dimensions of predestination: God's choice to save (some).

Augustine's emphasis on the positive and active dimensions of predestination stems from his theological understanding of sin, especially original sin. For Augustine, the sin that stains humanity puts us in a dire situation wherein our deserved penalty is divine judgment. Furthermore, the situation is such that we cannot save ourselves but are dependent on God for salvation. Even more than that, the stain of sin is original: all have sinned "in Adam." Augustine writes: "This human nature in which we are all born from Adam now requires a physician, because it is not healthy."[16] This means that regardless of the sins one commits, all are sinful (i.e. "not healthy") because of Adam. Augustine takes this view all the way, going so far as to declare the stain of sin that even infants bear:

> I, however, for my part, say that an infant born where it was not possible for him to be rescued through the baptism of Christ, having been overtaken by death, was thereby in such a state…because he could not have been otherwise… Justly, therefore, because of the condemnation which runs through the whole mass of humanity, he is not admitted into the kingdom of heaven.[17]

According to Augustine, all of humanity, including infants who have not (yet) sinned, are "bound by original sin" and in therefore in a state of condemnation.[18]

---

[16] Augustine, "On Nature and Grace," in *Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans. John A. Mourant and William J. Collinge (Washington, D.C: Catholic University Press, 1992), 24.
[17] Ibid., 28.
[18] Augustine, "Gift of Perseverance," in *Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans. John A. Mourant and William J. Collinge (Washington, D.C: Catholic University Press, 1992), 296.

Thus it is because and in the context of Augustine's robust doctrine of sin that he sketches a doctrine of predestination. For Augustine, all have sinned, which puts the human being in a situation so dire that we are dependent upon God's grace for salvation. He therefore emphasizes the fact that God, in mercy, chooses to save at all. For Augustine the point is not that some are not elected; the miracle is that any are saved. Again, it is because of his understanding of sin, and the predicament the human being is in as a result, that Augustine presents predestination as a choice by God to save (some). Augustine writes: "Even if no one were freed therefrom, there would be no just complaint against God. It is evident from this that it is a great grace that many are delivered and recognize, in those that are not delivered, that which they themselves deserved."[19] Justice, according to Augustine, is receiving the due penalty for our sin; salvation is grace and mercy. Therefore the response should be praise toward God that mercy is bestowed upon any who are delivered, not complaint that many are not.

In terms of the object of Augustine's understanding of divine election, God chooses human individuals. Or, perhaps more accurately stated, Augustine argues that God chooses to save, and the recipient of that choice is the redeemed human being. Humanity has sinned, in Adam, and is dependent upon God's grace for salvation; therefore God chooses to save (some) from perdition. Those who are saved have been predestined to salvation through the divine choice.

John Calvin, another significant figure in the theological history of divine election, follows Augustine very closely in his understanding of predestination. As Calvin himself notes regarding predestination: "If I were inclined to compile a whole

---

[19] Augustine, "On the Predestination of Saints," in *Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans. John A. Mourant and William J. Collinge (Washington, D.C: Catholic University Press, 1992), 238.

volume from Augustine, I could easily show my readers, that I need no words but his."[20] Although Calvin is often thought of as having made predestination a foundational tenet of his theological system, historical theologian Alister McGrath argues that "Calvin adopts a distinctly low-key approach to the doctrine," pointing out that a mere four chapters of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* are dedicated to predestination.[21] Despite the contested nature of its centrality, however, predestination is something that Calvin clearly address in his *Institutes*. But even more significant is the way that his understanding of predestination has resulted in a tradition of Calvinism that holds predestination to be one of its central tenets.[22]

One of the significant points of distinction between Calvin and Augustine is the former's emphasis on the dual nature of divine election. Whereas Augustine tended to emphasize the positive aspects of divine election—God elects those human beings deserving punishment to salvation, which reveals God's mercy—Calvin highlighted the "double" nature of predestination: "For Calvin, predestination is the eternal counsel of God by which he has, for his own glory, chosen some to eternal life and others to eternal death. The salvation of the elect reveals the depth of God's mercy, and the condemnation of the reprobate reveals the severity of his justice."[23] In order to account for the fact that some humans are saved and others are not, Calvin understands divine election as God's determination for every human being: some are elected to eternal life, some are elected to

---

[20] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II:193.

[21] Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 381.

[22] McGrath argues that it is figures like Theodore Beza, a follower of Calvin, who develop more of what is known as "Calvinism" by beginning with a doctrine of election and developing a system of theology around that premise. See McGrath 382ff.

[23] Paul King Jewett, *Election and Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 12.

eternal damnation. It is this attempt to give an account of all of humanity, i.e. what God chooses for every human being, that lends itself to double predestination. Calvin writes:

> Predestination we call the eternal decree of God, by which he has determined in himself, what he would have to become of every individual of mankind. For they are not all created with a similar destiny; but eternal life is foreordained for some, and eternal damnation for others. Every man, therefore, being created for one or the other of these ends, we say, he is predestinated either to life or to death.[24]

Calvin extends Augustine's point to explicitly highlight the double nature of predestination in order to accentuate God's providence. Calvin is concerned that focusing only on the positive aspects of divine election (to salvation) would allow some to conclude that its negative aspects (to damnation) might be left up to something other than God's sovereign will (e.g. chance, merits, etc.). Although the upshot of this move is that it might divert some of the negativity of this difficult doctrine from God (i.e. God is not directly responsible for electing some to eternal damnation), Calvin is more concerned with preserving God's sovereignty:

> Many, indeed, as if they wished to avert odium from God, admit election in such a way as to deny that any one is reprobated. But this is puerile and absurd, because election itself could not exist without being opposed to reprobation. God is said to separate those whom he adopts to salvation. To say that others obtain by chance, or acquire by their own efforts, that which election alone confers on a few, will be worse than absurd. Whom God passes by, therefore, he reprobates, and from no other cause than his determination to exclude them from his inheritance which he predestines for his children.[25]

Calvin's point here is certainly pertinent to the ground we will cover in this dissertation—that (divine) choice is inherently exclusive. And this leads Calvin to emphasize the double nature of predestination, in contrast Augustine's more singular focus, because to

---

[24] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II:176.
[25] Ibid., II:199.

talk only of one aspect (i.e. God's choice *for* without God's choice *against*) is "puerile and absurd."

To return to the present emphasis of our query, the object of divine election, then, for both Augustine and Calvin, is the individual human being. He or she is chosen by God: as an object of mercy that reveals God's grace, or as an object of divine judgment (directly for Calvin, indirectly for Augustine) for the deserved penalty of sin. A survey of Augustine and Calvin's understanding of divine election also highlights the inherent, structural exclusivity of (divine) choice or decision. Although Augustine wants to emphasize only the positive aspects of divine election—God's choice for salvation (for some)—Calvin contends that it is illogical, i.e. "puerile and absurd," to deny that a divine choice for some to be saved does not inherently mean that others will not. Put simply, Calvin acknowledges and addresses the structural exclusivity inherent in the divine choice. In Chapter One I will further discuss this inherent, structural exclusivity as it is highlighted by Derrida's work in deconstruction.

Group Election: The Chosen People

In this second sub-section of our focus on the objects of divine election we now intend to look at theologies that highlight the choice of a people or group. The object of our analysis will be largely directed at two significant instances of group election: a Jewish understanding of divine election and a Christian liberation theological understanding of divine election. In the former case the object of God's choosing is the people of Israel and, as we will see in the work of Jewish philosopher of religion Michael

Wyschogrod, divine election is understood biologically. From a liberation theological perspective, we will examine the notion of God's preferential option for the poor, oppressed, or marginalized, understood as kind of divine election.

Before turning to these Jewish and liberation theological examples, however, we should note how even Augustine and Calvin's individual notions of divine election entailed an understanding that is more corporate than it might seem. In other words, though such foundational Christian figures as Augustine and Calvin view the objects of divine election in terms of individuals, they do also suggest a corporate aspect to their theologies of election: the Church as the gathering of the elect. Augustine, for example, writes about the "City of God" (in the work of the same name) as consisting of all those elect among humanity, while the "city of men" or earthly city, is made up of those who are in rebellion against God.[26] In like fashion, discussing the unity of all those predestined to eternal life as one body, Calvin writes: "All the elect of God are so connected with each other in Christ, that as they depend upon one head, so they grow up together as into one body, compacted together like members of the same body; being made truly one, as living by one faith, hope, charity, through same Divine Spirit."[27] According to Calvin the Church is the assembly of the elect, the community of believers who have been eternally chosen by God.[28] The point here is that despite predestination's emphasis on the individual as the object of divine election, there is a pervasive theme in

---

[26] See: Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871).

[27] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II:271.

[28] We should also make brief mention of the distinction that both Augustine and Calvin draw between the visible and invisible Church, the former of which is the gathering of believers here on earth whereas the latter is the elect which is only known to God.

Christian theology wherein the Church, as the body of believers, is understood as the elect people of God.

In fact, Christian theology borrows—or steals—the concept of corporate election from Judaism. With the singling out of Abram in Genesis 12 and the promise to be made into a great nation, Judaism has traditionally understood itself to be the religion of the chosen people of God. Drawing on this covenantal relationship, Jewish philosopher and theologian Michael Wyschogrod emphasizes God's carnal (i.e. biological) and corporate election of the Jews: "God chose Abraham as his favorite and promised to make his descendants into a great nation."[29] Therefore, according to Wyschogrod, the Jewish people, as the seed of Abraham that can be traced back biologically, have an intimate, unique relationship with God. Though he admits that to say that God is incarnated in Israel would be to go too far, Wyschogrod does maintain that God dwells with this people in a special way. Simply put, the object of divine election in Judaism, according to Wyschogrod, is the people of Israel as descendents of Abraham. God specifically chooses Abraham and his descendants.

As we have seen in Augustine and Calvin, Christianity picks up on this theme of group election by understanding the Church to be the elect people of God. However, one significant strand of Christianity has understood God's choice of a particular group of people in terms of a "preferential option." Liberation theologies began emerging in the 1970s with major publications, including works by Latin American liberation theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez and black liberation theologian James Cone.[30] Through their

---

[29] Michael Wyschogrod, *The Body of Faith: God and the People of Israel* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996), 57.

[30] See Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1988); James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970).

pioneering work, a "preferential option" became one of the fundamental tenets in liberation theology's struggle against the societal oppression and exclusion of some based on class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. In order to address these injustices, liberation theologians point to a divine preference for the oppressed that disrupts the unjust status quo.

Since we will address liberation theology's preferential option as a distinct form of divine election more significantly in Chapter Two, I will only briefly highlight its function as group election here. One of the pioneers of liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez, argues: "When all is said and done, the option for the poor means an option for the God of the Reign as proclaimed by Jesus. The whole Bible, from the story of Cain and Abel onward, is marked by God's love and predilection for the weak and abused of human history."[31] Taking up this biblical theme of God's option for the weak and abused, Gutiérrez presents a contemporary understanding of divine election wherein the object of God's choice is the poor in society. God is on the side of, or privileges, those who are on the underside of history: the oppressed, poverty-stricken, and excluded.

In liberation theology, the preferential option has not only been understood in terms of poverty, but also in terms of race, as in the work of another foundational liberation theologian, James Cone. Articulating the same sentiment as Gutiérrez, Cone argues that theology must be preferential because God is preferential:

> If theological speech is based on the traditions of the Old Testament, then it must heed their unanimous testimony to Yahweh's commitment to justice for the poor and weak. Accordingly it cannot avoid taking sides in politics, and the side that theology must take is disclosed in the side that Yahweh has already taken. Any other side, whether it be with the oppressors or the side of neutrality (which is

[31] Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor," in *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology: Readings from Mysterium Liberationis*, ed. Jo Sobrino and Igna Ellacuria (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 27.

> nothing but a camouflaged identification with the rulers), is unbiblical. If theology does not side with the poor, then it cannot speak for Yahweh who is the God of the poor.[32]

Since God has chosen to side with the poor and oppressed, liberation theologians like Cone have maintained that we must do the same. And in the context of institutional, systemic racism in the United States, for Cone the divine preferential means that "the people of color are [God's] elected poor in America."[33]

To summarize our survey of group election, we see that these theologians have understood the object of God's choice to be a particular group of people. Wyschogrod maintains that Jewish biological descendants of Abraham are God's chosen people because of the biblical covenantal relationship revealed in Genesis. Gutiérrez picks up on the theme of God's partiality and emphasizes God's preferential option for the poor, oppressed, and excluded in society, which he relates to contemporary, materially impoverished peoples around the world. Cone too addresses the fact that God is partial by highlighting the divine election of African Americans in the context of racism.[34]

Note that in these human forms of election, whether as individuals or groups, the question arises as to what extent God's choice *for* also entails a choice *against*? This arose explicitly in Calvin and Augustine as the former explicitly asserted that divine election is specifically directed at both. James Cone too is forthright in an earlier work that God's preferential option *for* blacknesss in the United States is also a choice *against* whiteness. Because the blackness of Jesus Christ affirms God's choice for such,

---

[32] James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 65.
[33] Ibid., 126.
[34] Again, as I will address in Chapter Two, liberationists highlight the exclusive preference for particular oppressed groups *because* of the way they are excluded.

"whiteness is the symbol of the Antichrist."[35] But regardless of the explicitness of the theologian positing an object of God's choice, the question that deserves to be kept at the forefront of our discussion in every instance of divine election is: does God's choosing necessarily exclude? If so, then what, given the conclusion that contemporary theology has reached concerning the problem of exclusion?

Divine Self-election: God's Choice for the World

Before turning to critiques of divine election in terms of exclusion—which is the primary focus of this dissertation—we need to highlight two additional objects of divine election that already complicate its exclusionary nature: a process theological understanding of election wherein God chooses to orient the world toward an ultimate end, and Karl Barth's radical reforming of divine election wherein God choose who to be in Jesus Christ. Part of what is unique about these two approaches is that neither has the (individual) human being (or group of human beings) as its object; God does not merely choose some one (or group), which disrupts the traditional critique that God's choice of one is exclusionary of the other. The question remains, however, as to whether or not these understandings of divine election are also exclusive.

Although divine election is not typically a primary topic of discussion in process theology, Donna Bowman's *Divine Decision: A Process Doctrine of Election* reveals the significance of exploring this doctrine in a process theological framework.[36] This work

---

[35] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 8.

[36] Donna Bowman, *The Divine Decision: A Process Doctrine of Election* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

also presents a model of divine election that does not have humanity (as individual or group) as its object. Part of the reason for this is that process theology's scope is typically broader than many other theologies in that it is less anthropocentric: humanity is not the center of the world, nor God's work in the world, because God is intimately connected with *all* of creaturely reality.

In order to grasp the significance of Bowman's understanding of divine election, and the object of God's choice within it, we need to begin by highlighting some basic tenets of process thought and process theology. Drawing on the metaphysical framework of philosopher Alfred North Whitehead that challenges the traditional substance metaphysics of much Western philosophy and theology, process thought focuses on *events of becoming* in which the world is sweeping into *actual occasions*. As these actual occasions move along, each entity experiences physical *prehensions*, which are more than just perceptions for they include everything it perceives in the world at any given moment, including all the previous moments and prehensions of the entity's history. The entity has no control over what it encounters in these prehensions and the network of relations it is a part of, and this is understood as the *physical pole*: what is inherited through the prehensions. However, *how* the entity brings it all together is purely its own choice—it is not determined by these prehensions. This is understood as the *mental pole*, the choice to become. This choice on the part of the entity is the *subjective aim* that belongs to that specific occasion as the creature's choice to become this, and not that. This is where self-creation and novelty can occur, which are significant aspects of process thought. This entire process—of actual occasions prehending and choosing to

become—is not limited to human beings but applies to every swath of reality, including animals, plants, rocks, minerals, molecules, etc.

The new possibilities out of which entities choose what to become originate from God. *Eternal objects* are gifts from God where the offering of possibilities to become something new emerges. God orders the eternal objects based upon the greatest possible value that can result by creaturely choice. God, like the creature, also has two poles: a *physical pole* and a *mental pole*. The *primordial nature* of God is God's mental pole and it is a graded envisagement of all the eternal objects in the entire universe—every possibility that could ever be. This is God's vision for the future, where God decides what God wants for the world. However, for process theology the primordial nature of God is not deterministic (i.e. it is not considered a "blueprint" for creation), because the creaturely subjective aim is real and the creature has true freedom to decide what to become. God's primordial nature sweeps down in the *initial aim*, where the creature can access God's vision, which is how God *lures* the creature toward God's vision for the world. This lure, again, is not determinative, but persuasive as the creature has the power to accept or reject it.

The other aspect of God is the physical pole, God's *consequent nature*. God is intimately aware of what the creatures need because God is affected by their choices. In the moment of concrescence—where the prehensions narrow into the actual and the entity becomes this new thing—the creature actually sweeps *out* into the rest of the world and back *up* into God. Here God experiences the entire universe in God's consequent nature—the aspect of God that is continually becoming as God becomes something new with the world. What is evident in this model is the radical connectedness between God

and creature, as well as between creature and creature. The creature's decisions not only affect God, but they affect other creatures in the prehensions that will manifest because of its choices. In God's becoming, the initial aim comes out of the synthesis of God's consequent nature—what God feels through our choices—and the primordial nature—God's vision for the world. This means as God changes, so does the initial aim directed towards us.

Turning now to a process doctrine of election, Bowman argues that though God has two natures—primordial and consequent—in process theology, we should always keep in mind the divine unity that holds them together. It might be unavoidable to consider each separately in order to fully understand what is going on in each, but she offers a word of caution: "To discuss each nature separately is to run the risk of seeming to separate what cannot, in reality, be divided."[37] Additionally, since the creaturely response to God, in the consequent nature, directly affects the choices God makes, in the primordial nature, we should also keep in mind how intimately connected the creature's choices are to divine election.

Nevertheless, Bowman asserts that the "roots of election" are found in God's primordial nature where we encounter God's vision for the universe. Simply put, God elects who to be in the primordial nature. This is the basic decision of what God wants for the world: the mental pole of God's unchanging, eternal nature. Therefore, what God eternally elects or chooses is God's vision for the world, and the categories of this vision are primarily aesthetic. The object of election is in the initial aim, where the creature is lured to become something new. What God is coaxing it to become is part of the larger

[37] Ibid., 148.

vision that God wants the world to become. Bowman writes: "God's choice…is to be a God who chooses to fulfill the divine subjective aim through the creativity of creatures. God's aim to maximize value does not bind God to any specific course of action in pursuit of that goal."[38]

Therefore divine election, for process theology, can be understood as God's choice to work out God's vision for the world *through* creaturely reality. As Bowman maintains, it is "the divine self-election to be God for creatures, and as such also represents the election of a goal for the entire universal process: the world, God, and the world as included in God."[39] This is distinct from previous notions of election on several fronts. First, on the one hand the object of God's election is not humanity but is a divine self-election: God chooses to be *this* way, as co-creator with the world in its becoming. At the same time, however, the essence of this choice necessarily involves creatures. Although creatures might not be the direct objects of God's elected—chosen by God for salvation/judgment—creatures might be understood as the indirect objects of election—those entities who now participate in God's vision for the world: "We have been elected in God's determination of the universal order to cooperate with divine persuasion in advancing the world process."[40]

Additionally, since divine election is not deterministic in process theology, God's vision can (and will) be thwarted by creaturely choices that are contrary to God's vision. This raises an interesting point regarding our concern for exclusion: if God chooses a vision for the world that is primarily aesthetic, what if creatures choose to act in ways

---

[38] Ibid., 149.
[39] Ibid., 157.
[40] Ibid., 150.

that directly contradict this vision? The "beauty" of process election, however, is that true beauty includes the maximization of creaturely freedom. Therefore even creaturely choices that seem to thwart God's vision are also considered part of divine election because divine choice is intended to preserve creaturely freedom. Bowman argues that God chooses to maximize value even in ways that seem to contradict this aim:

> God has chosen to encourage the evolution of high levels of complexity, diversity, and even consciousness in the world. This strategy can lead to the creation of unique value through the vastly increased level of freedom of choice, but it can also result in wrong choices by the creatures that destroy value already achieved, prevent other creatures from achieving their goals and hence suppress the creation of value, and reverse the progress made by creatures as a whole toward God's aim.[41]

In other words, even when creatures choose against what God has chosen (i.e. maximizing aesthetic value), value is still obtained through diverse and complex creaturely expressions, and hence they are not ultimately excluded from God's choice to maximize value. Thus the only "exclusionary" aspect of Bowman's process divine election, it seems, is God's choice *against* value, beauty, and aesthetics, even if and when God uses those creaturely actions that devalue for valuable ends.

Divine self-election as presented in Bowman's process theology marks a fundamental shift from previous understandings of divine election in several ways. First, in terms of its object, in that humanity (individuals or collective) is not the direct object of divine choice; rather, divine election is understood as a divine self-election to be *for* the world and to include creaturely reality in God's vision. Additionally, Bowman uniquely and deftly navigates the problem of exclusion in the way that the divine choice is able to subsume—though not exclude—creaturely/human choice. In other words, even

---

[41] Ibid., 149–50.

those creaturely actions and choices that oppose God's choice for the world are not ultimately excluded, but included in God's vision for the world.

Both aspects are not unique to Bowman's process divine election, but can actually be found in Karl Barth's reformulation of divine election decades earlier. In fact, Bowman credits Barth with paving the way for her articulation of a process doctrine of divine election. According to Bowman, "the insights that Barth contributes in his doctrine of election can provide the Christian theological standard toward which the process doctrine of election strives.[42]

Double Divine Self-election: Who God Chooses to be in Jesus Christ

Barth's doctrine of divine election will be the final model examined in our survey of the objects of divine election for the purpose of highlighting its exclusivity. Since we will examine it in further detail in Chapter Three—because of how Barth emphasizes the way divine election is fundamentally about a *divine* and not a *human* choice/decision—we will only briefly address it here.

Although similar to Bowman's process model in terms of its object, i.e. divine self-election, Barth, with his roots in the Reformed tradition, embraces Calvin's notion of double-election. The major departure from Calvin is significant, however: rather than understand humanity as the object of election that is predestined to either salvation or perdition, Barth understands the "double" aspect of election as it is related to Jesus Christ, who is the both "object" and "subject" of election as both the elected human being

[42] Ibid., 4.

and the electing God, respectively. As electing God, Jesus Christ represents God's choice: *this* (person, act, event, etc.) is who God has chosen to be; thus Jesus Christ is the content of God's choice. As elected human being, Jesus Christ represents the object of God's choice as the human being chosen for fellowship with God. Additionally, Jesus Christ is doubly elected in that as the elect human being he is the one who is both elected to salvation *and* bears the judgment of humanity's sin.

Although Jesus Christ is the "direct" object of divine election, the "indirect" object is the human being. Barth describes the beneficiaries of divine election: "It is in individual men that, from the beginning of His ways and works, God has loved, regarded, known and marked out the many and the totality, bestowing upon them the benefit of His covenant and the grace of His choice. It is they who…compose the race elected in Jesus Christ."[43] Through Jesus Christ, humanity is able to gain fellowship with God, with whom they were once separate, and no longer faces the judgment of their collective disobedience. As elected human being, Jesus Christ represents the divine choice for all of humanity.

The Barthian emphasis on Jesus Christ only reaches its full Christological apogee, however, when we recognize that Jesus Christ is not only the object of election as the elected human being, but also—and primordially—Jesus Christ is the God who chooses as the electing God: "It is the name of Jesus Christ which, according to the divine self-revelation, forms the focus at which the two decisive beams of the truth forced upon us converge and unite: on the one hand the electing God and on the other elected man."[44]

---

[43] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley et al., vol. II.2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 313.
[44] Ibid., 59.

Highlighting Chalcedonian Christology's view of Jesus Christ as fully God and fully human, Barth depicts Jesus Christ as the subject of election: the electing God. With Jesus Christ as the electing God we see God's self-determination—or self-election—to be *this* way. In other words, Jesus Christ is not only the object of God's election, but in Jesus Christ we see the very nature of God as God in relationship, fellowship, and communion with humanity because Jesus Christ *is* the very "concrete and manifest form of the divine decision."[45]

Therefore in Barth's understanding, both the object and subject of election is Jesus Christ. He is the elected human being, who is chosen by God for fellowship as well as the one who bears the judgment and penalty for humanity's sin. At the same time, Jesus Christ is the electing God who is the manifestation of the divine decision to be for and with humanity.

In terms of exclusion, then, Barth's doctrine of election highlights the fact that no human being can ultimately be rejected by God. Although we may live and act as if this were the case, the reality for Barth is that Jesus Christ has taken that "right" away from us. Barth writes: "In defiance of God and to his own destruction [the human being] may indeed behave and conduct himself as isolated man, and therefore as the man who is rejected by God. He may represent this man. But he has no right to *be* this man."[46] Thus what is excluded is humanity's exclusion from God.[47] In divine election Barth declares that God has said "No!" to humanity's "no" to God; or, perhaps more accurately stated,

---

[45] Ibid., 105.

[46] Ibid., 316.

[47] Bowman picks up on this Barthian move and uses it in her process divine election, namely how the divine decision excludes the possibility of ultimate, final exclusion of humanity (or the creature for Bowman).

God says "Yes!" despite humanity's "no." Given Barth's emphasis on the wholly otherness of God, the divine "Yes!" trumps our "no" as God's choice for humanity is effective regardless of humanity's response. Similar to Bowman's model—who actually models her process divine election after Barth—what seems to be contrary to God's vision for the world is not ultimately excluded, even though there is an exclusionary aspect to Barth's divine election. Put differently, although for Barth God choice *for* fellowship with humanity entails a choice *against* the isolation of humanity, the human being who lives as if he/she were isolated is never ultimately excluded.

Additionally, as electing God, the choice to be *this* God excludes any possibility that God would or could be any other way in relation to humanity. God has decided once and for all, according to Barth, who God is going to be, excluding the possibility of being any other way (i.e. in some sort of hidden decree that we might worry about). Furthermore, for Barth, this divine choice is both enacted and revealed in Jesus Christ, which is also exclusive in that Jesus Christ represents the content and revelation of divine election, thus excluding all other understandings, confessions, or ideas about God. In other words, although Barth's doctrine of divine election is *inclusive* in the sense that no human being is excluded from the divine choice, it is only through Jesus Christ, which *excludes* all other religious or theological perspectives.

Despite the Object, Divine Choosing (Necessarily) Excludes

Our survey of the various objects of divine election—understood as individuals, the Church, the descendants of Abraham, the poor and oppressed, God's self, Jesus

Christ—is a necessary prolegomenon for the argument of this dissertation. First, it clarifies that my use of divine election, as a case study for the problem of exclusion, is not limited to traditional understandings of this theological notion. Rather, I am broadening the scope and framing divine election as (any kind of) "divine choice." For instance, in Chapter Two we will dive deeper into liberation theology's divine preferential option as a kind of divine election, which is not typically understood as such. Second, and related, my use of exclusion is not limited to the final, ultimate, eternal exclusion of human beings from such a divine choice. As we have already seen in Bowman and Barth, divine election does not necessarily entail that human beings are excluded from salvation, God's vision, etc. once and for all. Nevertheless, my argument is that divine election, as (divine) decision, is *inescapably* exclusive. Chapter One will explore this kind of structural, inescapable exclusivity in the nature of decision. The goal of such a survey of the various objects of divine election was intended to "set the table" for how/why divine election presents a suitable case study for our exploration of the complexity of the problem of exclusion.

At times the exclusivity of the divine choice was made explicit, e.g. Calvin's "double-predestination" as divine choice for salvation for some, reprobation for others; while in others, like Augustine who only focuses on God's choice for salvation (for some), the exclusivity is latent, because a choice for some necessarily means that some are excluded from such a choice. We will dive deeper into the kind(s) of exclusivity divine election deals with in the subsequent chapters, as well as the structural exclusivity of decision in Chapter One. Before beginning our exploration of the problem of exclusion in divine election in these chapters, we will close with a survey of some critiques of the

inherent exclusivity of divine election, as well as the ways in which progressive theologians (i.e. those concerned about exclusion) have attempted to limit, avoid, or reduce divine election's exclusivity. The preceding exploration of the various, traditional objects of divine election has helped to reveal an inherent exclusivity, and given the identification of exclusion as "the problem," divine election is necessarily problematic. The formula works like this: (a) exclusion is problematic; (b) divine election is necessarily exclusive; (c) thus the remedy is either to avoid a notion of God's choosing and/or limit its exclusivity. We therefore close the Introduction by identifying some critiques of divine election's inherent exclusivity and turn to those few ("few" because most just avoid a notion of divine election altogether) who have attempted to reduce its exclusivity. In so doing we will have highlighted the ways in which Christian theologians identify exclusion as "the problem" and attempt to remedy this problem by avoiding and/or limiting exclusivity (as exemplified in divine election).

Identifying and Critiquing Divine Election's Problematic Exclusivity

Feminist theologian Letty Russell argues that "divine election and its subsequent use in nation building and colonialism have often become a screen for imperialism and racial domination."[48] Drawing on the work of biblical scholar Renita Weems, Russell identifies exclusion as one of the contributing factors to the reification of divine election for colonialism, imperialism, and racism. Since divine election is necessarily exclusive, Russell argues that "those who have been excluded from Judeo-Christian theological

[48] Russell, "Postcolonial Challenges and the Practice of Hospitality," 115–16.

discourse and structures must begin their work with an analysis of 'election.'"[49] Russell thus makes the point that divine election has been understood as validation for abuse and oppression, because of its inherent exclusivity.

In *Who are the* Real *Chosen People?* Rueven Firestone highlights the way that divine election is ethically problematic because of its limiting nature. Firestone writes:

> Choosing is…limiting. It is an act of identifying, of distinguishing, of separating. Although it is possible to choose 'a few' rather than one, it is understood generally as singling out. The act of choosing immediately establishes a hierarchy. What is chosen is somehow different than the others. Usually, that difference represents a higher location on the ladder… Being chosen, therefore, would appear to be a special and positive status that places the chosen over and above the non-chosen.[50]

Firestone highlights a kind of structural exclusivity inherent in any choice or decision that will be further addressed in Chapter One. Additionally, Firestone argues that divine election not only excludes those whom are not chosen, but chosenness also carries a certain privilege for the one(s) chosen because that which is chosen is considered different, i.e. better, than those not chosen. This kind of privileging creates a hierarchal ordering and the creation of a special and positive status for the chosen one(s). Such privileging is only magnified when one considers being chosen by God. According to Firestone, chosenness connotes arbitrary favoritism, social eliteness, moral superiority, and total exclusiveness. What's more, Firestone argues that chosenness often leads to violence, especially given the fact that "the special nature of that divinely authorized status—its presumed superiority—has been glorified by religious civilizations when in positions of imperial power."[51] In an attempt to understand how and why it emerges,

---

[49] Ibid., 116.
[50] Reuven Firestone, *Who Are the Real Chosen People?: The Meaning of Chosenness in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Pub, 2008), vii.
[51] Ibid., viii.

Firestone catalogues the notion of chosenness in religious contexts from its birth "in the cauldron of ancient Near Eastern polytheisms and how it became a core part of the self-concept of one small community of monotheists" to the intra- and inter-group polemics among competing monotheisms "over which great arguments, inquisitions, and religious wars have been fought."[52]

In *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism,* Regina Schwartz also asks pressing questions about exclusion and preference. Although the doctrine of divine election is not explicitly treated in any one part of the text, Schwartz surveys the biblical literature and wonders about the shadow of the divine choice, which leads her to ask: what about those *not* chosen, i.e. the Canaanites, Moabites, Cain, Esau, etc.? Schwartz specifically focuses on the notion that identity is fostered and secured through violence and destruction of the "Other" in the exclusionary preference found in the Bible.

Catholic theologian Walter Bühlmann, in *God's Chosen Peoples*, also highlights and critiques the exclusivity of divine election. Arguing that the problem begins with God's covenants with Abraham, Moses, and Jesus Christ, Bühlmann argues for an understanding of divine election in salvation history to begin with what he calls "the creation covenant." This "primordial" covenant, in his opinion, is the foundation for all future covenants, and reveals the universality of God's election of and for all. Using biblical, historical, and comparative theological lenses, Bühlmann sets out to prove the universality of God's love: "All people are 'his' peoples; all are 'chosen peoples.'"[53] Bühlmann attempts to remove election's exclusivity and focus on its inclusivity by

---

[52] Ibid., 147.

[53] Walbert Bühlmann, *God's Chosen Peoples*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), xiii.

emphasizing how all are chosen by God for redemption.

Addressing the ways in which divine election has justified various kinds of abuses throughout history, liberationist Elsa Tamez also seeks to reinterpret divine election without exclusion. In fact, she argues that exclusionary divine election is merely a misinterpretation of a biblical concept. Tamez writes:

> Unfortunately, at different times in history the biblical words "choice" or "election" have been wrongly used. The concept of God's *choosing* certain persons or people has been taken from the Bible and misused. Thus, the term "the chosen people" has been used for ends not approved by God, such as to exclude others, to despise other cultures, or to justify acts of domination. The conquerors (who brought Christianity with them!) felt they had been "chosen" to conquer, steal, destroy our ancestors' cultures, take over the land and dominate.[54]

Since Tamez argues that God's mercy and love is extended to all, God's purpose is not to choose some and exclude others. Thus the abuses that occurred throughout history seem to be a misinterpretation of the exclusionary nature of election—that some are chosen while others are not. Those with the power to do so have used their superior position to oppress others and justified it through a notion of chosenness.

Liberation ethicist Ada Maria-Isasi Diaz accentuates the problem of exclusion by emphasizing the "kin-dom of God" as a contrast to the exclusive *king*-dom of God (where white, male dominance, racism, sexism, and classism are the norm): "The coming of the kin-dom of God has to do with the coming together of peoples, no one being excluded and at the expense of no one… Kin-dom of God happens when we struggle to do away with faith structures of exclusion."[55]

---

[54] Elsa Tamez, "God's Election, Exclusion and Mercy : A Bible Study of Romans 9-11," *International Review of Mission* 82, no. 325 (January 1, 1993): 29.
[55] Mujerista Theology, Part 1.

In her essay on divine election in the compilation *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, feminist theologian Margit Ernst-Habib also highlights the problematic exclusivity of divine election. Ernst-Habib clearly outlines the issues that emerge when discussing divine election, especially in terms of predestination, and how that leaves most of us feeling "decidedly uncomfortable, if not outright repelled."[56] Ernst-Habib highlights several issues with divine election: "(1) the focus on individuals and their 'private salvation; (2) the tendency to concentrate on the 'afterlife' while omitting our life here and now; (3) the limited character of human agency with respect to salvation; and, finally, (4) the implicit or explicit danger of an exclusive and hierarchical understanding of the chosen ones."[57] In terms of the problem of exclusivity, Ernst-Habib draws on several feminist and womanist responses and critiques of divine election, citing how it has perpetuated patriarchy, privilege, and hierarchical separation. These strident critiques of divine election lead Ernst-Habib to genuinely wonder:

> With all these questions, warnings, objections, and potentially harmful understandings, why should a feminist theologian be interested in this subject? Why should a feminist theologian…spend time and energy re-discovering this doctrine, which seems to work against some of her core concerns? Why not deposit it on the dumping ground of those theological doctrines that have proved to be destructive not only for women but for all people who do not fit into the definition of the "chosen race" because of their gender, race, class, or sexual orientation? Why not abandon the subject of predestination altogether, when it includes the discussion of God's "horrible decree," as even Calvin himself put it?[58]

Ernst-Habib's point—as well as the others just surveyed—is well-taken: to the extent that exclusion is considered problematic, divine election appears to represent the

---

[56] Ernst-Habib, "'Chosen by Grace': Reconsidering the Doctrine of Predestination," 77.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid., 80–81.

problem *par excellence*. This dissertation will dive further into the problem, however, by focusing more precisely on the inescapability of (some form of) exclusion. Thus I close the Introduction to this dissertation—as a way of opening up the discussion that will unfold—by revisiting the epigraph by Martin Buber: "If there were a devil, he would not be the one who decided against God, but he, that in all eternity, did not decide."[59] In contemporary, progressive theology the "devil," it appears, is exclusive (divine) choice; and although I agree, certainly on ethical grounds, that this is inherently problematic, I am also concerned about the illusion of any way to escape, avoid, and/or remedy the problem, thus revealing an-other "devil," one that might actually be more pernicious, precisely because it is more insidious, i.e. the "devil" that appears when we have reached such a conclusion that we can remedy or avoid exclusive (divine) choice.

[59] Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Touchstone, Simon & Schuster, 1996), 101.

CHAPTER 1

Deconstructive Complications of Attempted Remedies of the Problem of Exclusion

> *No justice is exercised, no justice is rendered, no justice becomes effective...without a decision that cuts and divides.*
>
> —Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority"

> *We are always negotiating violence…Every ideal of justice is rather inscribed in what Derrida calls an "economy of violence"… There is no call for justice that does not call for the exclusion of others"*
>
> —Martin Hägglund, "The Radical Evil of Deconstruction"

In the Introduction, I highlighted the ways in which Christian theologians identify exclusion as problematic and attempt to remedy this problem by avoiding and/or limiting exclusivity (as exemplified in divine election). Against that backdrop, the goal in this chapter is simple: to complicate such an identification of exclusion as "the problem" and *problematize* any attempts to remedy it. Naturally, when exclusion is identified as the problem, the remedy is to avoid, eliminate, and/or limit exclusion. However, through the lens of Derridean deconstruction, I intend to show that any attempt to avoid or eliminate exclusion is *impossible*, as deconstruction reveals the *inescapability* of some form of (structural) exclusion.

In order to uncover the structural impossibility and inescapability of exclusion, I will focus on some insights of Derridean deconstruction, especially the ways in which it has been theologically interpreted. The work of John D. Caputo, the foremost theological

interpreter of Derrida, has emphasized the movement toward avoiding, limiting, and/or remedying the problem of exclusion. Yet, I will argue that a more thorough, rigorous reading of deconstruction—with a sharper focus on the deconstructive "aporia"—complicates such a move by revealing the impossibility of avoiding some form of exclusion, i.e. the structural inescapability of exclusion.

In Part One, I will explore Caputo's work where I will show how he over-emphasizes the "impossibility" of religion and justice because of their tendency toward closure and exclusion, which he deems as ethically problematic. Caputo's approach serves as a pertinent illustration of both the emphasis on the "impossibility" by interpreters of Derrida, as well as an identification of exclusion as the problem that can or should be remedied. In other words, Part One will highlight a theo-ethical identification of exclusion as problematic that results in an attempt to remedy this problem, through a particular reading of deconstruction.

In Part Two, I will offer a more rigorous reading of deconstruction that complicates and critiques this identification and attempted remedy of exclusion—which will find its zenith in Caputo's reading of deconstruction—by focusing on the tension of the deconstructive aporia more explicitly (i.e. the problem of the structural, inescapable necessity of exclusion). Here I will argue that Caputo's reading of deconstruction identifies the "problem" of closure and exclusion in a way that relaxes the tension of the double-bind in the aporia, which is a fundamental aspect of deconstruction. Put simply, this second section reads deconstruction as highlighting a predicament in which there is no solution or remedy that is not also itself a problem, i.e. there is no escaping the problem. Thus, the emphasis in this second section is on the "inescapability" of

exclusion, or the "impossibility" of avoiding or remedying it. Therefore, any definitive critique of exclusion—as Caputo suggests through his reading of deconstruction—signals a departure from the deconstructive aporia of impossible, yet inescapable and necessary.

The overall goal of this chapter is, therefore, to highlight the complexity of the problem of exclusion, recognizing it as *both* problematic and inescapable/necessary, through a reading of deconstruction. As was stated in the Introduction, this is not an attempt to minimize the ethical problem of exclusivity or render such a problem unproblematic. On the contrary, the real work of this dissertation is to underline the significance of the problem by uncovering a deeper complexity than previously realized, which would, in turn, highlight the ways in which previous attempts to remedy exclusive divine election prove untenable because the problem might be more complex than it seems, and thus not so easily remedied. Thus, anyone concerned about the ethical problem of exclusion, must also be aware of its inescapability, and recognize that any attempt to remedy exclusion will be limited. Such deconstructive insight should shift our emphasis from attempting to avoid exclusion—which will include exclusive divine choice, as I will argue—to *discerning* between various types/kinds of exclusion entailed in the inescapability of decision.

A Word of Caution: Using Deconstruction as Method *For*…Theo-Ethical Ends

Before "beginning"[60] the primary work of this chapter—to explore the way(s) deconstruction complicate(s) the identification and attempted remedy of exclusion—it is

[60] As we will see, "beginning" is one of the things Derrida complicates in his early work, and thus already puts us in a precarious situation. As Geoffrey Bennington puts it in "Derridabase," which is considered to

important to signal a significant methodological obstacle that arises when one attempts to apply deconstruction as a tool for theological and/or ethical ends. First, we should be wary of *using* deconstruction *for* any ends—thus any stated attempt to use deconstruction "in order to" (as I seem to be suggesting and as I will try to show that Caputo has done) is already problematic. Derrida consistently claims that deconstruction is "auto-deconstruction."[61] It happens within, to the text itself. Deconstruction is beyond human mastery, "a strategy without finality"; it is wild, machine-like, always outside our control.[62] Deconstruction is beyond appropriation; it is not a method or a tool, for it is always *otherwise*.[63] Thus if deconstruction is always *otherwise*, how can anyone claim to use deconstruction "in order to…"—unless, in so doing, one admits to betraying or abandoning deconstruction? Or perhaps more accurately rendered, if deconstruction "is" betrayal itself—to the extent that it "is" anything at all (as we will see)—how could deconstruction be anything other than betraying what one might intend? For if deconstruction is always (already) beyond our control, then even our best attempts at "ethics," "justice," or "religion," using deconstruction, will always themselves be subject to deconstruction. To the extent that this is the case, perhaps the best attempts at engaging deconstruction are those that admit this at the outset.

---

be one of the foremost explications of Derrida: "We must begin somewhere, but there is absolutely no justified beginning. One cannot, for essential reasons that we shall have to explain, return to a point of departure from which all the rest could be constructed following an order of reasons." Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992), 15.

[61] Jacques Derrida, "The Villanova Roundtable: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida," in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, ed. John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 9.

[62] Jacques Derrida, "*Différance*" in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 7.

[63] Jacques Derrida, "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion," in *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

As one theological interpreter of Derrida, Walter Lowe, puts it: perhaps "theology must honor the difference between its own task and Derrida's. Having learned what it can, it must proceed on its own, trusting its own best lights."[64] Such is the proposed method of engagement with deconstruction in this dissertation: to allow deconstruction's insights to inform theo-ethical intentions, but to recognize that deconstruction cannot affirm, critique, or suggest alternatives to "the problem" (as I will go on to show). This does not render such an engagement with deconstruction fruitless and futile—on the contrary, deconstruction might help theology (as well as any other discipline) to sharpen its sights on the issues and what is at stake. By the end of the chapter, I hope to highlight how deconstruction can offer such a theo-ethical "service," so long as we keep these limitations in mind. But any theological, ethical, or theo-ethical project—including this dissertation and chapter—should recognize that its task "certainly cannot be by permission of Derrida."[65]

Part One: Caputo's Over-Emphasis on "Impossibility": Exclusion as Ethically Problematic

The goal in this first section is to highlight the way(s) in which a particular, theological reading of deconstruction both identifies exclusion as problematic, and appears to offer a remedy to said problem. As we will see, this reading of deconstruction finds its most explicit supporter and expositor in John D. Caputo, whose "religion without religion" (a phrase that Derrida originally coined) has been accepted as one of the

---

[64] Walter Lowe, *Theology and Difference: The Wound of Reason* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 16.
[65] Chris Boesel, *Risking Proclamation, Respecting Difference: Christian Faith, Imperialistic Discourse, and Abraham* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 270.

foremost theological and ethical interpretations of Derrida and deconstruction. In Caputo's reading of deconstruction, we will find perhaps the harshest critique of exclusivity, especially as found in exclusive divine election, as Caputo appears to identify exclusion as *the* problem in/for religion and justice. Before we turn to Caputo, however, let us keep in mind that the work of this chapter is twofold: first, to identify the way(s) in which a certain reading of deconstruction identifies exclusion (including exclusive divine election) as problematic—which will find its zenith in Caputo's reading. But also, secondly, to push further into the deconstructive aporia to identify a more complicated predicament wherein things are not only impossible, but inescapable and necessary. Although I agree with Caputo's ethical identification of exclusion as problematic (as I have already intonated in the Introduction), I intend to show in Part Two how such an identification cannot ultimately be supported by deconstruction because of how it relaxes the tension of the deconstructive aporia or double-bind.

Religion without Religion: Caputo's Understanding of the Deconstructive "Impossibility" (of Religion and Justice) and the Identification of Exclusion as Problematic

Caputo's work epitomizes the zenith of a critique of exclusive divine election in the name of "deconstruction" because Caputo not only emphasizes the "impossibility" of deconstruction and the problem of exclusion, but also zeroes in on the religious and theo-ethical implications of deconstruction, thus intersecting nicely with the overall goal of this chapter: to explore the problem of exclusive divine election through the lens of

Derridean deconstruction. In Caputo's reading, deconstruction offers a(n ethical) critique of any-thing that excludes (e.g. concrete, determinate forms of religion, justice).

Caputo's work with deconstruction and religion represents a unique approach in the midst of a sorted discourse. Though deconstruction was initially presumed to be hostile to religion and/or theology, several significant religious and/or theological engagements with deconstruction emerged in the 1980s. The theological reception of deconstruction took on several forms, ranging from its earliest engagements with the "death of God" theologians like Thomas Altizer[66] and Mark C. Taylor who argued that "deconstruction is the 'hermeneutic' of the death of God,"[67] to more confessional engagements by "Radical Orthodoxy" theologians who argued that only orthodox Christian doctrine can do justice to the implications of deconstruction.[68] Of course, in the midst of these two polarizing approaches, there were several other significant theological engagements with Derrida and deconstruction along the way.[69]

But no one attempted to follow Derrida as closely as Caputo's early work on deconstruction and religion—or at least presumed to follow Derrida as closely as possible. Especially in *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*, Caputo declares at the outset that the goal of this work is "to understand the

---

[66] See: Thomas Altizer, *Deconstruction and Theology* (New York: Crossroad Pub Co, 1982).

[67] Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology*, New edition edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1987), 6.

[68] See: John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2 edition (Oxford, UK ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006).

[69] These include such pioneering works as: Kevin Hart, *Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1989); Walter Lowe*, Theology and Difference: The Wound of Reason* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993); Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Ellen T. Amour, *Deconstruction, Feminist Theology, and the Problem of Difference: Subverting the Race/Gender Divide* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999).

'religion' of Jacques Derrida."[70] What separates Caputo's work with Derrida and religion from other, prior theological engagements is the admission of the latter that theology/religion is distinct from deconstruction, and therefore will need to "break ranks" at some point. Caputo, on the other hand, so closely tries to follow—and even mimic—Derrida in *Prayers and Tears* that it becomes difficult to discern the difference between the theological argument Caputo is presenting and Derrida himself—or for that matter, between Derrida, deconstruction, and this "religion without religion." This is no accident, as Caputo is explicit about what he is trying to do in this text, namely "to understand the 'religion' of Jacques Derrida." Thus, Caputo plays with the concepts intentionally so as to trouble any distinction between Derrida, deconstruction, Derrida's religion, etc.—so we hear Caputo talk about "Jacque's religion,"[71] deconstruction being a religious movement, etc. In fact, Caputo draws heavily on *Circumfession* (though not to the exclusion of other Derridean texts), an autobiographical reflection where Derrida explores his own religiosity, mimicking Augustine's *Confessions* as Derrida discusses his own religion (being Jewish), growing up in north Africa, and his mother (and her death).[72]

Consequently, what we get in Caputo's *Prayers and Tears* is a sustained reflection on Derrida and religion, Derrida's religion, and/or deconstructive religion—what Caputo will eventually coin as, in short, "religion without religion." Caputo goes so far as to declare that the "religious-ness" of Derrida/deconstruction is not external or

---

[70] John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), xviii.
[71] Ibid., xxix.
[72] See: Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1999).

foreign to what deconstruction is, but part of the very thing that stirs the deconstructive movement. Caputo draws heavily on Derrida's statement about his own Judaism in *Circumfession*, where Derrida laments: "that's what my readers won't have understood about me," resulting in being read "less and less well over almost twenty years, like my religion about which nobody understands anything."[73] Reflecting on these comments, Caputo writes:

> What we will not have understood about deconstruction, and this causes us to read it less and less well, is that deconstruction is set in motion by an overarching aspiration, which on a certain analysis can be called a religious or prophetic aspiration, what would have been called in the plodding language of the tradition (which deconstruction has rightly made questionable), a movement of "transcendence."[74]

This early statement already reveals the end result of Caputo's reading of Derrida on religion. Caputo argues that deconstruction is "set in motion by an overarching aspiration," which means not only that deconstruction is motivated by a "religious" sentiment or dynamic, but that the direction is toward the "impossible." According to Caputo, "justice"—which he will also link to "religion"—is always aspired for, because it can never be attained; in fact, any attempt to name it as such already betrays the aspiration, which is why Caputo even critiques the "plodding language of the tradition" that attempts to name such a movement as "transcendence." We should also note the close relationship this "religious" aspiration has with justice, where Caputo calls it a "religious or prophetic aspiration," referencing the Judeao-Christian tradition in which the prophet was considered the mouthpiece of God who demanded justice and spoke truth to unjust powers. What we will find in Caputo's "religion without religion" is the

---

[73] Ibid., 154.
[74] Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, xix.

preeminent critique of the problem of exclusion—including its representation in exclusive divine election—because it represents all that Caputo believes "deconstruction has rightly made questionable," namely determinate dogmas or doctrines that exclude, which are problematic because (a) divine election confesses, declares, names something definitive about God, denying what he understands as the "impossibility" deconstruction highlights; and (b) divine election excludes, which is ethically problematic (i.e. unjust).

In order to fully understand the implications of Caputo's critique of exclusion—and how that might apply to exclusionary divine election—let us begin by unpacking how Caputo defines "religion," especially how it relates to his deployment of Derrida's "religion without religion." Caputo attempts to clarify: "By religion I mean a pact with the impossible, a covenant with the unrepresentable, a promise made by the *tout autre* with its people, when we are the people of the *tout autre*, the people of the promise, promised over to the promise."[75] For Caputo, religion (without religion) is about a structural experience of the *impossible*; and as we will see, he understands this deconstructive, structural impossibility as a calling, weeping, waiting, praying for the *impossible*.

Caputo's definition of "religion" stems from his stated attempt to follow Derrida as closely as possible—a point that I will contest in Part Two. Derrida's so-called "turn to the ethical" in his later writings often coincided with his so-called "turn to religion," where Derrida engages such religious concepts, terms, and ideas as "apocalyptic," "apophatic," "messianic," and "faith."[76] However, just as Derrida's so-called ethical turn

---

[75] Ibid., xx.

[76] For more on Derrida's "ethical" and "religious" turns, see: James KA Smith, *Jacques Derrida: Live Theory*, annotated edition (New York ; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2005); Simon Critchley, *The*

did not constitute a significant shift from the earlier structural work of deconstruction in language and communication (according to some interpreters), for Caputo, Derrida's engagement with religion also only further illustrates the implications of deconstruction, especially as it relates to language, speech, and all forms of communication.

The religious terms Derrida engages are only used to reveal a *general* structural experience of *all* discourse, language, and communication. Thus, in Derrida's later work that explicitly engages religious themes, we discover that: "apocalyptic" unveils repetition and response that is indicative of all language;[77] every form of language is "apophatic" (in a sense) because of an inability of language to capture its referent;[78] the "messianic" is a structure of the to-come (that can and will never be present), which can relate to religion but also justice, etc.;[79] "faith" is the condition of all language because language is built on a promise;[80] and "fidelity" is absolute or infinite duty.[81] In other words, these "religious" terms, concepts, themes become evacuated of their particular, religious content so that they express a general, structural experience that deconstruction reveals, e.g. faith becomes a movement concerned with the impossible, *not* a particular belief. Thus religion, as Derrida says in *The Gift of Death*, is a "religion *without* religion." Discussing the history of European responsibility, which he argues is tied to

---

Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992); Herman Rappaport, *Later Derrida: Reading the Recent Work* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

[77] See: Jacques Derrida, "Of An Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy," trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., *The Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1984).

[78] See: Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," trans. Ken Frieden in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, eds. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York, 1992), 73-142.

[79] See: Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning & the New International* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

[80] See: Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 40-101.

[81] See: Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death, Second Edition & Literature in Secret*, trans. David Wills, 2 edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2007).

religion, Derrida notes that the connection between religion and responsibility is structural, not particularly related to religion per se, and certainly not married to Christianity—it is about a larger movement that the "religious" points to, but cannot fully capture. Derrida writes:

> What engenders all these meanings and links them, internally and necessarily, is a logic that at bottom…has no need of *the event of a revelation or the revelation of an event.* It needs to think the possibility of such an event but not the event itself. This is a major point of difference, permitting such a discourse to be developed without reference to religion as institutional dogma, and proposing a thought-provoking genealogy of the possibility and essence of the religious that doesn't amount to an article of faith…a *thinking* that "repeats" the *possibility* of religion without religion.[82]

It seems clear that for Derrida, the *movement* (i.e. the general, structural dynamic) of religion is the focus, not religion itself. Caputo, however, understands that to mean that religion itself—as determinate, institutionalized, dogmatic, historical, etc.—obstructs the movement that he believes deconstruction highlights, namely the aspiration for the *impossible*. Caputo, repeating Derrida, writes: "Deconstruction repeats the structure of religious experience…Deconstruction regularly, rhythmically repeats this religiousness, *sans* the concrete historical religions; it repeats nondogmatically the religious structure of experience, the category of the religious."[83] Caputo performs this repetition by structuring his book according to these religious categories: the apophatic, the apocalyptic, the messianic—chapters one through three, respectively. There is, therefore, two primary aspects to Caputo's "religion without religion" that are important for us to keep in mind: (a) religion as the aspiration or movement toward the impossible, that (b) is necessarily *sans* determinate, historical religions, dogmas, and doctrines. The first of

---

[82] Ibid., 50.

[83] Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, xxi.

these is significant, because Caputo repeatedly (as we have already seen) discusses deconstruction as an aspiration, calling, or movement *toward* some-thing, which implies several important points to keep in mind as we continue. First, the implication is that this "thing"—e.g. "religion," "justice," or even "impossibility"—exists; secondly, that one could measure determinate forms of religion or justice according to it; and, also, that one could intentionally direct oneself toward this "thing."

In order to understand why the *sans* is important for Caputo, let us continue unpacking his emphasis on the "impossible" in his reading of deconstruction and how that leads Caputo to privilege open-endedness over closure. More importantly, for the purposes of this dissertation and chapter, what we will find in Caputo's over-emphasis on impossibility is an identification and attempted remedy of exclusion as the problem. Again, in the opening pages Caputo sketches the movement of deconstruction toward this impossibility and the implications for religion (without religion). It is worth quoting this significant passage at length:

> Deconstruction stirs with a passion for the impossible, *passion du lieu*, a passion for the impossible place, a passion to go precisely where you cannot go. Deconstruction is called forth in response to the unrepresentable, is large with expectation, astir with excess, provoked by the promise, impregnated by the impossible, hoping in a certain messianic promise of the impossible… Deconstruction begins, its gears are engaged, by the promptings of the spirit/specter of something unimaginable and unforeseeable. It is moved—it has always been moving, it gives words to a movement that has always been at work—by the provocation of something calling from afar that calls it beyond itself, outside itself. Settling into the crevices and interstices of the present, deconstruction works the provocation of what is to come, *à venir*, against the complacency of the present, against the pleasure the present takes in itself, in order to prevent it from closing in on itself, from collapsing into self-identity. For in deconstruction such closure would be the height of injustice, constituting the simple impossibility of *the* impossible, the prevention of the invention of the *tout autre*.[84]

[84] Ibid., xix–xx.

According to Caputo, if deconstruction is a movement toward the impossible—that which is always to come that will shatter horizons, that which is unforeseeable and unimaginable—then anything that declares presence interrupts this, putting a stop to this movement, and is thus considered to be "the height of injustice." Its injustice stems—at least in part—from what Caputo believes to be a betrayal of the deconstructive movement. Derrida's early work in deconstruction has shown that Western philosophy (and, of course, theology) has been built on a metaphysics of presence that strives for, but never attains (even when it supposes it has), that which is originary and present. Therefore, in Caputo's reading, declaring presence prematurely —as he believes definitive forms of religion and justice do—is considered "unjust" because it mistakenly assumes a presence that is—and can never be—present, while also denigrating absence, which it can never escape. For Caputo, this "deconstructive critique" of a metaphysics of presence in Derrida's early work is corroborated by Derrida's later work on religion and justice, where Caputo sees a similar deconstructive critique of any notion of arrival, because justice is always on the horizon, never present, etc. Thus, in Caputo's understanding, the call to justice is a call to this impossibility, beyond present systems and instantiations of justice, which are always incomplete, lacking, and therefore, simply put, unjust. And since closure, answers, and arrival signal the end of waiting—or presence—we must infinitely forestall any such possibilities.

Throughout *Prayers and Tears* Caputo continues to emphasize this "deconstructive" impossibility, highlighting and unpacking its implications for religion and justice, by exploring some significant Derridean engagements with religion. In his chapter on "The Apocalyptic," Caputo highlights the impossibility of deconstructive

justice by concentrating on the "to come" that appears in Derrida's writings. Here Caputo strongly argues that deconstruction has become a meditation and prayer for what is coming: "Everything in deconstruction turns on the constellation of *venir* and *à venir, viens* and *invention, l'avenir* and *événement*."[85] This "coming," or call "to come" is the central focus of this section, and the "one" who comes is referred to as "the just one."[86] Caputo writes: "…like Levinas, Derrida clearly takes the *viens* to be a call for justice to come."[87] According to Caputo, justice is "clearly" called for in the *viens*—the question, however, is just what *kind* of justice is being referred to here, because if we have learned anything through our engagement with deconstruction (e.g. the kind of redefining apparent in religion without religion), then we should be keenly aware—and perhaps wary—of how justice is defined in this context.

As he transitions to the following section, "The Messianic," we find some guidance to help us decipher what Caputo might mean by "justice." Beginning with Derrida's lecture in 1989, "The Force of Law," Caputo cites Derrida's hesitation to link justice with a "messianic promise" similar to a "regulative idea." The reason for Derrida's hesitation "lies in his resistance to the very idea of a 'horizon,' for any horizon, be it that of a regulative idea or of a 'messianic advent,' sets limits and defines expectations in advance."[88] Similar to Derrida's musings on messianicity in *Specters of Marx*, this kind of restriction is antithetical to "the messianic" whose very purpose is to "shatter horizons." This leads Caputo to the conclusion that "the movement of justice is a

---

[85] Ibid., 69.
[86] Ibid., xxiv.
[87] Ibid., 85.
[88] Ibid.

movement beyond the hinges and fixed junctures of the law."[89] Openness, rather than closure, seems to be integral to the kind of "justice" at work in the messianic, keeping things "sufficiently dis-lodged and open-ended."[90]

All throughout *Prayers and Tears* Caputo continually emphasizes that closure is to be avoided in the pursuit of justice. In fact, the call for justice is *in itself* a call for openness, expectation, and waiting that can only be thwarted by closure. For Caputo, the passion for the impossible—which is what religion and justice is defined as—precludes closure, for any closing would always be too soon. The "to come" must be expected and therefore requires a continual "posture of expectancy" for that "which is always and structurally to come."[91] This is because "the one who is coming, the just one, the *tout autre*, can never be present."[92] It is the very essence of the *tout autre* that "what is coming be unknown, not merely factually unknown but structurally unknowable."[93] Thus to cease to wait, to enclose, to declare or even *know* what is to come, for Caputo, is considered to be "the height of injustice" in deconstruction. [94]

Continuing his exploration of Derridean engagments with religious themes in the section on "The Apophatic," Caputo shows how deconstruction helps apophatic theology resist such a desire to close, to encapsulate, to name, to disclose the secret, to answer the question. The Christian apophatic tradition is ripe for deconstructive engagement, for Caputo, because of its refusal to name or declare anything positive about God (although,

---

[89] Ibid., 123.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid., xxiii.
[92] Ibid., xxiv.
[93] Ibid., 101.
[94] Ibid., xix–xx.

in fairness, it is always accompanied by the kataphatic tradition, which in fact says, names, and declares positive things about God). However, as Derrida notes in "*Différance,*" although apophatic theology gestures toward the impossible and unknowable, Derrida believes apophatic (or negative) theology does ultimately refer to an ineffable, hyper-essential being—something Derrida claims is unsustainable according to deconstruction. For Caputo, Derrida therefore sets theology free from its "unjust" ways because even though the apophatic theologian claims unknowing, Derrida believes that deep down she *knows* what she is referring to. And for Derrida, even if she claims the inability to name God, she has an answer. Ultimately, Caputo concludes that "negative theology drops anchor, hits bottom, lodges itself securely in pure presence and the transcendental signified," thus closing the circle and cutting off justice.[95] Caputo explains why: "Deconstruction saves negative theology from closure. Closure spells trouble…closure spells exclusion, exclusiveness; closure spills blood, doctrinal, confessional, theological, political, institutional blood, and eventually, it never fails, real blood."[96]

It is at this point that we see most clearly the connection between "religion" and "justice" for Caputo. As we have seen, Caputo's religious understanding of deconstruction is closely tied to, if not indistinguishable from, justice. But here we begin to see that religion's association with justice has something to do with the ethical problem of exclusion, which means that Caputo's religion without religion has an implied ethics, namely an identification of exclusion as problematic. His identification with religion as a

---

[95] Ibid., 11.
[96] Ibid., 6.

passion for the impossible *must* mean a religion that resists closure in order to escape injustice because, for Caputo: (a) closure would assume presence, and would therefore betray deconstruction, and (b) because "closure spells exclusion," which "spells trouble" and "spills blood," and is therefore unethical/unjust. Thus Caputo continually highlights closure as problematic precisely because of its exclusionary nature. And here we can recognize a strong resonance with the contemporary, progressive theological landscape that was briefly surveyed in the Introduction: exclusion is that which is (ethically) problematic, i.e. "the problem," and thus should be avoided. Therefore if Caputo can show that religion (and/or justice) is exclusive, then it is unjust. Seen the other way around, for Caputo religion (traditionally understood) is unjust because of closure, and closure is ethically problematic because it excludes.

The same applies for justice—any justice that is exclusive is necessarily (and assumingly) unjust, which is why the key to understanding Caputo's notion of justice is openness. It is a justice that cannot be named, made present or known. Justice of this sort must be awaited; it is always to come. Yet he also says that it will surprise us (if/when it comes), because it is unimaginable, un-foreseeable, and un-believable. Therefore, "religion without religion" entails waiting and expecting something new "to come." And since closure, answers, and arrival signal the end of waiting—or presence—we must infinitely forestall any such possibilities.

Attempting to make things a bit more concrete, Caputo addresses the exclusion of real-life "others" in his chapter on "Circumcision," making connections between Derrida's Judaism and the politics that exclude. Caputo writes:

> The idea behind deconstruction is to deconstruct the workings of strong nation-states with powerful immigration policies, to deconstruct the rhetoric of

> nationalism, the politics of place, the metaphysics of native land and native tongue, of *propria* and my own-ness. The idea is to disarm the bombs…of identity that nation-states build to defend themselves against the stranger, against Jews and Arabs and immigrants…against all the others, all the other others, all of whom, according to an impossible formula, a formula of the impossible, are wholly other.[97]

Caputo's strong ethical point here—one that I certainly agree with—is that keeping the system open is intended to break the cycle of same-ness that excludes all others based on race, ethnicity, religion, etc. In his understanding, deconstruction aids us in that process by allowing the *tout autre* to remain "wholly other" in order to respect the difference, unlike Hegel's *Aufhebung* as a unifying System of same-ness:

> The whole point of the *tout autre* in deconstruction, the cutting edge behind this idea, if it is an idea, its burning passion, is a messianic one, to keep the system open, to prevent the play of differences from regathering and reassembling in a systematic whole with infinite warrant, and to take its stand with everyone and everything that is rejected and expelled by this omnivorous gathering, everything that is disempowered by all this power, with everyone who suffers at the hands of this gathering power, with all the detritus and excrement of the System. Everything about the *tout autre* in deconstruction is destroyed if the *tout autre* is made present.[98]

As is evident, for Caputo, keeping the system open, i.e. intentionally resisting or avoiding closure, is the best way to reduce violence, to work towards, to call for, what names "justice." Thus any closing, prohibiting, excluding, regathering, especially when connected with power, is to be avoided, and, again, that deconstruction allows or helps us in that process.

Therefore, in Caputo's reading of Derrida, any closure would prevent the invention of the *tout-autre*, would be too early/soon, forestall the coming of justice. Consequently, justice is not when things are nailed down, pinned in place, or inscribed,

---

[97] Ibid., 231.
[98] Ibid., 246.

but rather when they are allowed to unsettle, slip loose, twist free, leak and run off, exceed or overflow.[99] What this amounts to, for Caputo, is a call for justice—and a religion that is ethically viable—that directs us outward, beyond the present (system, answer, order, etc.), where we pray, weep, wait, and hope for *the* impossible.

Caputo's definition of religion and understanding of justice, combined with his attempt to align himself as closely as possible with Derrida/deconstruction regarding these ideas, leads him to present "religion *without* religion": a religion *sans* determinate doctrines, institutions, practices, etc., because of the way they exclude. This is the conclusion Caputo reaches in *Prayers and Tears*; and he continues along these same lines in *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*, where Caputo takes up the "theological" implications of "religion without religion" a bit more explicitly. Of course, "theology" comes with a re/definition:

> [T]he name of God is an event, or rather it *harbors* an event, and…theology is the hermeneutics of that event, its task being to release what is happening in that name, to set it free, to give it its own head, and thereby to head off the forces that would prevent this event.[100]

It should be clear to us by now what Caputo means by this definition of theology and where he is going: the eventive nature of God's name, and theology as the hermeneutics that releases and sets it free, is aimed at not allowing theology to do what it has always done (and which Caputo, according to his reading of deconstruction, identifies as problematic): to name, declare, forestall, close, and, ultimately, exclude.

Thus what we find in Caputo's work is an emphasis on his understanding of the "impossibility" he believes deconstruction reveals, and a concomitant attempt to satisfy

---

[99] Ibid., 12.

[100] John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 2.

and/or appease this deconstructive impossibility by holding out as long as possible. As a result, Caputo refuses to endorse any notion of religion or justice that he believes can be subject to a kind of deconstructive critique that presumably announces "No!" at every attempt to name, declare, systematize, etc. In so doing, he represents a strident critique of anything that excludes, especially as such exclusion is manifested in divine election.

Exclusivity as Problematic for Caputo's Reading of Deconstruction

Having surveyed Caputo's interpretation and work with deconstruction and religion/justice, we can now summarize our findings in Part One, as they relate to the overall goal of this chapter. For Caputo, exclusive divine election would represent the epitome of that which is critiqued by deconstruction. If, according to Caputo, deconstruction highlights an "impossibility" (as he understands it), then divine election—especially as exclusive, determinate choice—represents that which is in need of deconstruction. Through our engagement with his reading of deconstruction thus far, we can highlight two significant ways in which Caputo would identify divine election as problematic.

First, *divine election is problematic because it presents a determinate religious dogma or doctrine.* Deconstructive religion, according to Caputo, is *sans* historical religions, doctrinal language, doctrines, dogmas, etc. Derrida's "turn to religion" is the employment of religious terms, concepts, ideas—e.g. apocalyptic, apophatic, messianic, faith—in order to show the general movement of deconstruction. Caputo acknowledges this and therefore understands "religion" as the aspiration and hope for the impossible, the not yet, the to come. Thus any definitive religion or concept—e.g. a doctrine or

theological notion of divine election—is considered *irreligious* and *unjust* because it prematurely stops the deconstructive movement toward the impossible. Divine election declares something definitive about God, identifies a transcendental signified, claims to know, etc., which means that a doctrine, notion, confession of divine election epitomizes that which is or should be deconstructed; or, to use more appropriate deconstructive terms, for Caputo any notion of divine election would reveal its own deconstruction because naming, declaring, confessing such would be impossible. Caputo focuses on how Derrida continually critiques any absolute declarations about finality (religious and ethical), revealing the ways in which determinate, calculable, instantiated forms of justice are limited, always fall short, and are, themselves, unjust. Therefore, for Caputo, divine election, especially with its unique presentation of the problem of exclusion, represents the problem *par excellence*. It *is* a messianism with a messiah. It *is* a determinate, exhaustive, definitive choice. It *is* closure. It *is* no longer awaited, for it *has* come, happened, arrived, been decided. And in Caputo's reading, this betrays the deconstructive movement of the "impossible."

Second, and furthermore, that which divine election (as a theological doctrine or notion) declares is exclusive; therefore *divine election is (ethically) problematic because it is exclusive*. Divine election represents a divine, definitive choice, which, according to Caputo's reading of deconstruction is "bad" because it excludes other(s). Definitive choice excludes other persons, choices, options, possibilities, etc. As we have already established in the Introduction, divine election or choice is necessarily exclusive in that it carries a "this/that" dynamic. And since Caputo reads deconstruction as hostile toward and critical of such exclusivity, he emphasizes how openness is preferred to closure

because the latter will always be too soon, would cut out, prevent the coming of the *tout autre*, the justice to come—in short, because closure always excludes, which is ethically problematic.

Therefore, Caputo affirms the problematic nature of exclusivity, which would include its manifestation in divine election, through a particular reading of deconstruction. Although I will go on in the second section to further complicate this affirmation—or at least any attempt to remedy the problem—it is in the service of maintaining the tension of my understanding of the double-bind in the deconstructive aporia. Additionally, because I affirm the (ethically) problematic nature of exclusion, and its manifestation in divine election, my ultimate goal is a greater appreciation for the depth and complexity of the problem.

Part Two: Complications of a "Deconstructive" Identification of the Problem: Exclusion as Structurally Inescapable

Having accomplished the first task of this chapter—to identify how a particular reading of deconstruction renders exclusion (e.g. as found in divine election) problematic—the goal now is to present an alternative reading of deconstruction that complicates such an identification and attempted remedy of exclusion. In so doing, I will highlight how the deconstructive aporia or "double-bind" offers a different understanding of the deconstructive "impossibility," revealing the "necessity" and "inescapability" of (some form of) exclusion, such that any attempt to eliminate, remove, or remedy exclusion is "impossible." Deconstruction certainly highlights an "impossibility" at the

heart of language, justice, and religion, and this second section will show that the Derridean aporia constitutes a "double-bind" wherein the situation is not only "impossible" (in a way similar, yet more radical than Caputo reads this "impossibility") but also "necessary and inescapable." An appreciation for the live tension of the Derridean aporia thus reveals a further complication of the problem of exclusion—including its manifestation in divine election—and its attempted remedies.

I want to be clear, however, that the goal of this second section is *not* to completely discount Caputo's reading of deconstruction—it is only my contention that Caputo's reading separates out and over-emphasizes one aspect of the deconstructive aporia, i.e. the "impossibility," and in so doing distorts the movement of deconstruction, which can only be understood as or in this double-bind. I agree that deconstruction entails an "impossibility," yet my focus is more on the remedy to the situation that Caputo seems to propose where openness is preferred over closure, especially when said (ethical) remedy is understood as "deconstructive." Caputo's emphasis on the impossibility in deconstruction leads him to identify that exclusion is the problem and therefore that which can and should be avoided. Ethically, I agree with him: exclusion is problematic and should be avoided; and in the case of divine election—which we have shown to be *necessarily* exclusive, at some level[101]—it should be critiqued on ethical grounds. However, in my reading of deconstruction, I do not think deconstruction can offer any such ethical critique or justification for such a critique. Deconstruction does not let us "off the hook" so easily because it consistently reveals a predicament wherein the

[101] It is worthy of reminding the reader that my reference to divine election's "exclusivity" does *not* necessarily mean an absolute, once-for-all exclusion of human beings from salvation, as it is traditionally understood; rather, as I have shown in the Introduction and am continuing to make the case here, there is an inescapable, structural exclusivity in divine election as choice/decision.

problem cannot be avoided or remedied; the problem is (always already) inescapable and even necessary. Thus, here, I will highlight this predicament by focusing more explicitly on the deconstructive aporia: the "impossibility" as well as "necessity" and "inescapability." In so doing, I offer a reading of Derrida that attempts to feel, grasp, and appreciate the tension—and pinch—of the double-bind/aporia in deconstruction, and then note the implications for the problem of exclusion (and exclusive divine election). Put simply, my goal by the end of this chapter is to show how deconstruction reveals that we are always already in the midst of exclusion. To the extent that this is the case, it will problematize any attempt to avoid or remedy exclusion, as Caputo attempts to do in his "religion without religion."

A Close(r) Reading of the Deconstructive Aporia: The Inescapability of Exclusion

Let us begin by unpacking this notion of a deconstructive "aporia." In Derrida's earlier engagement with language, communication, and Western metaphysics, *as well as* Derrida's later work with religion and justice, deconstruction reveals a "double bind" wherein something "exists" or "occurs" (i.e. is "possible") only in its deconstruction (i.e. its "impossibility"). Put differently, its impossibility is its condition of possibility.

Western metaphysics, according to Derrida, is an attempt to return to the origin of self-presence; yet, in his early work, Derrida shows that such presence is illusory, thus revealing the deconstruction of a "metaphysics of presence." In the 1968 essay, "*Différance,*" Derrida is attempting to hold linguistic philosopher Ferdinand de Saussure's "feet to the fire" and spell out the metaphysical implications of Saussure's

structuralist claim that language is a system of differences with no positive terms.[102] In this essay Derrida introduces the term, "*différance*," as that which not only accounts for the spatial and temporal differences (deferrals) in language, but actually produces them. In other words, there is no "transcendental signified"—no structure, center, origin, telos, or that which ultimately puts a stop to the play of difference. There is nothing behind, above, beneath, or beyond language to which the signs refer. All we have are signs referring to signs—an endless chain of signifiers. In fact, all we have are traces of traces. At one point in the essay Derrida asks: "has anyone thought that we have been tracking something down, something other than the tracks themselves to be tracked down?"—as if anyone thought we were actually following the tracks in order to arrive at some-thing, because all we have are the tracks themselves.[103] There is no originary, self-present element or signified that we can ever get back to. All we have are the traces (of traces). As a result, language is always already underway. We cannot get back to the beginning, but enter in the midst of dialogue, reference. Derrida takes this central structural insight and pushes it "all the way" to highlight its implications: the deconstruction of everything that depends on language, including the philosophical underpinnings of Western metaphysics.

Derrida continues to reveal the deconstruction of Western metaphysics by turning to the denigration of "writing" to "speech." If the sign is denigrated in Western philosophy because it is considered representation, as opposed to presence in meaning, writing is even further denigrated because it is considered the sign of the sign, which

---

[102] Jacques Derrida, "*Différance,*" in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Reprint edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1984).
[103] Ibid., 25.

results in a further distancing from the immediacy of presence and meaning. Derrida's next main target, then, is the privileged position that speech gets in relationship to writing.

In "Plato's Pharmacy" Derrida performs a close reading of Plato's *Phaedrus* and the ways that Plato subordinates writing to speech in order to show how the former becomes a "dangerous supplement." In *Phaedrus*, Socrates recounts the origin of writing, calling it the "*pharmakon*," which can mean either remedy or poison. Derrida runs with this to show how writing is both given to speech and philosophy as a gift or remedy, in order to help with memory and knowledge, but, as the myth about the origin of writing in *Phaedrus* explains, it also becomes a poison as it causes further forgetfulness: "there is no such thing as a harmless remedy. The *pharmakon* can never be simply beneficial."[104] Derrida points how writing, the *pharmakon*, "is that dangerous supplement that breaks into the very thing that would have liked to do without it yet lets itself *at once* be breached, roughed up, fulfilled, and replaced, completed by the very trace through which the present increases itself in the act of disappearing."[105] "Supplement" is a key term for Derrida in this text as he uses it not only to mean "addition" but also "substitution." The implications of the *pharmakon*, therefore, indicate that philosophy becomes trapped in an attempt to both police itself from the harmful effects of writing, while also relying upon it. Derrida therefore illustrates the "aporia" of writing in relationship to philosophy: this policing is both necessary and impossible. As a result, philosophy's best attempts to

---

[104] Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (University of Chicago Press, 1983), 111.
[105] Ibid., 110.

subordinate writing to speech are upset by the deconstruction of the speech/writing binary.

However—and this is the "double-bind"—metaphysics *only* exists in this state of deconstruction. It can only ever *be* metaphysics if it attempts to do that (i.e. return to self-presence) which it cannot do. Derridean interpreter Geoffrey Bennington, writing what has come to be known as "Derridabase," tries to grasp this slippery notion: "This deconstruction is not something that someone does *to* metaphysics, nor something that metaphysics does to *itself…metaphysics only subsisted from its very beginnings through this deconstruction*."[106] Later on, showing how this impacts all of philosophy, Bennington writes about the implications of the deconstruction of a metaphysics of presence: "This is also the constitutive double bind of philosophy itself, which cannot be comprehended by anything other than itself, but cannot comprehend itself either, although it just is the effort to do this."[107] In other words, the double-bind of philosophy is an attempt to explain itself by going beyond itself to an outside referent, which is, according to deconstruction, impossible, and therefore makes the entire enterprise incomprehensible—but we only know it is incomprehensible by way of, because of, philosophy. This is the deconstructive aporia: the notion that something "is" or "exists" *only* in its deconstruction. Put differently, deconstruction reveals that the condition of possibility is the very thing that is impossible; seen the other way around, its impossibility is its condition of possibility. Throughout his oeuvre, Derrida points out such an aporetic tension in several significant examples, including the "gift,"[108]

---

[106] Bennington and Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, 37–38.
[107] Ibid., 127.
[108] See: Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, vol. 1, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth G. Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

"signature,"[109] "proper name,"[110] etc. For instance, the gift is annulled the moment it is acknowledged, because "your gratitude toward a gift I give you functions as a payment in return or in exchange, and then the gift is no longer strictly speaking a gift."[111] Thus the gift only exists in its deconstruction or impossibility, for how could it ever *be* without being acknowledged, which would no longer make it a gift—yet gifts are given every day. Similarly, although language is an endless chain of signifiers, it does "exist" in that we speak and write and read and listen.

In his later work, Derrida uses these deconstructive insights about language and communication (and their metaphysical implications) to point out the aporia of "the ethical" (e.g. justice, responsibility, duty, etc.), by showing how they too only exist or occur by, in, through their impossibility and deconstruction. Since Caputo takes Derrida's work and applies it more explicitly to religion and justice in order to show the limitations of dogmas, doctrines, institutionalized religion, etc., especially in the ways such limitations exclude, we will focus more explicitly on these later Derridean texts that engage themes such as "responsibility," "duty," "justice," "decision," etc. For Caputo, as we have seen, the messianic is always to come, never arriving, keeps us awaiting the future, which he understands as a very strident (ethical) critique of, for instance, Christian proclamations of the arrival of Jesus Christ as the messiah, or, more pertinent to this discussion, a doctrine of exclusive divine election. But what appears to be missed in Caputo's emphasis on the "impossible" is a full(-er) appreciation for the deconstructive aporia that also highlights an inescapability or necessity. Not only will the following

---

[109] See: Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and Samuel Weber, 1 edition (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988).
[110] See: Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (Paris: Galilée, 1974).
[111] Bennington and Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, 188.

reading indicate that one cannot have "impossibility" without "inescapability" but that what is revealed to be "impossible" is the very thing that Caputo seems to think deconstruction helps us accomplish, namely avoiding or remedying exclusion.

Gift of Death

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida argues that to be infinitely or absolutely responsible, one must be irresponsible. This is what Derrida refers to as the "paradox, scandal, and aporia" of "responsibility" or "duty."[112] The first half of this book is a reading of Jan Patocka's history of European responsibility and its connection with Christianity. Derrida troubles Patocka's opposition between responsibility—which, as Derrida will demonstrate, is tied to and comes from religion—and secrecy (or mystery) by showing how responsibility can never rid itself of secrecy. If we have learned anything about deconstruction, we should be able to guess where Derrida is heading: having highlighted Patocka's binary of responsibility/secrecy, Derrida will show how that which is "responsible" is only such because it is opposed to secrecy; however, this binary will reveal its own deconstruction because Derrida will show how secrecy is the condition of possibility for responsibility.

To that end, Derrida shows how for Patocka it is the gaze of God that rouses one to responsibility, resulting in the *mysterium tremendum*. Derrida suggests that for Patocka, the condition of possibility for responsibility is when the "Good [is] no longer a transcendental objective, a relation between things, but the relation to the other," which

---

[112] Derrida, *The Gift of Death, Second Edition & Literature in Secret*, 2007, 69.

entails that "goodness forgets itself…a movement of the gift that renounces itself, hence a movement of infinite love." In short, "responsibility demands irreplaceable singularity."[113] Thus, the key to infinite responsibility is singularity—a singularity that Derrida argues only comes through death, as death is the only thing that is completely *mine*. He writes:

> Death is very much that which nobody else can undergo or confront in my place. My irreplaceability is therefore conferred, delivered, "given," one can say, by death. It is the same gift, the same source, one could say the same goodness and the same law. It is from the perspective of death as the place of my irreplaceability, that is of my singularity, that I feel called to responsibility. In this sense only a mortal can be responsible.[114]

If singularity is the only thing that can make one truly responsible, and singularity is only "given" by death, then death is that which gives one responsibility; hence the title, "gift of death": the call to responsibility, which entails singularity, is a gift of death. To the extent that this is the case, (infinite) responsibility reveals its own deconstruction because it necessitates death, which betrays mortality or finitude, and therefore (infinite) responsibility is "impossible" by very definition: "there is a thus a structural disproportion or dissymmetry between the finite and responsible mortal on the one hand and the goodness of the infinite gift on the other."[115] Ultimately, then, responsibility entails guilt:

> I have never been and never will be up to the level of this infinite goodness nor up to the immensity of the gift, the frameless immensity that must in general define (*in*-define) a gift as such. This guilt is originary, like original sin. Before any fault is determined I am guilty inasmuch as I am responsible. What gives me singularity, namely death and finitude, is precisely what makes me unequal to the infinite goodness of the gift, which is also the first appeal to responsibility. Guilt is inherent in responsibility because responsibility is always unequal to itself: one

---

[113] Ibid., 51.
[114] Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 42.
[115] Derrida, *The Gift of Death, Second Edition & Literature in Secret*, 2007, 52.

> is never responsible enough. One is never responsible enough because one is finite.[116]

Therefore, infinite responsibility is shown to be always already irresponsible, as one can never be responsible enough because of human finitude.

In order to illustrate the irresponsibility of (infinite) responsibility, Derrida turns to a close reading of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, which is itself a reading and commentary on Abraham's (attempted) sacrifice of Isaac on Mount Moriah in Genesis 22. First, Derrida draws on the necessary singularity of Abraham, because if Abraham is to be infinitely responsible—to God, who has given him the command to sacrifice his only son—then the responsibility must be his alone, he cannot share it with anyone. Abraham must not—and does not—tell his son Isaac where the sacrifice will come from; and he does not tell anyone else about this secret either, which makes him singularly responsible: "to the extent that, in not saying the essential thing, namely the secret between God and him, Abraham doesn't speak, he assumes the responsibility that consists in always being alone, retrenched in one's own singularity at the moment of decision."[117] Speaking or sharing this secret would deliver one from his/her singularity, and thus his/her responsibility, which is why in order to be responsible one must be bound to silence and secrecy.

At the *same time*, however—and such *simultaneity* is important—secrecy undermines the very notion of responsibility because it means that Abraham will have a secret, which also means *irresponsibility*, because in order to be responsible we must be

---

[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid., 60.

held accountable for our actions; in other words, we must have no secrets. Derrida notes the paradoxical tension in play:

> For common sense, just as for philosophical reasoning, the most widely shared presumption is that responsibility is tied to the public and to the nonsecret, to the possibility and even the necessity of accounting for one's words and actions in front of others, of justifying and owning up to them. Here, on the contrary, it appears just as necessarily that the absolute responsibility of my actions, to the extent that it has to remain mine, singulary so, something no one else can perform in my place, implies instead secrecy. But what is also implied is that, by not speaking to others, I don't account for my actions, I answer for nothing, I make no response to others or before others. It is both a scandal and a paradox.[118]

Again, Abraham's singularity therefore reveals the "impossibility" of responsibility because the very condition of possibility—singularity (in, with, by secrecy)—is the very thing that undermines it by making it irresponsible. Thus the impossibility of responsibility does not render it something towards which to strive—as in Caputo's version of "impossible" justice—but *structurally impossible* by the very fact that its impossibility is directly tied to it being necessarily so. In other words, the "scandal and paradox" is that the condition of possibility for responsibility is that which makes it impossible; therefore attempting to avoid that which makes responsibility irresponsible is *impossible*.

Derrida also highlights the singularity of God as the one to whom Abraham is ultimately faithful and responsible as both necessary for responsibility, while at the same time that which undermines it. For Abraham to be infinitely responsible he needs to be faithful to God alone, but this means at the cost—or sacrifice—of all others, to whom Abraham is also responsible, which means that Abraham must be *irresponsible*. Again,

---

[118] Ibid., 61.

the aporia is in play: absolute responsibility bind me singularly to one, which means that I must be irresponsible in relation to all others. Derrida writes:

> Duty or responsibility binds me to the other, to the other as other, and binds me in my absolute singularity to the other as other…As soon as I enter into a relation with the absolute other, my singularity enters into relation with his on the level of obligation and duty. I am responsible before the other as other; I answer to him and I answer for what I do before him. But of course, what binds me thus in my singularity to the absolute singularity of the other immediately propels me into the space or risk of absolute sacrifice. There are also others, an infinite number of them, the innumerable generality of others to whom I should be bound by the same responsibility…I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others. *Every other (one) is every (bit) other* [*tout autre est tout autre*]; everyone else is completely or wholly other.[119]

Thus Abraham exemplifies absolute duty by being responsible to the singularity of One (e.g. God), which entails irresponsibility and neglect of all others. Again, Derrida reiterates how infinite or absolute responsibility demands that one behave irresponsibly: "the concepts of responsibility, of decision, or of duty, are condemned *a priori* to paradox, scandal, and aporia."[120] Derrida emphasizes the paradox of responsibility, i.e. the *impossibility* of being ultimately responsible and ethical, because in order to attain absolute duty one must sacrifice ethics. But again, this is an inescapable predicament, for the very attempt to be responsible, ethical, etc. is what makes it impossible. In the context of our current discussion, this would mean that any attempt to avoid being irresponsible—e.g. any attempt to be ethically responsible by avoiding exclusion—is also impossible, because irresponsibility is unavoidable, inevitable, inescapable, and structurally necessary to the very attempt to be responsible.

---

[119] Ibid., 68–69.
[120] Ibid., 69.

Force of Law

In "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" Derrida engages in a line of questioning with regards to the difference between law and justice. One of the main points Derrida makes in this essay is that law implies force, the possibility of being "enforced." But this leads Derrida to ask: "How are we to distinguish between this force of the law…and the violence that one always deems unjust?"[121] Derrida is attempting to show that law, by definition, requires a certain amount of force; but force can—and should—make us nervous, especially if we are sympathetic to the notion that exclusion through the use and abuse of power is "unjust," a point that Caputo has so deftly made in *Prayers and Tears*. In other words, given our ethical presuppositions and dispositions—i.e. that we deem force as violent or unjust—force would seem to be that which is contrary to justice.[122]

At the same time, however, force might be required, or *necessary*, for justice—even the kind of justice pursued by those who deem force as unjust. Quoting Pascal, Derrida cites the necessity of force in justice: "Justice without force is impotent. In other words, justice isn't justice, it is not achieved if it doesn't have the force to be 'enforced.'"[123] Derrida's point is that pure force without justice is "tyrannical," but

---

[121] Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1992) , 6.

[122] The problem of "force" gains even more traction given the recent events that have transpired in our nation. As I write this, I recall the incident a few weeks ago (June 2015) in Texas where a(nother) police officer used *unnecessary* force, this time violently restraining an (obviously) unarmed black, female teenager in a bathing suit in an attempt to "police" a swimming pool. Piled on top of the unfortunately numerous other examples of police violence against African-Americans prior to and since, the notion that force is something we should be wary of is fresh in all our minds.

[123] Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" 10–11.

equally, "justice without force is contradictory, as there are always the wicked."[124] Derrida uses Pascal to indicate that justice bears the mark of force; in order for justice to be justice it must be *enforced*. The only way to combat an oppressive or wicked force is with a just force—a point that we will return to in our discussion of the problem of exclusive (divine) preference in Chapter Two, wherein we will explore the extent to which liberation *from* exclusion entails some form of it.

Continuing his discussion of the difference between law and justice, Derrida cites the "aporia" of a justice "outside or beyond law."[125] On the one hand, we will never be able to fully experience justice here-and-now, as "justice is an experience of the impossible."[126] This is the unpresentable, incalculable form of justice that Caputo sketches in *Prayers and Tears* about a justice always to come, never present, which he calls the "impossibility" of justice. But in "Force of Law," Derrida's discussion of the aporia of justice highlights that its *impossibility* cannot be understood apart from its *necessity*, citing the double-bind of justice. As we have seen, force is both problematic yet necessary for justice; it is that which can on the one hand be the source of injustice, while on the other hand that which is inescapable and necessary—thus rendering justice as "an experience of the impossible."[127]

Derrida also makes a similar point regarding decision and justice. Discussing the aporia Derrida calls "the ghost of the undecidable," he admits that justice "is never exercised without a decision that *cuts*, that divides"; in other words, justice is dependent

---

[124] Ibid., 11.
[125] Ibid., 14.
[126] Ibid., 16.
[127] Ibid.

upon the cut, division, or *exclusion* of decision. Derrida, who often seems somewhat obsessed with decision in many of his writings, writes:

> The undecidable, a theme often associated with deconstruction, is not merely the…oscillation or the tension between two decisions; it is the experience of that which, though heterogeneous, foreign to the order of the calculable and the rule, is still obligated…to give itself up to the impossible decision, while taking account of law and rules…But in the moment of suspense of the undecidable, it is not just either, for *only a decision is just*.[128]

Contrary to much of his other writings about the incalculability and undecidability of justice—which emphasize the kind of *impossible* justice Caputos focuses on—here Derrida makes the point that the aporia points necessarily in the other direction as well: justice requires a decision. We are obligated, it appears, in the midst of an impossible decision *to decide*, "for only a decision is just." And if decisions necessarily cut and divide, i.e. exclude, then the impossibility of justice necessitates exclusion and closure. Put differently, the incalculability and undecidability of justice also, simultaneously, demands calculation and decision.

Of course, once the decision has been made "it is no longer *presently* just, fully just," which is why we must "give up to the impossible decision."[129] This is why justice is impossible: either the decision has yet to be made and nothing allows us to call it just, or it has already followed some rule, which means it could be reduced to calculation. Thus, the undecidable remains caught as a ghost that "deconstructs from within any assurance of presence, any certitude or any supposed criteriology that would assure us of

---

[128] Ibid., 24 (emphasis mine).
[129] Ibid., 24.

the justice of a decision."[130] Its impossibility is constitutive of the decision—yet, we must decide.

Consequently, what we get in the aporia of justice is an impossibility that appears even more *impossible* (than Caputo's rendering) because the situation is such that we are obligated to do that which betrays justice. In other words, there is no escaping injustice. On the one hand, justice cannot be present once it has been decided; on the other hand, justice is not even given a chance if no decision is made. On the one hand, force—with its implications of violence—seems contrary to justice; on the other hand, justice without force can never be achieved. With regards to our present focus, we should also note, therefore, that on the one hand exclusion is that which is ethically problematic; on the other hand, we cannot avoid it, and (as I will go on to show in Chapter Two), it might be required for justice—at least a kind of justice based on the notion of "liberation." But for now let us recognize what "Force of Law" gets on the table concerning the aporetic tension: deconstruction presents an aporia of justice wherein the very thing that undercuts justice remains inevitable and necessary. "Justice would be the experience of what we are unable to experience"; this is its impossibility.[131] Thus all our attempts to avoid exclusion entail a certain kind of exclusion, as the deconstruction of justice—i.e. its *impossibility*—reveals the structural *inescapability* of avoiding that which one deems "unjust." In other words, that which is impossible is also structurally inescapable and necessary.

Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion

---

[130] Ibid., 24-25.
[131] Ibid., 16.

Derrida continues to make the same point in other con/texts. In "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion," Derrida responds to questions, criticisms, and controversies that emerged after the publication of his early and influential essay, "Signature, Event, Context" in an interview-styled chapter included in the English translation of *Limited Inc*. Derrida begins by noting the inescapability of violence—something deconstruction had already implied in its earliest forms through the "impossibility" it suggested. However, the most interesting part of his response includes his suggestion that we have a certain responsibility to analyze and reduce such violence as much as possible, which would also suggest that "impossibility" might take on a different connotation than what Caputo suggests. Derrida writes: "The violence, political or otherwise, at work in academic discussions or in intellectual discussions generally, must be acknowledged."[132] Part of what deconstruction highlights for us in the "impossibility," I am arguing, is the impossibility of every attempt to avoid violence, because all such attempts will ultimately fail. He goes on, however: "In saying this I am not advocating that such violence be unleashed or simply accepted. I am above all asking that we try to recognize and analyze it *as best we can* in its various forms…And if, as I believe, violence remains (almost) ineradicable, its analysis and the most refined ingenious account of its conditions will be the least violent gestures, perhaps even nonviolent."[133]

What emerges in Derrida's response seems to be in conflict with the way Caputo understands the "impossibility" of deconstruction. Caputo understands "impossibility" in

---

[132] Jacques Derrida, "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion," in *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff; trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 112.
[133] Ibid. (emphasis mine).

his "religion without religion" to suggest that *any* attempt to close, decide, act, etc. betrays the deconstructive movement. Here, however, Derrida suggests that attempts to reduce violence are also necessary, such that recognizing and analyzing any form of violence "as best we can" is not rendered null and void or futile by deconstruction, even if and when any attempt will always be subject to deconstruction itself. In fact, as we have already seen, it is the attempt to reduce violence that deconstruction reveals to be a form of inescapable violence. "For that is what we want, isn't it, to reduce [violence and ambiguity], if possible. Is it certain that we can, on one side or the other ever eliminate them? Is it even certain that we should try, *at all costs*?"[134]

The deconstruction of absolute purity, Derrida assures us, does not leave us with an "all or nothing" situation where we are left with choosing between "pure realization" and "complete freeplay or undecidability." On the contrary, distinctions are necessary. In response to one of his major critics, philosopher John R. Searle, Derrida discusses the role deconstruction plays regarding distinctions:

> It can lead us to complicate—distinctly—the logic of binary oppositions and to a *certain use* the value of distinction attached to it. The latter has indeed certain limits and a history, which I have precisely tried to question. But that leads neither to "illogic" nor to "indistinction" nor to "indeterminancy"…It never renounces, as Searle in the haste of a polemic seems to do and to advocate, clear and rigorous distinction.[135]

Derrida's point is that deconstruction, by "definition," complicates distinctions based upon binary oppositions; however, this does not abrogate distinctions altogether. Quite the contrary, Derrida insists distinctions, which are necessarily exclusive, must be

---

[134] Derrida, "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion," 113.
[135] Ibid., 127.

made—a point that resonates with the conclusion in "Force of Law" that decisions, which are necessarily exclusive, must be made.

To illustrate the necessity of (exclusive) distinctions, Derrida uses the example of "the police" in response to a question about his statement "there is always a police and tribunal ready to intervene each time a rule is invoked in a case involving signatures, events, or contexts."[136] Whereas it seemed like an attack on the policing of rules, Derrida maintains that his intention was not to suggest that "the law, the tribunal, or the police as political powers are *repressive in themselves*…Every police is not repressive, no more than the law in general, even in [its] negative, restrictive, or prohibitive restrictions."[137] Often this is a difficult distinction to make, Derrida admits, but it is a necessary and indispensable distinction. The law and the police are not unjust simply by matter of their prohibitive nature. Of course, Derrida makes the point that we should be wary of the "unjust brutality" of such forces and powers, but this is to be sharply distinguished from all restriction in general, as if restriction—in and of itself—equated to injustice, precisely because the distinction between justice and injustice has been troubled by deconstruction. Yet making such distinctions allows us "to avoid hastily confounding law and prohibition, law and repression, prohibition and repression."[138] "This is why," Derrida writes, "there are police and police. There is a police that is brutally and *rather* 'physically' repressive and there are more sophisticated police that are more 'cultural' or 'spiritual,' more noble."[139] Every institution or entity that enforces the law is a police,

---

[136] Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 105.
[137] Derrida, "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion," 132.
[138] Ibid., 133.
[139] Ibid., 135.

including, Derrida suggests, the academy. But society cannot exist without such policing, which is the double-bind of the aporia: a necessary, impossibility. And the double-bind actually makes distinctions all the more important and valuable, because there are police and there are *police*. There are restrictions, prohibitions, laws, and rules that are unjust, power-driven, exclusive, etc., but this does not render all prohibitions, laws, rules, or even exclusions unjust, which is why we must distinguish and discern between the different kinds—itself a kind of policing, prohibiting, and excluding.

Going further, Derrida maintains that such policing is never "politically neutral either, never apolitical."[140] Derrida argues that such political and ethical evaluation is always formulated within a given context, and, over against another politics, which will ultimately result in a kind of exclusion. He writes: "Once it has been demonstrated, as I hope to have done, that the exclusion of the parasite cannot be justified by purely theoretical-methodological reasons, how can one ignore that this practice of exclusion, or this will to purify…translates necessarily into a politics?"[141] And this kind of politics is unavoidable, as it "touches all the social institutions…more generally, it touches everything, quite simply everything."[142] Contrary to the way deconstruction has typically been received, Derrida argues it is not that the police are politically suspect—as if we can critique the act of policing (which is itself an act of policing!)—but that any attempt to police (i.e. fix the contexts of utterances, etc.) is *always* political; it is also inevitable, because "one cannot do anything, least of all speak, without determining a context. Such an experience is always political because it implies, insofar as it involves determination, a

---

[140] Ibid.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Ibid., 136.

certain type of non-'natural' relationship to others."[143] Derrida goes further: "Once this generality and this a priori structure have been recognized, the question can be raised, not whether a politics is implied (it always is), but which politics is implied."[144]

Here is where we begin to feel the sharpest pinch of the double-bind: a situation wherein one cannot escape a problem. Let's recap: if we cannot escape determining contexts, and such an act is political, which is also exclusive, then it would appear that exclusion is inescapable. This is precisely what I am attempting to show in this chapter: Derrida highlights a precarious predicament wherein one cannot escape or retreat to a safe (i.e. apolitical) ground, for we are always already in the midst of determinations, distinctions, decisions, contexts, politics, policing, etc., which all explicitly entail *exclusion*. Once we recognize this, Derrida proposes "you can then go on to analyze, but you cannot suspect [*whether* a politics is implied], much less denounce it except on the basis of another contextual determination every bit as political. In short, I do not believe that any neutrality is possible in this area."[145] Derrida seems to be suggesting that the "best" we can do is to analyze the kinds of politics, decisions, determinations, *exclusions* that are always already in play, in everything we do. There is no escaping the problem; there is no neutral ground, for everything we do is trafficking in some version of this. If we are always in the midst of contexts—*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*—then we cannot denounce the exclusionary act of determining contexts *except* on the basis of *other* contexts, and hence other *exclusions*.[146] It is not the enforcement, policing, or

---

[143] Ibid.
[144] Ibid.
[145] Derrida, "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion," 136.
[146] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Corrected edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 158.

determining that is necessarily repressive—though it may be repressive—but such enforcement is always political. In the midst of this aporetic double-bind, Derrida is suggesting that the "best" we can do is to be as rigorous as possible in determining (i.e. exclusively) how we want to be political in our enforcement. *Which* politics? For what reason? *Which* exclusions? This includes recognizing that (exclusive) choices, decisions, distinctions, etc. are inescapable, necessary, inevitable.

In "Afterword" Derrida seems to make the point that "necessity" and "inescapability" are as much in play as "impossibility," which highlights the aporetic tension of the deconstructive double-bind. Seen the other way around, the impossibility deconstruction reveals does not leave us in a state of indistinction or indeterminancy. On the contrary, exclusive determinations and distinctions are necessary, precisely because their impossibility is the condition of possibility that deconstruction highlights. We cannot escape such determinations, and hence exclusion(s)—which nullifies Caputo's notion of the *sans* that presumes to do just that; therefore the task becomes discerning which determinations, which politics, which exclusions we will make.

"Passions: 'An Oblique Offering'"

Originally published in *Derrida: A Reader*, this essay by Derrida was included as a kind of response to the other eleven essays about Derrida's work. In it, the topic of responsibility emerges, particularly whether or not deconstruction is political/apolitical, moral/amoral, responsible/irresponsible, etc. Derrida refuses to answer such a question, and, recognizing how that might fuel even more criticism of deconstruction, it leads him

to turn to an example to illustrate the problem of responsibility (or response-ability). He asks:

> If, for example, I respond to the invitation which is made to me to respond to the texts collected here, which do me the honour or the kindness of taking an interest in certain of my earlier publications, am I not going to be heaping up errors and therefore conduct myself in an irresponsible way—by taking on false responsibilities?[147]

Having been addressed by these texts about his own work, Derrida is invited to respond. But such an invitation invokes a problematic situation for Derrida, as it puts him in an impossible predicament, namely the task of having to do "justice" to their work in response, which Derrida sees as ultimately "irresponsible." These irresponsible errors include, first of all, "disregarding the very scholarly and very singular strategy of each of these eleven or twelve discourses" through a hasty response. Derrida wonders: "By speaking last, both in conclusion and introduction, in twelfth or thirteenth place, am I not taking the insane risk and adopting the odious attitude of treating all these thinkers as disciples?"[148] Wouldn't his response, Derrida presumes, be considered the authoritative and first/last word on their work, summarizing their efforts in a few short words or comments? Thus responding would mean that he felt "capable of responding: he has an answer for everything, he takes himself to be up to answering each of us, each question, each objection or criticism."[149] Would that not entail some form of *irresponsibility* by not properly respecting the specificity, singularity, and complexity of each of these works? "To claim to do all this, and to do it in a few pages, would smack of a *hybris* and a naïveté without limit—and from the outset a flagrant lack of respect for the discourse, the

---

[147] Jacques Derrida, "Passions: 'An Oblique Offering,'" in *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. David Wood (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 18.
[148] Ibid.
[149] Ibid., 19.

work, and the offering of the other. More reasons for not responding."[150] Perhaps, then, he ponders, a non-response would be the "best" response, "the most polite, the most modest, the most vigilant, the most respectful."[151]

By now we should recognize that Derrida's appreciation of his current predicament resonates strongly with Caputo's reading of deconstruction and its over-emphasis on "impossibility," precisely because it is a response without a response. The *sans* is intended to respect the impossibility: of dogma, doctrine, determinate religion or justice, and in this case, response etc. Caputo thus holds out, resists closure, continually waits, refuses to name—or at least presumes or attempts to do such—because, in his estimation, doing so, he believes, betrays deconstruction's insight that any closure, naming, etc. will always be too soon (i.e. impossible). And thus Caputo's "religion without religion" is akin to Derrida's "non-response" in *this* predicament: Caputo recognizes the problems that arise by attempting to do that which deconstruction has rendered "impossible," and thus avoids, holds outs, refuses to do that.

But the non-response does not *solve* the problem, i.e. the ethical dilemma, either. Not responding might not be able to avoid *irresponsibility*; or, as Derrida will go on to point out: is the non-response even "possible"? Can one inhabit a space of non-response, as if such a pure, presence existed, such that the *sans* becomes the "appropriate" (e.g. most ethical, just, responsible) response? Does it avoid the errors one commits by closing, naming, determining, excluding, re-sponding, etc.? Or has deconstruction revealed that such avoidance, such a space of non-response is (also) *impossible*?

---

[150] Ibid.
[151] Ibid., 20.

Derrida continues: on first glance it would *appear* that one would be more responsible by not responding, that "I would avoid errors by not responding" because "it is more respectful to the other, more responsible in the face of the imperative of critical, hypercritical, and above all 'deconstructive' thought which insists on yielding as little as possible to dogmas and presuppositions."[152] Thus a non-response seems to be the more ethical, appropriate, responsible response, even, Derrida admits, according to (supposedly) "deconstructive thought."

On the other hand, Derrida suggests that not responding would entail irresponsibility also; in fact, a non-response might even be worse! Derrida continues his reflection and realizes that not responding would indicate that he did not take seriously the persons, texts, ideas being offered here, or that they did not warrant his time, as if he were ungrateful or indifferent. The non-response can also be irresponsible to the other by its strategic nature. Under the pretext of giving them the "due respect" they deserve by taking the time to read through, ponder, and labor over every word provides a kind of shelter from objection and criticism, which betrays the very notion of responsibility as having to answer for oneself.

Derrida then asks: "So, what are we to do?"[153] This is precisely the question deconstruction leaves *us* asking, in my reading, after having seen the double-bind clearly (and one in which deconstruction—or Derrida—cannot answer for us).[154] On the one

---

[152] Ibid., 21.

[153] Ibid., 22.

[154] We might note a slippage here between Derrida and deconstruction, perhaps one that has been present all along, muddying the waters even further. I do not think we can assume that just because Derrida is asking, "So what are we to do?" that deconstruction can/does ask that question. Derrida here, might be put in the same position as the rest of us, now recognizing where he stands in relation to this deconstructive insight, and thus his question about what we ought/should do next implies intentionality, direction, telos, ethics, etc.—all of which deconstruction perpetually *deconstructs*.

hand, Derrida recognizes that he cannot respond adequately, responsibly, to those who have addressed him and his work; on the other hand, he acknowledges that he must, in order to be responsible. On the one hand, responding (responsibly) is impossible; on the other hand, it is necessary for responsibility—precisely because what deconstruction reveals is that we are in the grip of structural forces prior and not subject to our agential, intentional, conscious (or ethical) decisions or desires. Derrida reflects upon this predicament: "This aporia without end paralyzes us because it binds us doubly. (I must and I need not, I must not, it is necessary and impossible, etc.)"[155] Thus we are caught in-between the two poles of the deconstructive aporia: the impossibility and the inescapability. What are we to do? One of the main goals of this dissertation is to ask ourselves this question regarding exclusive divine election, having seen the problem in all its complexity. The goal of this chapter is to recognize the complexity deconstruction reveals about this problem: that exclusion is both impossible *and* inescapable. But the "so what do we do now" question is one that deconstruction might not lend us any help with, and it might only "serve" to reveal the structural predicament we are always already within, and the limits of our best (theo-ethical) efforts and attempts, because of this double-bind. Yet this is the very thing that Caputo does not seem to recognize, as it seems that "religion without religion" appears to be the panacea to the problem(s) of religion and justice (because it does not exclude), even when Derrida repeatedly assures us that deconstruction should always unsettle, disrupt, *deconstruct*.

Derrida actually addresses the moralism (or immoralism) of deconstruction in "Passions,", noting that "some souls believe themselves to have found in

---

[155] Derrida, "Passions: 'An Oblique Offering,'" 22.

Deconstruction…a modern form of immorality, of amorality, or of irresponsibility," which would be understandable given the impossibility deconstruction highlights.[156] However, there are others, who, "more serious, in less of a hurry, better disposed toward so-called Deconstruction, today claim the opposite; they discern encouraging signs and in increasing numbers (at times, I must admit, in some of my texts) which would testify to…those things which one could identify under the fine names of 'ethics,' 'morality,' 'responsibility,' 'subject,' etc."[157] In other words, there are those who find resources for ethics, morality, responsibility in deconstruction, with Caputo being one of the preeminent examples. Yet, Derrida warns:

> [I]t would be necessary to declare in the most direct way that if one had the *sense* of duty and of responsibility, it would compel breaking with both these moralisms…including, therefore, the remoralization of deconstruction, which naturally seems more attractive than that to which it is rightly opposed, but which at each moment risks reassuring itself in order to reassure the other and to promote the consensus of a new dogmatic slumber.[158]

Derrida appears nervous at the extent to which deconstruction has been understood to provide ethical and/or political resources because of how it leads to a sense of assurance, something deconstruction always disrupts. And this leads us to ask: has Caputo (or any of us who are content with the identification of exclusion as problematic) slipped into such a "dogmatic slumber" by finding in deconstruction a moralism that, as attractive as it is, deconstruction can never support?

Derrida, continuing his questioning of responsibility, the "morality of morality," and "the ethicity of ethics," reminds us that neither he nor deconstruction can provide an

---

[156] Ibid., 15.
[157] Ibid.
[158] Ibid.

answer to these questions. Deconstruction cannot side with either moralism or amoralism, the political or apolitical. Even though they are urgent questions, according to deconstruction, "they must remain urgent and unanswered."[159] And though this gives ammunition to those opposed to deconstruction by posing an amoralistic, apolitical, nihilistic stance, "isn't that preferable to the constitution of a consensual euphoria or, worse, a community of complacent deconstructionists, reassured and reconciled with the world in ethical certainty, good conscience, satisfaction of service rendered, and the consciousness of duty accomplished."[160]

And this is precisely the point of this chapter: to ask poignantly, to Caputo and all others—of which I include myself—who can appear ethically certain, satisfied, and with a good conscious reassured: has identifying exclusion as the problem given us a sense of "consensual euphoria"? Is there a way in which Caputo's work—or *any* theo-ethical work that identifies and attempts to remedy exclusion—leads us to be "reassured and reconciled with the world in ethical certainty, good conscience, satisfaction of service rendered, and the consciousness of duty accomplished?" What I am proposing here is quite the opposite: to upset the euphoria, to question our assurance, to complicate our conscience, and render the task/duty of engaging the problem of exclusion as un-accomplished.

Caputo's Over-Emphasis on "Impossibility": Religion sans Exclusion

[159] Ibid., 16.
[160] Ibid., 17.

I have been suggesting that despite Caputo's attempt to follow Derrida as closely as possible, Caputo overemphasizes the "impossibility" of deconstruction—and its implications for religion and justice—at the expense of the aporetic tension of the double-bind in deconstruction, which leads him to privilege openness over closure that excludes. Caputo actually directly addresses a similar contention in his response to papers delivered on his work with Derrida and religion, that were later published in a series of essays entitled, *Religion with/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*.[161] In particular, the three opening essays of this work express a similar concern about the implications of Caputo's emphasis on impossibility for justice and religion. In Jeffrey Dudiak's essay, "*Bienvenue*—Just a Moment," he poignantly asks how a structurally future justice—one that is always coming but never arriving—relates to justice here-and-now? How, for instance, do these abstract notions of justice relate to more concrete and particular—albeit modest—acts of justice? How does the justice that is to come relate to "concrete acts of justice in lived time" where "virtue is required" *here-and-now*, "that is, bread and cold water for the beggars, the poor, the widows, orphans and strangers, concrete justice, today, in the present time, in the ordinary lived time of hunger and thirst"?[162] Dudiak thus challenges Caputo to think justice more humbly, in momentary acts of love, e.g. in "cups of cold water" here-and-now, because Caputo's emphasis on "impossibility" seems to denounce such.

In the second and third essays, Ronald Kuipers and Shane Cudney critique Caputo from a more religious perspective, maintaining that Caputo is overly negative toward

---

[161] James H. Olthuis, ed., *Religion With/Out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo* (London; New York: Routledge, 2001).
[162] Jeffrey M. Dudiak, "Bienvenue--Just a Moment," in *Religion With/Out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*, ed. James H. Olthuis (New York: Routledge, 2002), 13.

concrete religious communities in *Prayers and Tears*. Caputo's understanding and emphasis on impossibility denigrates and dishonors concrete, historical, and particular religions, writing them off as "essentially poisonous."[163] They ask whether or not all communities are essentially "violent" according to deconstruction, and how such a focus privileges the abstract and universal.

Fortunately, this work includes Caputo's response to each of the essays and critiques. On the one hand, Caputo frankly—and surprisingly—admits that there is credibility to the claim that he overemphasizes "impossibility" in *Prayers and Tears*. In response to Dudiak, Caputo clarifies that the messianic justice of the "to come" should not result in resignation or the negation of our demand for justice here-and-now. In fact, Caputo argues that there are not two times, but one, where the messianic breaks into the present and requires justice here-and-now. It is the messianic demand for justice now that constitutes the present as lived time. Caputo responds:

> The to-come does not consign us to despair but intensifies the demands of the moment, injecting the life of justice into the flow of time, exposing the present to the white light of an absolute demand for justice. The slightest imperfection in the present, the slightest injustice, is absolutely intolerable, and cannot be written off as a tolerable progress…The intensity of the demand for justice is set by the tension between the moment and the to-come, by the absolute pressure exerted upon the present by the relentless demand for justice, the demand to make justice come, which we can never meet. For we will never have done enough.[164]

Here it appears that Caputo is arguing that the "impossibility" of justice should not come at the expense of smaller acts of justice in the present, but, in fact, should only intensify the demand for better and better acts of justice here-and-now.

---

[163] Shane Cudney, "''Religion without Religion'': Caputo, Derrida, and the Violence of Particularity"," in *Religion With/Out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*, ed. James H. Olthuis (New York: Routledge, 2002), 46.

[164] John D. Caputo, "Hoping in Hope, Hoping Against Hope," in *Religion With/Out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*, ed. James H. Olthuis (New York: Routledge, 2002), 123–24.

Caputo goes even further in his response to Kuipers and Cudney admitting that a "serious failure" of *Prayers and Tears* is his inability to "maintain the tension, to maintain them in their pharmacological undecidability," i.e. between the poison and remedy that inhabits every institution, "[*Prayers and Tears*] appears to have broken the tension."[165] In fact, Caputo seems to make the very point that I am asserting when he declares: "deconstruction does not resolve contradictions…Rather, deconstruction defines and stresses the tension in a phenomenon; it might even be thought of as a kind of phenomenology of torques."[166] In my reading, I agree; deconstruction cannot affirm or critique any notion of a limited justice, "does not resolve contradictions" but rather "defines and stresses the tension"; where Caputo and I part ways in when he seems to suggest that the *sans* does resolve the tension, avoid exclusion, etc.

In fact, Caputo goes on in the same response to prefer openness to closure, stating: "if deconstruction were something, somewhere, if it did or did not do things…we would say that what 'deconstruction' does is keep the future *open*, and, by exposing the concrete messianisms to danger, protects them against themselves."[167] Here, Caputo appears to revert back to a notion of deconstruction that suggests: (a) remaining open is the ultimate goal or result, or that openness does not always, simultaneously accompany the inescapability of closure; (b) that deconstruction offers some ethical critique. Even though Caputo admits a "serious failure" in *Prayers and Tears* is breaking the tension of the aporia, he goes on to do the very same thing in the next breath by releasing or

---

[165] Ibid., 128.
[166] Ibid., 126.
[167] Ibid., 127.

collapsing the tension in favor of "impossibility" and openness that he believes deconstruction suggests.

As I have tried to show in the above reading, however, deconstruction only "is" (i.e. "exists"—to the extent that it "is" or "exists" at all) in the aporetic tension, that does not inevitably collapse into an "impossibility" that privileges openness to closure, but presents a situation wherein closure—and by extension, exclusion—is *structurally* inevitable and necessary. To the extent that this is the case, it would mean exclusion is always already present, inescapable, necessary, and thus a situation in which it is impossible to avoid it. Furthermore, it indicates that Caputo *has* in fact failed to maintain the aporetic tension in *Prayers and Tears* (but also in his own admission of failure to do so) by offering up a remedy to the problem that relaxes the tension, i.e. an identification and attempted remedy of exclusion as the problem.

Beyond Caputo's reading of deconstruction and its implications for religion and justice, or merely remaining true to the insights of deconstruction, my targets are set more broadly on the general consensus among contemporary, progressive theologians and ethicists who might be culpable of the same move: a relaxation, a sigh of relief, a justification or concession that we have achieved some progress (if not a solution) regarding the ethical problem of exclusion. *This* is the real target audience of this first chapter: those (of us) who agree that exclusion is ethically problematic and have attempted to remedy it without realizing the extent to which we cannot escape or avoid it and in fact need some form of it in our very attempt to remedy worse instances of it. Caputo merely represents a reading of deconstruction that attempts to do so. However, a reading of deconstruction that appreciates the aporetic tension problematizes,

complicates, and renders increasingly problematic the problem of exclusion, precisely because one can never escape it.

One of Caputo's fiercest critics, philosopher Martin Hägglund, also challenges Caputo's reading of deconstruction, from a non-religious—in fact, atheistic—perspective in a way that supports the reading I have just presented. Hägglund's survey of the current academic debates about religion suggest that from both sides, "whether by those who seek to abolish or renew religious faith," the focus has been on religion's predisposition to violence and intolerance, with the critics pointing to this inherent flaw as the reason to discard religion, while the supporters of religion attempt to diagnose and remedy it.[168] Caputo epitomizes the latter, in Hägglund's opinion, through the use of deconstruction, and as an astute reader of Derrida, Hägglund challenges Caputo's conclusions. In one of his debates with Caputo about Derrida and religion, Hägglund writes:

> According to Caputo, "deconstruction is a blessing for religion, its positive salvation" since it "discourages religion from its own worst instincts" and "helps religion examine its conscience, counseling and chastening religion about its tendency to confuse its faith with knowledge, which results in the dangerous and absolutizing triumphalism of religion, which is what spills blood."[169] All of Caputo's work on a supposedly deconstructive religion is structured around this opposition between a "good" religion that welcomes others and a "bad" religion that excludes others. The religion *without* religion that Caputo ascribes to Derrida would be a religion without violence, which repeats "the apocalyptic call for the impossible, but without calling for the apocalypse that would consume its enemies in fire" and "repeats the passion for the messianic promise and messianic expectation, *sans* the concrete messianisms of the positive religions that wage endless war and spill the blood of the other."[170] For Caputo, then, Derrida's work helps us move away from "the bloody messianisms" in favor of "the messianic" promise of a kingdom that is open to everyone.[171]

---

[168] Martin Hägglund, "The Radical Evil of Deconstruction," *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 11, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 126.
[169] John D. Caputo, ed., *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, 1 edition (New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), 159.
[170] Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, xxi.
[171] Hägglund, "The Radical Evil of Deconstruction," 127.

Hägglund's analysis resonates with the survey of the theological landscape that we presented in the Introduction, i.e. an assumed and assured conclusion that exclusion is the problem that should be remedied in religion, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc. Additionally, his analysis of Caputo's work is accurate to the extent that what Caputo seems to offer is a remedy for religion that is "better" based on the premise that "good" religion welcomes and "bad" religion excludes, where the *sans* seems to have solved the problem of exclusion. Furthermore, Hägglund believes that to credit such a theo-ethical move to deconstruction is a gross misinterpretation of Derrida. Hägglund critiques Caputo's reading of deconstruction on two fronts: first, Hägglund reads "a logic of radical atheism" throughout Derrida's work that suggests an *anti-religious* sentiment in deconstruction, rather than a religious one (as Caputo argues); second, that this "irreducible atheism at the 'root' of every commitment, faith, and desire…accounts for a constitutive violence that is at work even in the most peaceful approaches to the world, whether 'secular' or 'religious,' 'atheist' or 'theist.'"[172]

Hägglund's main disagreement with Caputo is the optimism Caputo finds in the impossibility deconstruction reveals. Caputo insists that the impossibility in deconstruction, which is emphasized in the *à venir* or "to come" of the "messianic," is something hopeful and good—that what is to come is always desirable. For Hägglund, "it would be hard to imagine a more straightforward misreading of Derrida's notion of the *à venir*," which Hägglund reads as more precarious than that.[173] According to Hägglund, Derrida continually emphasizes that the "to come" may not always be desirable or good,

[172] Ibid., 128.
[173] Ibid., 139.

or even subject to judgment or criteria, as if it were some-thing by which we could critique or judge (i.e. a transcendental signified). This leads Hägglund to suggest that "we must not exclude the possibility that the one who is coming is coming to kill us, is a figure of evil," or "that even the other who is identified as good may always *become* evil."[174] Thus one of Hägglund's main critiques of Caputo is that "religion without religion" presumes to escape an economy of violence (including the violence of exclusion) by emphasizing openness over closure. Much like the concerns that we have been raising above, Hägglund argues that "Derrida is *not opposing* closure…in favor of openness," but rather that deconstruction reveals a situation in which openness and closure are always already co-implicated. Hägglund writes: "the openness of the future is not something that one can promote *against* the closure of determination; the unconditional openness of the future is rather what makes the closure of determination necessary and unavoidable while compromising its integrity from within."[175] This seems like a more accurate reading of the deconstructive aporia than Caputo suggests: a situation in which openness and closure, impossibility and inescapability, are always already structurally present. This would mean that Caputo's preference for the former betrays the insights of deconstruction by suggesting a way out, an escape from the tension of the double-bind in the aporia by preferring and/or prescribing openness to closure, the incalculable to calculations, the indeterminate to determinate, inclusion to exclusion, etc. But what deconstruction actually reveals is the impossibility of avoiding the latter for the sake of the former, that the latter is always structurally inescapable.

---

[174] Ibid., 131.
[175] Ibid., 140.

Hägglund's point, therefore, is that nothing escapes the deconstructive movement, including "religion without religion." Deconstruction, then, cannot offer a preference for openness or closure—precisely because deconstruction cannot offer a preference of any kind. The impossibility in deconstruction is more *impossible* than that: "the openness to the future is unconditional in the sense that one is necessarily open to the future, but it is not unconditional in the sense of an axiom which establishes that more openness is always better than less."[176] In other words, Caputo's "religion without religion" suggests that openness is that which allows one to escape the deconstructive movement, or what deconstruction prescribes, and Hägglund is arguing that a preference for openness is neither found in deconstruction nor a panacea to the problem itself, for deconstruction reveals an inescapable problem, an aporia, a poison that has no remedy that is not itself also poisonous.

However, Hägglund argues that the realization of the inescapability of violence need not collapse into an apolitical or nihilistic stance toward violence; on the contrary, it raises the stakes for analysis and discernment through a more rigorous appreciation of the problem—the very task of this dissertation in terms of the problem of exclusion. Hägglund writes:

> This notion of radical evil does not seek to justify violence or to reduce all forms of violence to the same. On the contrary, it seeks to recognize that we are always negotiating violence and that our ideals of justice cannot be immune from contestation and struggle. Every ideal of justice is rather inscribed in what Derrida calls an "economy of violence"… There is no call for justice that does not call for the exclusion of others, which means that every call for justice can be challenged and criticized. The point of this argument is not to discredit calls for justice, but to recognize that these calls are always already inscribed in an economy of violence.[177]

---

[176] Ibid., 144.
[177] Ibid., 146.

Although I am not prepared to "go all the way" with Hägglund here and suggest that "radical evil" is the underlying logic of all reality, I do agree with his reading of deconstruction that reveals a situation in which we cannot escape violence and exclusion—which would include Caputo's "religion without religion." I also agree, on ethical grounds, that recognizing such does not abrogate responsibility or seek to justify exclusion, in whatever form it should take, but, quite the contrary, might make the pursuit of justice more rigorous by discerning between *which* exclusions. Thus Caputo's religion without religion appears to be unable to escape the problem of exclusion unscathed—and that is really my main point in this chapter: to problematize any attempted remedies for the problem of exclusion and to suggest we think of responsibility, ethics, justice in relation to exclusion differently, i.e. in terms of discerning *between* exclusions.

In this first chapter, the focus has been on doing that through the lens of deconstruction, where my real concern is that there seems to be an accepted "remedy" to the problem of exclusion—especially in a theological sense—which is epitomized in Caputo's "religion without religion." My point, then, has been to offer a reading of deconstruction—which is, ironically, the very thing Caputo does in order to present "religion without religion"—that complicates any remedy to the problem of exclusion. Put simply, I think that one of deconstruction's most important insights includes the recognition that we are always already in the midst of structural, inescapable violence. More specifically, I agree with Hägglund that "there is no call for justice that does not call for the exclusion of others," which suggests that exclusion is a structurally inescapable problem, a violence that cannot be remedied even if/when we recognize it as violent and problematic. In fact, it is the ethical desire to rid religion of exclusion, by

attempting to avoid or remedy—*exclude*—it that deconstruction reveals to be structurally *impossible*.

Deconstructive Implications for the Problem of Exclusion

Chapter One began the constructive work of this dissertation, highlighting a greater depth and complexity to the problem of exclusive divine election and its attendant remedies by exploring exclusion as a problem through the lens of deconstruction. Caputo's reading of deconstruction highlighted the (ethically) problematic nature of exclusion, and understood deconstruction as an attempt to avoid, limit, and/or remedy said problem. Caputo's "religion without religion" is a response to determinate dogmas and doctrines that close, cut off, and exclude, and thus not only offers a pertinent illustration of how deconstruction can be read to highlight the exclusionary tendencies of religious institutions, theologies, doctrines, dogmas, etc., but also provides an ethically exemplary attempt to remedy the problem of exclusion. In so doing, Caputo's "religion without religion" attempts to appreciate the "impossibility" deconstruction highlights by emphasizing the *sans*—a "without" that recognizes any attempt to name, close, determine, forestall will inevitably cease the endless play that Derrida highlights, and be subject to deconstruction. Thus Caputo's reading of deconstruction affirms the problematic nature of divine election on two fronts: first, divine election is problematic because it confesses, declares, names something definitive, determinate about God, which deconstruction has revealed as impossible; secondly, divine election is problematic because it excludes, which further verifies, for Caputo, the impossibility that

deconstruction has highlighted—any binary, system, choice, decision, idea, institution, etc. will always bear the mark of an "Other" that is cut off, left out, excluded. This is problematic for Caputo because he understands deconstruction as affirming certain ethical desires, namely the injustice of exclusion. Because I am sympathetic to Caputo's progressive ethical desire to remedy the problem of exclusion, I share the same conviction, namely that exclusion is, has been, and can be ethically problematic.

What I have tried to show, however, is an alternative reading of deconstruction that problematizes Caputo's use of deconstruction for such theo-ethical ends, by arguing that deconstruction reveals that any such avoidance or remedy of exclusion is *impossible*, because exclusion is structurally *inescapable*. Although I agree with Caputo's *ethical* desire to avoid, limit, and remedy exclusion, deconstruction cannot affirm said desire or be used for those ends, at least in my reading. Quite the contrary, deconstruction *deconstructs* any attempt to do so (ethical or otherwise), revealing a predicament wherein we are always already navigating some form of exclusion, and thus the limits of any attempt or effort to avoid, limit, or remedy it. Therefore, a more rigorous reading of deconstruction complicates and critiques Caputo's identification and attempted remedy of exclusion by focusing on the tension in the aporia of deconstruction more explicitly (i.e. the inescapable necessity of exclusion).

At the same time, however, the goal of reading deconstruction in this chapter is not to collapse into nihilism, apathy, or an apolitical approach to the problem of exclusion. In fact, perhaps the very insights of deconstruction might heighten our vigilance in dealing with these theological and ethical problems. Deconstruction reveals that the stakes are higher than we even imagined: we are trapped in a situation with no

pure or good solution—every attempt carries its own set of issues or problems. Exclusion is not a problem that can be either avoided or remedied, even if/when we recognize and affirm that it *is* problematic. But deconstruction itself—to the extent that it is a "thing"—will never be able to prescribe a remedy, solution, or even an ethical prescriptive of any kind (e.g. we should/ought), and thus we will be forced to acknowledge that any attempt to address the problem will also itself be problematic, i.e. deconstruct-able. In other words, deconstruction will continue to deconstruct—that is what it does, as "it 'is' only what it does."[178]

However, this does not mean that deconstruction lets us "off the hook"; in fact, I think it could actually heighten our vigilance after we have recognized what it reveals in the double-bind, which could be a valuable resource. In this way, deconstruction can perform a kind of theo-ethical service. Deconstruction reveals that our best attempts are always limited ("impossible"), and yet we are trapped in a situation in which we cannot avoid, remedy, or escape them ("inescapable"). And this is where I think Caputo's statement that deconstruction "intensifies our demand…for justice" can be pressed into service only if/when we recognize that deconstruction can aid us, perpetually, in *our* interrogating, questioning, critiquing, analyzing, discerning, etc., by revealing the limits.[179] But deconstruction cannot "solve" the problem for us or offer us anything constructive to do in response to this predicament—it can only point out the double-bind that we are in (always already).

---

[178] Derrida, "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion," 141.
[179] Caputo, "Hoping in Hope, Hoping Against Hope," 123–24.

The goal of this chapter, therefore, is to appreciate the way this deconstructive insight puts us in an im/possible predicament, especially as it pertains to the problem of exclusion. More accurately, and poignantly, deconstruction highlights the predicament we are always already in. This is not something we can escape, abstain from, bow out gracefully, refrain from engaging, as we are always already in the midst of it. But deconstruction can only reveal to us what was always there, not give us a prescription. Its use, if it has any—or at least my goal in this chapter using the insights of deconstruction—is to just show us the problem in a fuller light. The task now, in the remainder of this dissertation, is to show more directly how this applies to the problem of exclusive divine election.

Engaging deconstruction, therefore, can reveal the limits of our ethical desire about the problematic nature of exclusion, which highlights a depth to the problem of exclusive divine election not yet realized. In other words the "best" way to engage the problem of exclusion, as found in divine election, might mean recognizing the ways in which it is a problem not so easily solved as simply avoiding—or excluding—exclusion. Such deconstructive insight should shift our emphasis from avoiding exclusion—in this case divine exclusive choice—to discerning between various types/kinds of exclusion entailed in the inescapability of decision. The question that remains for us to explore more explicitly, then, is how does the deconstructive aporia impact divine election? Is an exclusive divine election inescapable and/or necessary, to some extent, even if/when it is identified as problematic? These are the questions that I intend to address in the following chapters, exploring the ways in which exclusive divine election might be inescapable or even necessary. First, in Chapter Two, I will explore this question through the lens of

liberation theologies, relating divine election to the preferential option and asking how God's option for the poor, marginalized, excluded impacts these questions. In Chapter Three, I will explore these questions through more traditional theologies of divine election that emphasize a *God* who chooses, and *not* a theologian who chooses, and the way(s) in which that complicates the problem of exclusive *divine* election.

CHAPTER 2

The Inescapable, Problematic Necessity of Exclusivity for Liberation

Justice for all just ain't specific enough…
—Common, feat. John Legend, "Glory" (Theme song from *Selma*)

In this white man's world, we the ones chosen…
—Kanye West, "Power"

In Chapter One we explored the problem of exclusion through the lens of deconstruction, which revealed that any such avoidance or remedy of exclusion is *impossible*, because exclusion is structurally *inescapable*. Here, in Chapter Two, I will highlight how the impossibility of avoiding or remedying exclusion, because of its inescapability, plays out in the specific context of liberationist discourses. Simply put, this chapter seeks to explore to what extent choice, preference, priority might be necessary for the pursuit of liberation from material oppression, even if/when such choices might inevitably exclude—at least at some level. Put differently: how is (a certain kind of) exclusivity understood as both problematic yet necessary for liberationist work? If Chapter One revealed the *impossibility* of avoiding exclusion, this chapter seeks to explore which kinds of exclusive choices might be *necessary* for theologians and ethicists who work for liberation. To the extent that this is the case, it would reveal a situation wherein the liberationist must discern between *which* exclusion, as opposed to avoiding it altogether. As hip-hop artist Common intonates in reflection upon the Civil Rights Movement and the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. in the movie *Selma*, the work for

justice might entail a specificity, particularity—even exclusivity—in order to adequately attain the justice pursued, as "justice for *all* just ain't specific enough."[180] The result would be that those seeking to remedy the problem of exclusion might need to recognize that navigating its problematic nature might not be as easy as identifying exclusion—broadly defined—as the problem, especially when (a certain kind of) exclusivity might be inescapable and necessary for the pursuit of liberation and justice. In other words, building upon the conclusions of Chapter One, the remedy to problem of exclusion of certain peoples and groups, might entail a (certain kind of) *strategic* exclusivity of its own.

Liberationist work emerged in response to the material oppression, marginalization, and *exclusion* of certain groups, peoples, identities. In order to remedy said exclusion, liberationists recognized the need for exclusive preference for those oppressed and excluded—particularly in the divine preferential option—and thus have always, from the beginning, recognized the need to navigate some form of exclusivity. Subsequent liberationist work, however, has been critical of the way exclusive preference for *one* oppressed group has resulted in the further exclusion of *other* oppressed groups, and thus identified the such *exclusivity* in liberationist work as the problem. As I intend to demonstrate in this chapter, however, any commitment to liberation must recognize the need to navigate some form of exclusivity, thus revealing that the remedy to the problem of exclusion (and oppression) necessarily, structurally, a kind of *strategic* exclusivity.[181]

---

[180] Common, "Glory" (From the Motion Picture "Selma"), ARTium/Def Jam Recordings, 2014, http://itunes.com.

[181] As I will go on to show, this exclusivity is "strategic" in the sense that it is not absolute, but provisional and temporal, a distinction that becomes especially pertinent when such exclusivity is tied to a concept of divine election.

In order to connect the inescapable and necessary exclusive preference of liberationist work with this dissertation's larger project of exploring the problem of exclusion through divine election, I will make an explicit connection between divine election and liberation theology's preferential option. Additionally, although part of the argument is suggesting the ways exclusive choice is inescapable or necessary for liberation, keeping with the theme of this dissertation we will also not neglect identifying the way(s) in which exclusion is also a problem—if not one of *the* major problems—that liberationists have and continue to engage. To that end, in this chapter I will outline how early liberationist work identified the exclusion of oppressed groups as problematic, and thus emphasized the divine preferential option as a response to this exclusion and oppression. Although early liberationist work recognized the problem with exclusive preference for those oppressed—i.e. that the remedy to the problem of exclusion entailed some form of it—subsequent liberationists have further critiqued the way exclusive preference for one oppressed group excluded other oppressed groups. Engaging this more recent work, this chapter will therefore: (a) outline how exclusive preference (i.e. in the divine preferential option) has been understood as problematic; (b) show how a certain kind of *strategic* exclusivity might still be necessary—even if/when problematic—in order to adequately attain liberation. Thus, the overall goal in this chapter is to continue to explore the problem of exclusion precisely *as problem*, but one in which the remedies or alternatives present problems of their own. By the end of the chapter I will have shown how exclusion is an inescapable problem for pursuit of liberation, something that liberationists must continue to grapple with, and will dissuade the notion that moving beyond exclusivity altogether offers any kind of satisfactory "remedy." In a sense, this

chapter intends to revisit an early liberationist move, noting the subsequent critiques, and arguing that some form of strategic exclusivity is necessary, even if problematic.

In order to accomplish the task at hand, we will need to begin by making the connection between liberation theology's preferential option and divine election. Therefore, in Part One, we will explore the preferential option as God's choice/decision (i.e. divine election) for a particular people or group through several strands within the liberation theological tradition: Latin American, black, gay and lesbian, and dalit liberation theologies. In each of these discourses, we will highlight how liberation theologians emphasize "God's love and predilection for the weak and abused of human history."[182] Taking up the theme of God's preferential option, liberation theologies present a contemporary understanding of divine election wherein God is on the side of, or privileges, those who are excluded and oppressed in terms of poverty, race, sexuality, social location, identity, experience, etc. Exploring this divine choice for a particular group in Part One will also accomplish the task of highlighting the exclusive nature of the preferential option. As we will see, however, its exclusivity emerged in direct response to the fact that these groups were *excluded*. Thus the early liberation theologians knew that exclusion was inherently problematic, and therefore wrestled with how to understand the tension between God's preferential option for the oppressed and the problematic exclusivity of that preference, since exclusion was one of the main problems the preferential option was attempting to remedy.

In Part Two, I will then highlight some more recent liberationist work that has honed in on and further critiqued the exclusive nature of such an identification and

---

[182] Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor," 27.

preference. In the ensuing decades, harsher critiques of liberation theology's exclusive preference emerged, especially in terms of how preference for one oppressed group excluded other oppressed groups. These critiques include the way in which God's identification with one group results in further exclusion not just of the oppressor but also of other oppressed groups, pitting one oppressed community's claims for liberation against another's, which in turn becomes a tool of hegemony—a divide-and-conquer strategy that continues to keep liberation out of the hands of the oppressed. Additionally, more recent liberationist work has revealed the intersectionality of identity and experiences, complicating such preference for *one* stable identity or group.

In Part Three, however, we will seek to probe *further* into the problem by asking: is (some form of) exclusivity inescapable, and even necessary for the work of liberation, such that even those who attempt to avoid or minimize it will always be navigating some version of it? These questions will address the second part of the double move: a complication of the remedy of exclusion. In so doing, I will reiterate a fundamental tenet of early liberationist work: that minimizing exclusivity (divine or otherwise) for the oppressed does not adequately deal with oppression and thus becomes a tacit preference for the oppressor by keeping the status quo in place; consequently, we will reexamine the contested notion that the only way to attain liberation is through a form of *strategic, exclusive* preference for particular oppressed group(s). Additionally, we will explore to what extent exclusive preference for one oppressed group might necessarily be in conflict with other oppressed groups in a way that is inescapable. As has been the case throughout this dissertation, the goal in Part Three is not to suggest unmitigated exclusivity, but merely to point to its problematic necessity.

Part One: Liberation Theology's Preferential Option as Divine Election: God's Choice/Preference for the Oppressed

Previously, in the Introduction, we outlined the various "objects" of divine election through several prominent figures and models. These elected objects included: individuals, groups, God's self, and Jesus Christ. In our discussion of divine election as God's choice for a particular group or people, we drew a connection with liberation theology's "preferential option" for the poor, marginalized, oppressed, seeking to understand it *as* divine election. In this first section of Chapter Two, we intend to build upon that connection by exploring several significant strands of Liberation Theology, highlighting the way they present God's choice *for* a particular people/group. In addition to providing an historical overview of the various ways divine election has been theologically understood in terms of its objects (i.e. who or what is chosen), understanding the objects of divine election also helped "set the table" for the larger issues of exclusion that this dissertation is focused on. As I have argued, identifying the objects of divine election reveals its inherent, structural exclusivity—i.e. the inescapable, necessary exclusion in every choice that was corroborated by the work of Chapter One—because it highlights the "this/that" nature of divine election: God's choosing *this*, excludes *that*.

In the midst of a discussion about divine election and exclusion, however, a continual word of clarification needs to be made regarding the way in which I am presenting the preferential option as a kind of exclusive divine choice, especially in relation to the eternality of such a choice. Traditionally understood—i.e. as "predestination"—divine election meant God's eternal, once-for-all decision; and, in

terms of exclusivity, this meant that God's choice for one (person, group, etc.) was an absolute decree about eternal destinies. In other words, the history of the doctrine of divine election typically addressed God's choice for one/some as the elected (or included) and other(s) as the rejected (or excluded), i.e. the former to heaven/glory and the latter to hell/damnation. Throughout this dissertation I have tried to frame divine election more broadly than traditional notions of predestination, eternal destinies, etc., by looking at it more in terms of "God's choosing." Nevertheless, any discussion of divine election and exclusion warrants clarification about the eternality of such a divine decision, especially as we now turn to a more thorough investigation into a particular type of divine election: liberation theology's preferential option. When discussing the exclusive nature of the divine preferential option in this chapter, I want to clarify that I do *not* mean to imply an eternal, once-for-all decision, because this is not how liberation discourses have understood the preferential option. As we will see, the divine preferential option has always, necessarily, been tied to particular historical realities, communities, and experiences. In fact, the purpose of God's choice *for* the poor, oppressed, marginalized, excluded is with the intended goal of *liberation from* these material realities. Thus, God's choice for the poor, oppressed, marginalized seems to be conditional on one's status in society, which means that if one (person, group, community, etc.) were to no longer be poor, oppressed, or marginalized, the implication seems to be that the preference is no longer needed. Again, that is the entire purpose of the preferential option: to liberate *from* this condition or situation. Therefore, in our subsequent discussion about the exclusivity of the preferential option we need to keep in mind that it is very much distinct from a

divine choice about one's eternal destiny, since such historical realities can—and hopefully will—change.

But I want to also clarify that although the lack of eternality associated with the kind of exclusivity we will be discussing in this chapter might seem to mitigate against the offensiveness of the preferential option's exclusive nature, I want to keep our eyes focused on the ways in which it is still *exclusive*—even if not eternally so. And that is the real point of emphasis in this chapter: to highlight how the preferential option is (still) exclusive (on some level), and thus problematic, as well as the way in which such exclusivity is inescapable and necessary for liberation. Consequently, perhaps "strategic exclusion" is a more fitting term to frame what we will be exploring in this chapter.[183] It is *strategic* in the sense that the purpose of the divine choice is to liberate and transform oppressive structures, which means it is different than an absolute decree with eternal destinies. But it is still *exclusive*, as I intend to show, in ways that are both problematic, yet inescapable and necessary.

As we will see, each of the following strands of liberation theology emphasize (exclusive) divine preference *for* oppressed and marginalized communities because they have been *excluded*. Liberation theology's insistence that God deals with the problem of exclusion by *choosing* those who have been excluded ensures that those who are excluded will always be God's chosen, while those who are oppressing others are not.

---

[183] "Strategic exclusion" calls to mind postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak's "strategic essentialism" as a way to forge a collective identity in political movements. There is actually a significant point of resonance between what I am attempting in this chapter and Spivak's work, especially in terms of identity, experience and the work for liberation. Unfortunately, exploring some of this resonance is beyond the scope of this chapter or dissertation. See: Gayatri Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Spivak*, eds. Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean (New York: Routledge, 1996): 203-236.

Therefore the earliest iterations of liberation theology recognized that moving away from, or reducing divine exclusivity for the oppressed does not adequately deal with oppression and thus can become a tacit preference for the oppressor by keeping the status quo in place; consequently, there appears to be a commitment to the notion that the only way to attain liberation is through *exclusive* preference for those on the underside of history, precisely because they have been *excluded*.

Latin American Liberation Theology: God's Choice for the Poor

The emergence of "liberation theology" was precipated by several significant publications in the 1970s, one of which included Gustavo Gutiérrez's landmark work, *Teología de la Liberación* in 1971, with its English translation two years later: *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*.[184] Through his pioneering work, Gutiérrez—a Peruvian priest—not only developed what became known as Latin American liberation theology, but can also be considered foundational for subsequent strands of liberation theology that would emerge in the ensuing decades, as he was one of the first to explicitly emphasize liberation as a central category for Christian theological reflection and analysis.[185] In the opening words of *A Theology of Liberation*, Gutiérrez sets forth the significance of social location and liberation: "This book is an attempt at reflection, based on the gospel and the *experiences of men and women committed to the*

[184] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*.

[185] Like any discourse or movement, it is difficult to track the genealogy to a specific starting point or origin (e.g. James Cone's work in Black Liberation theology also began around this time, and it is contested as to how much each other knew of the other's work). But in this first section of Part One I'm trying to track the emergence of Latin American Liberation theology, and show how it was at least somewhat foundational for subsequent strands of liberation theologies.

process of liberation in the oppressed and exploited land of Latin America. It is a theological reflection born of the *experience of shared efforts* to abolish the current unjust situation and to build a different society, freer and more human."[186] The goal, Gutiérrez argues, is to reconsider the "classical" themes of Christian theology in the light of these particular experiences—the experiences of those oppressed persons who work for liberation in Latin America.

Part of this work, according to Gutiérrez, is drawing attention to the "profound and rapid socio-cultural" changes taking place at that time that resulted in an extreme, economic discrepancy among nations. What's more, the growth of media had made many aware of such discrepancies, particularly acute in "poor countries where the vast majority of humans live" in "unacceptable living conditions."[187] According to Gutiérrez, this situation—the depth of poverty combined with an awareness of such inequalities—had called forth a "new historical era to be characterized by a radical aspiration for integral liberation" that demanded a Christian response.[188] In other words, for Gutiérrez, liberation theology begins with this situation and location, in the lives, experiences, and struggles against injustice in Latin America. Its goal is the liberation of such people: "In the last instance we will have an authentic theology of liberation only when the oppressed themselves can freely raise their voice and express themselves directly and creatively in society…when they are the protagonists of their own liberation."[189]

---

[186] Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, Revised (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1988), xiii (emphasis mine).
[187] Ibid., 13.
[188] Ibid., xvii.
[189] Ibid., 174.

Although not named explicitly in the above quote, Gutiérrez's desire for liberation of the oppressed continually emphasizes how it must *include* the poor being able to "freely raise their voice and express themselves" and be "protagonists of their own liberation," precisely because of how the poor have been *excluded* from this process. Gutiérrez contrasts this emphasis on liberation with the "'development' model…advanced by international agencies backed by the groups that control the world economy" in an attempt to provide "aid to the poor countries."[190] Although seemingly optimistic, Gutiérrez argues that in the development model "the alleged changes were only new and concealed ways to increase the power of the mighty economic groups," and thus keep the poor, oppressed in that state. As opposed to "development," which is an imposed strategy from the perspective of the oppressor, Gutiérrez suggests "liberation" is a more effective approach because of how "man begins to see himself as a creative subject; he seizes more and more the reins of his own destiny, directing it toward a society where he will be free of every kind of slavery." Simply put, liberation "expresses better the aspiration of the poor peoples," as opposed to an imposed strategy from the perspective of the oppressor.[191] What Gutiérrez is suggesting, therefore, is the inherent exclusivity of oppression, wherein the oppressed are *not only* materially oppressed structurally and systematically, but such oppression includes being *excluded* from realizing one's own aspirations, desires, subjectivity, agency, choices, decisions, etc., as the "poor" are objectified. This inherent exclusivity of oppression lends insight into why Gutiérrez develops a notion of the preferential option.

---

[190] Gustavo Gutiérrez, "Notes for a Theology of Liberation," *Theological Studies* 31, no. 2 (June 1970): 246.
[191] Ibid., 247.

Through Gutiérrez's pioneering work for the liberation of oppression in Latin America, a "preferential option" became one of the fundamental tenets in liberation theology's struggle against societal oppression based on class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. In order to address these injustices (which includes exclusion), liberation theologians argue that preference and priority should be shown to the oppressed in order to disrupt the status quo. As Gutiérrez notes in his landmark work, the discrepancy between the rich and the poor is so drastic that any attempt to bring about change *within* the existing order is futile, and thus "only a radical break from the status quo, that is, a profound transformation…and a social revolution…would allow for the change to a new society… In this light to speak about the process of *liberation* begins to appear more appropriate and richer in human content."[192] And, for Gutiérrez, such a commitment to liberation means a preferential commitment to the poor. Thus the preferential option—combined with liberation theology's emphasis on *praxis*—meant that Christians, as committed followers of Jesus Christ, "cannot claim to be Christians without a commitment to liberation."[193] Consequently, a theology of liberation, Gutiérrez argues, is an attempt to "reflect on the experience and meaning of faith based on the commitment to abolish injustice and to build a new society; this theology must be verified by the practice of that commitment, by active, effective participation in the struggle in which the exploited classes have undertaken against their oppressors."[194] He continues: "if—more concretely—in Latin America [theological reflection] does not lead the Church to be on the side of the oppressed classes and dominated peoples, clearly and

---

[192] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 17.
[193] Ibid., 81.
[194] Ibid., 174.

without qualifications, then this theological reflection will have been of little value," which will only serve "to rationalize a departure from the Gospel."[195] For Gutiérrez, Christian theology is only *Christian* to the extent that it focuses on liberation, and we can only achieve liberation if there is a radical break with the status quo, which means commitment to a preferential option *for* the poor and oppressed, "clearly and without qualifications."

Though not traditionally framed in terms of divine election, for the purposes of this dissertation we will explore the preferential option through the lens of divine election, seeking to investigate how this fundamental principle of liberation theology might be understood as a divine choice. At the same time, however, it appears that the preferential option certainly involves a human choice; as Gutiérrez has argued, liberation entails the "commitment to abolish injustice…by active, effective participation in the struggle." In other words, the preferential option emphasizes the Christian's (human) work and action to change the material realities of the poor. In fact, one of liberation theology's critiques of "classical" Christian theology is its over-emphasis on the spiritual, eschatological promises of Christianity at the expense of the material, here-and-now realities. Gutiérrez writes: "A poorly understood spirituality has often led us to forget the human message, the power to change unjust social structures, that the eschatological promises contain."[196] Thus, liberation theology is not a "wait-and-see what God will do" approach, but emphasizes the human praxis necessary to make concrete, political changes.

---

[195] Ibid.
[196] Gutiérrez, "Notes for a Theology of Liberation," 256.

Specifically addressing the preferential option and its significance for liberation theology, Gutiérrez maintains: "When all is said and done, the option for the poor means an option for the God of the Reign as proclaimed by Jesus. The whole Bible, from the story of Cain and Abel onward, is marked by God's love and predilection for the weak and abused of human history."[197] Again, the option here is presented as a human option—or choice—"for the God of the Reign as proclaimed by Jesus." However, it is important to note, the human option/choice is grounded in God's option/choice.[198] For Gutiérrez, God is on the side of, or privileges, those who are on the underside of history: the abused, weak, oppressed, poverty-stricken. And thus Gutiérrez, taking up this biblical theme of God's option for the oppressed, presents a contemporary understanding of divine election wherein the object of God's choice is the poor in society.

In fact, Gutiérrez goes on to state that the human commitment to the liberation of the poor and oppressed is not a product of social analysis, human compassion, or experience of poverty—as valid as these are—but ultimately grounded in *God's* commitment: "as Christians, we base that commitment fundamentally on the God of our faith."[199] In other words, the preferential option of human work for liberation *derives from* the prior preferential option of God. God's election of the poor is the basis for liberation theology's emphasis on liberative praxis; thus humans should show preferential treatment to the poor *because* God has first chosen the poor as God's elect:

> In the final analysis, an option for the poor is an option for the God of the kingdom whom Jesus proclaims to us… This preference brings out the gratuitous or unmerited character of God's love…for they tell us with the utmost simplicity

---

[197] Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor," 27.
[198] The connection, and distinction, between divine and human choice will be explored more explicitly in Chapter Three.
[199] Gutiérrez, "Option for the Poor," 27.

> that God's predilection for the poor, the hungry, and the suffering is based on God's unmerited goodness to us.[200]

Gutiérrez explains why it is significant to ground liberationist human praxis on God's prior commitment to liberation:

> The ultimate reason for commitment to the poor and oppressed is not to be found in the social analysis we use, or in human compassion, or in any direct experience we ourselves may have of poverty. These are all doubtless valid motives that play an important part in our commitment. As Christians, however, our commitment is grounded, in the final analysis, in the God of faith. It is a theocentric, prophetic option that has its roots in the unmerited love of God and is demanded by this love.[201]

Ultimately, for Gutiérrez, it is a notion of *divine* election, understood as a preferential option for the poor, that demands that *humans* (i.e. Christians who hear and heed this call) work for liberation from oppression. Additionally, as we have seen, the preferential option *for* the poor, emerges in response to their *exclusion*, which is part and parcel of their oppression.

Black Liberation Theology: "Jesus is Black"

In liberation theologies the (divine) preferential option has not only been understood in terms of poverty, but also in terms of race, as in the work of another pioneer in liberation theology, James Cone, whose ground-breaking work emerged about the same time as Gutiérrez's. His two earliest works, *Black Theology and Black Power*[202] and *A Black Theology of Liberation*[203] were the first book-length treatments of what

---

[200] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxvii.
[201] Ibid.
[202] James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, Second Edition (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1997).
[203] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*.

would come to be known as "black liberation theology"—the latter text being the first systematic, liberation theology ever published in English. In these texts Cone does not mince words and makes bold theological claims. Like Gutiérrez, Cone maintains that liberation is at the heart of the Christian gospel. He writes: "It is my contention that Christianity is essentially a religion of liberation…Any message that is not related to the liberation of the poor in a society is not Christ's message. Any theology that is indifferent to the theme of liberation is not Christian theology."[204] For Cone, and many other Christian liberationists, Christianity is fundamentally liberative: the entire contents of theology, the Gospel, biblical witness, God's work and identity, are all intimately related to the movement of liberation—in fact they *must* be. Therefore, he writes: "In a society where persons are oppressed because they are *black*, Christian theology must become *black theology*, a theology that is unreservedly identified with the goals of the oppressed and seeks to interpret the divine character of their struggle for liberation."[205] For Cone, God's identification with the oppressed—in this case African-Americans—means not only that theology must become "black," but also that God becomes "black." Cone warns his reader: "It will be evident, therefore, that this book is written primarily for the black community, not for whites…an authentic understanding is dependent on the blackness of their existence in the world."[206]

Part of the reason for Cone's insistence on "blackness" (i.e. the blackness of God, theology, reader), is because black theology emerges in response to "American white theology," which has been a theology of the white oppressor, and from the need for

---

[204] Ibid., ix.
[205] Ibid.
[206] Ibid.

African-Americans to liberate themselves from white oppression. White theology is that which is written without any reference to the oppressed (i.e. the exclusion of everything other than the dominant, white perspective). Black theology arises, however, "from an identification with the oppressed blacks of America…This means that it is a theology of and for the black community."[207] In fact, Cone claims that "theology ceases to be a theology of the gospel when it fails to arise out of the community of the oppressed."[208] For Cone, black theology is, therefore, a theology that is *of*, *for*, and *from* the black community. It is *of* in the sense that it is written by persons of a particular identity (dependent on "blackness"); it is *for* in that it is intended to liberate blacks from white oppression; and it is *from* in that it emerges from a particular location and/or community (black community). To put it another way, black theology must be *preferential* to blacks in order to be liberative. And since, for Cone, "Christianity is essentially a religion of liberation," Christian theology *must* become black liberation theology in a context where "theology" has typically been a theology of, from, and for the white oppressor (to the exclusion of all "others").

Articulating the same sentiment as Gutiérrez, Cone argues that theology must be preferential because God is preferential. In other words, this preference does not originate in the theologian, but in God's (prior) preference. A few years later in *God of the Oppressed*, Cone writes:

> If theological speech is based on the traditions of the Old Testament, then it must heed their unanimous testimony to Yahweh's commitment to justice for the poor and weak. Accordingly it cannot avoid taking sides in politics, and the side that theology must take is disclosed in the side that Yahweh has already taken. Any other side, whether it be with the oppressors or the side of neutrality (which is

[207] Ibid., 5.
[208] Ibid., 1.

> nothing but a camouflaged identification with the rulers), is unbiblical. If theology does not side with the poor, then it cannot speak for Yahweh who is the God of the poor.[209]

For Cone, since God has chosen to side with the poor and oppressed and excluded—*because* of their exclusion—theologians must do likewise. And anything less than choosing in this way (i.e. exclusively) is merely a choice for oppression.

Emphasizing the social context of Jesus as evidence of God's commitment to the oppressed, Cone argues that Jesus' "historical appearance in first-century Palestine…is the clue to his present activity in the sense that his past is the medium through which he is made accessible to us today."[210] For Cone, analyzing this historical context leads us to acknowledge the importance of Jesus' *racial* identity as a Jew. And since this history—who Jesus *was*—is important for understanding him today—who Jesus *is*—Cone affirms the blackness of Jesus Christ. The historical significance of Jesus' appearance reveals God's identification with the oppressed and the divine work of liberation on their behalf. Emphasizing the concrete particularity of this history, Cone correlates this with the contemporary context and circumstances of African-Americans in the United States. He writes: "The least in America are literally and symbolically present in black people. To say that Christ is black means that black people are God's poor people whom Christ has come to liberate."[211] Cone thus makes a profound declaration about the identity of Jesus: "He *is* black because he *was* a Jew."[212] Therefore, Cone argues, "the people of color are [God's] elected poor in America."[213]

---

[209] Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 65.
[210] Ibid., 106.
[211] Ibid., 125.
[212] Ibid., 123.
[213] Ibid., 126.

Thus we can see that Cone addresses the fact that God is partial by highlighting the socio-historical context of God's choice in the incarnation, pointing to the blackness of Jesus Christ and its concomitant affirmation of God's election of African-Americans. Cone maintains that the God of biblical revelation is never impartial: "God is never color-blind… Yahweh takes sides… Jesus is not for *all*, but for the oppressed."[214] According to Cone, if God was impartial and "color-blind," it would mean that God was blind to injustice and oppression, which betrays the fundamental tenets of Christianity as a theology of liberation.

Additionally, Cone is forthright that God's preferential option *for* blacknesss is inherently "exclusive" in the sense that it is also a choice *against* whiteness. Because the blackness of Jesus Christ affirms God's choice for such, "whiteness is the symbol of the Antichrist."[215] Cone's understanding of divine election as both for/against is important to note, given the way I have tried to sketch divine election as necessarily exclusive (i.e. God's choosing *this* and not *that*). As we have seen, sometimes the exclusivity is hidden, while other times it is more explicitly identified. For instance, Augustine emphasized God's grace as the lynchpin for his theological understanding of divine election and therefore focused on God's choice *for* the elect, whereas John Calvin approached the same topic by asserting that divine election must also be accompanied by an explicit rejection. Cone—ironically in this instance more seemingly Calvinist than Augustinian—is not shy about discussing God's election *for* blackness (those oppressed and excluded) and *against* whiteness (oppression and exclusion).

---

[214] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 6.
[215] Ibid., 8.

Gay and Lesbian Liberation Theology: Jesus is Gay

Following James Cone's radical declaration of the blackness of Jesus Christ as a liberation theological move that highlights God's preference for African-Americans, several strands of liberation theology began to emerge that made a similar move with respect to other oppressed and excluded groups, namely that in the Incarnation—i.e. Jesus *as* one of the oppressed—we see God's preference. One such strand included gay and lesbian liberation theologies, which emphasizes the identity and experience of, God's solidarity and identification with, and justice and activism for, gays and lesbians.

Of course, we should note that with any of these strands of liberation theology there are contours, debates, and trajectories that complicate any particular designation, categorization, or definition of these discourses, such that any attempt to do so will always be at the expense of their fluidity, difference, and complexity. This fact is magnified with gay and lesbian liberation theologies, where the focus is precisely on the fluidity, instability, and complexity of identities. Much of the development and trajectory of gay and lesbian liberation theology entails engagement—to various extents—with Queer Theory, which "destabilizes essentialist notions of sexuality, identity, and gender" that "renders fluid these cultural concepts and practices once considered stable."[216] Given the fact that gay and lesbian liberation theology—following the major tenets of its precursors in liberation theology—presents a theology *of/for* lesbian, gay, bisexual, and

---

[216] Robert E. Shore-Goss, "Gay and Lesbian Liberation Theologies," in *Liberation Theologies in the United States: An Introduction*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Anthony B. Pinn (New York ; London: New York University Press, 2010), 189.

transgendered (LGBT) people, it has been critiqued by further engagements of Queer Theory in what has become known as "Queer Theology," a discourse that complicates the stable notions of sexuality identity that gay and lesbian liberation theologies were necessarily based upon.[217] Although the "evolution" of gay and lesbian liberation theology is an interesting and complex trajectory, our main concern is with its earliest stages where God identifies, is in solidarity with, and displays preference for LGBT people because of its connection to the problem of exclusion, namely its development as a remedy to the problem of exclusion that entails its own exclusivity. The instability of identity, as Queer Theory argues, offers another layer to the problem, no doubt, because of how it reveals the problematic nature of identifying, and thus excluding, one group (over against another). As such, we will explore these issues further in Part Two of this chapter, as we delve further into some critiques of liberation theology's identification and (exclusive) preference for a particular group.

The designation of gay and lesbian liberation theology as a "liberation" theology stems (at least partially) from the fact that its aim is not merely the full inclusion of gays and lesbians (because of their exclusion), but demonstrates how (gay and lesbian) *liberation* is at the heart of the Christian gospel and theology. As feminist theologian Laurel Schneider suggests, gay and lesbian liberation theologies "concern themselves

---

[217] The situation is further complicated by the fact that the terms used do not also designate the difference between earlier LGBT *liberation* theologies and later Queer theologies (which focus more on destabilizing identities), such that some will use the word "queer" to identify their work while others argue this is a misnomer. Part of the contestation is over the use of the word "queer," with some arguing that earlier liberationist theologies cannot employ that term because of how it is based on notions of a stable identity, which Queer Theory has complicated. For more on the trajectory and development of Queer Theology, see: Grace Jantzen, "Contours of Queer Theology," *Literature & Theology* 15, no.3 (September 2001): 276-285; Elizabeth Stuart, *Gay and Lesbian Theologies; Repetitions with Critical Difference* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003); Patrick Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011).

with problems of exclusion and the need to obtain justice for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered people as full persons equal to their heterosexual neighbors in religious communities."[218] Again, the problem of exclusion is a central aspect of any liberationist approach, which will make our investigation into this problem all the more interesting and complex—i.e., the "exclusivity" of something like the preferential option is a response to how society, institutions, etc. *exclude* groups of people based on gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, socio-economic status, etc.

Thus gay and lesbian liberation theology's work for justice for LGBT community is modeled after its Latin American and black liberation theological precursors in the 1970s. Given what we have discovered about these early liberation theologies it should come as no surprise that gay and lesbian liberation theologies also argued "that God was not neutral and in fact had a preferential option for the poor and oppressed."[219] Queer theologian Patrick Cheng recounts several instances of this early move in gay and lesbian liberation theologies:

> For example, in 1968, the Anglican priest H.W. Montefiore published a controversial essay, "Jesus the Revelation of God," which suggested that Jesus' celibacy might have been due to his being a homosexual. If so, Montefiore argued, this would be "evidence of God's self-identification with those who are unacceptable to the upholders of 'The Establishment' and social conventions." That is, just as liberation theologians had argued in other contexts, Montefiore argued that God's nature was "befriending the friendless" and "identifying himself with the underprivileged."[220]

Cheng goes on to discuss other early works in gay and lesbian liberation theology, including the compilation of essays entitled *Towards a Theology of Gay Liberation*,

---

[218] Laurel C. Schneider, "Homosexuality, Queer Theory, and Christian Theology," *Religious Studies Review* 26, no. 1 (January 2000): 3.
[219] Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: Introduction to Queer Theology*, 1 edition (New York: SEABURY BOOKS, 2011), 30.
[220] Ibid., 30–31.

where Giles Hibbert argues that a Christian understanding of liberation cannot be understood apart from gay liberation,[221] and minister Howard Wells' article, "Gay God, Gay Theology" that refers to a "gay God" who is "our liberator, our redeemer."[222]

In *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto*, Robert Shore-Goss calls for and offers a liberation theology in response to contemporary theology's lack of context and relevance for gays and lesbians.[223] Goss defines this as a queer liberation theology that critically engages the oppressive context that forms the experience of gay and lesbian people, seeking to bring about political change. Given the importance of this experience, Goss is clear that no one "not involved in and committed to the struggle for gay/lesbian liberation can write a gay/lesbian liberation theology."[224] In this work Jesus' role as radical activist, social revolutionary, and one who embraces queer identity is highlighted to show God's solidarity with gay and lesbian people. For Goss, "the practice of God's reign actualizes Jesus' message that God is socially in the midst of queer struggle for sexual liberation"; thus "what Easter communicates is that God is passionately on the side of gay and lesbian people."[225]

In Goss' "Queer Christology," he emphasizes that it is through Jesus' "*basileia* practice of solidarity with the oppressed, his execution, God's identification with his crucifixion, and God's raising him from the dead that made Jesus the Christ," such that "Jesus asserted God as the saving reality of solidarity for the oppressed." Thus, God's

---

[221] Giles Hibbert, "Gay Liberation in Relation to Christian Liberation," in *Towards a Theology of Gay Liberation*, ed. Malcom Macourt (London: SCM Press, 1977).
[222] Cheng, *Radical Love*, 31.
[223] Robert Goss, *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993).
[224] Ibid., xvii.
[225] Ibid., 171.

identification with "the crucified Jesus" was "God's embodied action of solidarity and justice."[226] "Jesus embodied a preferential option for the oppressed," for Goss, which is directed at gays and lesbians.[227] He writes: "On Easter, God made Jesus queer in his solidarity with us. In other words, Jesus 'came out of the closet' and became the 'queer' Christ. Jesus the Christ becomes actively queer through his solidarity with our struggles for liberation."[228] Emphasizing the importance of Jesus' identification with—and hence God's preferential option for—gays and lesbians, Goss maintains:

> If Jesus the Christ is not queer, then his *basileia* message of solidarity and justice is irrelevant. If the Christ is not queer, then the gospel is no longer good news but oppressive news for queers. If the Christ is not queer, then the incarnation has no meaning for our sexuality. It is the particularity of Jesus the Christ, his particular identification with the sexually oppressed, that enables us to understand Christ as black, queer, female, Asian, African, a South American peasant, Jewish, transsexual and so forth. It is the scandal of particularity that is the message of Easter, the particular context of struggle where God's solidarity is practiced.[229]

Like Cone, Goss argues that anything less than God's identification with, and particular choice for, gays and lesbians turns the Gospel into "bad news" because it becomes a tacit affirmation of the status quo, which has perpetuated such oppression and exclusion of LGBT folk. Goss' point about the "scandal of particularity," which he understands as God's "identification with the sexually oppressed," is important to note, especially for the issues we will engage in Parts Two and Three. In Part Two, such divine identification with *one* oppressed group has been critiqued because of its exclusionary nature—in other words, if Jesus is gay (or black, or dalit, etc.), then Jesus is not white, Latina, poor, etc. In Part Three, however, we will return to the possible necessity of such particularity and

---

[226] Ibid., 77–78.
[227] Ibid., 82.
[228] Ibid., 84.
[229] Ibid., 85.

exclusivity, precisely because of what Goss (and others) are suggesting here—that anything less than preference for the oppressed and excluded will only maintain their oppression and exclusion: "if the Christ is not queer, then the gospel is no longer good news but oppressive news for queers." Additionally, Part Three will explore the even more problematic predicament wherein such exclusivity for one oppressed group or one form of injustice can be in conflict with others.

Goss' book—like the others listed above—has most of the basic ingredients that constitute gay and lesbian liberation theology. His political goals, emphasis on how the oppressive context forms gay and lesbian experience, privileging of that unique experience, and asserting God's solidarity and identification with gay and lesbian people are all key moves that are modeled after earlier forms of liberation theology. Although not framed explicitly in theological language of divine election, gay and lesbian liberation theology's employment of earlier liberation theological notions can be understood as God's choice *for* LGBT people. Just as Gutiérrez argued that liberation of the poor must be central to a Christian theology, so gay and lesbian liberation theologians argue that "queer liberation—that is, freedom from heterosexism and homophobia, as well as the freedom to be one's own authentic self—is at the very heart of the gospel message and Christian theology."[230] Similar to Cone's assertion of the blackness of Jesus as revelation of God's solidarity and preference for blacks in the United States, gay and lesbian liberation theology's notion of Jesus embracing queer identity reveals the identity of God as one who is fundamentally on the side of LGBT people who are oppressed.

---

[230] Cheng, *Radical Love*, 30.

Dalit Liberation Theology: Jesus is Dalit

The final strand of liberation theology we intend to explore as a form of divine election is dalit liberation theology. Emerging in response to Indian Christian theology that did not adequately address the situation of dalits in India, dalit liberation theology developed in the midst of the influx and spread of Christianity in India that "sought to translate, adapt, and correlate the 'good news' of Christian proclamation by taking into consideration its Hindu philosophical and cultural framework."[231] However, dalit liberation theologians argue that such an approach resulted in a Christianity that eluded "its responsibility of dealing with the culture and religion of a significant portion of its subaltern members who are not part of the Hindu community," namely the dalits, who "represent a large percentage of Indian society that did not come within the confines of the Hindu human community."[232] In order to better understand dalit liberation theology, we need to gain a bit more background on the situation of dalits, the caste system in India, and dalits' historical oppression.

The term "dalit" refers to a group of "untouchables" that are excluded from the fourfold Hindu caste system. They have been referred to by different names, including: *avarnas, Panchamas* (5th caste), Exterior castes, Depressed castes, Scheduled Caste, and *Harijans*.[233] Dalit can mean: "(1) the broken, the torn, the rent, the burst, the split; (2) the opened, the expended; (3) the bisected; (4) the driven asunder, the dispelled, the scattered; (5) the downtrodden, the crushed, the destroyed; (6) the manifested, the

---

[231] Sathianathan Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 18.
[232] Ibid.
[233] V. Devasahayam, "Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness—A Dalit Perspective," in *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College: 1990), 1.

displayed."[234] This historically oppressed people has not constituted a unified group, but have only been linked through the stigma of untouchability related to their polluting professions. Traditional dalit occupations included disposing of refuse (dead animals, rubbish, sewage), leather works, skinning, and carrying night soil. Referring to dalits in his survey of Indian Christian history, John C.B. Webster writes: "Not only were they poor and powerless, if not actual slaves, but they also suffered from the stigma of untouchability and, in the extreme south, of unapproachability as well."[235] In rural sectors, dalits were segregated simply because of their impurity. As a result, dalits, who currently comprise about seventeen percent of the Indian population, have been considered "the worst victims of the evil and divisive caste system in India."[236]

The situation began to change slowly, but significantly, for the dalits in the nineteenth century with emerging opportunities due to a shift in the political and social landscape. Webster distinguishes three stages in this movement of change, with the first being mass conversion. He argues that converting to Christianity (especially) became the greatest leap forward for dalits in the latter half of the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. The gains made in this stage were not economic, however, and even the social and psychological advances were tenuous, as conversion "often raised the converts in the esteem of the landlords but it did not remove the problem of poverty."[237] The second stage of the dalit movement was characterized by Hindu and governmental efforts to

---

[234] A.P. Nirmal, "Doing Theology from a Dalit Perspective," in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College: 1990), 139.
[235] John C.B. Webster, "From Indian Church to Indian Theology: An Attempt at Theological Construction," in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College: 1990), 96.
[236] Israel Selvanayagam, "Waters of Life and Indian Cups: Protestant Attempts at Theologizing in India," in *Christian Theology in Asia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 61.
[237] Webster, 98.

improve conditions, and according to Webster they seem to have been inspired by three motives: humanitarian-nationalist, prevent conversion, political. The 1920s to the present can be considered the third stage, and is marked by "the self-assertion and self-reliance on the part of the Depressed Classes themselves."[238]

It is within this last stage that we see the emergence of dalit liberation theology. One of its pioneers, Arvind Nirmal, observed that even as late as the 1970s Christian theology in India had been bent toward the Brahminic—upper caste—tradition and culture, to the continued neglect and exclusion of the depressed classes. In so doing, Indian Christian theology revealed that "it had no time or inclination to reflect theologically on the dalit converts who formed the majority of the Indian Church."[239] Though things began to change with the emergence of "Third world theology" and its connections to nascent liberation theologies, the unique situation of the dalits led Nirmal to contend in 1986 that "dalit theology is still in the process of emergence."[240] In his estimation, Nirmal stressed how theology still failed to see the dalit struggle for liberation as an appropriate subject matter for doing Indian Christian theology. This, he claimed, was "all the more reason for our waking up to this reality today and for applying ourselves seriously to the task of doing Dalit theology."[241] Theologians heeded Nirmal's call, and as a result dalit liberation theology has since established itself as "one of the most authentic expressions of the Indian liberation theology."[242]

---

[238] Ibid., 98-100.
[239] Arvind P. Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College: 1990), 56.
[240] Ibid., 58.
[241] Ibid., 57.
[242] Selvanayagam, 61.

The contours of dalit liberation theology during this time closely followed earlier strands of liberation theology, and thus insisted that dalit theology be produced *by* dalits, based on their own experience, sufferings, and goals. Unlike earlier expressions of Indian Christian theology *about* or *for* the depressed classes, Nirmal called for a theology *from* the dalits—a fundamental move of liberationists. Moreover, Nirmal insisted that dalit theology, as a counter theology, necessitated a certain type of methodological exclusivism. Since it represented a "radical discontinuity with the classical Indian Christian Theology of the Brahminic Tradition" that excluded dalits, Nirmal maintained that dalit liberation theology should not allow influence from the dominant (high-caste) theological tradition. Nirmal explains: "What this exclusivism implies is the affirmation that the Triune god—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit—is on the side of the dalits and not of the non-dalits who are the oppressors."[243] This God, according to Nirmal, is a "Dalit God" witnessed to by and through the dalitness of Jesus, which is best symbolized by the Godforsaken-ness experienced by Jesus on the cross. Put simply, for Nirmal, God's preferential option for the dalits is indubitable and unambiguous, and, as we have seen, must be explicitly, exclusively so in order to be liberative.

Subsequent to Nirmal's proposal, several discussions and consultations began to emerge on the topic of dalit liberation theology resulting in the publication of a number of books and articles that addressed the unique oppression facing dalits because of the caste-based social order where their deprived status remained fixed for ages. It became clear that the particular experience of the dalits as the "lowliest of people" had been

[243] Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," 59.

missing from Indian Christian theology.[244] As a result, one of the primary goals included focusing on the "concrete subjectivity" of the dalits, avoiding the "occluding, objectifying and abstract tendencies inherent in theological propositions."[245] In other words, some argued theology's attempt to speak about the poor or poverty *in general* concealed (i.e. excluded) the concrete situations of those living in these conditions and the reasons for their persistence. Thus dalit liberation theology—as a distinct form of contextual, liberation theology—became a necessary corrective in order to speak from, about, and to the particular experience of this group of people. Part of this work included the *inclusion* of dalits in the work for their own liberation and humanity:

> For a Christian Dalit theology…cannot be simply the gaining of the rights, the reservations and privileges. The goal is the realization of our full humanness or conversely, our full divinity, the ideal of the *Imago Dei*, the Image of god in us. To use another biblical metaphor, our goal is the 'glorious liberty of the children of God.'[246]

This meant establishing the subjectivity of dalits to be makers of their own history and of their own political liberation as well. In order for dalits to experience the fullness of this "glorious liberty," they would need to be freed from the oppressive structures that have excluded them, and this can only be accomplished, it is argued, through a particular emphasis on the concrete oppression of dalits in India, and God's preference and desire for their liberation.

The (Exclusive) Preferential Option as Response to Problem of Exclusion

---

[244] James Massey, "A Review of Dalit Theology," in *Dalit and Minjung Theologies: A Dialogue* (Bangalore: South Asia Theological Research Institute, 2006), 4-5.
[245] Saral K. Chatterji, "Why Dalit Theology?" in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College: 1990), 23.
[246] Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," 62.

In closing Part One of this chapter, I want to highlight a particular dynamic in each of these strands of liberation theology: namely the way in which liberationists seek to rectify the oppression and exclusion of certain groups through a preferential option *for* these groups (which we have connected with divine election), in a way that appears to be inherently, or inescapably, "exclusive." In other words, throughout this first part of Chapter Two we can see a kind of exclusivity—whether latent or explicit—begin to emerge in liberation theology's preferential option, namely God's choice *for* a particular group, people, etc. These early liberationists wrestled with the notion that the remedy to the exclusion of oppressed groups entailed some version of "strategic exclusivity" in order to adequately attain liberation. At times we find a certain necessity for exclusive preference, while at others a nervousness about such problematic exclusivity.

Again, the necessity for exclusion emerges in response to the material conditions of oppression. In *Fundamental Ethics: A Liberationinst Approach*, Patricia McAuliffe highlights these conditions of oppression, hegemony, and exclusion:

> Our experience of the world is not one of harmony, order, a God-given plan. Rather it is overwhelmingly one of disharmony, disorder, suffering, oppression. People are being destroyed due to their class, sex, sexual orientation, color, religion, language, because they are "too" old or because they are "handicapped"…; other species and the environment are being destroyed because they are seen as mere means to some people's ends. We are an "already damaged *humanum*" in an already damaged cosmos.[247]

According to McAuliffe, the reality of these structural injustices require or necessitate a paradigm shift in liberationist ethics: "Unless resistance to suffering and oppression is at

---

[247] Patricia McAuliffe, *Fundamental Ethics: A Liberationist Approach* (Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 1993), ix.

the center and core of our ethics, unless it is its *raison d'êre*, then ethics, our ethical lives, ourselves as ethical beings cannot be taken seriously."[248] McAuliffe's point echoes one of the most fundamental tenets of liberationist work: an awareness of systemic oppression and exclusion, the identification of a need for a paradigm shift to adequately address it, and the necessity of making liberation the center of our work.

McAuliffe also reiterates the liberationist conviction that any movement *away* from exclusive preference or priority will always undercut the work for liberation. First, McAuliffe makes the point that choice and preference are inevitable and inescapable (a move that is strikingly resonant with this dissertation, especially the deconstructive work of Chapter One). Furthermore, the more we are convinced that we are not choosing sides, the more likely it is that we are supporting the status quo, i.e. the systemic injustice, oppression, and exclusion that is our structural reality. She writes:

> In spite of the fact that our very historicity implies that we have to take sides, there are situations which create the illusion that: (1) we are being neutral, we are not choosing when, in fact, we do and must choose, or (2) we are being objective in the sense of supporting a value-free situation when the situation we support is but an option which is value-loaded, or (3) we are choosing a universal such as universal love, when we are being partial, choosing to side with some who are in conflict with others. In all these cases, it is when we choose the established order, the structures that are in place, the powers that be, the status quo, that our choice may give the appearance of being objective or universal or simply a neutral nonchoice. *We can give the impression of neutrality, of not choosing at all, because to support the established order is to engage in routine, to move with the flow, to refrain from deliberation and perhaps even to disattend from the situation.*[249]

If "nonchoice" or impartiality is an illusion, McAuliffe argues, then we should be careful and discerning about *which* choices we are making and *what* we are choosing to support.

---

[248] Ibid., x.
[249] Ibid., 62.

More poignantly, McAuliffe stresses the need for ethics to be concrete, and given the fact that the condition we live in is one of "disharmony, disorder, suffering, oppression," those concerned about liberation should recognize that "not choosing at all," or limiting the exclusivity, partiality, or preference of the choice *for* specific, particular oppressed group(s), will only continue to perpetuate these oppressions. We will revisit this point in Part Three, especially as it pertains to her suggestion of the illusion of "choosing a universal such as universal love, when we are being partial, choosing to side with some who are in conflict with others." In so doing, we will address the question: might the need for exclusive preference for the oppressed also be unable to avoid "conflict with others" who are fighting against oppression and injustice, such that we cannot focus on *all* forms of injustice and oppression?

McAuliffe is arguing that in order to gain equality and liberation, in order to work against the injustice of inequality, oppression, marginalization, and exclusion that is the current reality, we might need to be unequal and exclusive, because to do anything less is to merely support the status quo:

> We argued that if there is to be justice, and the love which includes everyone in the benefits of society, we cannot merely treat everyone as though she or he were equal. We must engage in equalizing by favoring the worst off. This is the only means by which we can even approach universal justice and love. Besides, we cannot avoid taking sides. To attempt to be neutral, to do nothing, is to support the structures that are in place; if we do not explicitly side with the oppressed…we will at least implicitly side with oppression.[250]

McAuliffe's point certainly resonates with the consensus among the liberationists we have just surveyed—that the movement away from exclusive preference can become a tacit preference for oppression. In a hierarchical, stratified society, *not* explicitly siding

---

[250] Ibid., 67.

with the oppressed results in implicitly siding with the oppressor. Exclusive preference is necessary for justice, because "equalizing"—or even including—means favoring those currently deprived of justice. "If there is to be justice, and the love which *includes* everyone," then exclusion might be a necessary ingredient.

Liberation theology's insistence that God deals with the problem of exclusion by *choosing* those who have been excluded ensures that those who are excluded will always be God's chosen, while those who are oppressing others are not. Therefore the earliest iterations of liberation theology recognized that moving away from, or reducing divine exclusivity for the oppressed does not adequately deal with oppression and thus can become a tacit preference for the oppressor by keeping the status quo in place; consequently, there appears to be a tacit acknowledgement of the notion that the only way to attain liberation (from oppression and exclusion) is through *exclusive* preference for those on the underside of history. Put differently, the remedy to the problem of exclusion necessitates a strategic, exclusive preference for those excluded.

An awareness of the problem of such exclusivity, however, has always been present in this discourse—especially since the early liberationists recognized that the preferential option was in response to the exclusion of those oppressed. Therefore, on the one hand, the earliest voices in liberation theology tended to be more radical in their claims for God's preference, i.e. that God is favors, chooses, is "on the side of" the poor, oppressed, excluded, etc.; on the other hand, even those like Gutiérrez—who first championed God's preferential option *for* the oppressed—were nervous about exclusion. In a revised edition of his landmark work (almost twenty years later), *A Theology of*

Liberation, Gutiérrez maintains that preference for the poor never meant exclusiveness. He explains why:

> The very word "preference" denies all exclusiveness and seeks rather to call attention to those who are the first—though not the only ones—with whom we should be in solidarity. In the interests of truth and personal honesty I want to say that from the very beginning of liberation theology, as many of my writings show, I insisted that the great challenge was to maintain both the universality of God's love and God's predilection for those on the lowest rung of the ladder of history. To focus exclusively on the one or the other is to mutilate the Christian message. Therefore every attempt at such an exclusive emphasis must be rejected.[251]

Gutiérrez, wrestling with the age-old dilemma in theology and philosophy regarding universality and particularity, recognizes the inherent, inescapable problem of exclusion and attempts to maintain the tension of both by asserting "both the universality of God's love" *and* "God's predilection for those on the lowest rung of the ladder of history." In so doing, Gutiérrez clarifies that his goal in liberation theology was never to advocate God's *exclusive* preference to the poor, but to show *priority* for those economically oppressed. The question that remains for us to pursue, however, is whether "every attempt" to reject exclusivity can succeed, even if/when it is problematic.

Even James Cone, whose poignant application of liberation theology and the preferential option in an American context led to bold claims about God's exclusive preference for African-Americans in the United States, admits significant "limitations" in his early work. In the "Preface to the 1986 Edition" of *A Black Theology of Liberation* (a similar revision some fifteen years later), Cone acknowledges "his failure to be receptive to the problem of sexism in the black community and society as a whole," and that it was such a "glaring limitation" and "failure" that he "could not reissue this volume without

---

[251] Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxv–xxvi.

making a note of it and without changing the exclusive language of the 1970 edition to inclusive language."[252] He also admits a failure to incorporate "a global analysis of oppression" by limiting his focus to the North American context and the absence of a more focused analysis of economic and class oppression.[253] Ultimately, Cone recognizes that "an exclusive focus on racial injustice" without a more "comprehensive analysis of its links" with other forms of oppression, i.e. sexism, neo-colonialism, capitalism, etc., was problematic because it illustrated both a limitation and failure on his part.[254] And liberationists are keen to the problem of exclusivity, precisely because their work is aimed at rectifying it.

A similar nervousness about Christian exclusivity can be seen in the work of LGBTQ liberationists. Part of the work here is to position the "universalist, fluid, 'Christian' and queer Jesus" against an exclusive, heteropatriarchal understanding of Christianity.[255] Robert Shore-Goss describes how "Jesus breaks many culturally religious laws and conventions…He proclaimed the wild grace of God that stepped outside the ghettoized boundaries of his religious community that the exclusivist gatekeepers so violently protected."[256] For Goss, a liberationist understanding of Christianity offers a critique of exclusion, especially the kind of exclusivity found in a Christianity that excludes LGBTQ people.

The question we will pursue in Part Three, however, is to what extent the problem of exclusion is somehow inescapable, and even necessary, for the work of liberation.

---

[252] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, xx.
[253] Ibid., xx–xxi.
[254] Ibid., xxii.
[255] Tonstad, "The Limits of Inclusion: Queer Theology and Its Others," 3.
[256] Robert E. Shore-Goss, "The Holy Spirit as Mischief-Maker," in *Queering Christianity: Finding a Place at the Table for LGBTQI Christians*, ed. Robert E. Shore-Goss (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013), 102.

Here we see, in some of liberation theology's earliest and foundational voices, one of the major issues that we are driving at in this chapter (and that subsequent liberation theologians will continue to engage): how an exclusive preference for one group, people, problem, issue, injustice can be problematic yet necessary, especially in terms of the liberation these theologies strive for.

Part Two: Liberationist Critique and Attempted Remedy of the Exclusivity of the Preferential Option

In Part Two, we will now explore some more recent liberationist work that goes further in its examination of the problem of exclusivity in the preferential option. Here we will see that the problem is not necessarily the way the oppressors are excluded in the divine preferential option (though there appears to be some concern about a general universality or inclusivity), but the way in which exclusive preference for one oppressed group can be to the exclusion of *other* oppressed groups.

Doubling Down on Particularity to Remedy Exclusivity: A Womanist Response to Black Liberation Theology

As we have seen, an identification of the problem of exclusion in liberation theologies has been present from the very beginning, but in the ensuing decades, liberation theologians and ethicists began to hone in on the exclusionary nature of the preferential option, critiquing notions of God's exclusive preference for one oppressed group at the expense of others, and thus mimicking the exclusivity of the status quo

liberationists are trying to remedy. One such critique of the exclusivity of liberation theology can be found in the womanist response of Delores S. Williams. In *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Williams reflects on her increasing awareness of the exclusion of *black women* in black liberation (as well as feminist)[257] theologies, noting that "what the sources presented as 'black experience' was really black male experience."[258] In other words, *black* liberation theology was not particular enough, because it still silenced, marginalized, and thus continued to oppress African-American *women's* perspective, experience, and voice by assuming that "black" was able to capture the entirety of African-American experience (male and female). What Williams is doing here is pushing further with one of liberation theology's major tenets, and, in so doing, critiquing black liberation theology by "doubling down" on particularity. Cone—and other early liberationists in a similar way—argued that black liberation theology must emerge as a response to *white* theology that assumes and exclusively privileges a *white* perspective and experience, which, Cone adds, would include the inherent racism of this perspective. The real problem, however, is that *white* theology (i.e. theology from a white perspective) is masked because it is only presented as "theology," which reveals the

---

[257] Although Williams challenges both black liberation *and* feminist theology's exclusion of African-American women's perspective(s), we will focus mainly on the former here because of the way these two discourses unfold and develop, especially in their relationship to the topic of this dissertation: exclusivity in divine election. As we have seen, liberation theology's emphasis on the preferential option, as a form of divine election, represents a pertinent example of problematic exclusivity in theology; feminist theology, on the other hand, did not typically emphasize such an exclusive divine choice for women. Of course, a case could be made for further exploration into the ways in which feminist theologies—especially in their earliest iterations—paralleled a similar move that could be read as exclusive in order to counter women's oppression; but for the sake of clarity of focus we will concentrate predominantly on the way in which these problems manifest themselves in liberation theologies. Ironically, such a *choice* performs and instantiates the very thing this dissertation has set out to explore: the inevitability, necessity, and problematic nature of exclusive choice.

[258] Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Orbis Boks, 1995), 1.

dynamic in which the dominant perspective need not be named. Thus black liberation theology must emerge as a response not just to *white* theology, but to "theology" (in general), because the latter really is the former. Williams, therefore, is arguing similarly: *black* liberation theology only names and identifies the (male) racial experience and perspective, not the gendered experience and perspective, which, in a patriarchal society, means that women's perspective and voice gets silenced, marginalized, and hence *excluded*. Thus *womanist* theology must emerge as a response to black liberation theology as a "Christian theology from the point of view of African-American women."[259] Naturally—as feminist and liberation theologies have argued for decades—when what was once silenced is now given voice and *included*, there are significant theological implications, and Williams points out the difference this change in perspective makes theologically.

In *Sisters in the Wilderness*, Williams identifies biblical interpretation as one of the key challenges womanist theology presents to black liberation theology, specifically the way in which black liberation theologies have emphasized *liberation* in their reading of the Bible. Williams uses Hagar as the critical lens with which to challenge such an emphasis on liberation: "A womanist rereading of the biblical Hagar-Sarah texts in relation to African-American women's experience raises a serious question about its use as a source validating black liberation theology's normative claim of God's liberating activity in behalf of *all* the oppressed."[260] Through this womanist reading, Williams highlights how the oppressed do not always experience God's liberation, as seen in the

[259] Ibid.
[260] Ibid., 144.

case of Hagar. Black liberation theology's error, according to Williams, is that it has too readily identified with Sarah, and has failed to acknowledge the perspective of the "oppressed of the oppressed."[261] Therefore to read the bible, or make theological assertions, with a core assumption of liberation (as liberation theology does) only further marginalizes and excludes those who are already doubly oppressed—in this case, African-American women. Williams thus suggests an "additional hermeneutical posture—one that allows [black liberation theology] to become conscious of what has been made invisible in the text and to see that their work is in collusion with this 'invisibilization' of black women's experience," which might enable black liberation theologians to read critically against their own (i.e. male) perspective.[262] Instead of a reading that understands the African-American community's relationship to Sarah (who is one of the elect), Williams focuses on the Hagar texts in order to "demonstrate that the oppressed and abused do not always experience God's liberating power," and, in so doing, reveals a "non-liberative thread running through the Bible."[263] The importance of recognizing—and even identifying with—those who have been silenced in the biblical text is in order to see the "oppressed of the oppressed in scripture," those whose situation is most analogous to black women.[264] Consequently, black liberation theology would recognize that its core assumption of liberation at the center of Christianity actually functions to perpetuate oppression of African-American women. In terms of reducing the exclusivity of black liberation theology, Williams proposes that "wilderness experience"

---

[261] Ibid., 149.
[262] Ibid.
[263] Ibid., 144.
[264] Ibid., 149.

is more appropriate to describe African-American experience because it "expands the content" and is more "inclusive."[265]

Williams' point here is particularly relevant, not only in the way it highlights the latent problem of exclusion—through the silencing of African-American women's perspective—in liberation theology, but also its connection with divine election; and still more pertinent because of *how* such exclusivity is navigated. According to Williams, black liberation theology's identification with Sarah—whom God is partial to because of Jewish election—has resulted in the further exclusion of black women as the oppressed of the oppressed. Williams thus suggests identifying with the non-Hebrew (Hagar in this case), in order to avoid excluding black women. The move, then, on the one hand, is seemingly toward a more *inclusive* theology—one that does not exclude the lived realities and experiences of black women—but is only accomplished by being *more* particular.

Womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas argues similarly against the exclusionary tendencies of liberation theology that womanist theology has identified. Drawing on Alice Walker's definition of a womanist, Douglas recounts finding solace in the commitment "to survival and wholeness of an entire people, male *and* female."[266] There is still the particular emphasis on African-Americans, and even more particularly women, yet Douglas asserts: "Womanist theology must make clear that authentic knowledge is not that which fosters any form of oppressive power. On the contrary, it is that which challenges dominating power, including the complex discourses that help

---

[265] Ibid., 158–60.

[266] Kelly Brown Douglas, "Twenty Years a Womanist: An Affirming Challenge," in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 145.

maintain such power."[267] Douglas thus argues that womanist work has broadened its scope to include the dismantling of *all* oppressive structures and forces, in whatever form they may appear—including those of black liberation theology where the emphasis on race neglects the double-oppression African-American women face.

Douglas and Williams offer a strident womanist critique of liberation theology's emphasis on (divine) preference for one group and the way that has excluded other oppressed groups, namely the doubly oppressed, i.e. African American women. Turning liberation theology's best intentions back on itself, they identify that it is exclusive precisely to the extent that it is not particular enough: "black" actually works to silence those within the African-American community who are oppressed. In other words, "black"—as a category, label, identity—is not *particular* enough to account for the varied experiences and perspectives within that label, and thus womanist work attempts to give voice to African-American women and "construct Christian theology" from that point of view.[268] Of course, race and gender are not the only two markers—or even the two most important, one might argue—to account for any one experience, nor does any person comfortably inhabit any of these categories in any stable way. Consequently, more recent work in feminist, womanist, and other liberation theologies has identified intersectionality, hybridity, and multiple sites of oppression and privilege that complicate earlier work in liberation theology that assumed categories like "poor," "black," "woman," "gay," etc. could be stable enough to cohere. We will explore some of this

---

[267] Ibid., 147–48.
[268] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, 1.

more recent work below, especially as it pertains to the focus of our present investigation into the problem of exclusion.

What is interesting, however, at least about the womanist work we have just surveyed, is the way in which the problem of exclusion—i.e. the exclusion, silencing, marginalization of African-American women inherent in the category "black"—is navigated. It appears that the only way to account for the experience that is silenced in the broad category (i.e. black) is to name said experience (i.e. womanist) more particularly. To put it differently, to be more "inclusive" one might need to be more "particular," because, as we have just seen, broad, universal categories cannot capture the more specific experiences of those on the bottom rung of society. Thus we see a counter-intuitive dynamic at work: broadening might mean being more specific, otherwise those who are silenced, marginalized, and oppressed will always remain so. This is the very nature of marginalization and oppression: the dominant perspective normalizes and hides itself, in order to remain in power. For example, "theology," without any prefix or indicator, assumes an objective, universal viewpoint; but as liberationists argue, all theology is contextual: "The idea of theologizing from a position of complete 'objectivity' is a myth constructed to protect the privileged space of those with the power to determine how the discipline is to be defined. In short, objectivity is the dominant culture's subjectivity."[269] Thus, anything "other than" the dominant perspective (e.g. white, male, Western, European, heterosexual, etc.) warrants an adjectival label: e.g. African American/black, Womanist, Latino/a, Native American, etc. In other words, because "the center is secured," all other theologies are understood as deviating from this

[269] Dr Miguel A. De La Torre, ed., *Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation* (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2004), 2.

male, Western, Euro-centric norm, and consequently, understood as less authoritative, significant, important, etc., which only perpetuates the oppression.

Thus some liberationist—including womanist—work suggest a move toward greater and greater particularity in order to limit or avoid exclusivity. The real question, however, is whether or not this move toward particularity also entails a kind of exclusivity of its own. In other words, does the remedy to exclusion, i.e. giving voice to the marginalized through more concrete particularity, always entail some version of exclusivity itself? Additionally, does multiplying and increasing the particularities "solve" the problem of exclusive preference, by being able to somehow *include* all particularities?

Problem of Essentialist Notions of God's Preference

Part of the problem that more recent work in liberation theology has identified is an essentialist notion of God's preference, leading to identity politics and competing claims for divine favor among oppressed groups, which has, consequently, undermined the liberationist work for oppressed groups. In an essay entitled, "Subalterns, Identity Politics and Christian Theology in India," Sathianathan Clarke challenges the parochial nature of contextual liberation theologies—and their tendency toward exclusivity—through an investigation of dalit and tribal theology in India.

Clarke begins his essay by describing a trip to a dalit community in South India in which he and his class experienced firsthand the many layers of divisions in this Indian village. He writes: "To begin with there was the caste community and the dalit

community partition…Then, as is true of much of rural India, there was the intra-dalit community division…Finally, and also quite characteristic of Indian social life, there was the dalit community and the Adivasi community separation."[270] In other words, not only did they observe intra-dalit segregation, but they also noted division between the dalit community and the Adivasi community, another oppressed and marginalized group in the village. Clarke reflects upon these divisions: "The Irrullar, an outcast Adivasi community, was considered so low in rank and status that they were also looked down upon by the dalits."[271] Clarke found these kinds of divisions, and even inter/intra-group animosities, to be disheartening, but unfortunately not atypical. Though he admits that much has been achieved in contextual liberation theology since the 1980s, Clarke still concludes: "Dalit Christian communities may have concretized and contextualized the Christian gospel into their own particular historical context but this has not enabled them to broaden the scope of this good news to build community solidarity with similar oppressed communities."[272] Contextual liberation theology, especially in India, may have properly responded to the initial call, but Clarke maintains that it is time to consider taking these theological expressions in a new direction.

Pointing to the ways that oppressed communities outside the caste society exclude one another, Clarke calls for a re-examination of Indian Christian theology that, among other things, allows for a "roomier conception of community" and "is less prone to becoming insular."[273] This leads Clarke to ask pressing questions about the connection

---

[270] Sathianathan Clarke, "Subalterns, Identity Politics and Christian Theology in India," in *Christian Theology in Asia*, ed. Sebastian C. H. Kim (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 271–72.
[271] Ibid., 272.
[272] Ibid., 273.
[273] Ibid., 274.

between the particularizing of theology and its propensity toward such parochialism and exclusivity. Part of the way he addresses this is by looking specifically at the ways theology has linked God preferentially with *one* marginalized community at the expense of other oppressed communities for whom God might have the same preference, and with whom it might be beneficial to build solidarity.

Clarke recognizes the need for such theological particularity given how hegemony operates. Utilizing the work of Antonio Gramsci on the "subaltern," Clarke highlights how the dominating elite weaves convincing, all-embracing worldviews making oppression acceptable and even meaningful for the oppressed. This works to legitimize the conditions of domination by offering a rationale for the dominated to actually participate in their own domination.[274] Theology, it seems, has the propensity to serve the purposes of hegemony. In response to this, liberation theology counters such tendencies by calling for a preferential option for the poor, oppressed, excluded.

The problem with liberation theology's solution, for Clarke, is that "God's preferential option is actualized in *essentialist* terms," which leads to further exclusion of other oppressed groups.[275] Essentialism is a hotly-debated topic in the fields of race, gender, sexuality, and postcolonial studies. Feminist literary critic Diana Fuss defines essentialism as "a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity."[276] Determining the true essence entails discovering these inherent and unchanging properties, because they constitute the most fundamental aspects of the entity's core identity. These essential characteristics

---

[274] Ibid., 275.
[275] Ibid., 276 (emphasis mine).
[276] Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), xi.

must therefore be universally present in all instances of a given object, person, thing, etc.[277] In critical race and gender studies, such essential properties can be used to distinguish one race or gender from another, and within postcolonial theory essentialism has referred to the notion that individuals share an essential cultural identity.[278]

The critique of essentialism by feminist and postcolonial theorists has been influenced by the work on language and identity in post-structuralist theorists such as Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, and Michel Foucault. These critiques gave rise to constructionism, which, in responsive opposition to essentialism, insists that "essence" is a cultural or historical construction and thus rejects the idea that any essential precedes the processes of social determination. As Fuss explains, ultimately it is a question of the *natural* vs. the *social*: "The difference in philosophical positions can be summed up by Ernest Jones's question: 'Is woman born or made?'"[279] In postcolonial studies, the political purpose of anti-essentialism includes exposing "the falsity of this mode of representing the colonial subject as an 'other' to the Self of the dominant colonial culture."[280] Similarly, some feminist theorists critique essentialism because it legitimizes women's historical subordination to men by making it seem like a natural fact, rather than a cultural product. Women, like the colonial "other," become defined in opposition to the dominant type—in this case men or "the masculine"—and thus have no identity of their own. More importantly, feminists point out that these essential properties are simply inaccurate because they fail to account for the complex reality of women's lives.[281]

---

[277] Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 25.
[278] Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds., *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, 2 edition (Routledge, 2001), 77.
[279] Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, 3.
[280] Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies*, 78.
[281] Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 29.

Defined in this way, essentialism is rejected outright by many feminist and postcolonial theorists.[282]

By critiquing liberation theology's employment of God's preferential option in "essentialist terms," Clarke is arguing against exclusive priority in terms of a stable, ethnic identity; in other words, that dalits receive God's preference because of some essential characteristic (i.e. experience, ethnicity, caste position, etc.). As we have already seen, such divine preference in terms of some essential quality or trait has been problematic because of its inherent exclusion. Therefore, Clarke contends that Indian Christian theology interpret God's preferential option for dalits more "in terms of process" and *not* some essential characteristic. Clarke writes: "Thus, in advocating God as preferentially opting to covenant with subalterns we are stressing that God is aligned with the *activity* of people who participate in countering hegemony and embracing their own authentic freedom and dignity."[283]

Clarke maintains that interpreting God's favor in essentialist terms "negates the dynamic that was initiated and mediated by Jesus as the Christ."[284] In Clarke's analysis, part of what Jesus inaugurated was a new understanding of the covenant, ending the "traditional" understanding of God's preference with a certain people in terms of ethnicity. God's presence is now experienced and expressed through the "dynamic movement of people struggling for life and liberty."[285] In other words, we come to know

---

[282] Other postcolonial theories, including Gayatri Spivak, have advocated for a "strategic essentialism," pointing to its usefulness for struggles of liberation. See: Gayatri Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Spivak*, eds. Donna Landry and Gerald Maclean (New York: Routledge, 1996): 203-236.
[283] Clarke, "Subalterns, Identity Politics and Christian Theology in India," 276–77.
[284] Ibid., 276.
[285] Ibid., 277.

that God is on our side by *participating* in the cooperative struggle, alongside God. Hence, there can be no claim to an "ontological privilege" (based on some essential characteristic or identity) in one's relationship with God, but "rather, claiming God is conceived of as participating in God's working."[286] Even though God is the same God for any who would participate in the struggle, Clarke makes the point that those who are oppressed—in this case, dalits—are typically the ones who want to subvert unjust structures; they will more likely join in God's working for freedom and life. Thus, Clarke contends that this kind of "participatory knowing" assuages concerns about God's preference for a particular group, to the exclusion of others, yet remains contextual and liberative because the oppressed "will inevitably take the side of God" and therefore receive God's favor.[287]

Clarke's proposal negotiates the tension in liberation theology's preferential option by confronting the way it excludes other oppressed groups, while retaining its liberative and contextual character. Clarke shows how liberation theology's greatest strength—its preferential option for the poor, oppressed, marginalized, excluded—can present its own issues of exclusion and parochialism as oppressed communities claim *the* essential characteristic that leads to God's favor. Clarke summarizes: "For the dalits, Adivasis and the other oppressed communities, this theological position, which does not presuppose the privileging of any human collective in terms of their ethnic reality, is a move away from the hierarchical mindset that leads to claims of exclusive priority of God's favor."[288] In other words, *the problem* is the inherent exclusion of the preferential

---

[286] Ibid.
[287] Ibid.
[288] Ibid.

option. But rather than abandon God's preferential option altogether, Clarke understands it in terms of participation rather than identity. God is on the side of those who join in the struggle for liberation, freedom, and life. And since those who are oppressed are more likely to—or even "inevitably will"—participate in God's working, God's preference is still more germane to dalits.

Although Clarke offers a viable response to the problem of competing, exclusive claims among oppressed groups, what we intend to investigate even further in Part Three is whether Clarke's proposal—or *any* alternative—can escape a certain kind of exclusivity altogether? Does Clarke's proposal *exclude* those who do not participate in the struggle for liberation? Is there a hidden anti-Semitism in Clarke's critique of God's choosing a group/people "in terms of their ethnic identity"? In other words, is there an inescapable, necessary exclusivity in liberationist work?

Exclusivity—and Particularity—Undercuts Work for Justice

Many liberation theologians and ethicists echo Clarke's concern for competition over exclusive divine preference and the damaging effects that has for the work of liberation. Liberation ethicist Miguel De La Torre argues that liberative work "should not be conducted from only one marginalized perspective," as is the case when an oppressed group claims God's exclusive preference, because "keeping the marginalized groups separated insures and protects the power and privilege of the dominant culture."[289] In fact, black liberation ethicist Darryl Trimiew argues that "the refusal of various liberation

[289] Miguel A. De La Torre, *Doing Christian Ethics From the Margins* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2004), 18–19.

movements to concern themselves with the fates of others is the self-issued death warrant of these moral movements."[290]

Theologian and cultural critic Thandeka notes that keeping oppressed communities at odds with each other is a well-oiled "divide and conquer strategy" of the dominant position. Using the history of colonial America to illustrate this point, Thandeka highlights how wealthy white Virginians prevented poor whites from building natural allegiances to black slaves (with whom they had a shared economic plight), by infusing racist laws and endowing whites with privileges over blacks.[291] Prior to this, the white ex-indentured servant were an oppressed and despised group, considered to be the "rabble of Virginia."[292] But white masters' fear of an uprising of the oppressed—by both poor whites and black slaves—"required a new strategy for social control, for the affinities between indentured servants and slaves presented a danger to the masters…With a swelling slave population, the masters faced the prospect of white freeman with 'disappointed hopes' joining forces with slaves of 'desperate hope' to mount ever more virulent rebellions."[293] The "solution," argues Thandeka, was "the sinister design of racism," which fostered a division among these oppressed groups and thus protected the power of elite whites by seducing poor whites into despising newly freed blacks, whom they should have been in solidarity with. Liberationists, like De La Torre, point out that such insight about the machinations of domination is something that we should take seriously: "Then, as now, the dominant culture's privilege is maintained

---

[290] Darryl M. Trimiew, "Ethics," in *Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation*, ed. Miguel A. De La Torre (St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2004), 108.
[291] Thandeka, *Learning to Be White: Money, Race and God in America* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2000), 46.
[292] Ibid., 43.
[293] Ibid., 45.

because different marginalized groups fight with limited resources for black justice, Latino/a justice, Amerindian justice, gender justice, Asian-American justice, and so on."[294] Thus, when one group claims *exclusive* (divine) preference, the end-result actually maintains the power of the dominant position because the various oppressed groups are all fighting with each other.

The problem becomes even more complicated when we also realize, as other recent work has pointed out, that these identities (e.g. black, African-American, Caribbean, Latino/a, Hispanic, etc.) are constructions that the dominant culture has used to separate, oppress, and marginalize that which is "Other." Sociologist Manuel Mejido Costoya notes that "the plurality of perspectives that attempt to grapple with the coming of age of U.S. Hispanic reality—Chicano, borderland, Latino/a, poco, diasporic, feminista, mujerista, etc.—lack a common root or ground."[295] This "fragmentation, that is the U.S. Hispanic mestiza/o reality" results in a lack of unity, "which fragments and turns mujerista vs. feminista, east vs. west, etc."[296] In other words, the attempt to be more particular and true to the realities of the experience of an oppressed group that denies the label (e.g. "Latino") the dominant culture imposes, has the unintended result of only maintaining the separation and fragmentation of those oppressed and marginalized, which perpetuates the oppression. Again, any theological understanding of God's preference for any one of these groups (or sub-groups) only reinforces a divide-and-conquer strategy that continues to keep liberation out of the hands of the oppressed.

---

[294] Torre, *Doing Christian Ethics From the Margins*, 20.
[295] Manuel Mejido Costoya, "Rethinking Liberation," in *Rethinking Latino(a) Religion & Identity* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006).
[296] Ibid.

Moreover, this critique raises questions over the value of being even more particular in liberation work, as was the case with the womanist response to black liberation theology. We should recall that part of Cone's analysis of (white) theology was that by not naming the dominant perspective (i.e. "white") it perpetuated the exclusion of "other" perspectives, thus black liberation theology emerged in response to the exclusion of a black perspective. The womanist work of Delores Williams pushed even further by asserting that "black" was not particular enough to account for the experience of black women—the doubly oppressed—and thus needed to become even more particular, in order to be less exclusive. But the above critiques seem to propose that a lack of unity among oppressed groups can also perpetuate oppression, which suggests that particularity can be both resource and poison, thus only further complicating the work for liberation.

What we see emerging in these critiques of exclusionary preference is the dynamic that has been at the fore throughout this entire dissertation: does choice—or even preference—necessarily, and problematically, exclude? In light of this complexity, feminist ethicist Kate Ott raises this question in terms of work for justice: "How do we better integrate our justice work so we are not advocating for one issue over and against another, but out of an awareness of and commitment to ending all oppression/injustice? Said more directly, when we choose one 'justice' to focus on (because of our identity affiliation), are we in turn doing injustice to others?"[297] These questions emerge as Ott discusses specific concerns for justice, i.e. feminist, sexual, reproductive, etc. In order to illustrate the issue and present a remedy, Ott walks us through a reading of Jesus'

---

[297] Kate M. Ott, "Feminism and Justice: Who We Are, What We Do," in *Faith, Feminism, and Scholarship: The Next Generation*, ed. Melanie L. Harris and Kate M. Ott (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 38.

encounter with the Syrophoenician/Canaanite woman in the Gospels, where we find Jesus' infamous denial of healing and seemingly insensitive response about being sent only to the lost sheep of Israel and taking the children's food and throwing it to the dogs. Ott suggests a reading that relates Jesus' response to this woman's plea for justice in a similar way to ours: "There is only so much justice one person can do, and [Jesus] has a tall order just dealing with his own community. We do the same thing…we parcel out what resources we have (monetary, time, interest) based on proximity of those in need, entitlement toward those like us, and safety of our own self and community."[298] But through the encounter with the Syrophoenician/Canaanite woman, Jesus realizes the limits he placed on his ministry and the injustice that resulted. Jesus' experiential frame limited his understanding of justice; but once challenged by this woman he realized "he had to push beyond the limits of *who* he had thus far included."[299] Ott argues that this story teaches us about ourselves, our limits on who gets included in our understandings of "justice," and the ways in which we can push beyond such limits through challenging encounters to our experiential frame. Thus Ott suggests that we "should be erasing modifiers of justice," because "when we base justice work on categories of oppression, we may easily fall prey to saving some people's daughters without working to change the world so all daughters have a chance at a fulfilled and healthy life."[300]

Ott's point is well taken, and offers another significant critique of the problem of exclusive preference for one group or form of "justice." Those who work for justice need to continually check our limits, push beyond them, become increasingly aware of

---

[298] Ibid., 40–41.
[299] Ibid., 42.
[300] Ibid., 42–43.

injustice, lessen and avoid exclusion and violence as much as possible. We need to continue to become aware of our ignorance, exclusions, "other-ings," stereotypes, privileges, limited worldviews, racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc. As we have also seen, however, recognizing and attempting to remedy the exclusivity of the preferential option is not easily navigated, as some are calling for more and more particularity (in order to be more inclusive), while others are suggesting less particularity. Already, then, we see that any attempt to remedy exclusion, and focus on liberation and justice, is complicated. As I will go on to show in Part Three, the complication might not just be disagreement over finding the right solution to the problem of exclusion, but whether or not a solution to the problem is possible—i.e. might the remedy to the problem of exclusion entail some version of exclusivity?

As we have seen, from its earliest iterations liberationists have been concerned about the problem of exclusion. Gutiérrez and Cone, two of the earliest voices in this discourse, both identified the problematic ways that the preferential option could be understood as too exclusive, and, in revised editions of their landmark works, clarified or corrected previous claims in order to counter this trend. Subsequent work in liberation theology and ethics has also focused on the problem of exclusion, particularly the way oppressed groups continue to be excluded when preference for one is employed. Again, in the spirit of diving deeper into the problem of exclusion, those concerned about justice and liberation should take these critiques seriously and recognize the way(s) in which such exclusivity is problematic. In other words, Part Two affirms the perennial problem of exclusion in liberation theologies. If exclusion is one of the primary problems

liberationist work intends to remedy, then any exclusivity is problematic, especially continued exclusion of those oppressed.

Part Three: Exclusion as Inescapable Problem for Liberation

We have seen liberationists navigate the problem of exclusion since the beginning. Our task in this last section is to probe *further* into the problem by asking to what extent a certain kind of exclusivity might be inescapable or necessary for liberation, even though it is clearly problematic, which will mean that exclusion cannot be avoided because liberationist work entails navigating some form it. Highlighting this predicament is the real "constructive" work of this chapter.

Since its inception, liberation theology has recognized how minimizing divine exclusivity for the oppressed does not adequately deal with oppression because of how it becomes a tacit preference for the oppressor by keeping the (oppressive, exclusive) status quo in place. In other words, early liberationists recognized the need for a "strategic" exclusivity *for those excluded*, which suggests excluding the oppressor or oppressive context, system, etc.—a form of exclusion that most liberationists would readily acknowledge, even if not explicitly. In Part Two, we highlighted more recent liberationists who pushed further in their critique of exclusionary preference for one group, as a corrective to the ways it has perpetuated hegemony, oppression, and the exclusion of other oppressed groups. What we seek to do now is simply highlight the limitations of identifying exclusion "in general" as the problem, especially when a certain kind of (problematic) strategic exclusivity might be necessary for liberation. Besides the

implicit exclusion of the oppressor or oppressive predicament, which appears evident in nearly every strand of liberationist work, what we also seek to explore is the more complicated predicament wherein exclusive preference for one oppressed, marginalized, excluded group (inevitably, necessarily) *excludes* other oppressed, marginalized, excluded groups. This is the real critique marshaled in Part Two, and we will also seek to highlight the inescapability of this form of exclusivity in liberationist work.

"We Must Make Decisions"

If early liberationist work has accurately identified the nature of oppression, and that anything less than (divine) exclusive preference for those oppressed and excluded will only continue to perpetuate the status quo, is it inevitable that such preference will run up against limits that will necessarily exclude other oppressed groups? If "we cannot avoid taking sides"—because to do so merely perpetuates the exclusive oppression inherent in the status quo—*whose* side do we take, especially when we recognize that categories like "oppressed" are too broad, not particular or concrete enough, let alone stable and definitive?[301] In other words, can there ever be a preference for "the oppressed," as a general category—or does such a category insinuate that we are losing the particularity that liberationist work has so accurately identified as necessary in order to disrupt the status quo of oppression? Is it inevitable that in liberationist work we must be partial, "choosing to side with some who are in conflict with others," even when those "others" are also oppressed?[302] Perhaps the work for liberation requires that we must

[301] McAuliffe, *Fundamental Ethics*, 67.
[302] Ibid., 62.

choose and prioritize, even when such choices might be exclusive, and thus problematic. Additionally, such choices might not be able to account for all forms of injustice, and, even worse, might even oppose *other* liberationist work.

As we have seen, in the 1986 preface of *A Black Theology of Liberation*, James Cone admits limitations to exclusive preference for African-Americans. At the same time, however, he also affirms that his "view of white theology is generally the same today as it was in 1970."[303] Cone writes:

> I was determined to speak a liberating word for and to African-American Christians, using the theological resources at my disposal. I did not have time to do the theological and historical research needed to present a "balanced" perspective on the problem of racism in America. Black men, women, and children were being shot and imprisoned for asserting their right to a dignified existence. Others were wasting away in ghettoes, dying from filth, rats, and dope, as white and black ministers preached about a blond, blue-eyed Jesus who came to make us all just like him. I *had* to speak a different word, not just as a black person but primarily as a *theologian*. I felt then, as I still do, that if theology had nothing to say about black suffering and resistance, I could not be a theologian.[304]

Cone's reflection upon the exigency of the situation facing the black community, which compelled him to "speak a different word"—i.e. "a liberating word" in the midst of oppression—reflects the sentiment that liberation demands a radical break from the status quo.[305] The situation was so dire that he did not have the luxury or time to present a "balanced" perspective on racism. Although, upon further reflection, he can admit some limitations to this earlier work (i.e. that racism was not the only form of oppression in the United States), he stands by the fact that he felt an obligation to "speak forcefully and truthfully about the reality of black suffering and of God's empowerment of blacks to

---

[303] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, xix.

[304] Ibid., xvi.

[305] Unfortunately, some thirty years later, the situation of racism in the United States is not drastically different than what Cone depicts here. In that case, we should genuinely ask whether there is a similar kind of exigency, and, necessity to "speak a different word."

resist it," especially because "theology" (i.e. *white* theology) was tacitly endorsing and perpetuating racism and *its* unjust exclusivity.[306] Cone thus reflects about having to make difficult—i.e. exclusive—choices, in light of this. Clarifying that his goal was never to make black theology "acceptable to white racists and their sympathizers," he maintains: "Theology is not only a rational discourse about ultimate reality; it is also a prophetic word about the righteousness of God that must be spoken in clear, strong, and uncompromising language."[307] For Cone, the "prophetic word" meant speaking truth to "white theologians who defined the discipline of theology" and reinscribing the centrality of God's liberation in Christianity, pointing out the heresy of racism, and exposing "white theology for what it was: a racist, theological justification of the status quo."[308] In his estimation, only a radical break with the status quo (i.e. "white theology" and its exclusion of everything non-white) can begin the necessary work for liberation and justice. As Cone says, "it was not time to be polite, but rather a time to speak the truth with love, courage, and care for the masses of blacks."[309] The "truth," for Cone, is the content of black theology, namely "that the liberation of the black community *is* God's liberation," meaning that theology is the process of interpreting God's liberating activity, which concerns, in the context of the United States, racism and the reality of the oppressed black community.[310] And Cone is uncompromising in maintaining that preference *for* the oppressed excludes the oppressor and/or oppressive situation, e.g. "white theology."

---

[306] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, xvi.
[307] Ibid.
[308] Ibid., xvii–xviii.
[309] Ibid., xix.
[310] Ibid., 5.

Moreover, Cone, anticipating an obvious reaction to his bold, particular, definitive—seemingly *exclusive*—claims about God's preference for African-Americans, expects "that some will ask, 'Why *black* theology?'"[311] What about other injustices? Don't others also suffer under oppression? Don't even whites suffer from (certain forms of) oppression, especially in light of more recent work that identifies the multiplicity, hybridity, and complexity of identities and experiences, including the fact that race is not the only category by which people are oppressed? Cone offers several responses to these questions, including his claim that "in a revolutionary situation there can never be nonpartisan theology," that "God is never color-blind" or indifferent to injustice, and even an admission that "there are, to be sure, many who suffer, and not all of them are black."[312] But in the midst of these comments, he offers a telling response: "We *must* make decisions about where God is at work so we can join in the fight against evil."[313] Cone seems to be suggesting that, in the end, we *must* make decisions, even if/when such decisions are problematic, limited, unbalanced, exclusive—perhaps even when they cannot account for, or include, other oppressed peoples, because Cone admits that there are others who are oppressed who are not black. Thus although he recognizes the problematic exclusivity of his claims, the alternative is itself problematic, i.e. the illusion of a non-decision or the less-exclusive choice, because of his concern about how that might serve to perpetuate the oppressions and exclusions that are already so firmly in place. In other words, it might not be a matter of avoiding or remedying exclusion, but

---

[311] Ibid., 6 (emphasis mine).
[312] Ibid., 6–7.
[313] Ibid., 7.

which exclusion are we going to focus on? Cone reflects upon this precarious predicament:

> We are thus placed in an existential situation of freedom in which the burden is on us to make decisions without a guaranteed ethical guide. This is the risk of faith. For the black theologian God is at work in the black community, vindicating black victims of white oppression. It is impossible for the black theologian to be indifferent on this issue. Either God is for blacks in their fight for liberation from white oppressors, or God is not. God cannot be both for us and for white oppressors at the same time.[314]

For Cone, it seems clear that systemic racism places us in a difficult, problematic situation wherein we cannot remain neutral: either we (tacitly) support racism, or we fight against it. And indifference is support because anything *less* than focusing explicitly on racial injustice is also support. On the one hand, this seems to be reiterating what liberationists have said all along; on the other hand, Cone seems to suggest that the explicit focus on *racial* injustice might run up against *other* injustices. And this is where the folks in Part Two have entered the conversation, recognizing the way competing interests among oppressed groups is problematic for the work of liberation, and thus critiqued exclusive preference for one (oppressed group, injustice) at the expense of others. For example, we have already seen, from a womanist perspective, how the focus on racial injustice can silence, marginalize, and further exclude black women, because racial injustice cannot account for patriarchal injustice. Thus for the liberationists in Part Two, the movement is toward multiplying the particularities, or even consolidating and building solidarity amongst those facing injustice, in an attempt to account for the complexity and multiplicity of identities and oppressions.

---

[314] Ibid.

Although Cone recognizes this problematic predicament, he seems to be suggesting a kind of inability to escape it. Put simply, Cone suggests we cannot focus on *all* forms of injustice, oppression, exclusion. And if injustice demands explicit attention for liberation, because anything less will leave the status quo intact and perpetuate injustice, then "we must make decisions" about which injustice to focus on. To the extent that this is the case, it would require a kind of *strategic* exclusivity in liberationist work for particular, concrete forms of injustice, oppression, and exclusion, even when such work might be in conflict with other liberationist work. It must be "exclusive" in order to be effective; yet it must be "strategic" in that it is not absolute, final.

Commitment to Particular Forms of Justice: The Necessity of Prioritizing (and even Opposing)

In the essay, "Is a Womanist a Black Feminist? Marking the Distinctions and Defying Them: A Black Feminist Response," West makes several important points regarding the relationship between womanist and black feminist scholarship; but there is one brief point toward the end of the essay that is especially pertinent to our present focus. In discussing her work on violence against black women, West states that such work entails *prioritizing* women's safety and well-being:

> My work on the experience of intimate violence against black women requires the privileging of support for their wholeness. It involves my adamant opposition to maintaining silence about black male violence against them, a silence that is too often demanded out of concern for what image of black people descriptions of this black male violence might invoke in the minds of white people. Because my allegiance to women's wholeness takes priority, the womanist commitment to the wholeness of the black community as an expression of its communalism would not necessarily be an essential goal for me. Also, my liberationist commitments to pointing out the problem of black male clergy who sexually harass women congregants, or my identification of state sanction for and church blessings of

> same-sex marriage as a civil rights cause blacks must champion, may generate divisiveness that violates womanist notions of black communal unity.[315]

Here West admits that womanist commitments to black communalism and unity—in order to fight the injustice of racism in the United States—ran up against her own commitments to the safety and wholeness of black *women*. Thus, West's "adamant opposition" to silence about black male violence against women may have violated womanist concerns about black unity. In other words, West acknowledges that her allegiance to *women's* wholeness must take "priority" over her allegiance to "black communal unity." Put differently, West recognizes that the commitment to black unity and the protection of black men's image because of racial injustice was in conflict with her commitment to women's wholeness because of the injustice of intimate violence. For West, at some point these commitments part ways, and then a difficult choice must be made: *which* commitment takes priority? It appears that we cannot have it both ways, for a both/and approach—as is the common response to the problematic nature of complex identities, intersectionality, identity politics, etc.—will not work. In this case, West identifies that priority *must* be shown in order to adequately work against the injustice of intimate violence against black women. Such is the imbricated nature of oppression and injustice, whose boundaries are not easily identified.

In "Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing," Andrea Smith corroborates the complicated terrain of oppression and the work for liberation by highlighting the complex machinations of white supremacy and the limits of previous attempts to engage it. Smith writes: "the premise

---

[315] Traci C. West, "Is a Womanist a Black Feminist? Marking the Distinctions and Defying Them," in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 294.

behind much 'women of color' organizing is that women from communities victimized by white supremacy should unite together around their shared oppression."[316] But this approach is limited, Smith argues, because "it tends to presume that our communities have been impacted by white supremacy in the same way" and "that all of our communities share similar strategies for liberation," when, in fact, "our strategies often run into conflict."[317] In other words, Smith points out that because of the complexity of oppression—in this case, white supremacy—oppressed groups often become complicit in the further oppression of other oppressed groups. Outlining what she calls the logic of three pillars of white supremacy, Smith highlights how victims of one pillar of white supremacy become complicit in white supremacy by being "seduced with the prospect of being able to participate in the other pillars."[318] Smith argues that such complexity must further heighten the vigilance needed in order to address injustice and oppression—a point that I have been trying to make throughout this dissertation.

Thus, West's distinction among priorities raises an important issue for liberationists to reckon with: might the necessary work for liberation demand such difficult decisions, choices, and priorities? Might (concrete) liberation entail a kind of specificity, particularity, and even exclusivity that runs up against *other* commitments—even "adamant opposition" to them (as West admits)?

Of course, the complexities continue to multiply, and I must address at least one more layer to this problem. I raise the above questions bearing in mind the pertinent

---

[316] Andrea Smith, "Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Women of Color Organizing," in *Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology*, ed. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2006), 66.
[317] Ibid., 67.
[318] Ibid., 69.

warning West highlights in the opening of her book *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter*: "The inevitability of conflict over moral issues seems to grant permission to wound those one opposes by targeting and trampling the most vulnerable, manipulating those who are least informed and most fearful, and doing whatever else seems necessary to claim moral superiority and power over others."[319] This is an extremely pertinent point, and I cannot stress enough that this is certainly not my intention! Raising a concern of inevitability may indeed be subject to this critique—especially coming from a position of power, privilege, ability, and a history of wounding those at the margins—but my intention is quite the opposite: I raise this issue *because* of my concern for and commitments to justice, liberation, and the dismantling of oppression.

With an appreciation for these concerns in mind, then, I ask again: do our commitments for justice and the priorities they entail mean that at some point we will inevitably have to part ways, even with others who are working for justice? If so, what does that mean for our attempts at "building a shared ethics"?[320] Might each of us, depending on our justice commitments, have certain non-negotiables or priorities that preclude us from such a shared ethic, or at least a recognition that we might have to part ways, we might have to choose or prioritize, we might have to adamantly oppose other commitments? In other words, might we have to resort to a certain kind of exclusivity, a "strategic" exclusivity, that is always problematic, limited, never enough?

---

[319] Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), xi.
[320] Ibid., xv.

The kind of "exclusivity" I am suggesting here is not meant to insinuate permanent, absolute, once-for-all exclusion; it is, as I have been stating, "strategic" in that it is temporal, condional, contingent. I am merely trying to highlight the edges of difficult decisions and choices entailed in the work for liberation. Thus it is still *exclusive*, even if not permanently or absolutely so. If systemic injustice and oppression means a stratified, hierarchical society where those at the bottom will remain there because the dominant position is perpetuated through power, liberation might entail a kind of strategic, exclusive priority for particular oppressed, marginalized, excluded groups, because anything less than such will not be radical enough to disrupt the status quo. In other words, if liberation—concrete, particular liberation—is not made an explicit priority, then it will never occur. To the extent that this is the case, it would mean that liberationist work for "justice" or "the oppressed" as abstract categories might never be particular or concrete enough to do the work it intends to do. This, in turn, would cause the liberation theologian or ethicist to discern *whose* liberation he/she intends to pursue, *which* injustice she/he intends to work against, and therefore a recognition of the necessity of limited, problematic, exclusive nature of such work. Now we have reached the pinnacle of what this chapter intends to highlight: a "truth in advertising" moment—the work of liberation, as a way to remedy exclusion, entails some version of strategic (i.e. temporary) exclusivity. And it is up to us who work for liberation to acknowledge this, partly to "be honest," but more so to keep us vigilant in recognizing that there is no remedy to the problem that is not itself also poisonous. I affirm the nervousness of liberationists about exclusivity, and why it is so problematic; but we cannot ever rest on the notion that we have escaped some version of it altogether. This is where the

Derridean insights of Chapter One dovetail with and might help aid liberationist work, by revealing the structural *impossibility* and *inescapability*—an impossibility to remedy the problem of exclusion without navigating some form of it, because exclusion is inescapable. As always, I must remind the reader that my goal in highlighting such a dynamic is never intended to be nihilistic or, worse, an apologetic *for* exclusion, but a more keen evaluation of the predicament in order to increase our vigilance in engaging it.

Liberation Demands Particularity

How might such insight affect the strident critiques about the problem of exclusivity that were raised in Part Two? In particular, Kate Ott suggested that integrating our work for justice should be concerned about working for one justice over and against another, because "when we choose one 'justice' to focus on (because of our identity affiliation), are we in turn doing injustice to others?"[321] As I stated above, this is a pressing concern, and one that should be taken seriously. At the same time, however, Ott's response to this insight now bears more critical reflection, as she suggests that we "should be erasing modifiers of justice" in order to be more broad, expansive, and inclusive enough of all forms of injustice.[322] But should we not also be concerned about the erasure of such modifiers? This movement towards expansion, broadening, inclusion is important, but perhaps we should *also* be concerned about letting it become the pervasive movement in our work for justice because, as Ott maintains: "Justice-seeking

[321] Ott, "Feminism and Justice: Who We Are, What We Do," 38.
[322] Ibid., 42.

requires that we start somewhere. It is a concrete action."[323] Justice demands concrete action, which, it appears, is a movement towards particularity and closure. Liberationist work seems to suggest that in order for there to be concrete justice at all, we *must* take stands, choose, prioritize, show preference—even if/when such choices are problematic (i.e. exclusive). Perhaps a return to such an acknowledgement of the veracity of one of the fundamental insights of liberationist work is important to keep in mind, namely that in order for those on the bottom or margins to receive justice, priority must be shown; otherwise they will continually remain at the bottom or margins.

What I am suggesting, however, is not an unbridled move to preference and priority without concern for exclusion. Much to the contrary, I am not suggesting—or could suggest—a remedy that might both avoid exclusion (because of priority, preference—limiting justice—as Ott suggests) *and* result in justice for those in desperate need of it (because justice can only ever be achieved, even for some, through priority, preference). I think the best that we might be able to do, at this point, is raise the issue: can we ever achieve a justice without modifiers; or does "erasing modifiers of justice" actually result in injustice? Might liberation demand particularity and specificity with regard to the justice it seeks to achieve, recognizing the limited nature of such and the necessity of making tough, limited (exclusive) decisions?

All of this raises the question, or the sentiment expressed by hip-hop artist Common, that we began this chapter with: is "justice-for-all" just not specific enough? Because of the nature of stratification, oppression, and domination, those of us concerned about concrete justice—defined as naming and working against the injustice of those

---

[323] Ibid., 38.

particular oppressed groups—should be aware of the predicament liberationist work must engage. To what extent does remedying the problem of exclusion—by attempting to be more open, broad, or *inclusive*—annul, quash, or reverse the work for liberation and justice by not being particular enough? If the dynamics of domination and oppression are already in place and work to keep those oppressed *at the bottom*, doesn't liberationist work require a kind of particularity and exclusivity? Anything else would be a tacit support and perpetuation of the dynamic of oppression.

In a compilation of essays entitled, *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays*, liberation theologian Jon Sobrino highlights this dynamic. In this work, Sobrino explores "voices of hope" in the Latin American liberation theological tradition to address the contemporary reality of "cruel inhumanity." Sobrino writes:

> The underlying reflection is about our present world, a world of poverty and opulence, victims and victimizers; about the salvation and humanization that are so urgently needed; and about where that salvation and humanization might come from. They are all based on the words of Ignacio Ellacuría in his last speech, given in Barcelona on November 6, 1989, ten days before his assassination: "The civilization is gravely ill—sick unto death, as Jean Ziegler says; to avoid an ominous, fatal outcome, the civilization must be changed." With absolute and radical clarity Ellacuría added, "We have to turn history around, subvert it, and send it in a new direction." Today's world, the official and politically correct world, refuses to listen, and in any case to take the radical action required by the utter gravity of the problem.[324]

Here, Sobrino, through Ellacuría's speech, is highlighting the urgency and exigency of the current globalized, neoliberal, socioeconomic society in which we live, and the desperate need for prophetic voices to awaken us "from the sleep of cruel inhumanity," and force us to confront the accusations: "Are these not human beings? Do they not have rational souls? Do you not see this? Do you not feel it? How can you stay in such

---

[324] Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2008), ix.

lethargic sleep?" In short, Sobrino is invoking the liberationist sentiment that we need something radical to disrupt "the drawn shades of indifference"[325] that plague our contemporary situation.[326]

In Sobrino's chapter on liberation theology's option for the poor, however, we find the tension of attempting to urge the radical shift necessary to disrupt such indifference, while also navigate the inherent exclusivity in the preferential option. On the one hand, Sobrino—heeding the concerns expressed in Part Two—names exclusion as that which to be avoided: "the option becomes a way to move toward a truly human and *inclusive* globalization that does not paradoxically become antihuman and *exclusive*."[327] Throughout his chapter on the preferential option, Sobrino affirms the critiques of its exclusivity, maintaining that it is, was, and remains "'preferential' but 'not exclusive.'"[328]

On the other hand, although Sobrino explicitly names exclusion as problematic, he also suggests that it—or something close to it—might be necessary. And that is the real work of this chapter: seeking to acknowledge the inescapability of a kind of strategic, problematic exclusivity for liberation. Sobrino insists on four elements in order to properly understand the option for the poor in today's world. First, he suggests a

---

[325] Ibid.

[326] In my experience teaching undergraduate courses in philosophy, theology, and contemporary ethical issues, Sobrino's words are hauntingly all too familiar. Most college students appear apathetic and indifferent to issues of justice, which might have some connection to issues of "political correctness," as Sobrino surmises. When pressed on why they do not take firmer stances or recognize the problem more clearly, many admit a fear of saying the wrong thing, appearing politically incorrect, etc., which results in a refusal to engage these issues. In light of what this dissertation intends to explore, I wonder to what extent these students—like most of us—have become so convinced of the "problem" of exclusion that we are afraid to say anything (exclusive), which might only serve to further perpetuate the injustice of the status quo.

[327] Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, 19 (emphasis mine).

[328] Ibid., 21.

"dialectic element" that requires confrontation, which is often avoided, because "dialogue, negotiation, and tolerance" are the preferred methods of engagement. In a reality of division between the oppressor and oppressed, however, Sobrino argues that anything less than confrontation is inadequate. He writes: "Of course, we must avoid and control violence as much as possible, but an option for the poor that fails to be dialectical, that is not an option against oppression, is not the option of Jesus; in the long run it leaves the poor at the mercy of the oppressor."[329] Sobrino's point about the necessity of confrontation for justice resonates closely with Derrida's point about the only way to combat an oppressive force is with a just force: "Justice without force is impotent. In other words, justice isn't justice, it is not achieved if it doesn't have the force to be 'enforced.'"[330] Just as justice bears the mark of (a problematic) force, so Sobrino is suggesting that justice bears the mark of (a problematic) confrontation. Moreover, because Sobrino is maintaining that the option *for* the poor must also require an option *against* oppression, I suggest that justice bears the mark of (a problematic) exclusivity.

Continuing, Sobrino's second element is "partiality." Appreciating and anticipating the nervousness that accompanies this language, Sobrino insists on retaining it "because it has been said, fallaciously, that 'equality' (or at least a gentler inequality) is possible, a sufficiently human 'universality,' and that this miracle would come about through neoliberal globalization." He goes further: "The flaw in the metaphor is that there's room for 'everyone' on the globe, which is an obvious lie. We mention this to emphasize that if the goal is salvation for the poor of this world, they must be explicitly

---

[329] Ibid., 31.
[330] Derrida, "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" 10–11.

placed at the center."[331] Here is the pinch that Sobrino so deftly highlights: anything less than partiality, anything less than "explicitly" placing "the poor…at the center," will not achieve the liberation intended. The real pinch, however, is that "the poor" cannot encompass all forms of oppression or exclusion. So Sobrino's point is accurate, but once we recognize that partiality might also run up against other forms of injustice, oppression, and exclusion. Again, *if* liberation is the goal, which requires partiality and preference in order to disrupt the status quo, it appears a kind of strategic exclusivity is required. The reason for this, as we have stated, is because discussion of universality, inclusion, "all," etc., is not radical or particular enough. In fact, these modern universalities were the very thing that funded and perpetuated oppression, marginalization, exclusion in the first place; "that is why a contrary thesis is needed, and a willingness to take sides," writes Sobrino.[332]

To use a pertinent illustration of what is at stake here, we should consider the debate between "black lives matter" and "*all* lives matter." If liberationist work has taught us anything, then we should recognize that saying "all lives matter" will never achieve the justice it seeks, and thus it is necessary to say "*black* lives matter" precisely because the status quo, the current situation and reality, indicate that they do not. But saying "black lives matter" can be problematic, as the issues raised in Part Two identify, precisely because it can be understood as too exclusive or particular, and is not broad, expansive, or inclusive enough of all the injustices in our present society. For instance, it does not name *other* lives that unfortunately do not matter in our society: Latino/a,

---

[331] Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, 31.
[332] Ibid., 32.

LGBT, poor, immigrant, non-human lives, etc.; it does not take into account how the category/label "black" is constructed, who is included/excluded in that category, its stability, complexity, etc. Although protesting "black lives matter" does not necessarily imply that other lives do not, what liberationist work reveals is that in a racist society we have to declare explicitly and protest, "*black* lives matter," even as we recognize that this does not include all those who are oppressed, marginalized, facing injustice, which means that it might further the exclusion and oppression of those others. Such is the double-bind of liberationist work that I have tried to highlight: a necessity to make tough, exclusive decisions for the liberation of particular oppressed groups, while recognizing the impossibility of avoiding perpetuating exclusion and oppression for others. The end result of which is the conclusion that remedying exclusion is impossible, and thus we are left to discern between *which* form of exclusion. Seen the other way around, liberationist work reveals that remedying the exclusion and oppression of a particular group entails its own form of exclusivity, even to the point where one must choose/decide *whose* liberation or *which* injustice to focus on.

A Liberationist Problematic, but Necessary Exclusivity

> In *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, Emilie Townes writes:
>
> Evil does not…come in pristine forms. Like goodness, it is messy and rather confusing. Writers often appreciate this more than ethicists I think. And so I engage these writers as mentors and guides. Yet, like mentors and guides, they can only go so far and then I must make the journey on my own. I attempt to provide a set of lenses for examining and understanding the structural nature of

> evil. In the process, imagination, memory, and history dance through my analysis as Macbeth's three witches—"Fair is foul, and foul is fair."[333]

In this chapter I have tried to show how the evils of injustice, oppression, and exclusion do not come in "pristine forms," and, consequently, that any attempts to subvert, dismantle, and work toward liberation will always be "messy and rather confusing." More specifically, this chapter has explored a depth and complexity to the problem of exclusion, i.e. its "evil-ness," in order to uncover its messiness. In the spirit of Chapter One's work with deconstruction, my concern is that if/when we identify exclusion as "the problem" we might rest assured that we have accurately identified the problem, and that we have begun our good, responsible, ethical work of solving or remedying this problem. But the problem of exclusion might not lend itself to such a simple analysis, identification, and remedy. It is much thornier, complicated—i.e. more *problematic*—than that. In the specific context of liberationist discourses, such an analysis, identification, and remedy might actually undercut this work. In other words, a certain kind of strategic exclusivity might be inevitable and necessary—even when recognized as problematic—for liberation, and thus the liberationist is left having to "make the journey on [his/her] own" in discerning between *which* injustice and *whose* liberation. As we dance through these murky, dangerous, problematic waters, we might recognize, along with Townes and Macbeth's three witches, the ways in which "Fair is foul and foul is fair." *Liberation* (i.e. what is "fair") from oppression and exclusion ends up negotiating some version of *exclusion* (i.e. what is "foul"), such that *exclusion* becomes necessary for *liberation*, thus revealing that liberation from exclusion must be exclusive, and the way in

---

[333] Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 9.

which fair (i.e. liberation) is foul (i.e. exclusive) and foul (i.e. exclusivity) is fair (liberative).

As I have tried to insist throughout this dissertation—and must continue to do so in order to avoid misunderstanding my goal—the work here is not intended to relativize, minimize, or even justify exclusion. Quite the contrary, the intended aim of this dissertation—as well as this chapter—is to plumb the depths of the problem of exclusion, to be as rigorous as possible in identifying and analyzing it as problem, which includes any attempted remedy of it.

To that end, this chapter has focused on the problem of exclusive divine election through the lens of liberation theologies, highlighting the way the problem takes on a new light in the midst of this discourse. In so doing, Part One established a connection between God's "preferential option" in liberation theologies and divine election, showing how the former represents a type of the latter. In so doing, we explored the contested necessity for some kind of divine, exclusive choice for the oppressed and excluded.

Part Two highlighted more recent critiques of the preferential option's exclusivity, revealing the perennial problem of exclusion in liberationist work. Although the exclusivity of the preferential option was most evident in the earliest iterations of liberation theology, even then these theologians expressed concern about the problematic nature of exclusion. In the ensuing decades, however, the movement was *away* from divine, exclusive preference for any one group, critiquing how God's identification with one group results in further exclusion of other oppressed groups, pitting one oppressed community's claims for liberation against another's, which in turn becomes a tool of hegemony: a divide-and-conquer strategy that continues to keep liberation out of the

hands of the oppressed. Combined with more emerging dialogue with poststructuralist and postcolonial theories, liberationist work recognized how problematic it is to speak *for* or *from* the perspective of one, stable, pure identity, and thus began moving *beyond* particularity and exclusivity. Thus Part Two affirmed the problematic nature of exclusion in liberation theologies.

In Part Three, however, we probed *further* into the problem. Liberationist motivation for exclusive preference for the oppressed did not emerge in a vacuum, but in the midst of oppression—in other words, as a *response* to domination, marginalization, and exclusion. And *in the midst* of such a reality, liberationists recognized that perhaps exclusive preference for those excluded is necessary for liberation. The systems of dominance, power, and exclusion that are already in place are so fortified that anything less than exclusive choice or preference will only serve to maintain the status quo. Thus we need a radical break or shift to disrupt these systems and practices, or else those at the margins will always remain there. An appreciation for this reality thus casts the problem of exclusion in a new light. We are already in the midst of a problem, a violence, an exclusion and marginalization of certain peoples and groups, and thus to talk about or identify exclusion as problematic *abstractly*, i.e. without recognizing the reality of stratification in our society, betrays liberation theology's intentions. Put differently, exclusion is certainly problematic, but we must also recognize the context in which that problem emerges, especially in the discourse of liberation theologies.

This very tension is what this chapter has tried to name, identify, and explore, namely a recognition of the problem of exclusion, *as well as* a need to be exclusive when liberation is the goal. Exclusivity might be required for attaining liberation because

anything less than that does not adequately deal with oppression and thus becomes a tacit preference for the oppressor by keeping the status quo in place. Notions like "equality" and "universality" are just not sufficient—or as the hip-hop artist Common says, "specific"—enough.[334] Although exclusion is inherently problematic, the gravity of the current situation requires "radical action,"[335] which means that those concerned about liberation need to appreciate how exclusion might be necessary in order to achieve liberation and justice.

Thus we conclude this chapter with a similar acknowledgement that was reached at the end of Chapter One, namely that the problem of exclusion is not one that can be adequately remedied. Any attempt to minimize or avoid exclusivity, in the work for liberation, will always entail some version of it. At the end of Chapter One we acknowledged as much *structurally*, but now, in an exploration of liberationist work, this acknowledgement takes on a kind of specificity. Those theologians and ethicists whose work is directed at liberation from injustice and oppression, must recognize the problematic way in which exclusion might be necessary for attaining liberation, even if/when such liberation is exclusively oriented. Thus, if liberation from oppression and exclusion is a primary concern, then the theologian should recognize the necessity of some form of exclusion in attaining liberation. Such a recognition should therefore shift our focus from attempting to avoid exclusion (because the work for liberation requires some version of it), to discerning *whose* liberation to pursue, *which* injustice to focus on. The final issue I intend to pursue regarding the thorny problem of exclusion is its most

---

[334] Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor*, 31.
[335] Ibid., ix.

theological version, where in Chapter Three ,we will explore the question that arises when discussing divine choice is: *whose* choice is it?

CHAPTER 3

Whose Choice is it? *Divine* Choice as Theological Impossibility

> *What makes us tremble in the* mysterium tremendum*?...knowing all along that it is God who decides: the Other has no reason to give to us and no explanation to make, no reason to share his reasons with us.*
>
> —Jacques Derrida, *Gift of Death*

> *We ought to speak of God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God.*
>
> —Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*

There is one final layer to the problem of exclusive divine choice that this dissertation intends to investigate. In fact, it might be the most problematic aspect of "divine election," if not downright terrifying. It is, as Derrida notes, that which "makes us tremble…knowing all along that it is *God* who decides."[336] The theological notion (let alone the possibility or reality) that God—a being, an agent, entity, "Other"—might decide, without our consultation, with no reason or explanation, or at least "no reason to share such reasons with us," should make us tremble. This is the problem, as well as the attempted remedy to said problem, that this chapter intends to investigate. Having explored the problem of exclusive divine election through a reading of deconstruction and liberation discourses, the task in this chapter is to probe more deeply and explicitly into the *theological* nature of the problem with a *God* who chooses (or not). Simply put, a fundamental issue arises in *divine* election—as both theological notion and possibility or reality—that this chapter seeks to explore, namely: *whose* choice is it?

---

[336] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death, Second Edition & Literature in Secret*, trans. David Wills, 2 edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2007), 56–57 (emphasis mine).

If the remedy to the problem of divine election—problematic mostly because of its inherent exclusive nature, as we have seen—is that the *theologian* chooses to avoid it or reduce its exclusivity,[337] then it is no longer *divine* election, but human election, i.e. the object of the theologian's choice. Simply put, when the theologian decides whether or not "God"[338] chooses, and what the object of such a "divine" decision might be, "God" has been reduced to an object of human (theological) decision. The theologian can decide that a notion of a "God" who chooses (exclusively) is too problematic, and thus choose to include or reject it (i.e. exclude it from his/her theological repertoire), or navigate its exclusivity in the way that he/she deems fit. What the move to remedy exclusive divine election reveals, however, is a fundamental *impossibility* for the theologian—both for the theologian who chooses to exclude, reject, or remedy it, as well as the theologian who chooses to include, endorse, or confess it.

The theologian who avoids, rejects, limits, or excludes *divine* election, must reckon with the notion that any remedy to (exclusive) divine election necessarily entails a form of (exclusive) human election—by being the one who chooses to exclude such a possibility—thus reducing God to an object of human choice, and trafficking in a version of what they have tried to avoid or remedy. Additionally, for those with a *theological* commitment to a divine reality beyond, outside, apart from, or at least not beholden to the control of the human being, such an objectification and reification of "God" is

---

[337] The reading of deconstruction presented in Chapter One (which revealed the structural inescapability/necessity of exclusive choice), and the exploration of how such exclusive choice is navigated in liberation discourses in Chapter Two, has already problematized any notion of choosing "less exclusively."

[338] The use of "God" (in quotation marks) is strategic, in that part of what this chapter will do is distinguish between "God" as merely the product or object of human theological ideas, language, decisions, choices, and the possibility, reality of God that is not merely such, i.e. the difference between a "God" of human choosing/decision and a God who chooses/decides (or not). Although there is no way to "prove" the latter, the real difference is rather the desire to affirm, leave space for, attempt to maintain the *possibility* of such.

problematic, because "God" is no longer a being, agent, reality, an "Other," but has been reduced to nothing more than human theological ideas, language, symbols. Even if one does not share a commitment to such a divine reality—i.e. whose concern is *not* (or never was) to maintain a notion of a divine being, agent, or reality beyond theological language, symbols, etc.—there might still be an expressed *ethical* concern about human mastery and control over "God," wherein it is the human who can declare who/what "God" is/does, even if those ends appear "ethical" at first glance. If there is any concern about human mastery over divine mystery—as "when an embodied creaturely reality identifies itself with and so presumes to grasp and control an infinite mystery"[339]—the theologian who avoids, rejects, limits, or excludes *divine* election must also recognize that in said remedy "God" has been reduced to an object of human mastery and control, a "God" of *their* choosing. In Caputo's words, "God" has then become "something I have added to my repertoire, brought within the horizon of my experience, knowledge, belief, identification, and expectation."[340] Thus *divine* election reveals an "impossibility" to avoid trafficking in exclusive election—the very thing intended to be remedied—as well as a theo-ethical betrayal of human mastery over divinity, wherein "God" has become the object of human choice/decision.

At the same time, the theologian who chooses to confess, discuss, include a notion of *divine* election, must reckon with a divine choice that was never theirs, revealing an *impossibility* to discuss, understand, and confess such (even on the basis of divine revelation), while also reckoning with the necessity and inescapability of doing so, since

---

[339] Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller, eds., *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 4.
[340] John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 10.

the theologian cannot choose otherwise, as it was never their decision to make. But the theologian always runs the risk of conflating or confusing *God's* choice with their own, and thus reducing God to an object of human theological choice, i.e. that which said theologian has tried to avoid. Thus *divine* election reveals an inescapable human choice, which always runs the risk of collapsing *divine* election into merely *human* election, the very thing he/she has tried to avoid.

What *divine* election reveals, therefore, is a kind of deconstructive "impossibility" (that always already carries a structural inescapability and necessity, as I have demonstrated in Chapter One) for the task of theology. It is both *impossible* for the human theologian to confess or declare it, yet also *impossible* to avoid, limit, or exclude it (in other words *inescapable*). Thus this chapter intends to explore how a genuine, radical understanding of *divine* election "deconstructs" theology, revealing an aporetic double-bind, and the rupture of the impossibility yet necessity, necessity yet impossibility.

In order to probe deeper into the deconstructive *impossibility* divine election reveals, this will focus explicitly on the problem of a *God* who chooses (exclusively), with the remedy being *the human theologian* chooses a "God" who doesn't choose (or at least "chooses" in a way that he/she deems appropriate). Throughout this dissertation I have already highlighted how divine election is identified as problematic: in the Introduction through our framing of divine election and the brief survey of the critiques of its inherent exclusivity (i.e. God's choosing *this* excludes *that*); briefly in Chapter One where we explored the structural exclusivity entailed in the structure of decision; and in Chapter Two where we explored how such exclusivity is understood in terms of divine election as the preferential option in liberation theologies. What I intend to hone in on

now is the attempted remedy of said problem, which we have also seen thus far, namely the human theologian's choice or decision for/against a "God" who chooses (or not). What this move reveals, however, is not *just* a complication of the remedy of exclusive divine election, but also the way that *divine* election poses an impossibility for the theologian who seeks to remedy and/or exclude *divine* election, as well as for the theologian who seeks to confess or include it.

To that end, I will begin in Part One by exploring what issues arise when the theologian chooses the kind of "God" who chooses (or not). Again, the unstated "remedy" to the problem of exclusive divine election—or at least previous, "traditional" doctrines of it—has been that the contemporary, progressive theologian chooses a better alternative. As we have seen throughout this dissertation, this can take the form of avoiding (or excluding) the notion of divine election altogether (i.e. a "God" who does *not* choose)—whether explicitly or implicitly—or, reframing the object of such a decision in a way that appears less exclusive (e.g. "God's" choice for all). Part One will explore the issues that arise when the remedy to the problem of God's choosing becomes solely a human choice, which includes trafficking in a form of the very same "problem(s)" the theologian has attempted to remedy, namely an exclusive human election and mastery over divinity, thus revealing the deconstructive impossibility of *divine* election.

The predicament is no less precarious for the theologian who chooses to confess a God who chooses. In Part Two, I will highlight the deconstructive impossibility facing the theologian who confesses or includes *divine* election, through an exploration of Karl Barth's doctrine of divine election (and concomitant doctrine of divine revelation). In Barth we find a stated commitment—i.e. a human, theological *choice*—to maintain that it

is primarily *God* who chooses, *not* the human theologian, in divine election. As we will see, Barth's doctrine of divine election is grounded in his prior doctrine of divine revelation, which also adds to the impossibility. Although in Barth, human choice is not abrogated, there is still a commitment to the notion that divine election—especially because of how he bases it on a doctrine of divine revelation—is fundamentally about *God's* choice and not a human one. Thus there is the sense that God is responsible, for better or worse, for the problem of exclusive divine election; "in other words, don't blame Barth, blame God."[341] It is both Barth's desire to affirm divine election as truly *divine* election—i.e. God's choice, not the human theologian's—as well as his admission of the precarious position for the theologian, that makes his doctrine of divine revelation especially pertinent to our discussion. Barth acknowledges that divine election places the human theologian in an impossible, yet necessary predicament: a necessity to confess God's decision (as God's, not ours), while recognizing the impossibility that accompanies doing so. Not only does Barth acknowledge that the human theologian *cannot prove* that God did actually elect—in the way Barth confesses and tries to explicate—nor even that God revealed such a decision (since he bases the former on the latter). Barth also recognizes that even the confession of such, based on divine revelation, can still result in a "God" of our own choosing, which is the very thing Barth (and any theologian who desires to confess and remain true to *divine* election) has tried to avoid. Thus Barth's doctrine of divine election highlights the impossibility and necessity, the necessary yet impossible nature, facing the theologian who confesses, chooses, includes

[341] Chris Boesel, "Divine Relationality and (the Methodological Constraints of) the Gospel as Piece of News: Tracing the Limits of Trinitarian Ethics," in *Divine Multiplicity: Trinities, Diversities, and the Nature of Relation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 259.

divine election. Additionally, Barth's doctrine of election serves as a pertinent example because of how it illustrates the structural inescapability of exclusion inherent in the structure of decision (i.e. it is exclusive); yet Barth's doctrine of election does not necessarily entail a divine exclusion of some human beings from eternal salvation by an absolute divine decision, which illustrates the kind of exclusivity this dissertation has tried to track. Although discussion of exclusivity in terms of divine election might imply an eternal, absolute exclusion (e.g. to salvation or damnation), it does not necessarily entail such; yet, as I will again demonstrate in Barth's doctrine of divine election, it is still *exclusive* (at some level), and thus problematic.

The overall goal of this chapter will be to probe deeper into the remedy to the problem of exclusive *divine* election by exploring what issues arise when the theologian chooses the kind of God who chooses (or not), in order to reveal a complication to any attempted remedy of the problem. The chapter therefore concludes by pointing to the "impossible" predicament that *divine* election presents wherein every attempt to remedy the problem engenders problems of its own, revealing an "inescapability" to the problem(s) that one attempts to remedy, and again brings us to the thesis that the theologian must discern between *which* exclusionary election and *whose* choice is it. The intended goal of this chapter, like the preceding chapters, is an appreciation for the depth and complexity of the problem of exclusive divine election, with a focus in this chapter on the theological complexity that arises in a notion of *God's* choosing.

Part One: Problems or Issues that Arise When Divine Election is Reduced to a Human Choice/Decision

For the sake of clarification, I want to draw attention to the fact that the issue I am raising here—i.e. human theological choice about divinity—is one that has been continually addressed throughout the history of Christian theology, particularly in the orthodoxy/heresy debates; yet at the same time, I want to clearly distinguish how my argument differs. From as early as the late second century where Tertullian wrote *On Prescription Against Heretics*, to the conciliar debates in fourth and fifth century (and beyond), to the Inquisition(s), etc., Christianity has repeatedly attempted to define and defend "orthodoxy" over and against "heresy." Given that "the etymology of heresy can be traced to the Greek word *hairesis*, which means to choose…the implication is such that choice is in itself wrong and to be condemned."[342] In other words, defense of "orthodoxy" was predicated on a notion that the problem was with choice itself, i.e. with any human, theological choice. Since it was believed by the "orthodox" theologians that the truth of Christianity was revealed, and thus established and confirmed beyond human control in an absolute sense, any picking and choosing on the part of the human theologian would always amount to error and lead to untruth. Thus, as theologian Clayton Crockett points out, the conclusion was: "I choose and therefore I am a heretic. I choose and it's necessarily the wrong choice…because the problem is with choice itself, the presumption that one could choose."[343] As historian Justo González highlights, early

---

[342] Clayton Crockett, "Polyhairesis: On Postmodern and Chinese Folds," *Modern Theology* 30, no. 3 (July 2014): 34.
[343] Ibid., 35.

Christian theologians like Tertullian (and subsequent generations of theologians who mounted the accusation of "heresy") believed that "once one had found the truth of Christianity, one should abandon any further search for truth," i.e. any further human speculation. González quotes Tertullian's "Prescription Against Heretics": "You are to seek until you find, and once you have found, you are to believe. Thereafter, all you have to do is to hold to what you have believed. Besides this, you are to believe that there is nothing further to be believed, nor anything else to be sought."[344] For Tertullian, philosophical inquiry, based on human logic and reasoning, was the most dangerous of all speculation, because God has revealed "the truth," and thus any human speculation, or picking and choosing, would only amount to human projections about "God" or "truth," and be led astray from divine revelation. Tertullian argues: "whatever noxious vapours, accordingly, exhaled from philosophy, obscure the clear and wholesome atmosphere of truth."[345] Again, the problem seems to be with human choice.

Although my own inquiry in this chapter shares a similarity with theologians who define orthodoxy over against heresey—in terms of highlighting the theological problem of human choice—there is certainly a clear point of departure in the goal and motivation for such. As is well-known, "the habit of producing heretics as outer boundary markers for orthodox identity…exposes a repressive evasion of evident Christian complexity."[346] In other words, the pursuit of orthodoxy has rejected or *excluded*—often violently—any alternative, defining itself in relation to (the) Other/s, and thus repressed an inescapable

---

[344] Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity, Volume 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 75.
[345] Philip Schaff, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Allan Menzies, vol. 3 (Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2010), 184.
[346] Catherine Keller and Laurel Schneider, eds., *Polydoxy: Theology of Multiplicity and Relation* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 2.

complexity that has always been part of the Christian tradition. My goal, however, is precisely the opposite: to *expose* a greater complexity to the problem, revealing the limitations of any proposed answer or solution. Thus though the locus of the problem of human theological choice is similar, the goal is could not be more different. In fact, part of what I intend to show is the way in which the critique of orthodoxy—as a totalizing discourse that operates on a power dynamic, embedded within a logic of the One,[347] with excluding tendencies,[348] etc.—emerges from a theological location that *is also* nervous about human choice, control, and mastery over divinity. Furthermore, remedies to the problem of exclusive divine election cannot avoid trafficking in exclusion themselves. In other words, I will argue that the problem of human theological choice, which is what drove the orthodox theologians to define heresy, is something that the progressive theologian—who critiques orthodox theologians for defining heretics—also believes to be problematic. Moreover, the remedy to the problem of exclusive *divine* election cannot escape navigating some form of exclusive human theological choice, which is precisely what it defines as problematic and has attempted to remedy. Therefore, in direct contrast to presenting an orthodox theological position in this chapter, I hope to expose a complexity to the problem of divine/human choice, an impossibility and necessity revealing no adequate, final, definitive solution or answer for the theologian who attempts to remedy exclusive *divine* election.

---

[347] See: Laurel C. Schneider, *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2008).
[348] See: Margaret R. Miles, *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 65–114.

Progressive Theo-Ethical Concerns about Human Mastery over Divinity

The goal of this section is merely to point to some issues that arise in the remedies to a *God* who chooses. As I have suggested, the move that arises in said remedies is for the theologian to choose, more wisely, reasonably, less "exclusively,"[349] etc. Consequently, this section intends to highlight the issues that arise when divine election—and perhaps even "God" more generally—is reduced to (nothing more than) an object of human choice. In other words, what should theologians who are concerned about divine (exclusive) choice *also* be concerned about when "God" is at the disposal of the theologian's (exclusive) choice?

When God becomes the object of the theologian's choice, progressive theologians have expressed apprehension about human mastery and control over divinity. Such nervousness appears most explicitly in contemporary engagements with the Christian *apophatic* tradition, and in the opening pages of *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*, this concern is sketched quite clearly. Recounting the danger of too firm a relationship between human language, concepts, ideas and the divine, the editors of this volume write:

> This problem arises when the difference and distance between divine and creaturely reality is not big or radical enough; when creaturely finitude assumes too cozy a relation with the divine infinite, as if the former—creaturely concepts, categories, languages, texts, persons, communities—could comprehend and so contain divine reality. And when an embodied creaturely reality identifies itself with and so presumes to grasp and control an infinite mystery, it is time to start passing out the crash helmets and flak jackets to protect the bodies of neighboring

[349] See footnote #2.

> but differing creatures. Mastery over divine mystery routinely results in a body count.[350]

Here we see the problem of human "mastery over divine mystery" clearly illustrated: whenever "God" is reduced to human "concepts, categories, languages, texts," etc., there is ample reason to worry about too much power in the hands of the human theologian to comprehend, contain, and control the "divine." As Chris Boesel's chapter goes on to point out: "isn't human mastery of divine mystery always precisely ethically problematic, in that, in whatever form, it always puts the neighbor at risk?"[351] This risk is what Letty Russell calls the "power quotient," the ability to enlist divine reinforcement and justification for human desires and ideals; and, unfortunately, history has proven that such power often translates into domination. As we have seen, this is part of the critique of divine election from both a liberal, progressive theological perspective, as well as a liberationist perspective, namely the way in which divine election routinely results in a situation where "a people who consider themselves special in the eyes of God have the power and privilege to dominate others."[352] Historically, when humans have had the ability to claim, co-opt, control divine power (including "choseness"), it has typically meant "bad news" for others. Russell captures the essence of the problem: "election helped provide *divine reinforcement* of racism and imperialist expansion in the United States, South Africa, and elsewhere."[353] We have already explored the way this problem manifested throughout this dissertation, pointing to the ways many theologians have

---

[350] Boesel and Keller, *Apophatic Bodies*, 3–4.
[351] Chris Boesel, "The Apophasis of Divine Freedom: Saving 'the Name' and the Neighbor from Human Mastery," in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), 325.
[352] Russell, "Postcolonial Challenges and the Practice of Hospitality," 118–99.
[353] Ibid., 119 (emphasis mine).

abandoned a notion of divine election precisely because of such exclusionary aspects—using divine chosenness as justification for oppression, domination, colonization, etc. Part of the problem, therefore, of exclusive divine election is the way such a "notion" allows "divine reinforcement" for ethically problematic ends (e.g. racism, sexism, colonialism, etc.). But what I am arguing is that the remedy to exclusive divine election also becomes problematic, for the very same reasons, when the *human* decides, placing him/her in the "divine" driver's seat. Moreover, the problem of human control over "divinity" is often recognized by the same theologians attempting to remedy *divine* election.

Theologian Matthew Lundberg, addressing how such concerns are manifested in the work of liberation theologians like Jon Sobrino, discusses how liberation theologians have always had a healthy desire to secure theology from our "expectations regarding God." Lundberg writes about the concern:

> Human god-talk in natural theology is directed by a sinful and manipulative self-interest that grasps the positive features of created reality in an attempt to create an image of the divine that justifies and legitimizes human projects in the world. It is the sinful human tendency to manipulate the idea of God—particularly acute in the case of natural theology, without the governing checks and balances of revelation—that is most determinative for Sobrino.[354]

In Lundberg's assessment, Sobrino, as a liberation theologian whose primary concern is the historical sin of structural oppression, argues that "the sinful human tendency to manipulate the idea of God" has funded and perpetuated such oppression. In an attempt to respond "theologically to the oppression and poverty that has been tacitly and sometimes overtly supported by the Christian church and its theology since the 15th-

---

[354] Matthew Lundberg, "Echoes of Barth in Jon Sobrino's Critique of Natural Theology: A Dialogue in the Context of Post-Colonial Theology," in *Theology as Conversation: The Significance of Dialogue in Historical and Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 92.

century conquest," particularly in Latin America, Sobrino highlights and critiques the problems that arise when humans have control and mastery over divinity.[355] In other words, such human control over divinity "justifies and legitimizes human projects in the world," including colonialism, domination, oppression, etc. The problem is further exacerbated by human control of divine election, as we have seen, because of how the conquerors believed themselves to be "chosen" by God for such exploits. As liberation theologian Elsa Tamez points out: "the conquerors (who brought Christianity with them!) felt they had been 'chosen' to conquer, steal, destroy our ancestors' cultures, take over the land and dominate.[356] The problem, it seems, stems from the ability to "manipulate the idea of God," and the way that it enlists too much power in the hands of the human theologian.

Concern over too much power in the hands of humanity over "divinity" is widespread. As we have seen in Chapter One, "radical" theologian[357] John D. Caputo's work is critical of the exclusivity found in determinate forms of religion (and justice); but it seems that another one of Caputo's concerns is human mastery and control over divinity. As Chris Boesel points out, in the last few decades there has been an "emerging arena of postmodern discourse" that engages "the theme of incomprehensible divine mystery and the critical-constructive readings of the apophatic tradition."[358] Part of Derrida's "turn to religion" included significant engagement with apophatic tradition,

---

[355] Ibid., 84.
[356] Tamez, "God's Election, Exclusion and Mercy," 29.
[357] Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 17.
[358] Boesel, "The Apophasis of Divine Freedom: Saving 'the Name' and the Neighbor from Human Mastery," 307.

and, as we have seen, Caputo's reading (as well as many other interpreters) of Derrida certainly address these themes.

We might also recall from Chapter One that in Caputo's reading of deconstruction, he argues the *sans*—i.e. "religion *without* religion," or religiousness *sans* determinate dogmas, doctrines, etc.—"differentiates the 'determinable' faiths, which are always dangerous,"[359] precisely because they *determine*, i.e. they place themselves (mistakenly) in the dangerous, powerful, dominant position of determining, naming, choosing, deciding. This is what Caputo names, in other contexts, "strong theology," and offers the alternative of a "weak theology." In *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*, Caputo reflects further on the misplaced power that theology has desired, arguing that "theology has always been strong theology and religion has been strong religion, in love with strength, right from the gate."[360] Though he seeks to find in the theological tradition the places that gesture toward "the weakness of God," he laments theology's denial of such because "it is too much in love with power, constantly selling its body to the interests of power, constantly sitting down to table with power in a discouraging contradiction of its own good news."[361] So rather than continuing a tradition that "can accumulate an army and institutional power, semantic prestige and cultural authority," Caputo seeks to sketch a theology that unleashes the name of God as a "weak force."[362] For those keenly aware of the dangers of power, especially "divine power" in the hands of humans, Caputo offers an alternative: "In a strong theology, the name of God has

---

[359] Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 47.
[360] Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 7.
[361] Ibid., 8.
[362] Ibid., 7.

historical determinacy and specificity—it is Christian or Jewish or Islamic, for example—whereas a weak theology, weakened by the flux of undecidability and translatability, is more open-ended."[363] For Caputo, (part of) the problem with "strong theology" is its misplaced desire and claim to name something determinate and specific, thus reducing God to "an object of conceptual analysis."[364] Thus, for Caputo, it appears that "strong theology" is ethically problematic because of its claim to put itself in the divine driver's seat, endowing it with a (desire for) power that is always dangerous.

Caputo's ethical concern is directly related to the one that I am raising here, namely the problem of human mastery and control over "divinity." However, might a "weak theology" be subject to the same critique, navigating a similar kind of danger? Might a "weak theology" actually *strengthen* the hand of the human theologian, which is the very thing Caputo is trying to remedy? More importantly, might any remedy to *divine* election wherein the human theologian decides, chooses, *determines* that God does not choose, be subject to the same critique Caputo marshals against the "'determinable' faiths, which are always dangerous"?[365]

As I also argued in Chapter One, although Caputo suggests impossibility, undecidability, open-endedness, indeterminancy, etc. are preferable to decision, closure, and determinations, deconstruction reveals the *impossibility* of preferring the former for the latter, or avoiding the latter, such that deconstruction *deconstructs* the ability to

---

[363] Ibid., 8.

[364] On the opening page of *The Weakness of God*, Caputo confesses "a weakness for theology," despite his attempts to avoid it, especially in *Prayers and Tears* where he is more comfortable talking in terms of "religion." Now, however, he admits that he can no longer "deny that what I am doing here is theological." In the footnote to this statement, he argues that his desire to avoid "theology" was because of it "suggests the onto-theological project, which takes God as an object of conceptual analysis" (p. 301).

[365] Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 47.

critique decision, closure, determination on the basis that undecidability, open-endedness, indeterminancy are "better," because we are always already navigating some form of them. Thus a "God" of undecidability—i.e. one who cannot, does not elect—can only be arrived at through the *decision* of the *theologian*. Therefore, when the theologian decides the kind of God who chooses (or not), such a move reduces "God" to "an object of conceptual analysis," something the human theologian can choose (or not), and enlists the human (theologian) with a dangerous power supply—the very thing Caputo critiques about "determinate faiths." So while I agree with Caputo's ethical concern about enlisting the human theologian with a dangerous "power supply,"[366] I am also concerned about how choosing a "God" who chooses (or not) does just that. Furthermore, if exclusive choice—or a divine choice that excludes—is *the problem*, the remedy to divine election that entails *excluding* such a possibility cannot avoid that which it has tried to remedy. In other words, the remedy to (divine) exclusive choice is (human) exclusive choice.

Although Caputo does not directly address a "divine election," he does seem to share a similar concern about a "God" of *our* choosing. We have already seen some of his *ethical* reasons for critiquing determinate faiths and religions, but Caputo (especially in some of his more recent work) also expresses *theological* concerns about human control and mastery over divinity. In *The Weakness of God*, Caputo dives deeper into these theological concerns:

> The modest proposal I make in this book is that the name of God is an event, or rather that it *harbors* an event, and that theology is the hermeneutics of that event,

[366] Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 13.

> its task being to release what is happening in that name, to set it free, to give it its own head, and thereby to head off the forces that would prevent this event.[367]

In his attempt to sketch a "theology of the event," Caputo naturally wants to define what he means by "event," and he does so through eight descriptors: uncontainability, translatability, deliteralization, excess, evil, beyond Being, truth, time. Rather than unpack each one individually, I want to highlight how his understanding of the event continually evokes a sense of rupture, in-breaking, surprising, overflowing, releasing, etc. "There is always something uncontainable and unconditional about an event,"[368] Caputo argues, something that betrays any attempt to name it completely, which means that "the name can never be taken with literal force, as if it held the event tightly within its grip, as if it circumscribed it and literally named it, as if a concept (*Begriff*) were anything more than a temporary stop and imperfect hold on an event."[369] Thus theology should recognize that "an event cannot be held captive by a confessional faith or creedal formula," which is why Caputo contends that theology's task is to release and set free, rather than foreclose or hold captive.[370] In perhaps the most poignant and pertinent application to our present issue, Caputo writes:

> Events happen to us; they overtake us and outstrip the reach of the subject or the ego. Although we are called upon to respond to events, an event is not our doing but is done to us (even as it might well be our undoing). The event arises independently of me and comes over me, so that an event is also an *advent*. The event is visited upon me, presenting itself as something I must deal with, like it or not…the event is not necessarily good news.[371]

---

[367] Ibid., 2.
[368] Ibid.
[369] Ibid., 3.
[370] Ibid., 4.
[371] Ibid., 4–5.

If one were to simply exchange "event" for "*divine* election" here—which would undoubtedly be a violence to Caputo's intention (despite any "death-of-the-author" claims)—this would sound eerily familiar to the stalwarts of divine election like Augustine, Calvin, and Barth, for whom divine election "happens to us…is not our doing but is done to us…arises independently of me and comes over me…presenting itself as something I must deal with, like it or not." And (other than Barth), Augustine and Calvin would certainly agree that divine election "is not necessarily good news," or does not always appear that way, is not always experienced as such, etc.—Calvin surely had ample reason to call divine election the *decretum horribile* (especially given his understanding of double predestination).[372] So it appears that we find a shared resonance between those who confess divine election and Caputo (who we might readily assume does not!), namely a shared concern about theology being reduced to something *the theologian* does, something that is within the grasp and control of the human "subject and ego," something that is merely the result of human theological desires, something inherently problematic about reducing "God" to an object of human choice or decision. Caputo seems intent on maintaining the uncontainability of the event that happens to us, to "head off the forces that would prevent this event," that happens "independently of me and comes over me."[373] But when the theologian chooses to exclude the possibility of a God who chooses, the "event" (i.e. "God") is contained, prevented, is no longer independent of me, but is dependent upon the decisions and choices that I make. In other words, just as Caputo is arguing that "a confessional faith or creedal formula" forecloses, holds captive,

---

[372] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II:207.
[373] Caputo, *The Weakness of God*, 2.

or prevents the event (of "God"), the same could be said for the exclusion of the possibility that "God" chooses (or not).

Caputo continues his theological project in a more recent work, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*, where he attempts to further distance what he calls "weak theology" (a continuation of his theology of the event) from "strong theology," by drawing on a theological notion of "perhaps." Caputo insists: "One must, it is absolutely necessary, always say 'perhaps' for God: God, perhaps (*peut-être*). Whenever and wherever there is a chance for the event, that is God, perhaps."[374] In contrast to "theology in the strong standard version" that employs "omni-nouns and hyper verbs" to establish power and presence, "weak theology…is content with a little adverb like 'perhaps,'" which interrupts and intercepts, disrupts and deflects.[375] Proposing a weak theology of "God, perhaps," Caputo writes:

> Once I say I know the name of the event, once I can say, this is God, the event is God, then the event ceases to be an event and becomes something I have added to my repertoire, brought within the horizon of my experience, knowledge, belief, identification, and expectation, whereas the event is precisely what always and already, structurally, exceeds my horizons. What I mean by the event is the surprise, what literally over-takes me, shattering my horizon of expectation.[376]

In a theology of "perhaps," Caputo seems to be critiquing definitive claims about God, "something I have added to my repertoire, brought within the horizon of my experience, knowledge, belief, identification, and expectation"—in short, a "God" of my choosing. Thus, according to Caputo, a theology of "perhaps" appreciates the surprise of the event that will always shatter my horizons and expectations.

---

[374] Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 9.
[375] Ibid.
[376] Ibid., 10.

Taking Caputo's point seriously, here is what I am suggesting we consider: when the theologian has decided that it is best for the *theologian* to decide, when he/she has come to the conclusion (not surprisingly) that a "God" who chooses is far too violent, offensive, problematic (i.e. exclusive), has he/she not fallen prey to what Caputo is railing against here? Could it be that avoiding—or excluding—a notion of divine choosing might actually be a denial of the "perhaps," because such a decision reduces God (as "event") to something "within the horizon of my experience, knowledge, belief, identification, and expectation" and consequently does *not* exceed my horizons of expectation? When the theologian critiques definitive claims about "God," e.g. a "God" who chooses, are they not making a definitive claim themselves? To the extent that this is the case, it would mean a precarious predicament wherein either *we* decide, and thus make "God" an object of *our* decision and, ironically, fall prey to the "strong" theology Caputo critiques here; or *perhaps* we leave room for a God who decides, chooses.

Now, of course, Caputo (and others) might argue that a "God" who chooses—especially when connected to traditional understandings of divine election—is merely the work of a strong theology of absolutes, assurance, closure, dogmas, etc., especially since his theology of the "perhaps" *insists* that "God does not exist," but rather, "God insists" (which, of course, begs the question: how far does the "perhaps" go?).[377] And, on the one hand, this might be an accurate accusation. But what I am arguing—or attempting to problematize—is the way in which any definitive exclusion or denial of a God who chooses is subject to the same critique. To put the same point I have been trying to make all along a bit differently, how much does a "God" who *doesn't* choose really "shatter our

[377] Ibid., 13.

horizons of expectation"? Isn't a "God" *we* choose very much the product of *our* expectations, a God who has been "added to my repertoire, brought within the horizon of my experience, knowledge, belief, identification, and expectation"? And, if so, shouldn't that make us—e.g. Caputo and anyone else concerned about human mastery over divinity—nervous?

Further along, Caputo asserts: "If the name of God is not causing us a great deal of difficulty, it is not God we are talking about."[378] This is precisely what this chapter—and, more generally, this dissertation—is trying to do: highlight how the problem of exclusive divine election *should* cause us a great deal of difficulty, and if it is not, then perhaps we have not understood the problem in all its fullness and complexity. In this chapter more specifically, I am trying to highlight how remedying *divine* election can result in a "God" of our own choosing, believing to have "solved" the problem, and hence no longer causes us a "great deal of difficulty"; in so doing, according to Caputo, that might mean "it is not God that we are [now] talking about." Perhaps, if we have begun to think we can do away with a "God" who chooses, quickly dispose of and exclude such an antiquated, obsolete notion, then perhaps we were never talking about God to begin with. To put it differently, perhaps there is no escaping exclusion either (as I have shown in Chapter One), as the remedy to exclusive divine election necessitates *excluding* it.

For Caputo, "God's problem"—or the problem with God, including and especially a God who chooses—"is that God *insists*, is an insistent problem that won't go

[378] Ibid., 28.

away."[379] I am suggesting that exclusive *divine* election "*insists*, is an insistent problem that won't go away." Perhaps *choice* is the problem, one that we have never been comfortable with (as we saw in Chapter One). Of course Caputo might argue that the problem of God's choosing is a "non-problem" because it assumes the existence of (a) God (who could choose), which means it has not allowed the full weight of the "perhaps" to take hold; that is it is only a problem because it assumes the existence of God, and thus harbors an "illusion" that mistakes "an event for a being, or a Super-being, a ground of Being, beyond or without being, a mighty being that does things, or mysteriously decides not to, an agent-being in the sky."[380] Perhaps he'd be right. But I might argue in the opposite direction and ask: has the "perhaps" been collapsed into concluding that the existence of God is not even a possibility, much less the possibility of a God who can, does, might choose—and might make choices that are not beholden, or acceptable, to human choices? And in so doing would such a conclusion deny and abrogate the "perhaps" altogether, turning "God" into "something I have added to my repertoire, brought within the horizon of my experience, knowledge, belief, identification, and expectation"?[381] In that case, wouldn't Caputo fall prey to his own critique? Put differently, does *excluding* the possibility that God chooses (or not) not only traffic in the very thing attempted to be remedied, i.e. exclusive decision, choice, election, but also become something "I know…once I can say, this is God"?[382]

---

[379] Ibid., 29.
[380] Ibid., 30.
[381] Ibid., 10.
[382] Ibid.

The larger point of this chapter, however, is to unearth the problems that arise with *divine* election, and in this section the focus has been on the issues that arise when the theologian attempts to remedy exclusive divine election by choosing the kind of "God" who chooses (or not). What I am trying to show, ultimately, is that *divine* election is a problem that *insists*, that won't go away, that troubles even when we think we have safely escaped or remedied it, even when we convince ourselves that the thorn has been removed, and I believe Caputo's theology of perhaps highlights this problem nicely, mostly because I think it shares a similar concern: the problem of reducing God to an object of human decision, control, and mastery. To the extent that Caputo's critique is accurate, however, it would mean that a "weak theology" might actually, unexpectedly, strengthen the hand of the human theologian, and be just as dangerous as a "strong theology"—or at least be unable to rid itself of the poison of "strong theology," continuing to traffic in what it has attempted to remedy. Additionally, unless the "perhaps" allows room (perhaps) for at least the possibility of a God who might choose, then it too would be subject to the same critique. More importantly, any remedy to the problem of exclusive *divine* election that includes the human theologian being the one who makes (all) the choices and decisions, should also make Caputo—and anyone concerned about human mastery over divinity—nervous. Thus what *divine* election reveals is that any attempt on the part of the theologian to remedy it—by choosing an alternative—results in a betrayal of the very same ethical intentions to remedy that which is poisonous, including trafficking in some version of exclusive election and human mastery and control over divinity.

Part Two: The Impossibility Facing the Theologian Who Confesses, Attempts to Maintain, Declare *Divine* Election

Having identified how *divine* election presents an "impossibility" for any attempt to remedy or exclude it in Part One, the goal in Part Two is to explore the way that *divine* election also presents a theological impossibility for the theologian who chooses to confess or include it. In order to do that, we will take a close look at the doctrine of divine election (and divine revelation) in Karl Barth's theology, which is paradigmatic in many ways, precisely because he takes "traditional" theological concepts, ideas, and doctrines, and amplifies them to their limit. And in our discussion of the emphasis on *God's* choosing in divine election, Barth does not disappoint. Perhaps more so than any other theologian, Barth is adamant about maintaining an emphasis on theology's proper "object," i.e. God, that can only be known by appreciating the "Subject" of divine action (e.g. revelation, election, etc.), which means that he consistently worries about theology collapsing into merely a human enterprise that privileges human knowledge, logic, reasoning, etc. when speaking about God, and thus reducing "God" to merely the object of theological analysis. In the case of divine election, Barth similarly wants to maintain that it is and remains primarily *God's* choice/decision, and not ours, such that we do not lose sight of the One who decides.[383] However, it is Barth's recognition of the inescapable fact that theology is, must be, and cannot help but be a human enterprise (i.e. spoken, written, confessed, proclaimed by humans), which makes it precarious, and puts it in the impossible predicament. For Barth, as we will see, the "best" way to navigate

[383] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1957, II.2:50–51.

such a predicament—especially in something like the *divine* election—is to ground theology in *divine* revelation. Barth therefore represents the preeminent example of the theological impossibility I am highlighting in this chapter, namely the issue of reducing *divine* election to the discussion of the theologian's choices/decisions, even if/when the theologian *chooses* to include or confess it.

Barth: Divine Election as Truly Divine (not human) Election

Throughout Barth's writings, he tenaciously insists that "Christian theology"[384] is only possible *if and when* God reveals Godself, which means that theology—i.e. the human witness to the divine event and action—must begin and end with God's self-revelation, not human ideas about "God," the human capacity for knowledge about God, etc. Whether it was his critique of Schleiermacher's desire to "validate the potential for religion" by making the human being and its capacity for religion the starting point, [385] or his accusation that theology had fallen prey to Feuerbach's claim that "theology is anthropology" (i.e. "talk about God is in the end only talk about humanity"),[386] or even his famous *Nein!* to Emil Brunner who wanted to establish a human capacity for

[384] I will use the phrase "Christian theology" throughout this section on Barth to signal one of the primary points of Barth's theology, namely that theology is—or should be—about an actual, living, personal reality, and not merely human ideas, concepts, language, etc.
[385] Karl Barth, "Evangelical Theology in the 19th Century," in *The Humanity of God* (Richmond: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 22.
[386] Trevor Hart, "Revelation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 40.

revelation,[387] "Barth was convinced that God could be known by God alone."[388] In other words, Christian theology needs to not only ensure that God remains its proper object, but be dependent upon God as the free Subject of divine action, i.e. that theology listen to, respond, and speak only on the basis of, *God's* self-revelation. For Barth, "in the event of revelation God himself is both the object of our knowing, and yet mysteriously the subject. He is the one who initiates and brings to completion the act of knowing."[389] As Barth consistently argues, it is crucial that we let God (as the Subject of divine action) define Godself (as the object of theology) and be vigilant in not imposing human definitions upon God, which he believed theology had succumbed to in his context.

Here we see an immediate (ironic) resonance between Barth's concern, and the concerns expressed in Part One, about human mastery over divinity. As a result of such a concern, however, for Barth it is imperative that the object of theology, God, is only possible if and when God, as Subject, reveals Godself—which marks a clear departure from the apophatic tradition and Caputo. But, as Boesel points out, such a departure might function apophatically in its own way. Boesel argues that "in the free event of divine self-giving," i.e. in Barth's doctrine of divine revelation that depends on God's self-revelation, what is revealed "never passes over into our possession, never becomes our own, even when given to us."[390] Thus, although the apophatic tradition—as well as postmodern engagement with it—attempts to "'save the name' of God from human

---

[387] Karl Barth, "No!: Answer to Emil Brunner," in Emil Brunner, *Natural Theology: Comprising "Nature and Grace*," trans. Peter Fraenkel (London: The Centenary Press, 1946).
[388] George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 36.
[389] Trevor Hart, "The Word, The Words and The Witness: Proclamation as Divine and Human Reality in the Theology of Karl Barth.," *Tyndale Bulletin* 46, no. 1 (May 1995): 83.
[390] Boesel, "The Apophasis of Divine Freedom: Saving 'the Name' and the Neighbor from Human Mastery," 320.

mastery" by un-saying, Barth's notion of the divine freedom of God as Subject of revelation can function similarly.

Again, in the context of late-nineteenth and early-to mid-twentieth century theology, Barth is responding to the growing tendency in modern, liberal theology to speak about God from the basis of human ideas, logic, reasoning, experience, etc., and critiquing such. For Barth, theology must be beholden to the "if and when" of God's self-revelation, and not any capacity, knowledge, etc. on behalf of the human being. Since everything Christian theology says and does must begin and end with God's self-revelation, Barth methodologically begins his magnum opus, *Church Dogmatics*, with a "Doctrine of the Word of God," in which he develops the notion of God's self-revelation as the event and person of Jesus Christ.[391] Thus we arrive at the Christocentric theologian *par excellence*, as Barth maintains that Jesus Christ is not only the center of Christian theology, but that everything that can or should be said theologically must begin and end here.

Barth rigidly maintains this Christocentric logic all throughout *Church Dogmatics*, and the determination of theology by Jesus Christ is perhaps no clearer than in Barth's doctrine of divine election, where Jesus Christ is both the human object (who is chosen) and divine subject (who chooses). Unpacking not only the content, but also the method of Barth's doctrine of divine election—which will include its dependence on divine revelation—highlights how he attempts to maintain divine election as ultimately *God's* choice, and not a human one, despite the fact that emphasizing the former cannot avoid the latter.

---

[391] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley, vol. I.1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975).

Barth begins the second part of volume II of *Church Dogmatics*, his "Doctrine of God,"[392] by continually reminding the reader what has already been established in the previous two-thousand pages (i.e. his "Doctrine of the Word of God"), namely the notion that Christian theology must begin and end with, and be continually beholden to, the event of God's self-revelation (i.e. Jesus Christ). As he continues his doctrine of God, Barth reflects upon this methodological presupposition:

> We have tried to learn the lofty but simple lesson that it is by God that God is known…Our starting-point in that first part of the doctrine of God was neither an axiom of reason nor a datum of experience. In the measure that a doctrine of God draws on these sources, it betrays the fact that its subject is not really God but a hypostatized reflection of man. At more than one stage in our consideration of the earlier history of the doctrine we have had to guard steadfastly against the temptation of this type of doctrine. We took as our starting-point what God Himself said and still says concerning God, and concerning the knowledge and reality of God, by way of the self-testimony which is accessible and comprehensible because it has been given human form in Holy Scripture, the document which is the very essence and basis of the Church. As strictly as possible we have confined ourselves to the appropriation and repetition of that self-testimony as such. As strictly as possible we have let our questions be dictated by the answers which are already present in the revelation of God attested in Holy Scripture.[393]

Barth, again, is very clear about his theological methodology: "it is by God that God is known." God is known only through God's self-revelation or "self-testimony," which is "accessible and comprehensible…in Holy Scripture."[394] For Barth, this is the "best" way to avoid collapsing theology into "a hypostatized reflection of man," i.e. "something I have added to my repertoire, brought within the horizon of my experience, knowledge,

---

[392] Again, it is important to note that before Barth can even begin his "doctrine of God" (volume II) he must begin with a "doctrine of the Word of God," which is methodologically significant because for Barth God can only be discussed if and when God reveals Godself.

[393] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1957, II.2:3.

[394] In another context, it might be worth considering *this* methodological move, and exclusivism, on Barth's part, and to what extent it ensures knowledge of God.

belief, identification, and expectation."[395] And since, as we have seen, Barth is convinced that Jesus Christ is God's "self-testimony," then "theology must begin with Jesus Christ, and not with general principles…Theology must also end with Him, and not with supposedly self-evident general conclusions."[396]

Because Jesus Christ is the source and norm of Barth's theology, it follows that Barth will attempt to describe divine election with Jesus Christ at the center. In fact, Barth believes that the main failure of John Calvin's doctrine of divine election (i.e. double-predestination) was a result of Calvin *not* keeping Jesus Christ at the center. Barth writes: "All the dubious features of Calvin's doctrine result from the basic failing that in the last analysis he separates God and Jesus Christ, thinking that what was in the beginning with God must be sought elsewhere than in Jesus Christ."[397] In Barth's estimation, understanding divine election apart from Jesus Christ led Calvin to erroneously conclude that humanity is the object of God's choosing, which resulted in Calvin's infamous double predestination: the human chosen by God for salvation or perdition. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin describes his understanding of divine election: "In conformity, therefore, to the clear doctrine of the Scripture, we assert, that by an eternal and immutable counsel, God has once for all determined, both whom he would admit to salvation, and whom he would condemn to destruction."[398] For Barth one can only reach the conclusion that divine election is (only) about the eternal destinies of human beings by attempting to understand divine election abstractly—in other words,

---

[395] Caputo, *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*, 10.
[396] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1957, II.2, 4.
[397] Ibid., 111.
[398] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. John Allen, vol. II (Philadelphia: Presbyterian board of Christian education, 1936),181.

attempting to understand divine election *apart from* God's self-revelation, which for Barth is the person and event of Jesus Christ.[399] Thus, all throughout *Church Dogmatics* Barth maintains that the Christian does not deal with an abstract concept of "God"—or even a "God" of the theologian's choosing—but who (he believes) God has revealed Godself to be.

In so doing, Barth maintains that in divine election "its direct and proper object is not individuals generally, but one individual—and only in Him the people called and united by Him…In the strict sense only He can be understood and described as 'elected' (and 'rejected')."[400] Of course the "Him/He" is Jesus Christ, for Barth, who is the object of divine election as the elected human being, through which all humanity participates in Jesus Christ's righteousness, glory, and exaltation. Therefore, the fellowship that Jesus Christ has with God as the perfect human being (who has accepted this fellowship) now becomes available to all humanity because Jesus Christ represents the human being elected by God. At the same time, however, Barth asserts that Jesus Christ also bears humanity's judgment because of sin. Thus Jesus Christ is not only the human being chosen for fellowship with God, but is the human being chosen to bear the punishment, judgment, and wrath of God because of humanity's disobedience.

But the present focus of this chapter should bring our attention to the other—in fact, more primary and primordial—aspect of Barth's twofold doctrine of divine election where Jesus Christ is not only the "object" of God's choice (as human being

---

[399] Of course, Calvin (and others) have also based their doctrine(s) of divine election on revelation, as is evidenced by the quote above; it's just that Barth believed the content of divine revelation should be based solely on Jesus Christ. But rather than debate the "true" revelation of God (which is certainly not my goal!), the larger point is Barth's attempt to remain true to *divine* revelation.

[400] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1957, II.2: 43.

representative of all humanity), but the "Subject," i.e. the God who chooses: "It is the name of Jesus Christ which, according to the divine self-revelation, forms the focus at which the two decisive beams of the truth forced upon us converge and unite: on the one hand the electing God and on the other elected man."[401] Highlighting Chalcedonian Christology's view of Jesus Christ as fully God and fully human, Barth also depicts Jesus Christ as the Subject of election: the electing God. With Jesus Christ as the electing God we see God's self-determination—or self-election—to be *this* way. In other words, Jesus Christ is not only the object of God's election, but in Jesus Christ we see the very nature of God as God in relationship, fellowship, and communion with humanity because Jesus Christ *is* the very "concrete and manifest form of the divine decision."[402]

It is important to note, however, that Jesus Christ's "electing" also entails a *human* choice, which adds a fundamental aspect to Barth's understanding of *divine* election, especially with regards to our present focus on theological impossibility. Since Barth subscribes to the Chalcedonian understanding of the simultaneous full humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ "without division, without separation," the humanity of Jesus is not (just) elected, but also *elects*.[403] Barth writes: "In so far as Jesus Christ is the electing God, we must obviously—and above all—ascribe to Him the active determination of electing. It is not that He does not also elect as man, i.e. elect God in faith. But this election can only follow His prior election."[404] For Barth, then, divine election—primarily as *God's* choice—always entails, involves, calls for *human* election,

---

[401] Ibid., 59.
[402] Ibid., 105.
[403] Henry Bettenson, ed., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 73.
[404] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1957, II.2:102.

decision, choice. For Barth, God (in Jesus Christ) elects/chooses humanity (in Jesus Christ), and the human being (in Jesus Christ), in turn, elects/chooses God in faith. There is, therefore, a necessary aspect of human choosing involved in *divine* election, especially when one confesses or chooses to include it theologically. The problem, as we will see, arises with the recognition that there is no safeguarding against collapsing, reducing, or turning *God's* choice into merely a human one. This aspect of Barth's doctrine of divine election will be important for our present discussion of the "impossibility" of *divine* election as we move forward, namely how to confess, understand, or even *choose* a choice that is fundamentally "other," i.e. *God's*. The short "answer" for Barth—although even he admits there is no way to ultimately insure or protect against this—is only on the ground of divine revelation of said divine choice. But before turning more explicitly to that complexity (or impossibility/necessity), we should continue our exploration of Barth's attempt to assert that divine election is, or should be, ultimately, primarily about *God's* decision.

Part of Barth's concern about previous understandings of divine election, including those of Augustine and Calvin, is the way in which an appeal to mystery or unknowability can actually mitigate against the very content of *divine* election, namely as *God's* decision, by turning it into human speculation and reducing it to merely human choice or decision. In Barth's theology, Jesus Christ, as the Subject of election—the electing God—safeguards against any unknown mystery regarding divine election, for if Jesus Christ is the elector and elected then we have the content of the very decision before us. Otherwise, for Barth, we might be concerned about what kind of God we are dealing with when discussing such a precarious topic as divine choice. The "good news,"

then, at least for Barth, is that in Jesus Christ we have to do with the decree of God: the One who decides and the Object of that choice. And it is the "certainty" of such (through faith) that permits Barth to declare that divine election—previously understood as *decretum horribile*—"is the sum of the Gospel because of all words that can be said or heard it is the best."[405] In other words, the fact that in divine election we have to do with Jesus Christ as the electing God (and elected human being), is what makes it "good news," in fact the "best" news humanity could ever receive, precisely because it reframes what was once a "horrible decree"—because of God's mysterious choice of some over others—into the divine election of all humanity, in the election of Jesus Christ.

Barth therefore marks a departure from an appeal to an unknown mystery in an attempt to ensure that *divine* election does not collapse into *human* election. As we have seen in Part One, contemporary, progressive engagements with the apophatic tradition, including Caputo's "weak theology," emphasize unknowability, or impossibility, to protect "divinity" from human mastery and control. In Augustine and Calvin's doctrines of divine election, we find a similar appeal to mystery and unknowability, for similar reasons.

When pressed to the limits of "why" God chooses or has chosen some, Augustine appeals to the mystery of God in an attempt to be faithful to the notion that divine election is fundamentally about God's choice, not a human choice. Although the point that Augustine is trying to make is that it is "good news" that God chooses any to be saved, he too cannot help but wonder about those who are not chosen, who are predestined to eternal damnation, and the ways in which that seems like very *bad* news

---

[405] Ibid., II.2:3.

(for some). When discussing God's mercy and judgment, Augustine defers to the inscrutability of God and God's ways, and interrupts his analysis of divine election by stating: "But His ways are unsearchable. Therefore the mercy by which He freely delivers, and the truth by which He righteously judges, are equally unsearchable."[406] In the midst of this treatise on predestination, Augustine, who is never short on words, analysis, declarations, etc., makes a strangely *apophatic* gesture in the midst of his strongly *kataphatic* assertion of God's sovereign, free, gratuitous choice of desperate, dependent, despondent humanity. Augustine, who in the preceding—and subsequent—pages expressed full certainty, confidence, and clarity about *who/what* God has chosen, appeals to mystery when he cannot figure out or reconcile *why* a seemingly gracious God has chosen to condemn some human beings to eternal damnation of "His" own free will. Later on in the same document, Augustine poses this very question, asking "*why* He delivers one rather than another?"[407] Citing Romans 9 (i.e. grounding his approach on what he assumes to be God's self-revelation in the testimony of the Bible), Augustine again appeals to God's discretion and volition to have mercy on whoever "He" chooses, and Paul's response to any who would question such: "O man, who are you that repliest against God?" (Romans 9:20). It is better, Augustine maintains, to remember this "than to dare to speak as if we could know what He has chosen to be kept secret."[408] Again, Augustine, in an attempt to maintain a notion of God's choosing, appeals to mystery when the human cannot understand, make sense of, explain, or justify what God has *chosen* not to reveal.

---

[406] Augustine, "On the Predestination of Saints," in *Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*, trans. John A. Mourant and William J. Collinge (Washington, D.C: Catholic University Press, 1992), chapter 11.
[407] Ibid., chapter 16.
[408] Ibid.

John Calvin also appeals to the mystery (and beneficence) of divine will in his doctrine of divine election in order to assert that divine election is primarily *God's* choice/decision. Before beginning to explicate his doctrine of predestination, Calvin addresses the danger of human curiosity and its wanderings into "forbidden labryrinths, and soaring beyond its sphere, as if determined to leave none of the Divine secrets unscrutinzed or unexplored." He thus admonishes the curious—and arrogant—seeker:

> First, then, let them remember that when they inquire into predestination, they penetrate the inmost recesses of Divine wisdom, where the careless and confident intruder will obtain no satisfaction of his curiosity, but will enter a labyrinth from which he will find no way to depart. For it is unreasonable that man should scrutinize with impunity those things which the Lord has determined to be hidden in himself; and investigate, even from eternity, that sublimity of wisdom which God would have us to adore and not comprehend, to promote our admiration of his glory.[409]

Calvin is suggesting that it is "unreasonable" to think that the human being could not only understand, but actually investigate with scrutiny, divine election, as if the human being could attain the "sublimity of wisdom" that is only reserved for divinity. Again, like Augustine (and the concerns expressed in Part One), Calvin makes a similar appeal to divine wisdom, mystery, and inscrutability in order to keep divinity out of the grasp and control of humanity. Although for Calvin, this is less of an overtly apophatic move, because he is more explicit in maintaining that the only way we can know the secrets of divine wisdom is through the testimony of Scripture. Remember, Calvin comes to the conclusion that "by an eternal and immutable counsel, God has once for all determined, both whom he would admit to salvation, and whom he would condemn to destruction," through an appeal to "conformity…to the *clear doctrine of the Scripture*."[410] Scripture

---

[409] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II:172.
[410] Ibid., II:181 (emphasis mine).

clearly reveals, for Calvin, that there is no "reason" other than divine will for God's election. Following Augustine, Calvin also cites and explicates Romans 9:8:

> "God hath mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth." You see how [Paul] attributes both to the mere will of God. If therefore, we can assign no reason why he grants mercy to his people but because such is his pleasure, neither shall we find any other cause but his will for the reprobation of others. For when God is said to harden or show mercy to whom he pleases, men are taught by this declaration to seek no cause beside his will.[411]

At the same time, however, Calvin maintains that an appeal to divine will is something that we can trust because of God's goodness. Therefore humans should not question divine will because it is foolish for the creature to question the Creator—in other words, for Calvin: how could that which has been created scrutinize the wisdom of the One who creates? Simply put, the human being is incapable of understanding or comprehending divinity.

As we can see, Augustine and Calvin's desire to maintain that divine election is truly about *God's* choice comes by way of an appeal to divine mystery (i.e. out of the grasp and control of human hands, intellect, reason, etc.). But it is Barth's shared desire to keep divine election *divine* that actually clears up some of the mystery for Barth, because he is convinced that God has indeed revealed Godself in Jesus Christ. "So much depends upon our acknowledgment of the Son, of the Son of God, as the Subject of this predestination," Barth writes, because "if Jesus Christ is…not…primarily the Elector, what shall we really know at all of a divine electing and our election?"[412] If we remove our focus from Jesus Christ when discussing divine election, Barth critically asks, then what are we left with? "The result will be, of course, that we shall be driven to

---

[411] Ibid., II:197–98.
[412] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1957, II.2:105.

speculating about a *decretum absolutum* instead of grasping and affirming in God's electing the manifest grace of God."[413] And this is the real pinch, both for Barth and for our own inquiry into how much *divine* election truly is about God's choice (and not ours): on the one hand, to maintain the notion that divine election is ultimately God's choice led Augustine and Calvin to the point of mystery—if it is God's, then it is not ours to be analyzed, questioned, etc. However, Barth questions whether or not appealing to mystery might have its own way of turning divine election into a "God" of our own making, choosing, etc. And, in fact, he argues that declaring quite the opposite—i.e. that "there is no such thing as a *decretum absolutum*…no such thing as a will of God apart from the will of Jesus Christ,"[414] that in this divine decision "we can know with a certainty which nothing can ever shake that we are the elect of God"[415]—is a surer way to maintain divine election as *divine*, because "He tells us that He Himself is the One who elects us."[416] In other words, as Barth sees it, what might seem like deference to mystery (as in the case of Augustine and Calvin, or even those concerns expressed in Part One) in order to safeguard against human mastery over divinity, might actually have the opposite result, namely running the risk of turning divine election into human election.

Let's dive deeper into this strange logic. Barth admits that his thesis, that divine election begins and ends with Jesus Christ, marks a significant departure from previous understandings of the doctrine in many ways, including its refusal to adhere to an unknown mystery of divine election. In these previous interpretations, Barth argues, both

---

[413] Ibid.
[414] Ibid., II.2:115.
[415] Ibid., II.2:116.
[416] Ibid., II.2:115.

"the Subject and object of predestination (the electing God and elected man) are determined ultimately by the fact that both quantities are treated as unknown."[417] As we have seen, it is this "mystery" that both Augustine and Calvin refer to when the (inevitable) questions are raised in light of the rationale or justification of God's choice; in other words, for them, this "unknown" protects the agency, subjectivity of God—it is *divine*, not human, election. Barth, who appreciates this desire to maintain the primacy of *God's choosing* in divine election, acknowledges this:

> We may say that the electing God is a supreme being who disposes freely according to His own omnipotence, righteousness and mercy. We may say that to Him may be ascribed the lordship over all things, and above all the absolute right and absolute power to determine the destiny of man. But when we say that, then ultimately and fundamentally the electing God is an unknown quantity… At this point obscurity has undoubtedly enveloped the theories of even the most prominent representatives and exponents of the doctrine of predestination. Indeed, in the most consistently developed forms of the dogma we are told openly that…we have to do, necessarily, with a great mystery. In the sharpest contrast to this view our thesis that the eternal will of God is the election of Jesus Christ means that we deny the existence of any such twofold mystery.[418]

Despite Barth's shared commitment with Augustine and Calvin to allow God to "dispose freely" in divine election (i.e. not impose our choices upon God but confess that God is the One who chooses in freedom in *divine* election, and has revealed this to us), in contrast to Augustine and Calvin Barth finds it necessary to deny such an unknown "mystery" in order to do so. Part of Barth's issue—and what he understands as one of the main issues with any notion of divine election—is "whether it is incomprehensible light or incomprehensible darkness."[419] In other words, is divine election "good news" or

---

[417] Ibid., II.2:146.
[418] Ibid.
[419] Ibid.

dusagge&lion ("bad news")?[420] Barth is convinced that divine election is, should be, and was always intended to be "the sum of the Gospel," and "not a mixed message of joy and terror, salvation and damnation."[421] But, according to Barth, such an "affirmation" of the good news of divine election "could not and cannot be made as long as the step is not taken which we are now taking and have already taken in the present thesis: as long as it is not admitted that in the eternal predestination of God we have to do on both sides with only one name and one person…Jesus Christ."[422] Thus part of Barth's problem with such an appeal to divine mystery is that it necessarily obscures the goodness of the news that divine election was (always) intended to be.

But more pertinent to our present focus is the other issue Barth takes with the appeal to divine mystery when discussing divine election, namely the way in which it can actually, unexpectedly, collapse divine election into human analysis, choice, decision, etc. The way Barth sees it, "as long as we cannot ultimately know, and ought not to know, and ought not even to ask, who is the electing God and elected man, it does not avail us in the least to be assured and reassured that in the face of this mystery we ought to be silent and to humble ourselves and to adore."[423] In other words the "unknown" does *not* lead to humility, silence, and respect for the fact that this decision is God's and not ours, as perhaps it was intended, but has the opposite result. As Barth sees it, appeals to "mystery" or "unknown" routinely results in speculation (which is precisely what Augustine, Calvin, and others are trying to avoid). And when we speculate about what it

---

[420] Ibid., II.2:18.
[421] Ibid., II.2:13.
[422] Ibid., II.2:146.
[423] Ibid., II.2:147.

could (or should) be, the "mystery" or "unknown" does not stay that way, but becomes a known concept, idea, etc. Therefore, such human speculation is what makes Barth nervous. In fact, Barth argues:

> It is inevitable that we ourselves should try to fill in the gap, that of ourselves we should try to make known the unknown. It is inevitable that we should arbitrarily ascribe to this unknown this or that name or concept. It is inevitable that we should seek in Him this or that reality. It is inevitable that we should humble ourselves before this or that self-projected image of God in a silence and adoration which is certainly not intended by those who plunge us into that obscurity, but from which we can hardly restrain ourselves as long as they refuse, like the traditional exponents of the dogma, to point us to the genuine form of the mystery which we could and should approach with genuine silence, humility and adoration.[424]

Thus, for Barth, an appeal to "mystery" might not (always) have the desired effect, i.e. avoiding reducing "divinity" to human speculation, but in actuality opens up the space for human speculation about the nature of this God, this divine decision, its object(s), etc., in which case it does not remain a "genuine…mystery." In Barth's estimation, genuine appreciation for the Subjectivity of God in divine election, i.e. that in such a notion we are dealing with *God's* choice and not ours, comes only when we actually know, with certainty, who this God is and what this choice is, as revealed in Jesus Christ. In other words, affirming that God has indeed chosen means affirming what that choice actually is, not simply deferring to mystery or unknowability, because Barth believes that one cannot help but speculate and thus "make known the unknown."

Perhaps Barth's point about how appeals to mystery can result in declaring something known applies not only to Augustine and Calvin, but the concerns expressed in Part One. As I suggested, those who are concerned about human control and mastery

---

[424] Ibid.

over divinity should recognize the way such a concern is betrayed when the theologian chooses/decides the kind of God who chooses (or not). Additionally, despite Caputo's attempt to keep "weak theology" free from determination, declaration, decision, absolutes, and to be "content with…'perhaps,'" this seems to be betrayed when he writes that "one *must*, it is absolutely necessary, always say 'perhaps' for God."[425] Such an absolute necessity and demand seems contrary to "perhaps." And when Caputo declares that "God does not exist," but rather, "God insists,"[426] he seems to betray the "perhaps" by doing what he critiques "strong theology" for doing, such that instead of leaving room for "the event" he does indeed "fill in the gap" by *declaring* something definitive about "God," i.e. that "God does not exist."[427] *Perhaps* Barth was onto something, then, when he suggested that appeals to mystery, unknowability, uncertainty, etc. cannot remain that way, as it is inevitable that we should "try to make known the unknown."

Of course, even Barth recognizes that "certainty" entails problems of its own as well—though certainly not to same extent as Caputo—which points to the impossibility I have been alluding to. Barth admits that his certainty about the substance and content (i.e. the subject and object) of divine election does not fully "solve the problem," at least epistemologically, and thus acknowledges the impossibility of the task at hand. In fact, it still leaves certain pressing questions, namely whether such an affirmation can be made, whether he is right to make it, or on what basis he can make such an affirmation? "How do we know that Jesus Christ is the electing God and elected man? How do we know that

---

[425] Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 9 (emphasis mine).
[426] Ibid., 13.
[427] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1957, II.2:147.

all that is to be said concerning this mystery must be grounded in His name?"[428] It should come as no surprise that Barth addresses these questions by referring back to the initial premise of *Church Dogmatics*, explicitly his doctrine of revelation, the Word of God revealed in and through Jesus Christ, which means we "know" because this is who God has revealed Godself to be. This is circular reasoning, for sure! And according to a preeminent Barthian interpreter, George Hunsinger: "Barth was well aware of the circularity of this argument. He had in no way tried to *prove* that God has engaged in an act of self-revelation."[429] And neither is it the intention of this chapter to seek after any such "proof" with regards to if God elects, who or what God elects, the nature of such election, etc., but merely to point to the issue that arises when discussing divine election, namely the impossibility, and problematic nature of, discussing, analyzing, choosing, making decisions about a "divine" choice/decision. And that is precisely the issue that Barth's theology raises, which is still pertinent to our present discussion: the way in which Barth tries to maintain that divine election be truly *divine* election, and not be another way to create a god of our own making, crafting a "divine" choice into what we want, desire, hope for, discern as the best possible option. And Barth, perhaps more so than any theologian, attempts to do so to the fullest. The question that remains, however, is not merely whether or not he succeeded in doing so—which would mean definitive, factual, certitude that Jesus Christ is indeed the electing God and elected human being (which is a futile enquiry because even Barth claims this can only be known through faith)—but whether or not divine election presents an impossibility by its very nature:

---

[428] Ibid., II.2:148.

[429] Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth*, 36 (emphasis mine).

that *divine* election causes us to reckon with the impossibility of knowing, confessing, declaring that God might choose (or not), while also an impossibility to avoid or remedy this dilemma by reducing divine election to merely the theological discussion of what is most logically, reasonably, ethically coherent, desirable, viable, according to the standards that we set.

Such "impossibility" was not lost on Barth either. For all his talk of certainty regarding divine revelation, election, etc., Barth recognized that theology, by its very nature, presents an impossibility—or more pertinent to this dissertation, both an impossibility *and* necessity. Again, Barth arrives at certainty, methodologically, *because* he wants to affirm that Christian theology always begin and end with God (through revelation, in Jesus Christ), and not human reasoning, experience, etc. Thus Barth's attempt to maintain the Subjectivity of God in divine election results in a *necessity* to speak about divine election in the way God has chosen, not the choices we make.

Yet we also find Barth making strange, unexpected gestures in the opposite direction throughout *Church Dogmatics*, discussing "the speech of God as the mystery of God,"[430] and unsettling anyone who might rest assured in such certainty. Speaking of the unavoidable limitations of theology, Barth writes:

> All theology is *theologia viatorum*…It does not exhibit its object but can only indicate it, and in so doing it owes the truth to the self-witness of the theme and not its own resources. It is broken thought and utterance to the extent that it can progress only in isolated thoughts and statements directed from different angles to the one object. It can never form a system, comprehending and as it were "seizing" the object.[431]

---

[430] See, for instance, the subject heading "The Speech of God as the Mystery of God" in: Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley, vol. I.1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 162ff.

[431] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley and R.J. Ehrlich, vol. III.3 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 293.

Again, Barth's real desire is to be as rigorous as possible "that in everything our concern is with *God's* speech and *God's* act," and not our own. Thus Barth must also be wary of the "continual temptation to think and speak of the Logos of God…in such a way that we think we know it…that we think we perceive its structure and understand its operation, so that in thought and speech we are its master, as well or as badly as man may become the master of any object of thought or speech."[432] In other words, if theology ever intends to be about a divine reality, and not merely the projection of human ideas such that its object (i.e. "God") comes under the control and mastery of humanity, then theology should always appreciate the precarious position it is in. Barth thus asks: "Is it clear…that the serious element in serious theological work is grounded in the fact that its object is never in any circumstances at our command, at the command of even the profoundest biblical or Reformation vision or knowledge, at the command of even the most delicate and careful construction?"[433]

Here Barth is also issuing a warning against resting too much in any kind of "certainty"—much like his warning against an appeal to mystery—over any theological notion, doctrine, or dogma because of the way it too results in bringing God under the command and mastery of human thoughts, ideas, etc. In fact, he goes so far as to admit that even in his own theology there is no way "we could and should prove that we have not deceived ourselves, that we have really been speaking of the Logos of God," because "thinking we can prove this in some sense, we should really betray the cause."[434] In other words, if all the talk about basing theology on God's revelation and not our own meant

---

[432] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1975, I.1:162.
[433] Ibid., 163.
[434] Ibid.

anything, then "we must accept the fact that only the Logos of God Himself can provide the proof that we are really talking about Him when we are allegedly doing so."[435] Going further, he writes:

> And we should have succumbed already to the afore-mentioned temptation if we were to look about for some means to ward it off, to secure ourselves against it, and to make ourselves immune to temptation. For it would be a highly refined way of becoming master of God's Word to think we could put ourselves in a position in which we have securely adopted the right attitude to it, that of servant and not master. Would this not be the loftiest triumph of human certainty? But would it not be a confirmation and a fall into the temptation?[436]

And here is the point in which we reach the impossible predicament. Barth's point is that the temptation to bring God (and "God's Word") under human control and mastery cannot be safely guarded against *even by* doing what he has tried to do, i.e. recognizing the temptation, by trying not to do so, because even then we could fall prey to "the loftiest of human certainty" by thinking that we had "adopted the right attitude" theologically, and thus escaped the temptation or avoiding the danger. To the extent that Barth is onto something here, it would mean a direct exposure and critique of the approaches highlighted in Part One, including those that believe that they have been able safely avoid human mastery over divine mystery, that they have succeeded in warding it off, securing themselves against it, "adopted the right attitude to it."

Thus Barth seems to appreciate a theological impossibility, a danger that is inescapable, where he must admit: "All our delimitations can only seek to be signals or alarms to draw attention to the fact that God's Word is and remains God's, not bound and not to be attached to this thesis or to that antithesis."[437] And the theological commitment

---

[435] Ibid.
[436] Ibid.
[437] Ibid., 164.

to divine Subjectivity does not result in "an ultimate 'assuring'" of theology, "but always a penultimate 'de-assuring' of theology, or, as one might put it, a theological warning against theology."[438] Barth thus appreciates the precarious position *divine* election presents, one in which the theologian finds himself/herself caught in this impossible, yet necessary predicament: a necessity to confess God's decision (as God's, and not ours), while recognizing the impossibility of doing so. Furthermore, as Barth suggests, there is no guarding or protecting against, no avoiding or escaping, the dilemma, the impossibility/necessity, even if/when one recognizes and attempts to avoid it, as he himself has tried to do.

This kind of "de-assuring" is precisely the goal of this chapter, and more generally, this dissertation: that any attempt to remedy (exclusive) divine election will be met by limits, impossibility. In this chapter more specifically, I am drawing attention to the way in which that is highlighted by a notion of *God's* choosing. Even more specifically in this section, I am trying to highlight how even a recognition of the problem, even an attempt to keep divine election *divine* (and not *human*) election, cannot avoid the dilemma, such that there is no way "to look about for some means to ward it off, to secure ourselves against it" or "to think we could put ourselves in a position in which we have securely adopted the right attitude to it."[439] That would apply both to the theologian attempting to remedy exclusive divine election (by choosing to exclude it), as well as the theologian attempting to remain "true" to it (by choosing to include it).

---

[438] Ibid., 164–165.
[439] Ibid., I.1:163.

In an essay entitled "The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching," Barth expounds even more upon this theological impossibility and necessity. As intonated by the title, Barth's main focus is on the *necessity* facing the preacher, i.e. the need to preach the Gospel. The need, for Barth, emerges from "God's promise, which lies behind it all."[440] Yet this necessity carries with it a simultaneous (or even greater) impossibility as well. "But we must not stop here," Barth writes, speaking of the necessity of Christian preaching, "the Word of God on the lips of man is an impossibility."[441] Although the Christian preacher is called by God to preach the "Word of God" (necessity), for Barth doing so is "impossible." It should come as no surprise that the impossibility arises from Barth's conviction that "the word of God is and will and must be and remain the word of *God*," and there is always the danger in Christian preaching—and, in Christian theology, I would add—of confusing what is rightfully God's with what is ours, by turning it into something within our possession, control, etc.[442] Thus Barth reflects on the "great peril" that the preacher, and theologian, faces:

> Is there not every likelihood that men will seem to have undertaken and—who knows?—accomplished the feat of taking God's word on their lips as their own?... What can it mean? It means above all that we should feel a fundamental alarm. What are you doing, you man, with the word of *God* upon *your* lips? Upon what grounds do you assume the role of mediator between heaven and earth?... Did one ever hear of such overwhelming presumption, such Titanism, or—to speak less classically but more clearly—such brazenness! One does not with impunity cross the boundaries of mortality![443]

Although part of Barth's concern here is how the preacher can claim to "usurp the prerogative of God," ours is a little less ominous (i.e. I am not trying to invoke a concern

---

[440] Karl Barth, "The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978), 124.
[441] Ibid.
[442] Ibid., 125.
[443] Ibid.

about the wrath and vengeance of a punitive God), though ominous nonetheless. As I have tried to sketch the problem in this chapter, I think Barth's concern over the peril of assuming to speak *of*, *for*, or even *about* divine election is sound and sober. Thus when Barth speaks about the perilous situation facing the one who claims to preach God's word, that "so far as *we* know, there is no on who deserves the wrath of God more abundantly than the ministers," we might also do well to appreciate how *divine* election reveals a similar kind of peril and danger in the predicament facing every theologian.[444]

Barth continues: "As a matter of fact, the church is really an impossibility. There can be no such thing as a minister. Who dares, who can, preach, knowing what preaching is? The situation of crisis in the church has not yet been impressed upon us with sufficient intensity. One wonders if it will ever be."[445] And I am arguing that the impossibility is equally as live for the theologian, such that what *divine* election reveals is that "there can be no such thing as a theologian," if being a theologian means safely navigating this impossibility/necessity. If *divine* election highlights this impossibility—in either speaking about a God who chooses or choosing not to—then the situation is certainly a "crisis," one in which I have tried in this chapter to impress "upon us with sufficient intensity." To make matters worse, for the theologian (and preacher), the impossibility is such that there is no safely escaping the problem, which highlights the necessity as well. Remember, for Barth, the impossibility emerges in light of the necessity. As he says elsewhere, "We ought to speak of God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God."[446] To that end, this chapter has pursued the problem of *divine* election wherein it is the *theologian*

---

[444] Ibid., 126.
[445] Ibid.
[446] Karl Barth, "The Word of God and the Task of Ministry," in *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978), 186.

who faces the impossibility and necessity of deciding, either to confess, declare, include *divine* election, or to avoid, remedy, exclude it.

Before closing our exploration of Barth's theology of divine election, I want to highlight a dynamic in play that is particularly relevant to this dissertation's overall aim. We have focused our attention explicitly in this chapter on the "methodological" problem of excluding or including the notion of a "God who chooses"—and the impossibility that emerges on both ends—but we must remember that the primary motivation for the former is because of divine election's exclusivity. And while Barth's theology certainly exemplifies the tension of the methodological impossibility (and necessity) of *divine* election, it also exemplifies the issue of exclusivity—especially the kind of nuanced, specific exclusivity this dissertation seeks to highlight: the structural inescapability of exclusion inherent in the structure of decision, which does not necessarily entail God electing some to eternal salvation while excluding others in an absolute decision. Barth's doctrine of divine election surely gestures toward a more "universal" notion of election, as all are chosen in Jesus Christ; yet it is still "exclusive." Methodologically, Barth is certainly exclusive because divine election can *only* be properly understood in Jesus Christ; and this is important to acknowledge because it "can pack a rather mean exclusionary punch" for anyone who does not affirm Jesus Christ as God's (primary, only, exclusive, once-and-for-all) revelation, i.e. practioners of any other religious tradition.[447] Simply put, "the problem is obvious: God *only* in Jesus Christ," which *excludes* all other theological or religious understandings, traditions, beliefs.[448] Thus even

[447] Boesel, "Divine Relationality and (the Methodological Constraints of) the Gospel as Piece of News: Tracing the Limits of Trinitarian Ethics," 255.
[448] Ibid., 258.

if *all* are chosen in Jesus Christ, which might seem to suggest that it is not exclusive, it is the fact that all are chosen *in Jesus Christ*, that is certainly exclusive. So Barth's doctrine of divine election can also serve to represent the main problem this dissertation has been tracking all along: the inherent, structural exclusivity of choice/decision, that is manifested in our exploration of divine election. Of course, it is not the same kind of exclusivity found in "traditional" doctrines of divine election wherein some elected to salvation while others are not; but the goal of this dissertation has been an attempt to highlight an inevitable (form of) exclusivity, which Barth's theology also illustrates—especially this more nuanced form that need not be a once-for-all, absolute, eternal exclusion.[449]

The Impossibility of *Divine* Election

In this third, and final, chapter of our exploration of the problem of exclusive divine election I highlighted a more rigorously *theological* layer by exposing the deconstructive "impossibility" *divine* election presents. For the theologian who is concerned about the exclusivity of divine election, or even a notion of a "God" who chooses (at all), our exploration of *divine* election revealed a precarious predicament for any attempt to remedy, avoid, or exclude it. If the remedy to exclusive divine election is that the *theologian* chooses, or decides the kind of "God" who chooses (or not), what such choice might be, etc., then said remedy is trafficking in the very thing it has

[449] Given the inevitable, structural exclusivity this dissertation has demonstrated, one might consider whether Barth's particular form of exclusion is more palatable than other forms, if the possibility of avoiding altogether is no longer viable.

attempted to avoid or remedy, namely exclusive election, choice, decision. Furthermore, for the theologian who is concerned about human mastery and control over "divinity," then the remedy to *divine* election also reveals an impossibility to avoid that which is problematic. Seen the other way around, if there is a genuine concern about "God" (as a theological notion or idea) or even God (as a divine reality) becoming "something I have added to my repertoire, brought within the horizon of my experience, knowledge, belief, identification, and expectation,"[450] or human "mastery over divine mystery,"[451] then it is *impossible* to exclude (at least) the possibility, "perhaps," that God chooses. It might also be *inevitable* to say, name, or declare something about "God," even when one appeals to mystery, unknowability, or "perhaps." Additionally, our exploration of *divine* election in this chapter revealed the impossibility of guarding against human mastery over divine mystery, even if/when one believes to have adopted the right attitude toward it.

For the theologian who chooses to confess, declare, include *divine* election, he/she must acknowledge the impossibility of avoiding collapsing it into merely *human* election, which is the very thing he/she is trying to avoid, because there is no avoiding the human aspect of confessing—or choosing to confess—such. Our foray into Karl Barth's theology revealed not only the impossibility of proving the reality or fact of *divine* election, as only "God…can provide the proof that we are really talking about [God] when we are allegedly doing so,"[452] but also the impossibility of avoiding the risk of speaking about *divine* election, *divine* revelation, or anything *divine* "in such a way that we think we know it…that we think we perceive its structure and understand its

---

[450] Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 10.
[451] Boesel and Keller, *Apophatic Bodies*, 4.
[452] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1975, I.1:163.

operation, so that in thought and speech we are its master."[453] And because even for Barth *divine* election always entails (a form of) *human* election, there is no escaping that which one has tried to avoid. Even Barth's appeal to the "certainty" (through faith) of divine revelation acknowledges there is no escaping this predicament. Thus lest this chapter be read as an apologetic for Barthian theology as if he were able to "solve the problem," I read Barth more as merely representing an attempt at negotiating the predicament *divine* election presents, by at least acknowledging its impossibility. Barth himself could be the target of his own critique, or at least the manifestation of the impossibility he acknowledges, simply by pointing out "Barth's own systematic blindness to his patriarchal context,"[454] which has been present through most of the quotations cited in this chapter, not the least of which is his exclusive use of "He," "Him," "His," "man," etc. Such blindness might lead us to ask how "His" decision(s) and choice(s) were impacted by "him," or vice-versa?

Part of what this chapter seeks is "truth in advertising." If the theologian is convinced that "God" is merely a function of human intentions, an object for our use, an entity, thing, theo-poetic symbol or figure that we deploy for ethical, theological, and/or political ends, in which case a notion of a "God" who chooses is too violent, unethical, exclusive, then said theologian must recognize that they too fall prey to the critique of "human mastery over divine mystery," which is often marshaled against "traditional" theologies. The theologian cannot *both* remedy exclusive (divine) election *and* avoid human mastery over divine mystery, as well as some form of exclusive (human) election.

---

[453] Ibid., I.1:162.

[454] Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 9.

At the same time, the theologian concerned about a "God" of our choosing, who desires or at least hopes for theology to be about something *beyond* human mastery, control, creation, or choice, should recognize that there is no way to safeguard against this kind of objectification. Furthermore, the theologian is always trafficking in human control, decision, choice, in "broken thought and utterance," even as he/she tries to remain true to *divine* election.

Perhaps what *divine* election reveals is a deeper, more radical notion of apophaticism. As Boesel argues: "because this is *divine* activity, the measure of it—*ethically* and…*epistemologically*—is precisely that which is and always remains radically beyond our ken and so radically beyond our ethical as well as epistemological grasp, control, and mastery."[455] To take the critique of human mastery and control over divine mystery seriously, then, might mean being *apophatic*—i.e. *un-saying*—our rejection and exclusion of divine election. To acknowledge that God is (or could be) beyond our theological and ethical projects, or the "horizon of my experience, knowledge, belief, identification, and expectation,"[456] means that God may indeed *choose* (or not). And thus any attempts to remedy this "problem" encounter strict limits, an impossibility, an impossible necessity, wherein the theologian is left to discern between *which* exclusionary election and *whose* choice is it.

---

[455] Boesel, "The Apophasis of Divine Freedom: Saving 'the Name' and the Neighbor from Human Mastery," 324.
[456] Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 10.

CONCLUSION

Theological Options

> *It could save the world or destroy it—and in the next two hours will very likely do one or the other—for as any doctor knows, the more effective a treatment is, the more dangerous it is in the wrong hands.*
>
> —Walker Percy, *Love in the Ruins*

As Dr. Thomas More contemplates how his invention, the "ontological lapsometer," can be both an "effective treatment" as well as extremely "dangerous," how it will very likely either "save the world or destroy it," so we too come to the "conclusion" (of this dissertation) with a similar sentiment: while I do not claim world-annihilating or saving powers, to the extent that my argument has been successful, its implications are very dangerous—or, more accurately, the implications of this dissertation reveal "the more effective a treatment is, the more dangerous it is." To the extent that my point about the *impossibility* and *inescapability* of exclusive divine choice has merit, then the whole goal of this dissertation will have been to lead us to the point where we ask: "So, what are we to do?"[457] If my goal—which has been to render the problem of exclusion, through an investigation of its representation in divine election, *more* problematic, because it is inescapable and impossible to avoid—has been fulfilled, well then where do we go from here?

Although I do not harbor any illusion—unlike our dear friend Dr. More—that I have found a "treatment" or remedy for the problem, his reflection here does resonate with my findings in this way: to the extent that exclusion might be inescapable and

[457] Derrida, "Passions: 'An Oblique Offering,'" 22.

necessary, including the kind of exclusivity encountered in divine choice, we can be assured that it is still—and perhaps now so more than ever—"dangerous." As I have been trying to say all along, my goal has *not* been to give us a way out, an escape, a remedy, cure, or treatment to the problem that will result in a bill of clean-health, or any kind of assurance, "ethical certainty, good conscience, satisfaction of service rendered, and the consciousness of duty accomplished";[458] in fact, my work has tried, as much as possible, to push in the *other* direction: to ruffle the feathers, to disabuse, to problematize, to question our assurance, to complicate our conscience, and render the task/duty of engaging the problem un-accomplished. Which would mean, of course, that *no one* will be able to walk away feeling "good" about what we have discovered. Put simply, my conclusion is that no approach to exclusive divine election can result in "an ultimate 'assuring'" of theology, "but always a penultimate 'de-assuring' of theology."[459]

To continue to play with Dr. More's reflection, my goal has been to demonstrate how the problem of exclusive divine election is—and will always be—both "dangerous" and a "treatment." It can/does function as an effective treatment; but it is also dangerous. Seen the other way around, this dissertation enters the conversation wherein the conclusion or assumption, at least in contemporary, progressive theological contexts, is that exclusive divine election is (only) dangerous. What I have argued, however, is that it is even more dangerous than we think, precisely because it can/does also function as treatment. Thus, it might be a dangerous treatment, an illustration of Derrida's *pharmakon*—the remedy that is always itself a poison, or the poison that can also be a

---

[458] Ibid., 17.
[459] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1975, I.1:164–65.

remedy.[460] And it's not just dangerous in the "wrong hands," for there are no hands in which the treatment is not dangerous. So here we are: stuck between a figurative (or literal) rock and a hard place, in a Catch-22, caught in the impossible possibility. And, again, continuing to illustrate how "in the ruins" we are, this dissertation has also tried to highlight an exigency to the situation, namely that we are not only faced with an impossible predicament—how (not) to *choose*—but the situation is such that we must do so *now*, because we are always already within this predicament. Thus, like Dr. More, "in the next two hours"—or even always already—our fate awaits us, and as we attempt to discern between a/n option(s) that "could save or destroy," we should also recognize the immediacy of how such choice(s) "will very likely do one or the other." As Jame Cone admits, the situation is both dire and exigent, such that we do "not have time to do the theological and historical" (and/or ethical, philosophical, etc.) "research needed to present a 'balanced' perspective on the problem,"[461] but "we must make decisions," limited, problematic decisions. Our exploration of the problem of exclusive divine decision reveals that "we are thus placed in an existential situation…in which the burden is on us to make decisions without a guaranteed ethical guide."[462]

My proposal, then, in an "inconclusive" manner—or in the manner of Kierkegaard's infamous title, *A Concluding Unscientific Postscript*—is to leave us to consider the following.[463] Having explored these three layers to the problem of exclusive divine election, we will "conclude" by naming the implications of such an exploration

---

[460] Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (University of Chicago Press, 1983), 111.
[461] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, xvi.
[462] Ibid., 7.
[463] Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, ed.Alastair Hannay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

and suggesting possible theological, or theo-ethical, options in response to the problem, now that a fuller appreciation of its complexity is recognized. An appreciation for the *inescapability* of exclusive divine election, as well as the *impossibility* of avoiding and/or remedying it altogether, is not intended to leave us in a state of nihilism or apathy regarding the problem, but to heighten our vigilance in dealing with the "violence" entailed in any approach or engagement with it. Borrowing once again from Derrida, and concluding this dissertation the way I began it:

> In saying this I am not advocating that such violence be unleashed or simply accepted. I am above all asking that we try to recognize and analyze it *as best we can* in its various forms… And if, as I believe, violence remains (almost) ineradicable, its analysis and the most refined ingenious account of its conditions will be the least violent gestures, perhaps even nonviolent.[464]

If the violence, i.e. the problematic nature, of exclusion—especially as manifested in divine choice—is inescapable and impossible to avoid, I am arguing that the way to be "least violent" in relation to the problem is to be transparent about how it is unavoidable, and be as rigorous as possible about discerning between "better" and "worse" forms of it. Rather than assuming that identifying exclusion (especially as found in divine election) as problematic means we have done our theo-ethical duty or solved the problem, "I am above all asking that we try to recognize and analyze it *as best we can*, in its various forms." Thus my "deconstructive" thesis is that the (theologically and ethically) responsible approach to exclusive divine election is to discern between its various forms, i.e. *which* exclusion(s), *which* exclusionary preference, *whose* election?

---

[464] Jacques Derrida, "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion," in *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff; trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 112 (emphasis mine).

Which Exclusion(s)

Chapter One began the work of exploring the problem of exclusive divine election by honing in, first, on the problem of exclusion, through the lens of deconstruction. Caputo reads deconstruction as highlighting the (ethically) problematic nature of exclusion, and, although I agree with his ethical assessment—i.e. that exclusion *is problematic*—I presented an alternative reading of Derrida that problematizes Caputo's use of deconstruction for such theo-ethical ends, by arguing that deconstruction reveals that any such avoidance, limitation, or remedy of exclusion is *impossible*, because exclusion is structurally *inescapable* and *necessary*. And thus the theologian (or ethicist) is left to discern between *which* exclusion(s).

What deconstruction reveals, then, is a problem without a clear solution, or a question—i.e. *which* exclusion(s)—without (a good, final) answer. Furthermore, deconstruction cannot aid us in the process of answering the question or dealing with the problem. As Derrida admits, we "will be guided by a question that I will in the end leave in suspense."[465] Part of the reason for such "suspense," according to Derrida, is because deconstruction cannot side with either moralism or amoralism, the political or apolitical. Derrida consistently claims that deconstruction is "auto-deconstruction,"[466] it is beyond human mastery, "a strategy without finality"; it is wild, machine-like, always outside our

---

[465] Jacques Derrida, "A Word of Welcome," in *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, 1 edition (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1999), 19.

[466] Jacques Derrida, "The Villanova Roundtable: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida," in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, ed. John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 9.

control.[467] Deconstruction is beyond appropriation; it is not a method or a tool, for it is always *otherwise*.[468] Deconstruction will therefore never be able to prescribe a remedy, solution, or even an ethical prescriptive of any kind (e.g. we should/ought), and thus we will be forced to acknowledge that any attempt to address the problem will also itself be problematic, i.e. deconstruct-able. In other words, deconstruction will continue to deconstruct—that is what it does, as "it 'is' only what it does."[469] Thus even though the question of *which* exclusion(s) is urgent and pressing, according to Derrida, "they must remain urgent and unanswered."[470] And though this might give ammunition to be read—especially in this chapter—as presenting an amoralistic, apolitical, nihilistic stance, "isn't that preferable to the constitution of a consensual euphoria or, worse, a community of complacent deconstructionists, reassured and reconciled with the world in ethical certainty, good conscience, satisfaction of service rendered, and the consciousness of duty accomplished."[471]

And such is the risk of Chapter One (if not the entire dissertation), being mistakenly read as nihilistic, indifferent to—or worse apologetic for—the problem of exclusion, when in fact the real goal of this chapter is to heighten our vigilance in identifying and discerning between such problematic exclusions. Just as Derrida says, "there are police and police," so I am suggesting there is exclusion and *exclusion*, and not every form of it is equally just, responsible, ethical, etc. Thus affirming the inescapability

---

[467] Jacques Derrida, "*Différance*" in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 7.
[468] Jacques Derrida, "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion," in *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988).
[469] Derrida, "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion," 141.
[470] Derrida, "Passions: 'An Oblique Offering,'" 16.
[471] Ibid., 17.

of exclusion makes the task even more difficult, because we are left having to choose between "better" and "worse" forms of the same problem. And that is the real goal of this chapter, and this dissertation, to avoid the "easy-way-out" wherein we can simply identify exclusion as problematic and harbor the illusion that we have solved the problem by simply avoiding it. To that end, this chapter seeks to illustrate how the problem of exclusion is even more problematic than it might appear, precisely because it is inescapable. As Chris Boesel (deconstructively) concludes in *Risking Proclamation, Respecting Difference: Christian Faith, Imperialistic Discourse, and Abraham*: "There is no possibility of ethical purity, of clean hands, of escaping the complicity in the very problem one intends to remedy."[472] Thus Boesel suggests, in the context of risking Christian proclamation while respecting the difference of the "Other(s)": "the best the Church can do in its relation to the Jewish neighbor is to discern between different forms of interpretive imperialism."[473] Similarly, I am suggesting that a thorough reading of deconstruction reveals the same predicament for the problem of exclusion, such that the best the theologian or ethicist can do is to discern between different forms of exclusion. And in the context of exclusive (divine) choice, Chapter One already reveals the inescapability exclusive (human) choice in its conclusion, because the theologian (or ethicist) who identifies exclusion as problematic must discern between *which* exclusion(s)—which is itself a kind of choosing, limiting, excluding. His/her task becomes all the more difficult then, as the theologian (or ethicist) finds themselves faced with the predicament in which they will need to discern between two versions of the

---

[472] Boesel, *Risking Proclamation, Respecting Difference*, 220.
[473] Ibid., 201.

same problem, as opposed to a clear identification of the problem (i.e. exclusion) with a clear solution.

Which Exclusionary Preference

Chapter Two attempted to take the problem of exclusion, and exclusive divine election, out of the realm of the abstract and address it more concretely and materially by focusing on the problem through the lens of liberationist discourses. In so doing, I highlighted how the divine preferential option (which was cast a form of divine election) emerged in response to the material oppression and exclusion of certain groups in order to achieve liberation from these realities. More recent liberationist work, however, has critiqued the *exclusive* preference of one oppressed group because of how that perpetuates the oppression (and exclusion) of other oppressed groups. Taking these critiques seriously, i.e. affirming the problematic nature of exclusivity in the divine preferential option, Chapter Two also tried to revisit one of the fundamental tenets of liberationist work, namely that anything less than exclusive preference for particular forms of oppression, injustice, and exclusion will only perpetuate the status quo wherein these realities exist. Thus, if liberation is the goal, this chapter has uncovered the complexity of the problem of exclusion that has always been present, the tension of identifying and attempting to remedy exclusion (i.e. the exclusion of oppressed groups) through a strategic exclusivity for particular oppressed groups. Furthermore, if exclusive preference is *necessary* for liberation, then it is *impossible* to account for all forms of injustice and oppression. Such a recognition should therefore shift our focus from

attempting to avoid exclusion (because the work for liberation requires some version of it), to discerning *whose* liberation to pursue or *which* injustice to focus on.

Although each of the layers to the problem of exclusive divine preference that I have explored in this dissertation entails a particular kind of danger—i.e. being read the wrong way—the issues addressed in Chapter Two might make those of us with progressive, liberationist, *ethical* intentions the most nervous. There is a way in which this chapter can be read as vindicating or validating the perpetual exclusion of oppressed persons or groups; but as I have tried to reiterate throughout this dissertation, that is not my goal. In fact, what I have tried to demonstrate is that liberation *from* particular forms of oppression and exclusion entails a certain kind of strategic exclusivity. Thus rather than continue to perpetuate oppression and exclusion (that is already a reality), this chapter has been aimed at a more rigorous appraisal of liberationist work in order to heighten the vigilance it demands, especially when we move out of the realm of the abstract (e.g. in Chapter One) and begin talking about flesh and blood realities (e.g. the material oppression of human beings). Therefore the real conclusion of this chapter is that to continue to harbor the notion that exclusion can or should be avoided is the very thing that will undercut the work for liberation, and thus keep the status quo—which is exclusive—intact.

I want to return, again, therefore, to Cone's pertinent realization and admission. Even though, he admits, in his landmark work about *black* liberation theology, that "there are, to be sure, many who suffer, and not all of them are black," if the goal is "the liberation of humankind from the forces of oppression," then "we *must* make

decisions."[474] Although pertinent some thirty years ago, when Cone is primarily responding to the critique that he focuses exclusively on *black* liberation (to the exclusion of others), the situation becomes even more complicated in light of the more recent liberationist work we explored in this chapter, namely the complexity, multiplicity, instability, fluidity, and hybridity of identities and experiences (and hence forms of oppression and exclusion). In light of these complexities, the liberationist must also recognize the imbricated nature of injustice, how its "evil does not come in pristine forms," and thus any attempt to work for liberation must also be "messy and rather confusing."[475] One such problem that we identified in Chapter Two was the way in which liberationist commitments necessitate a certain kind of "privileging," or "priority," even if/when they require "adamant opposition" to other liberationist work and "may generate divisiveness," as in the case of West's commitment to "women's wholeness" that ran up against a "commitment to the wholeness of the black community."[476] In other words, perhaps such exclusivity is inescapable, such that the work for liberation demands that at some point particular commitments for justice will be at odds with others. The problem of oppression, injustice, and exclusion, therefore, puts the liberationist "in an existential situation…in which the burden is on us to make decisions without a guaranteed ethical guide," as "there is no perfect guide for discerning God's movement in the world."[477] Again, to speak about "injustice" or "oppression" generally, might not be radical enough

---

[474] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 7.
[475] Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, 9.
[476] West, "Is a Womanist a Black Feminist? Marking the Distinctions and Defying Them," 294.
[477] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 7.

to achieve any kind of real justice or liberation, and thus the liberationist must decide *which* to focus on, commit to, work for.

It is perhaps not coincidental that the sub-text to the conclusions in a dissertation about divine election boils down to a matter of choice/decision. At the end of each chapter, and already here in the Conclusion, I am suggesting that the "best" *we* can do is "to discern between" exclusions and elections, which is certainly a form of election itself. As we saw in Chapter Three, even our attempt to be as rigorous as possible at maintaining the divine aspects of God's choosing—by not reducing it to a human one—cannot escape the inherent, inescapable human element of choice/decision. Thus the liberationist must acknowledge the inherent exclusivity needed for liberation from oppression and exclusion, and the necessity of taking particular, definitive, even exclusive stands against concrete forms of injustice, oppression, and exclusion. The conclusion to Chapter Two, therefore, is an acknowledgement of the predicament facing the liberationist, wherein he/she must discern between *whose* liberation to pursue, *which* injustice to focus on, *which* exclusionary preference?

Whose **Choice?**

In Chapter Three we rolled up our theological sleeves and explored the problem of exclusive *divine* election by asking, *whose* choice is it? In so doing, I highlighted how the remedy to exclusive (*divine*) election entails a form of exclusive (*human*) election, wherein "God" has been reduced to an object of human (theological) choice/decision, and thus the impossibility and inescapability the theologian encounters. We explored how this

is true both for the theologian who chooses to avoid, reject, or exclude *divine* election, as well as for the theologian who chooses to confess or include it.

The theologian who avoids, rejects, limits, or excludes *divine* election—because it is too offensive or problematic—must reckon with the notion that any remedy to (exclusive) divine election necessarily entails a form of (exclusive) human election—by being the one who chooses to exclude such a possibility—thus reducing God to an object of human choice/decision, and trafficking in a version of what he/she tried to avoid or remedy. Furthermore, for the theologian who is concerned about human mastery and control over "divinity," the remedy to *divine* election also reveals an impossibility to avoid that which is problematic. Seen the other way around, if there is a genuine concern about "God" (as a theological notion or idea) or even God (as a divine reality) becoming "something I have added to my repertoire, brought within the horizon of my experience, knowledge, belief, identification, and expectation,"[478] or human "mastery over divine mystery,"[479] then it is *impossible* to exclude (at least) the possibility, "perhaps," that God chooses.

The theologian who chooses to confess, declare, include *divine* election, must also acknowledge the impossibility of avoiding collapsing it into merely *human* election, which is the very thing he/she is trying to avoid, because there is no avoiding the human aspect of confessing—or choosing to confess—such. Using Barth as a paradigmatic representation of the predicament, we discovered not only the impossibility of proving the reality or fact of *divine* election, as only "God…can provide the proof that we are

---

[478] Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 10.
[479] Boesel and Keller, *Apophatic Bodies*, 4.

really talking about [God] when we are allegedly doing so,"[480] but also the impossibility of avoiding the risk of speaking about *divine* election "in such a way that we think we know it…that we think we perceive its structure and understand its operation, so that in thought and speech we are its master."[481]

Thus part of our discovery in Chapter Three was an ironic shared resonance between postmodern engagement with the Christian *apophatic* tradition and Barth's (very) *kataphatic* declarations about God, namely the concern over human mastery and control over divinity. Such a resonance illustrated the deconstructive thesis of this chapter, that *divine* election reveals an aporetic double-bind, the rupture of impossible yet necessary, necessary yet impossible. Acknowledgement of this predicament also entails recognizing that there is no security in believing we have "adopted the right attitude to it."[482] Whether we choose to include or exclude it, *divine* election reveals that there is no safe ground, no certainty to be had, theologically or ethically, with respect to how we approach it. Whether we take the more postmodern, apophatic approach, like Caputo, and propose a more "weak theology" that "is content with a little adverb like 'perhaps,'"[483] in order to prevent "God" from becoming "something I have added to my repertoire, brought within the horizon of my experience, knowledge, belief, identification, and expectation";[484] or whether we boldly declare, like Barth, that *divine* election "*is* the election of Jesus Christ,"[485] that in this divine decision "we can know with a certainty

---

[480] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1975, I.1:163.
[481] Ibid., I.1:162.
[482] Ibid., I.1:163.
[483] Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 9.
[484] Ibid., 10.
[485] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1957, II.2:146.

which nothing can ever shake that we are the elect of God"[486]—neither can prevent or safeguard against human mastery over divine mystery, or turning *divine* election into merely human election. As Barth admits: "And we should have succumbed already to the afore-mentioned temptation if we were to look about for some means to ward it off, to secure ourselves against it, and to make ourselves immune to temptation."[487] The "best" we can do, therefore, is to acknowledge the predicament. Any attempts to remedy this "problem" encounter strict limits, an impossibility, an impossible necessity, wherein the theologian is left to discern between *which* exclusionary election and *whose* choice is it.

[486] Ibid., II.2:116.
[487] Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1975, I.1:163.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Altizer, Thomas. *Deconstruction and Theology*. New York: Crossroad Pub Co, 1982.

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, eds. *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. 2 edition. Routledge, 2001.

Augustine. *Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*. Translated by John A. Mourant and William J. Collinge. Washington, D.C: Catholic University Press, 1992.

———. "On the Predestination of Saints." In *Four Anti-Pelagian Writings*, translated by John A. Mourant and William J. Collinge. Washington, D.C: Catholic University Press, 1992.

———. *The City of God*. Translated by Marcus Dods. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871.

Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*. Edited by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance. Translated by G.W. Bromiley, J.C. Campell, Ian Wilson, J. Strathearn McNab, Harold Knight, and R.A. Stewart. Vol. II.2. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957.

———. *Church Dogmatics*. Edited by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance. Translated by G.W. Bromiley and R.J. Ehrlich. Vol. III.3. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961.

———. *Church Dogmatics*. Edited by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance. Translated by G.W. Bromiley. Vol. I.1. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975.

———. "Evangelical Theology in the 19th Century." In *The Humanity of God*. Richmond: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960.

———. "The Need and Promise of Christian Preaching." In *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, translated by Douglas Horton. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978.

———. "The Word of God and the Task of Ministry." In *The Word of God and the Word of Man*. Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978.

Bennington, Geoffrey, and Jacques Derrida. *Jacques Derrida*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1999.

Bettenson, Henry, ed. *Documents of the Christian Church*. 2nd ed. London: Oxford University Press, 1963.

Boesel, Chris. "Divine Relationality and (the Methodological Constraints Of) the Gospel as Piece of News: Tracing the Limits of Trinitarian Ethics." In *Divine*

Multiplicity: Trinities, Diversities, and the Nature of Relation. New York: Fordham University Press, 2013.

———. *Risking Proclamation, Respecting Difference: Christian Faith, Imperialistic Discourse, and Abraham*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008.

———. "The Apophasis of Divine Freedom: Saving 'the Name' and the Neighbor from Human Mastery." In *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2009.

Boesel, Chris, and Catherine Keller, eds. *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2009.

Bowman, Donna. *The Divine Decision: A Process Doctrine of Election*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.

Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. Translated by Walter Kaufman. New York: Touchstone, Simon & Schuster, 1996.

Bühlmann, Walbert. *God's Chosen Peoples*. Translated by Robert R. Barr. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982.

Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Translated by John Allen. Vol. II. Philadelphia: Presbyterian board of Christian education, 1936.

Caputo, John D., ed. *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*. 1 edition. New York: Fordham University Press, 1996.

———. "Hoping in Hope, Hoping Against Hope." In *Religion With/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*, edited by James H. Olthuis. New York: Routledge, 2002.

———. *The Insistence of God: A Theology of Perhaps*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013.

———. *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.

———. *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006.

Cheng, Patrick S. *Radical Love: Introduction to Queer Theology*. 1 edition. New York: SEABURY BOOKS, 2011.

Clarke, Sathianathan. *Dalits and Christianity: Subaltern Religion and Liberation Theology in India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.

———. “Subalterns, Identity Politics and Christian Theology in India.” In *Christian Theology in Asia*, edited by Sebastian C. H. Kim. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Cone, James. *A Black Theology of Liberation*. C. Eric Lincoln Series in Black Religi. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970.

———. *Black Theology & Black Power*. Second Edition. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1997.

———. *God of the Oppressed*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997.

Crockett, Clayton. “Polyhairesis: On Postmodern and Chinese Folds.” *Modern Theology* 30, no. 3 (July 2014).

Cudney, Shane. “‘’Religion without Religion’’: Caputo, Derrida, and the Violence of Particularity".” In *Religion With/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*, edited by James H. Olthuis. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Derrida, Jacques. *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. Translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. 1 edition. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1999.

———. “Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion.” In *Limited Inc*, edited by Gerald Graff, translated by Jeffrey Mehlman and Samuel Weber. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988.

———. *Dissemination*. Translated by Barbara Johnson. First Thus edition. University of Chicago Press, 1983.

———. “Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority.’” In *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, edited by Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, and David Gray Carlson. New York: Routledge, 1992.

———. *Limited Inc*. Edited by Gerald Graff. Translated by Jeffrey Mehlman and Samuel Weber. 1 edition. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988.

———. *Margins of Philosophy*. Translated by Alan Bass. Reprint edition. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1984.

———. *Of Grammatology*. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Corrected edition. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

———. “Passions: ‘An Oblique Offering.’” In *On the Name*, edited by Thomas Dutoit, translated by David Wood. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1995.

———. *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning & the New International*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

———. *The Gift of Death, Second Edition & Literature in Secret*. Translated by David Wills. 2 edition. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2007.

———. *The Gift of Death, Second Edition & Literature in Secret*. Translated by David Wills. 2 edition. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2007.

Douglas, Kelly Brown. "Twenty Years a Womanist: An Affirming Challenge." In *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, edited by Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas. New York: NYU Press, 2006.

Dudiak, Jeffrey M. "Bienvenue--Just a Moment." In *Religion With/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*, edited by James H. Olthuis. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Ernst-Habib, Margit. "'Chosen by Grace': Reconsidering the Doctrine of Predestination." In *Feminist and Womanist Essays in Reformed Dogmatics*, edited by Amy Plantinga Pauw and Serene Jones. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

Firestone, Reuven. *Who Are the Real Chosen People?: The Meaning of Chosenness in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Pub, 2008.

Fuss, Diana. *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*. New York: Routledge, 1989.

González, Justo L. *The Story of Christianity, Volume 1: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984.

Goss, Robert. *Jesus Acted up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto*. 1st edition. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993.

Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Revised. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1988.

———. "Notes for a Theology of Liberation." *Theological Studies* 31, no. 2 (June 1970).

———. "Option for the Poor." In *Systematic Theology: Perspectives from Liberation Theology: Readings from Mysterium Liberationis*, edited by Jo Sobrino and Igna Ellacuria. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.

Hägglund, Martin. "The Radical Evil of Deconstruction." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 11, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 126–50.

Hart, Trevor. "Revelation." In *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

———. "The Word, The Words and The Witness: Proclamation as Divine and Human Reality in the Theology of Karl Barth." *Tyndale Bulletin* 46, no. 1 (May 1995).

Hunsinger, George. *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

Jewett, Paul King. *Election and Predestination*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985.

Jones, Serene. *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.

Keller, Catherine. *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.

Keller, Catherine, and Laurel Schneider, eds. *Polydoxy: Theology of Multiplicity and Relation*. New York: Routledge, 2010.

Lundberg, Matthew. "Echoes of Barth in Jon Sobrino's Critique of Natural Theology: A Dialogue in the Context of Post-Colonial Theology." In *Theology as Conversation: The Significance of Dialogue in Historical and Contemporary Theology*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009.

McAuliffe, Patricia. *Fundamental Ethics: A Liberationist Approach*. Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 1993.

Mejido Costoya, Manuel. "Rethinking Liberation." In *Rethinking Latino(a) Religion & Identity*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006.

Milbank, John. *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. 2 edition. Oxford, UK ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006.

Miles, Margaret R. *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004.

Olthuis, James H., ed. *Religion With/out Religion: The Prayers and Tears of John D. Caputo*. London; New York: Routledge, 2001.

Ott, Kate M. "Feminism and Justice: Who We Are, What We Do." In *Faith, Feminism, and Scholarship: The Next Generation*, edited by Melanie L. Harris and Kate M. Ott. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Russell, Letty M. "Postcolonial Challenges and the Practice of Hospitality." In *A Just & True Love: Feminism at the Frontiers of Theological Ethics: Essays in Honor of*

Margaret A. Farley, edited by Maura A. Ryan and Brian F. Linnane, 109–34. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

Schaff, Philip. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Edited by Allan Menzies. Vol. 3. Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2010.

Schneider, Laurel C. *Beyond Monotheism: A Theology of Multiplicity*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2008.

———. "Homosexuality, Queer Theory, and Christian Theology." *Religious Studies Review* 26, no. 1 (January 2000): 3–12.

Schwartz, Regina M. *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Shore-Goss, Robert E. "Gay and Lesbian Liberation Theologies." In *Liberation Theologies in the United States: An Introduction*, edited by Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Anthony B. Pinn. New York ; London: New York University Press, 2010.

Smith, James K.A. *Jacques Derrida: Live Theory*. Annotated edition edition. New York ; London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2005.

Sobrino, Jon. *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays*. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2008.

Tamez, Elsa. "God's Election, Exclusion and Mercy : A Bible Study of Romans 9-11." *International Review of Mission* 82, no. 325 (January 1, 1993): 29–37.

Taylor, Mark C. *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*. New edition edition. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1987.

Thandeka. *Learning to Be White: Money, Race and God in America*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2000.

Torre, Dr Miguel A. De La, ed. *Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation*. St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2004.

Torre, Miguel A. De La. *Doing Christian Ethics From the Margins*. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2004.

Townes, Emilie M. *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

Trimiew, Darryl M. "Ethics." In *Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation*, edited by Miguel A. De La Torre. St. Louis, Mo: Chalice Press, 2004.

West, Traci C. *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

———. "Is a Womanist a Black Feminist? Marking the Distinctions and Defying Them." In *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*. New York: NYU Press, 2006.

Williams, Delores S. *Sisters in the Wilderness Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. Orbis Boks, 1995.

Wyschogrod, Michael. *The Body of Faith: God and the People of Israel*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1996.