Creative Disobedience: Dorothee Sölle's Political Theology and Ethics for U.S. Christian Contexts

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CREATIVE DISOBEDIENCE:
DOROTHEE SÖLLE’S POLITICAL THEOLOGY AND
ETHICS FOR U.S. CHRISTIAN CONTEXTS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN THEOLOGY

BY

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CHICAGO, IL
AUGUST 2023
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to so many people whose support was crucial to my completion of this process, especially during some particularly difficult years. I am grateful for the mentorship of Dr. Hille Haker who helped me envision my project especially during the times when it seemed murky. Thanks goes to my readers, Dr. Aana Vigen and Dr. Susan Ross for their support, encouragement, and close attention as each chapter took its form. Joanne Brandstrader was consistently there to offer both material assistance and emotional support. I have appreciated each celebration and conversation with mentors and peers of the theology department who have made this department feel like community. I am indebted to the Schmitt Fellowship for funding my sixth year of study as well as to the theology department and the theology students who allowed me to teach another year so that I could support myself through the final year of my program.

My ISET cohort, Dr. Martin Tomszak, Keunwoo Kwon and Dr. Molly Greening provided an intimate learning community while we studied for our comprehensive exams and we fostered loving and supportive friendships along the way. Molly Greening became my “Diss Sis,” whose companionship was a daily lifeline throughout the entire process. I am also grateful for the ways that Dr. Sara Wilhelm Garbers and Dr. Karen Ross, along with Dr. Molly Greening and LaShaunda Reese have shaped my own identity as a feminist ethicist during our memorable travels together to ethics conferences. I was fortunate to meet Dr. Sheryl Johnson at the Society of Christian Ethics conference in 2018, and she has become a co-presenter, co-author, co-editor
and most importantly to me, a friend in this process. Our weekly phone conversations have been life-giving and have helped me to grow both as a scholar and as a person.

My parents, Cindy and Steve Matteson, have always encouraged me to dream and have always believed in me and supported me in countless ways. My best friend, Alissa Bolan Craddock, witnessed my budding desire to pursue a PhD when we were still college students and has been there for me every step of the way, even though we have lived on separate continents since 2011. My siblings, Alana and Jessa Matteson have cheered me on and I am so grateful for their love and humor. My former spouse, Thomas Cook, was a loving partner during the time that our journeys converged, and I am grateful for the love and the ministries we shared which fueled my work and growth as a person. Susan Putney and Kathy Matteson Beltrone are two aunts in my life who have always reminded me how proud they are of me. My Grandmother, Dorothy Putney, after learning that I was accepted into Loyola’s PhD program, told me that I would be president one day. This was her way of expressing her pride in me, which has continued to carry me even after her death in 2016. My grandparents, Dr. Ronald and Juanita Matteson offered tangible support and well-wishes throughout the entirety of my schooling. Marcia and John Greening have provided the feeling of home away from home and their hospitality and encouragement have meant so much to me, especially at the end of this process as I struggled toward the finish line.

I am also grateful to the Sisters of St. Joseph for being the first to show me how faith could be expressed through social justice, and for my time at Catholic Theological Union where I learned that theology is praxis and vice versa. EncounterPoint has become my community and my sacred space in Chicago, and I feel so rich when I think of the ways that I am held by this community of social justice-minded souls. Edgewater Mutual Aid Network has shown me who
my neighbors are and has cared for me well. Erin, Kelly, Saleha, Rossi, Alexis, Evan, Zac: Your friendship has nourished me and stabilized me countless times.

   My gratitude and love extend to this great cloud of witnesses.
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INTRODUCTION

I began my PhD program the year that Donald Trump was elected in 2016. Like many people, I grappled with the fact that this person, whose hateful speech and violent political goals were supported largely by white-Christians in the US who elected him. I noticed within me the strong desire to distance myself from the “kinds” of Christians who bought into the Trumpian vitriol.¹ I had an important realization, however, a few years later, reading about the shooting that took place in Poway, California in April of 2019. John Earnest, a 19-year-old white man opened fire on a synagogue, killing one person and injuring three, including a Rabbi and a baby. This young person held an articulate understanding of a particular strain of protestant Christian theology. The manifesto he penned demonstrates a nuanced rendering of Reformed and Calvinist thought, while, at the same time, it vilifies Jewish people and blames them for Jesus’ death. Commenting pastors have assessed his theology as cogent, surprised that his articulate thoughts on God lie parallel to extreme anti-Jewish hate speech.

Despite his violent speech and actions, Earnest was no outlier in his community. He was a regular member at his church; his father even served as an elder. Various evangelical religious leaders around the country have responded to Earnest’s attack and his manifesto. Chad Woolf, a pastor from Florida, stated, “We should recognize that somebody could grow up in an evangelical church, whose father was a leader, and could somehow conflate the teachings of

¹ Eric D. Knowles et al., “Deny, Distance, or Dismantle? How White Americans Manage a Privileged Identity,” Perspectives on Psychological Science 9, no. 6 (2014): 601–2. This article explains the process of white distancing where white people downplay racial identity and distance themselves from taking responsibility for racial harm.
Christianity and white nationalism. We should be very concerned about that.”\(^2\) John Earnest was thought of as a regular member of a Christian community and the violent outcome of his theological indoctrination took religious leaders by surprise.

Painful reflection on this particular case led me to realize that I could have written my own hateful manifesto based on the indoctrination I received going to a predominately white Dutch Reformed youth group in rural upstate New York. One time at a youth group meeting, the youth pastor read excerpts from the Qur’an and then proceeded to mock it, in an attempt to prove that Islam is a sham and to assert Christian supremacy. He also preached that Christians should pity gay people because they will never be fulfilled in life and because their lifestyle can only lead to tragedy. Reading about this particular shooting and the young white man who opened fire on the Poway California community, I realized I was no longer able to distance myself from an example of white Christian supremacy. The theological background of John Earnest was too close to home. Since then, I found myself searching for a moral response to Christian supremacist ideologies in the US that denounces these evil distortions of Christian theology while also refusing to distance oneself completely from the broader historical contexts of Christian supremacies in North America.

Meanwhile, I was reading Dorothee Sölle whose writing I fell in love with as a masters student at Catholic Theological Union and whose theology I wrote about wanting to study in my PhD application to Loyola. Sölle, who was born in 1929 in Cologne, Germany, and died in 2003, was a political theologian, poet, mystic and activist who grappled with her national and religious identity and agonized over the overwhelming German Christian support for Nazism that arose.

during the time when she was coming of age. Sölle’s commitment to political activism, Christian socialism, and her intention to write theology that was both public and poetic, was deemed too radical for German universities who blocked her from faculty positions. Eventually, however, she found a home at Union Theological Seminary in New York from 1975 to 1987. It was at UTS that her feminist consciousness blossomed, and she became deeply influenced by the US American tradition of civil disobedience and allowed liberation theologies to shape her own thinking.

I became intrigued by an essay Sölle wrote reflecting on her experience watching US televangelists for the first time. She observed that free-market capitalism, white supremacy, and nationalism were becoming the new “anonymous authority,” influencing white-Christians’ psyche and behavior. Sensitive to her own historical link to German fascism, Sölle formulated a harsh critique and warning against what she calls “Christofascism,” or, the nexus of Christianity and nationalism propped up by structures of free market capitalism, sexism, racism, and militarism. She coined this term while watching how militarism seeped back into the European way of life even after promising “never again” and how, in the US, consumerism and militarism operated as parallel mechanisms.

Reading Sölle’s strong warning against Christofascism in the US in the 1980s gave me courage to address today’s US Christian participation in violent political goals and cultures of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy. And it helped me process the way in which Christians draw on theology and scripture to justify these forms of violence. Of course, Sölle is among many theologians to critique racial and religious supremacies in the US. But, I learned an

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important lesson from Sölle’s self-reflexivity as well as her intended audience. Rather than issuing a harsh critique of Christofascists from across the political divide, she addresses progressive Christians who hold social and economic privilege in North America and Europe. This led me to wonder at the idea of holding Christians responsible, even the ones who publicly reject Christofascist ideology.

Parallel to Sölle’s warning against Christofascism, I began to trace a critique throughout her political theology and works on religious experience, a critique about a moral habit which is much less shocking and much more common. This is a thread that runs through Christian theology and moral systems for which Sölle ultimately believes that Christians must account if they are serious about eradicating Christofascism. The common thread, for Sölle, is the virtue of obedience. Ultimately, Sölle argues that if Christians are going to finally renounce their ties to structures of violent domination, they need to relinquish language of obedience from their theology and moral reflection.

I have adapted Sölle’s critique of the language of obedience in Christian theology and ethics as a call for white-Christians\(^4\) to examine the ways in which Christian moral systems reinforce cultures and politics of domination even if the intention is to disrupt these same structures. Through this project, I have become convinced that white-Christians should examine

\(^4\)Miguel A De La Torre, *Burying White Privilege: Resurrecting a Badass Christianity*, 2019, 53. In Chapter III, I explain why I prefer to use the term “white-Christian” to distinguish it from Miguel De La Torre’s concept of “white Christianity,” which he uses as a critique of Christians upholding neo-liberal and white supremacist ideologies. “White-Christian,” in my dissertation, denotes persons who hold white racial identity and Christian belonging, and can extend across diverse denominational and political affiliations. I am not disagreeing with De La Torre, I am simply attempting to speak to people who are white and Christian and may publicly reject racial and religious supremacies. I implement the term, “white-Christian” in order to call more white-Christians into the conversation beyond those who hold may hold conservative religious or political values. In Chapter V, I speak directly to progressive white-Christians (PWCs) in particular.
their moral formation by placing it within the context of white supremacy, coloniality, and kyriarchy, and evaluate the extent to which their moral systems reflect these structures of domination. Further, they need to identify habits that reinforce relationships of domination in their own communities. This process would allow white-Christians to internalize their political goals that seek to eradicate Christian nationalism from public policy. This would ensure that who we are becoming is in integrity with the forms of justice we envision at a political and societal level. If this part is left out of the process of political transformation, white-Christians will continue to cause harm and hamper liberation movements because they have not accounted for the ways that structures of domination are embedded within their moral habits.

The first two chapters of the dissertation contextualize and summarize Sölle’s critique of obedience so that in Chapter III, I am able to analyze the extent to which this critique is applicable to white US Christians in 2023. In order to understand Sölle’s critique against

5 Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1999), 16. When I use the term “white supremacy” in this dissertation, I am referring not just to an ideology, but the concrete functions of the supremacy of white culture in US American society. I take Kelly Brown Douglas’ definition of the function of the supremacy of white culture as my primary definition of white supremacy: “White culture is…distinguished by its ability to promote the sanctity of whiteness by devaluing that which is non-white. This culture asserts the supremacy of whiteness and is accompanied by social, political, and economic systems that also privilege whiteness. Whiteness has become, therefore, the ticket to social, political, and economic status, if not power, in American society. White culture with its secretion of white supremacist values and ideology serves as a safeguard for white, racist, patriarchal hegemony in America.”

6 Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 4. My use of the term “coloniality” in this dissertation refers to the historical “colonial matrix of power” that “was constituted, managed, and transformed from its historical foundation in the sixteenth century to present.” I am speaking about coloniality as it is present in US American culture today through the “habits that modernity/coloniality implanted in all of us.” Coloniality’s history is present today as a habitus: “Being used by modernity means that coloniality operates upon you, controls you, forms your emotions, your subjectivity, your desires” (146).

7 Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Transforming Vision: Explorations in Feminist The*ology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 8. I am referring to Schüssler Fiorenza’s definition of kyriarchy as “a sociopolitical and cultural-religious system of domination that structures the identity slots open to members of society in terms of race, gender, nation, age, economy, and sexuality and configures them in terms of pyramidal relations of domination of submission, profit and exploitation.” Schüssler Fiorenza explains that Christianity can operate as a structure of kyriarchy and amidst a broader societal kyriarchal system as well.
obedience, it is crucial to understand her historical and religious context, as well as her theological lineages. Chapter I describes Sölle’s historical and religious background as a German Protestant and, it contextualizes her theological critique of obedience. When Sölle claims that, after Auschwitz, it is no longer responsible to utilize theological and moral language of obedience, she is referring to a particular lineage of obediential theology. Chapter I traces the evolution of the “virtue” of obedience across Sölle’s particular Protestant and Lutheran lineage. Chapter I reveals the depth and breadth of the language of obedience and its rootedness as part of political theologies asserting Jesus’ lordship over against imperial rule. I highlight how Paul’s statement that “Jesus is Lord” shaped the ways in which this strain of theology has been constructed to support or question Christian citizens’ obedience to the political authority.

Chapter I highlights Sölle’s “theological fathers” Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann as well as Dietrich Bonhoeffer. All three of these theologians refer to obedience as central to discipleship in various ways especially in resistance against Nazism. For Karl Barth, discipleship revolves around the individual’s free choice to obey God’s command. Through his concept of “free obedience,” Berkheiser emphasizes obedience as openness to and acceptance of God’s grace. Bonhoeffer offers an understanding of obedience as the doing of faith. The disciple lives out their faith through obedience to God as concrete action that is also political in nature. “Single-minded obedience” is the performance and central force of discipleship. And for Bultmann,
“radical obedience”\textsuperscript{10} is described as central to discipleship in that it is a dynamic dialectic between the Word of God and the political situation at hand.

Sölle’s theological fathers define discipleship through adapted interpretations of obedience with emphasis on moral agency in response to a concrete political situation. In a US context, womanist and feminist theologians have also reinterpreted obedience beyond the authoritarian frame.\textsuperscript{11} Yet, in Chapter II, I uncover Sölle’s argument against continuing to use language of obedience within Christian theology and ethics, even if it is used to resist violent political domination. Drawing on Erich Fromm, Sölle places her critique of obedience in the context of the authoritarian social character\textsuperscript{12} and the capitalist social character\textsuperscript{13}. She argues that forming Christians to be obedient can exacerbate habits that Christians already form in navigating authoritarianism and capitalism. Sölle identifies habits such as masochism, apathy, conformity, alienation, cynicism and compulsion that develop in relation to authoritarian forms of Christianity as well as by nature of navigating living life in a capitalist society. Sölle points to the cognitive and moral dissonance present in forming morality around obedience while at the same time instructing Christians to \textit{disobey} political authority. Sölle warns that if obedience continues to be the guiding moral habit, then the potential for a Christofascist society grows, because Christofascism thrives on uncritically obedient Christians.

\textsuperscript{10} Rudolf Bultmann, \textit{Jesus and the Word} (New York: Scribner, 1958), 52.


\textsuperscript{13} Erich Fromm, \textit{The Sane Society} (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1955), 44.
At the end of Chapter II, I consider the extent to which Christofascism already exists in US society today through the presence Christian nationalism. I highlight Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry’s three ideological pillars within Christian nationalism as upholding hierarchies of power, racial and religious boundaries, and a heteropatriarchal social order.14 These three categories will be considered in Chapters III and V as to their influence on white-Christs beyond Christian nationalism.

Chapter III contextualizes Dorothee Sölle’s theoretical critique and evaluation of the virtue of obedience through defining and applying Erich Fromm’s concept of social character, Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s concept of kyriocentrism. I show how histories and structures forming US white-Christian social character--white supremacy, coloniality and kyriarchy--require white-Christian obedience to the same structures of power, boundaries and order. This chapter argues that obedience to power, boundaries and order are not just pillars of Christian nationalism but are rooted in colonial histories of violence and domination and surface much more broadly across the spectrum of US Christianity. This chapter demonstrates that forming Christians to understand morality primarily as obedience to God or to religious authority does not effectively disrupt Christian habits of obedience to structures of power, boundaries and order. This is because Christians must understand that Christian moral systems do not operate in a vacuum but interrelate with authoritarian and capitalist social character, white habitus and kyriocentric relationships of domination.

Chapter IV summarizes Sölle’s political theological intervention in view of the habit of Christian obedience and its dangerous potential. Sölle articulates a feminist theology that gives way to an alternative vision for Christian moral agency beyond obedience. She puts forth creative disobedience, the guiding virtue or cluster of virtues that are crucial to build up Christian moral agency that contributes to political transformation. I interpret Sölle’s political theology as anti-domination theology, a project of asserting new and ancient language beyond divine domination. Through her political hermeneutic which reinterprets sin, forgiveness and hope beyond atonement; through her theology that yearns for life that refuses to participate in systems of unfreedom for others; and through her poetic theology of response, Sölle formulates theological underpinnings for creative disobedience. The obedient social character can be transformed, according to Sölle, through new moral habits that move beyond control to spontaneity, from divine command to imagination and from self-negation to self-fulfillment. Sölle demonstrates this creativity through writing poetry as a theological language in reflection upon living amidst the violence of the “Death Machine” on one hand, and in response to the invitation to participate in the spirit of God and God’s justice on the other. Through hosting political liturgies, Sölle’s community demonstrates creative possibilities for the potential to combine prayer with public protest.

In Chapter V, I adapt Sölle’s creative disobedience as an ethical process for progressive white-Christians in the US today. Inspired by Sölle, I argue that denouncing Christian nationalism is only the first step, especially for progressive white-Christians. In view of the historical context of white supremacy, coloniality, and kyriarchy, progressive white-Christians must directly face the way in which they form their habits around power, boundaries and order in their own communities. This begins with a process of critique. I demonstrate a critical evaluation
of the habits Christians have formed in obedience to structures and relationships of power, boundaries and order. First, I argue that obedience to power, boundaries and order yield habits of disempowerment, repression, and compulsion to order among progressive white-Christians. I exemplify ways that PWCs can detect these habits within their own Christian communities.

Arguing from a virtue ethics perspective that habits can only be transformed through embodied practices, I then suggest three practices that I believe can transform disempowerment, repression and compulsion to order. These are concrete practices that communities can implement in order to form one another to be creatively disobedient rather than habitually and uncritically obedient. Instead of repeating the habit of disempowering one another, communities can be formed to embolden one another to speak. I suggest the use of talking circles as a practice that allows communities to relearn a democratized communication style that affords each participant equal voice. This would counteract the habit to authorize one or a few persons to speak to and for the community. In reversing the habit of repression, I encourage communities to take up practices that allow openness and emotional responsibility. Rather than bordering off emotional experiences for the sake of security, communities can embody practices of attuning to emotional and body sensations within a liturgical context. And, communities can reimagine their structures beyond traditional concepts of order by learning from mutual aid.

This dissertation is the outcome of years of grappling with the reality of Christofascism in the US in the 2020s. This dissertation is a denunciation of Christian nationalism through a refusal to perpetuate the habit of white distancing. It is an attempt to call in white-Christians to name the ways that white-Christian identities are proximate to histories of colonization, slavery, land-stealing and to current contexts of racial capitalism across political and denominational affiliations. It demonstrates a process of accounting for histories of obedience to structures of
domination. And, it is an imagining of ways to be Christian and disrupt and dismantle structures of domination through embodying practices of *creative disobedience*. 
CHAPTER I
TRACING HISTORIES AND THEOLOGIES OF OBEDIENCE

Introduction

Is the virtue of obedience detrimental to Christian moral agency? Should obedience to God, religious authority, or scripture continue to define Christian discipleship and moral agency? To what degree should obedience to Christ be the guiding virtue for protesting political oppression? From a feminist political theological standpoint, Dorothee Sölle responds to these questions arguing for the radical critique of obedience because of the moral distortion and political violence that this “virtue” has contributed to in the twentieth century, especially among Christians in Germany and the United States. This dissertation examines the claim that obedience ought to be scrutinized throughout Christian theological, ethical, and spiritual language because of its impact on moral agency, critical analysis of oppression, and the Christian responsibility to transform injustice.

Before evaluating the argument against obedience, it is important to understand the context that informs Sölle’s call for the critique of obediential language. This chapter explores Dorothee Sölle’s historical, political, and theological lineages of obedience. First, this chapter lays out histories of obedience in Germany related to fascist political domination and describes the Protestant church in reaction to fascism. In this examination, two instances of institutional obedience occur in reaction to political authority. On the one hand, large segments of the institutional church show complete obedience to political power, and, on the other hand, the
Confessing Church demonstrates disobedience to political authority through a call for obedience to God.

Secondly, this chapter traces Sölle’s theological lineage related to the question of obedience to God versus obedience to political authority. This chapter follows Pauline theology which argues for obedience to the lordship of Christ and weaves its way through Martin Luther and John Calvin’s use of obedience in response to political authority. Only then can one consider Sölle’s “theological fathers”1 and their use of the language of obedience in critical resistance against political domination of the Nazi regime. The chapter ends introducing Sölle’s New Political Theology interlocutors and their theological arguments for Christian participation in God’s justice in history.

Overall, this chapter highlights German theologians’ and church leaders’ attempts to articulate Christian responsibility to resist political domination. This chapter traces the way in which obedience continues as a thread weaving through political theological expressions of Christian moral identity and agency in response to political domination. The contextualization of Sölle’s feminist intervention and radical critique of Christian obedience provides a richer understanding for Chapter II which attends to Sölle’s reasoning behind her argument for the radical critique of obediential language within Christian theology, ethics, and spirituality.

**Fascism and Political Obedience**

The story of fascism in Germany in the early twentieth century is in large part a story of political obedience. Understanding the historical phenomenon of the rise of Nazism in Germany

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sets the stage for grappling with contrasting responses to fascism among Christians in Germany during this time. This section attends briefly to the question, *how did so many German citizens become obedient to a fascist regime?* In answering this question, I highlight the ways in which galvanizing the obedience of the masses involved the manipulation of political emotions to sway peoples’ will by triggering their economic insecurity and political fears in a way that poses categories of people as a security threat. One will see how, in the context of Germany, obedience to fascist political authority involved giving over to fear and insecurity and cementing violent hierarchies of power through ideologies promising “security.”

Fascism arose in the early twentieth century in many places all over the world. As is well known, it held particular sway and gained ground in Italy and Germany in the early 1900s. Nazi Germany of the twentieth century has since become a historical poster-child for fascism, as it not only resulted in domestic political revolution, but also propelled international conquest and perpetuated genocide. Humiliation after the first world war, a ravaged economy, a narrowing political gap between extreme left and extreme right, and fraying social cohesion are some of the reasons historians give for the rise of German fascism. Of course, one cannot discount the influence one particular leader can also have especially when he can channel enough people’s remorse, anger and resentment, and rally support for a different form of government, one which citizens are willing to give up their democratic rights to support.

However, as the historian Robert Paxton argues, fascism does not just “happen” without each part playing its role. Adolf Hitler did not simply grab hold of the political reins of an entire

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country, forcing all parties to obey his will. In fact, he did not even obtain the majority vote. Rather, Hitler succeeded in making gains only as state leaders, institutions, and citizenry furthered his demands in their own right. Further, Hitler did not elicit support from critical state and institutional leaders by demonstrating his political leadership capacity or by proving his entitlement to power. Instead, he inspired widespread faith among diverse groups of Germans. Paxton describes Hitler as having evoked “a public faith,” a belief that Hitler was an incarnation of “national destiny.” As growing numbers of state and institutional leaders placed their faith in Hitler, Nazism cast a disturbing shadow over the country, and biological racism and aggressive imperialism were written into both policy and collective mentality.

Propaganda fueled this new-found faith in Hitler, and it is worth pausing to peel back the layers of ideology that led to fascist politics flourishing in Germany at this time. If German fascism was propelled not just by one charismatic leader, but also by his enthusiastic supporters, what sort of ideology was at play that converted so many people to place their faith in a despot? Many philosophers and historians have identified fascism not just as a political movement, but as a pervasive ideology, in order to understand why it grips the masses. Though it is not always philosophically consistent, it has shown itself to be an ideology that first harnesses, and eventually exacerbates, strong yet vulnerable emotions within the collective psyche, emotions which, in Germany, were reeling at the end of the First World War. The goal of fascism is never

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4 Paxton, *Comparisons and Definitions*, 12.

5 Paxton., 11.

to obtain loyalty through rational argumentation but rather to leverage emotions in order to “sway the will.” Paxton names the insecurity that resulted from humiliating national defeat as the single “most important precondition” for fascism to take root.

Fear becomes a tool many fascist leaders have used, including Hitler, to persuade the masses that only their leader can alleviate their anxiety. Fear is not always a negative emotion. In fact, it has been a useful emotion in human evolutionary growth. However it is easily exploited because it is so primitive and basic to human survival. Fear becomes a useful energy for fascist leaders, because it is “self-focusing.” Fear is an inwardly facing experience of anxiety, which limits the scope of rational thought beyond one’s own inner circle of relationships.

The collective exacerbation of fear is an important step toward creating a strong “us versus them” mentality, which is another signifier of fascist political tactics. In fact, the us-them construction is for philosopher Jason Stanley the defining feature of fascist politics. “Giving a description of fascist politics involves describing the very specific way it distinguishes ‘us’ from ‘them’; appealing to ethnic, religious, or racial distinctions, and using the division to shape ideology and, ultimately, policy. Every mechanism of fascist politics works to create this distinction.” Fascism gives fear an outlet: it is vehemently encouraged to direct itself at “them,” and, in Germany, “they” were primarily people of Jewish heritage.

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8 Paxton, *Comparisons and Definitions*, 7.


10 Nussbaum, 322.

In the face of fear, fascism also offers a sense of security. It does this through erecting and reinforcing strong social hierarchies. Stanley calls this installation of hierarchies “a kind of mass delusion” that citizens choose to accept.\(^\text{12}\) Hierarchy helps to establish the leader as the “father” of a nation, and sexual hierarchies of worth are argued to be natural categories.\(^\text{13}\)

Obtaining such sought-after security in a fascist society rests upon one’s ability and willingness to remain in one’s hierarchical place, and to act as a reinforcer of hierarchy even in the personal spheres of life. Citizens of a fascist state trade in their democratic rights for obedience to philosophical and political structures of hierarchy. Maintaining a hierarchical order of things requires people to limit their own moral reasoning. This mentality asserts that an action is virtuous to the extent that it obeys the hierarchical frame of society, regardless of its outcome.\(^\text{14}\) In this system, the virtue of obedience becomes the highest of virtues. It provides an illusion of security and belonging, quieting emotions of fear and insecurity, at least for those who belong to “us.” For “them,” this kind of hierarchy is the onslaught of terror.

It became a strategic move, then, to bring in both the Catholic and Protestant churches as an arm of the Nazi state. Not only would the church continue to reinforce hierarchical structure and mentality, it would fuel people’s faith in—and obedience to—the \textit{Führer}.

\textbf{The Protestant Church Responds to Fascism in Germany}

In her monograph, \textit{Creative Disobedience}, Sölle laments that “as a German, a Christian, and a woman, I was brought up in three traditions that demanded obedience.”\(^\text{15}\)

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\(^\text{12}\) Stanley, 79.  
\(^\text{13}\) Stanley, 82.  
\(^\text{14}\) Paxton, \textit{The Anatomy of Fascism}, 34.  
\(^\text{15}\) Dorothee Sölle, \textit{Creative Disobedience} (Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock, 2007), ix.
and Christian during Sölle’s lifetime was to either align oneself with, or, to stand against fascism. The following section summarizes the contrasting responses given by the Protestant churches in view of the pressures of the Nazi regime. While the *Deutschen Christen* (German Christians) were formed as an institutional backing for the Nazi regime, the Confessing Church provides an example for institutional disobedience against fascism.

*Die Deutschen Christen (The German Christians)*

Many have argued that the Nazi movement was a thoroughly anti-Christian phenomenon. Dietrich Bonhoeffer portrayed Nazism as a threat to Christian civilization throughout Europe. However, the historical reality of the *Deutsche Christen* contradicts the idea that Nazism was purely anti-Christian in nature. Many Protestant Christian leaders and communities enthusiastically joined the German Christian movement, because they felt it promised a religious revitalization throughout Germany. This hope for religious renewal was manipulated by Hitler and his counterparts in order to galvanize supporters. As Haynes argues, “Invoking Jesus himself as an anti-Jewish crusader, Hitler and the Nazis undoubtedly saw in Christianity a crucial ideological ally in their struggle against ‘the Jew.’” Christian symbols and familiar theological language would prove instrumental for galvanizing individual and institutional support among Christians.

In 1933, the *Deutsche Christen* became the official “pro-Nazi faith movement,” and with this event, the Protestant Church was joined to the Nazi movement as an arm of the state. Pastor

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Joachim Hossen Felder, a leader of the movement, preached that Christians should imprint both the swastika and the cross upon their hearts. The German Christians obtained majority status in the 1933 Protestant church elections, headed by Ludwig Müller, who was named Reichsbishop. Müller would go on to serve as the personal advisor to Hitler in regard to the Protestant Church’s institutional life.

German Christians endorsed Nazi ideology including the belief that Germany was the true Holy Land, not Palestine, and that God’s law was incarnate in Hitler. Such ideology took concrete form, when, for example, the German Christians began to push for limiting church leadership to “Christians of the Aryan race.” This claim that hierarchies of race, ethnicity, and nationality are ordained by God fabricated theological backing for the biological racism that propelled the Nazi ideology. Known as the “Aryan Paragraph,” this statement, which was passed into law April 7, 1933, went so far as to exclude pastors with any amount of Jewish ancestry from continuing in their positions as church leaders.

Nazi ideology continued to burn through the Protestant church, and the attempt to combine fascism with Christianity came to a head in November of 1933 at the Berlin Sports Palace rally. A gigantic crowd of over twenty thousand cheered as Reinhold Krause, leader of the Berlin German Christians, demanded even more from the Christian church. Krause advocated

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20 Livingstone.

for the removal of the Old Testament from the Protestant canon, and wanted not only to eradicate pastors with Jewish heritage, but all church members with any Jewish ancestry.\textsuperscript{22}

\textit{The Confessing Church}

Not all Christians endorsed the German Christian movement. A “Pastor’s Emergency League” was formed across denominations, first gathered together by Berlin Pastor Gerhard Jacobi, and eventually headed by Pastor Martin Niemöller, who was elected president of the covenant which by 1934 had over seven thousand members. In reaction to the Sports Palace event, six pastors, including Dietrich Bonhoeffer, publicly threatened to break with the Reich Church, arguing that it was infringing upon basic tenets of the Protestant church since the Reformation. Consequently, a “muzzling decree” was issued by Reich Bishop Müller in an attempt to stifle the progress of church leaders protesting the German Christian movement.\textsuperscript{23}

In the Spring of 1934, the Confessing Church (\textit{Bekennende Kirche}) became the official name for the growing numbers of dissenting church leaders and communities. They called themselves the Confessing Church, invoking the Reformation and the confession of faith which bound the German Protestant church together over the centuries. In the name was a kind of resistance that re-established loyalty to the Church, and to God’s law, over and above political authority. The Confessing Church officially broke ties with the Reich Church at a May 1934 synod in Barmen. Here, the Barmen Declaration was written, establishing a common theological

\textsuperscript{22} Hockenos, 7.

\textsuperscript{23} Hockenos, 7.
foundation among Reformed, United, and Lutheran churches across Germany, which established
a unified and independent institutional structure outside of the Reich Church.²⁴

Karl Barth, the primary author of the Barmen Declaration, laid the theological
groundwork within the declaration for establishing the obedience of the church to the lordship of
God over against the political authority. In classic Barthian language, the statement proclaims
that, “Faith and obedience to the Word of God” should be upheld even when it clashes with
governmental demands (8.07).²⁵ Urging Christian leaders to recognize the way in which the
German Christian movement draws the church away from its true mission, the declaration
announces that,

> We publicly declare before all evangelical Churches in Germany that that which they
hold in common, in this Confession is grievously imperiled, and with it the unity of the
German Evangelical Church. It is threatened by the teaching methods and actions of the
ruling Church party of the ‘German Christians’ and of the Church administration carried
on by them (8.07).

The statement goes on to confess particular theological principles that the authors believe were
being denigrated by the German Christians, including the centrality of Jesus Christ, who “is
attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we
have to trust and obey in life and in death” (8.11). Christ is affirmed in the document as the
primary object of one’s obedience for both the individual, and on an institutional level. Anything
that collides with Christ’s command is false doctrine. Exposing the falsity with which the Reich
Church claims its power, the declaration states, “We reject false doctrine, as though the Church,
apart from this ministry, could and were permitted to give itself, or allow to be given to it,

²⁴ Hockenos, 8.

special leaders vested with ruling powers” (8.21). While the statement still affirms that the state is appointed by God, it reminds readers of the “responsibility of both rulers and the ruled” to be vigilant in watching for instances when the state becomes “the single and totalitarian order of human life” overriding church teaching (8.24).

Even though some Christians were worried that the Confessing Church was becoming a rogue movement, many Christian leaders were willing to subscribe to the Barmen Declaration. In March 1934, “more than 700 Confessing pastors from Prussia were arrested for condemning the German Christians and the Nazi view of religion from the pulpit,” Hockenos records.26

Bonhoeffer reminded Christians that they were not a radical group outside of the church, but continued to believe that “we are not a movement; we are the church of Jesus Christ.”27

**Tracing Obedience Through Political Theologies**

The theology of the Barmen Declaration demonstrates one of the primary themes within political theology. That is, much of political theology attends to the question of Christian obedience in response to political domination. This section traces the thread of obedience comprising a strand of political theology that begins with Paul and weaves its way through Luther and Calvin, to Sölle’s “theological fathers.” This thread begins with the Pauline affirmation that “Jesus is Lord” over against any other lord or ruler. Paul’s affirmation implies that the Christian is to obey the God of Jesus Christ before any political authority. Martin Luther and John Calvin continue to interact with this thread, articulating their own distinct interpretations of how Christian obedience to God’s sovereignty should play out within the

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26 Hockenos, “Bonhoeffer and the Church Struggle,” 9.

27 Hockenos, 9.
political sphere. The following brief account continues to highlight the reflection upon Christian obedience within the political theologies of Sölle’s “theological fathers.” Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer belong to a tradition of German theologians and church leaders grappling with how to understand Christian responsibility under a fascist government. Rudolf Bultmann, one of the most influential thinkers for Sölle in her earlier years as a theologian, provides yet another interpretation of discipleship through “radical obedience.”

*Martin Luther and John Calvin, Obedience, and Political Authority*

The crisis of Christians in Germany dealing with the political pressures of fascism necessitated justification for civil and institutional disobedience. To understand Barth, Bonhoeffer, and Bultmann is to view them as part of a long tradition grappling with the Pauline ethic that Christians ultimately owe God obedience before political authority. In essence, the struggle to determine the extent to which Christians should obey the political authority reaches back to early Christianity. Jesus’ proclamation of the praxis of the reign of God appears to stand in complete opposition to the political theology of *Pax Romana* which would be achieved through violent conquest.

Biblical scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan describe Roman imperial theology as “centered and incarnated in the emperor himself,” and supported by four pillars: religion, war, victory, and peace.  

When early Christians professed Jesus Christ to be the “Son of God,” “Savior,” “Prince of Peace,” and “Lord,” they were subverting language used to glorify the Roman emperor, and, they were asserting Jesus’ example that peace was to be achieved not

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by domination and imperial expansion but by nonviolence and justice. In essence, Pauline Christian theology is “counter language” to Roman imperial theology; asserting Jesus as Son of God, is in effect, “denying Caesar his highest title,” undermining Roman imperial theology of war and victory, and upholding Jesus as their true Lord beyond any and all political authorities. Therefore, the Pauline statement, Jesus is Lord, has always been a political statement.

Yet, the question of how Christians should apply this ethical imperative becomes a stumbling block over and over again throughout Christian history. In responding to their concern over Christian participation in Nazi politics, Barth, Bonhoeffer and Bultmann are branching out from a long tradition that begins with Pauline theology and weaves its way through and beyond the legacies of Martin Luther and John Calvin. The development of obediential theology becomes a particular response to the ethical question, if Jesus is ultimately Lord, as Paul asserts in his letters, to what extent should Christians obey human law?

**Martin Luther**

Martin Luther’s (1483-1546) thought on how Christians ought to understand political authority is based on his two kingdoms theory, in which for him, there exists two realities: all

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29 Borg and Crossan, 121. In contrast to Roman imperial theology of *Pax Romana*, Borg and Crossan maintain that Jesus’ political vision stands on the four pillars of religion, nonviolence, justice, and peace.


32 Bruce C. Birch et al., *Bible and Ethics in the Christian Life: A New Conversation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 34.
people either belong to the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of the world. He maintains that if the world were made up of true Christians, the “secular sword or the law” would be obsolete. True Christians have no need for the law because they are directed by the Holy Spirit from within to act with love and justice. But unfortunately, most self-proclaimed Christians, according to Luther, are not even fully Christian. Therefore, the “secular” law is ordained by God to prevent individuals from committing evil deeds and to keep societal order. The few true Christians that exist are expected to obey the law for the benefit of their neighbors and in honor of God.

When tyranny arises, however, Christians are given an out. Temporal authority should not infringe upon God’s rule, and when it does, Luther believes disobedience is called for, even if this leads to punishment by the state. Luther says, “You may be punished, but blessed are you if you are! If you do not resist this tyrant, then you have denied God!” Obedience to God is of primary importance for Christians.

From here we can say that for Luther, the two kingdoms are hierarchically imagined, with God ruling over both, having given certain authority to the political “princes” to oversee the social sphere, while Christian leaders are given the task of caring for the souls of citizens. The prince’s power is limited by his duty to obey God by serving his subjects, heeding the advice of

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33 It is important to note that Paul Althaus complicates the dualism of the Two Kingdoms especially in how he describes them interlocking and depending on one another. See: Paul Althaus, The Ethics of Martin Luther, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Fortress Press, 1972), 79–82.


35 Martin Luther, Martin Luther: Selections From His Writings, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor, 1958), 338.
his counselors, and punishing evil-doers.\textsuperscript{36} Beyond the temporal authority that rules the earthly kingdom, God lives at the top of the cosmic structure, ruling the heavenly kingdom.\textsuperscript{37}

The common Christian subject holds the duty to obey God through obedience to political authority, which Luther grounds in 1 Peter 13-14. And this fundamental subordination to God is spelled out through language of freedom in Luther’s thought. The iconic equation that Luther forwards in his letter to Pope Leo X, “Freedom of a Christian” (1520) is at play here for understanding the individual role of the Christian in the temporal sphere, a role that is defined simultaneously by slavery and freedom. Luther forwards that “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”\textsuperscript{38} This statement is based upon Luther’s anthropology of the human person as having a twofold nature that is at once spiritual and bodily. Free lordship occurs in the inner sphere of the Christian. Through faith, the Christian becomes free, and nothing on the outside can take away from that freedom.

It is freeing too, that the only thing required for salvation is faith alone. Even though Christians are instructed to obey temporal authority for the good of their neighbor, they are technically free from it because their faith raises them above the need for law. This, for Luther,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Luther, 400.
  \item \textsuperscript{37} Luther, 366–71.
  \item \textsuperscript{38} Luther, 53. Luther grounds his argument primarily in his interpretation of Paul’s theology: “These two theses seem to contradict each other. If however, they should be found to fit together they would serve our purposes beautifully. Both are Paul’s own statements, who says in 1 Cor 9:19, ‘For though I am free from all men, I have made myself slave to all,’ and in Rom 13:8, ‘Owe no one anything, except to love one another.’ Love by its very nature is ready to serve and be subject to him who is loved. So Christ, although he was Lord of all, was ‘born of a woman, born under the law’ (Gal 4:4), and there for was born at the same time a free man and a servant, ‘in the form of God’ and ‘of servant’ (Phil 2:6-7).”
\end{itemize}
makes all Christians “Lords.” At the same time, the Christian is a slave, putting themselves in absolute service of God and neighbor. One of the three powers of faith, according to Luther, is that of “obedience by faith alone,” trusting in the ultimate truth of God’s righteousness. Obedience by faith means that the soul is in a state of constant consent to the will of God. Love, or, service to the neighbor, spills forth from this posture of faith-as-obedience-to-God, and in this sense, the Christian is also constantly subject to God. But Luther claims that this subordination is ultimately freeing.

**John Calvin**

In contrast to Luther’s image of the two kingdoms, John Calvin (1509-1564) believes that the ultimate Lordship of Christ should have full sway over every sphere of spiritual and political life. Whether in regard to public or private matters, the individual Christian is called to uphold God’s sovereignty. God gives each individual a social “station” in society from which to battle one’s own vices, to fight for good in the world, and ultimately, to show obedience to God. With Luther, Calvin argues the law is meant to restrain vicious passions. Beach and Niebuhr summarize Calvin’s thought on the role of the Christian in view of political authority, remarking that, "The sovereignty of God is being exercised in a world in which there is rebellion, but in which those who are reconciled to him become free citizens, happily consenting to the laws and cooperating to increase the glory of the kingdom." For Calvin, the whole world is subject to

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39 Luther, 63.

40 Luther, 73–76.

41 Michael Kirwan, *Political Theology: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 76. See Chapter 5 for a full comparison between Luther and Calvin on this subject.

God’s sovereignty, and individuals obey God by obeying the law, albeit, “freely.” While Calvin exhorts the critical nature of obeying constitutional authority, he, like Luther, also leaves space for civil disobedience if it is in ultimate obedience of God and in honor of the Lordship of Christ.43

The ethical imperative to obey God by way of obedience to political authority can contradict itself especially when the “prince” is a tyrant. Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer were theologians on a mission to respond to the rise of fascism in Germany while they watched in horror as the institutional church, and, individual Christians, collaborate with the Nazi program. The theological and moral reasoning used by these theologians urging Christians to resist Nazi power reveals a parallel crisis of language side by side with the crisis of Christian participation in fascism.

*Sölle’s “Theological Fathers”*

The following section highlights the theologians who were foundational to Sölle’s theological work. The writing of the Protestant theologians, Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Rudolf Bultmann provide important background to understanding Sölle’s own theology. In her autobiography, Sölle refers to both Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann as her “theological fathers.” It is evident that she attributes her theological inheritance both to their content as theologians and to their practical contributions to the Christian church as pastors. She says of both Barth and Bultmann, “They were there for the church, whereas the [conversation] partners of today’s theological masters are other academics.”44 Barth and Bonhoeffer were informed by and

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43 Beach and Niebuhr, 273.

immersed in their concrete ministerial and political activity. Sölle did not overtly name Bonhoeffer a theological father, but she is in conversation with his work throughout her own theology, and his influence on her is especially evident in her political theology. The purpose of the following section is not to summarize the theological contributions of Barth, Bonhoeffer, and Bultmann, but rather to highlight the ways in which obedience factors into their political theologies, especially their articulation of moral agency and discipleship in response to political domination. This will provide the theological context for Sölle’s critique of obedience within theology which will be spelled out in Chapter II.

**Karl Barth: Freedom Through Obedience**

Karl Barth (1886-1968), a Swiss Protestant theologian and ordained pastor of the Reformed Church was deeply concerned about the political sphere throughout his ministerial life, articulating various ways to engage with the political in his theological developments. Early on, during the First World War, Barth was a pacifist and a member of the Religious Socialist Movement. However, he later severed his involvement with the socialist movement. By the time the Nazis gained political ground, his criticism of liberal Protestantism reached a high point, already evident in his work, *Der Römerbrief*, published in 1919, his dialectical theology is fully established. Barth was central in the formation of the Confessing Church, and, was one of the primary authors of the Barmen Declaration of 1934.45

Obedience plays a key role in Barth’s theology in terms of his understanding of hermeneutics, ecclesiology, and anthropology. In *Der Römerbrief*, Barth claims that even the work of hermeneutics should be an obedient act. Barth’s dialectical theology, which shines

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through this text, emphasizes the transcendence of God while also exposing human finitude. It sheds light on humanity as fallen and distant from God. Barth’s critique of liberalism finds articulation in his anxiety about Christians interpreting the Word of God as a teaching rather than a proclamation. In other words, Barth wanted to center biblical hermeneutics around Christ and his direct demand of the reader over against liberal approaches that attempted to create distance between the reader and the text through sociological and historical methodological approaches. Barth feared that historical criticism, for example, threatened the potency of the *Kerygma*.46

Moreover, Barth warns against the gospel becoming a manual for political action rather than revelation of God’s grace. To confront this problem, he urges Christians to read scripture with the analogy of faith as the primary lens.47 In other words, following Kierkegaard’s distinction between divine and eternal time, interpreting the World of God must be done in a manner that upholds God’s transcendence and acknowledges human finitude. This is why the reader has a responsibility to read scripture not as teaching or a historical document, but as proclamation (*Kerygma*). God proclaims through scripture, and one can only hear God’s command through ears of faith.

Barth’s ecclesiology pivots on obedience. The role of the church, as evidenced in the language within the Barmen Declaration, is to confess its faith by acknowledging itself as “under” the Word of God. The Holy Spirit makes possible the church’s response to the proclamation of God’s Word within scripture. The church’s role, then, is to read scripture with the eye of faith searching for God’s revelation, and to proclaim the Word of God by upholding

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47 Thiselton, 187.
the lordship of God. In this way, the church is not a self-sufficient human institution, but is rather a community acting in constant obedience to God’s Word found in scripture.⁴⁸

“The Doctrine of Creation” in Church Dogmatics (1961), specifically sections 41, 52 and 55, crystalizes Barth’s anthropology, which is characterized by human obedience. Barth’s theology surrounding human obedience stems from the idea of “divine command.” According to Barth, God is commanding humanity to obey, but not in the sense of an overbearing tyrant. Rather, God commands through grace, and God’s command is grace. What is God commanding? God commands humans to be free; to freely obey. The nature of the relationship between God and humanity is one of bondage, for Barth. He simultaneously describes love and bondage in one singular concept: the two are one and the same. God’s love is a binding force between God and humanity.⁴⁹

For Barth, there is no higher exemplar of obedience than that of Christ’s atoning action on the cross. In fact, obedience cannot be understood without viewing it through the lens of Christ. The obedience shown in Christ’s submission to God on the cross is not simply a consequence of his human incarnational state, but representative, rather, of his “eternal relationship of obedience” to God.⁵⁰ Christ’s obedience, which “fulfills divine subordination,” (as Barth notes in CD, vol. IV/1, 209) is the very lynchpin of the economy of salvation itself.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Thiselton, 187–89.


⁵⁰ Daniel B Gallagher, “The Obedience of Faith: Barth, Bultmann, and Dei Verbum,” Journal for Christian Theological Research 10 (2005): 47–48. In reference to Barth’s CD, vol. V/I, 205, Gallagher argues that, “The obedience with which Jesus submits Himself to the Father is not limited to his incarnate reality, but is essentially based on his eternal relationship of obedience as the divine second person of the Trinity. Furthermore, it is precisely in his obedience that Jesus Christ manifests himself as Son.”

⁵¹ Scott Swain and Michael Allen, “The Obedience of the Eternal Son,” International Journal of Systematic Theology 15, no. 2 (2013): 114. “…the Son’s obedience to the Father in accomplishing the work of salvation is not
Living out Christ’s example of obedience, for Barth, completely defines faith and discipleship. Barth’s notion of faith is heavily influenced by Romans 1:5 which states: “Through him we have received the grace of apostleship, to bring about the obedience of faith, for the sake of his name, among all Gentiles.” The free gift of God’s grace saturates this definition of faith with “obediential potency:” Openness, and the capacity for passive acceptance of this “infusion of grace,” is the beginning of obedience. In the Epistle to the Romans, Barth claims that at its base, Paul defines faith as submission and obedient response to God. In Barth’s words, “We are servants, slaves, existentially appointed unto obedience. We are servants to God, existentially appointed unto obedience.”

Morality, for Barth, is directly attached to one’s capacity to obey God’s command. An action is never in itself good, nor is its outcome. Rather, human action is good when it springs from obedience before God--when the human hears the Word of God and does it. This is not a universal command for all Christians; rather, it is a personal command, pouring forth from scripture, communicating God’s will to each individual reader of God’s Word.

Defining love as bondage, and evaluating human action according to its reflection of obedience, one might wonder where freedom fits into the equation, if at all. For Barth, human freedom lies in the freedom that is part and parcel of God’s command. Only through obedience can the human be truly free. God commands humanity to be free, and human response to God is

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characterized by Barth as “free obedience.” For him, freedom is in the choice to obey God’s command; and, only by obeying God’s command can true freedom be obtained.

It becomes clear how Barth is arguing both against indiscriminate obedience to political authority, which can lead to complying with nationalistic authoritarianism, as he argues at the same time against liberalism’s tendency to define freedom as license to do anything one wishes. The theology which structures the Barmen Declaration exemplifies what Barth is trying to do in his divine command obediential theology. As sentence 8.11 states, “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.” Beyond the claim of political authority and individual conscience alike, lies the duty of the Christian and the Church to obey the Word of God and to confess the Word of God. This is a political statement, because it strips political authority of absolute power over Christian citizens. Even though political authority may still be ordained by God, as the Barmen declaration affirms, the responsibility remains with both “rulers and the ruled” to ensure that the state is not overstepping its bounds by persuading citizens to neglect direct obedience to God (8.24).

For Barth, obedience is good when it is in direct response to God’s command. Human action is good when it is an act of obedience to God. One might say that for Barth, the divine-human relationship can be summed up as follows: love is bondage to God, and freedom is in obedience to God. The Christian’s relationship to political authority should be filtered through this ultimate obedience to God.

**Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Obedience Activating Faith**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s (1906-1945) theology is heavily influenced by his work with Karl Barth, especially his skepticism of liberal theology and the similarities he finds in “secular
totalitarianism.” He departs from the idea that the political authority is ordained by God, and holds fast to the language of Christian obedience as response to God’s command, taking it so far as to characterize obedience as central to discipleship.

The fact that Bonhoeffer critically engaged the Lutheran idea that political authority is God-ordained is reflected in his frustration with the direction of the Confessing Church at times. Bonhoeffer became disappointed with the Confessing Church movement after a certain point, because he found that it became too wrapped up in internal arguing for its own right to exist. This conversation, he felt, took away from garnering resistance against the war and against Nazi terrorism. Even so, Bonhoeffer supported the Confessing Church to the end, and even worked to establish seminaries for training leaders in the Confessing Church.

Nachfolge, or, Discipleship, first published in 1937, provides a sample of how Bonhoeffer worked out the role of obedience in his theology. In terms of the ecclesiology, for Bonhoeffer, the church exists as an institution serving Christians and wider society through “word and prayer.” Bonhoeffer spells out the role of the church as “proclaiming God’s rule over the whole world through word and faith.” Even as Bonhoeffer describes the church as serving the state, there is a limit to which the church should obey political authority. Evoking Martin

55 Bonhoeffer, 31.
56 Hockenos, “Bonhoeffer and the Church Struggle,” 2.
Luther, Bonhoeffer claims that the church can and must criticize and disobey the state if it is contradicting or preventing the church’s ability to proclaim the Word of God.⁵⁸

Jan Ligus clearly summarizes Bonhoeffer’s understanding of the extent to which Christians should obey the law this way,

We see that Bonhoeffer’s understanding of obedience and disobedience to the authorities depends on the proper and responsible exercise of secular office as well as on the freedom to proclaim God’s Word. If the state prevents this, we pass the limit of obedience. This idea is still relevant in the world today.⁵⁹

As a church leader himself, Bonhoeffer lived in disobedience to the Nazi state, especially as it encroached upon institutional church matters, making demands which Bonhoeffer repeatedly refused.

The theological basis for Bonhoeffer’s protest of political oppression springs from his work on what it means to be a disciple under “costly grace.” While cheap grace requires nothing of the believer, costly grace cannot be separated from the demands of discipleship. Discipleship comprises both faith and obedience for Bonhoeffer. Faith is lived out in the doing of obedience. In other words, obedience is the action step of faith, which is played out in daily political life.

Obedience, because it is the “doing of” belief, is the thing that makes faith possible, according to Bonhoeffer. He writes that if someone momentarily feels it difficult to have faith, perhaps they need to apply obedient action, since obedience is the primary activator of faith. One’s faith life will inevitably fall flat if belief remains divorced from obedient action.⁶⁰ Genuine obedience emanates from both act and intention, according to Bonhoeffer. Similar to Barth, an action is not

⁵⁸ Liguš, 176.

⁵⁹ Liguš, 176.

good in itself, but must be paired with obedient intention. An act must be done for the right reason for it to count as an obedient action. This is what Bonhoeffer calls “single-minded obedience.”

Jesus Christ provides the greatest example of obedience, according to Bonhoeffer. In his interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, Bonhoeffer argues that Jesus is calling his followers ultimately to surrender and obedience. He further argues that obedience is the particular act through which Jesus proved both his divinity and his humanity, and through which he fulfills the law and prophets.

For Bonhoeffer, it is clear that obedience to Christ is the central force of discipleship and it extends beyond discipleship to define Bonhoeffer’s overarching understanding of anthropology. Not only does obedience define Christian faith, freedom, and morality, it is the very foundation of personhood. Bonhoeffer writes that Christians access their humanity to the extent that they obey God’s command. Obedience, ultimately, should be shown to God over political authority, especially when the state is preventing the proclamation of God’s word.

**Rudolf Bultmann: Radical Obedience**

Though Sölle attributes much of her theological foundation to Barth and Bonhoeffer, she sees Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) as especially foundational to her own theological formation, especially in her development as a young student. Sölle was introduced to Bultmann’s work in high-school where she first encountered an intellectual dynamism that she had not known to be possible for conceiving of God and the world, encompassing both “thinking and believing,

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61 Bonhoeffer, 81.

criticism and religiosity, reason and Christianity.”  Bultmann’s influence over Sölle, and the foundational nature of his thought in her theology is evidenced in her work Political Theology in which she lays down its principles in direct conversation with Bultmann. Though much of her political hermeneutic unfolds in reaction against Bultmann, his influence on her own thinking cannot be overstated.

Bultmann is most famous for his work of “demythologization,” which swayed interpretation of the New Testament away from literalism, toward a new way of re-interpreting myth for modern readers. Bultmann started with the presupposition that the reader encounters the text fully embedded in her own historical context and subjective experience. The relationship between the reader and the text is its own category to be taken seriously and to examine, because it determines the nature of the interpretation of the text. Thinking with Schleiermacher, Dilthey and Heidegger, Bultmann rules out the possibility for an objective stance in relation to scriptural text. It also rules out the chance to glimpse any kind of objective truth from scripture itself. For Bultmann, the text is not at all describing reality. Rather, New Testament texts are communicating the confession of faith from particular communities in history. Rather than interpreting the New Testament as factual reporting, Bultmann, like Barth, preferred to see it as testimony of a faith proclamation. Said differently, the Word of God comes through these testimonies as an address from God through the faith articulated in the texts. God addresses the reader in their particular historical context through the proclamation of faith from particular

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63 Sölle, Against the Wind, 28.
communities in history. God’s Word travels via proclamation from one subjective position to another addressing the reader as “Kerygma.”  

All of this is to say that the reader, then, must choose her response to the proclamation of the Word of God found in the New Testament. But this time, the response is not one of direct obedience to God’s command, or an assertion of the Lordship of Christ. Rather, the response is elicited by the Kingdom of God. In his Kingdom of God theology, Bultmann articulates a “radical obedience,” hoping to nuance the authoritarian divine-human relationship suggested in obediential theology. For Bultmann, the Kingdom of God is a future reality that operates in the present, “compelling one to decision.” When faced by a concrete situation, the Kingdom of God compels one to decide one’s actions, informed by, but not necessarily bound by, God’s will. The freedom to decide remains with the individual, and she is not forced to act in any one particular way. God places trust in humanity to respond to the situation, giving humanity the opportunity to make a “positive” decision.

In regard to faith life, radical obedience is not something one does, rather, the Christian becomes obedient. Bultmann emphasizes this notion though his distinction between work and act. While a work is something someone does, they are still separate from it. An act requires becoming. Faith is an act for Bultmann, and ultimately is defined as an “obediential’ choice and act.” Reversing the natural direction of the will becomes fundamental to living out an obediential faith under Bultmann’s conception of radical obedience. In directing one’s will away

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64 Thiselton, Hermeneutics, 166–70.
66 Bultmann, 55.
from the self and toward the will of God, the Christian is able to act faithfully. Further, obedience to God, the act of obedience, is primarily lived out in love of the neighbor, according to Bultmann, echoing Martin Luther. Radical obedience functions as the capacity to respond to one’s political situation inspired and sustained by a vision of the future Kingdom of God.

While Sölle held Barth, Bonhoeffer and Bultmann in very high regard, these brief summaries of the usage of obediential language among these three figures will help provide context to the critique of obediential language within Christian theology and ethics. The critique extends beyond the promotion of obedience within authoritarian politics and religion and encompasses the use of obedience even among theologies written to incite protest against political domination. In this way, Sölle poses a feminist critique against her “theological fathers” even as she remains indebted to their influence on her work, and deeply respects their outstanding historical and theological contributions; and in the case of Bonhoeffer, the staggering willingness to risk his life.

*New Political Theology Against Political Domination*

Sölle participated in the New Political Theology conversation, which became a watershed development in Catholic and Protestant theology. This section highlights Jürgen Moltmann and Johan Baptist Metz who are key interlocutors of Sölle’s, as they attempt to speak about God in full view of the atrocities of the Shoah. German New Political Theology exploded onto the theological scene around 1968 in response to turbulent events in history, such as the Cold War,

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69 The term, “New Political Theology,” was coined by Johann Baptist Metz to distinguish it from Carl Schmitt’s political theology which capitalizes on images of divine sovereignty to bolster decisionistic political power. See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).
the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., Medellin (the conference of Latin American Bishops in Columbia), the Vietnam anti-war movement, and Vatican II. New Political Theologians interpreted these events to call for a theology which ushers in and is defined by historical justice-centered praxis on the part of the church. They affirmed wholeheartedly that after the Shoah, one must speak of God in completely different language. Within this conversation, Johann Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann set down decisive definitions for how theology could and should respond to the political sphere, and as will be shown in later chapters, Dorothee Sölle contributed tremendously to this new language. The section that follows presents the theo-ethical break from the attempt to justify civil disobedience by claiming the duty to obey divine sovereignty.

Jürgen Moltmann

“J.B. Metz came to Political Theology through Karl Rahner. I came to this new frontline of postwar theology in Germany through Karl Barth,” Jürgen Moltmann (born in 1926) remarks in a paper given at the 2010 Conference at University of Heidelberg, Germany which underscored New Political Theology’s foundations and current relevance.70 This quotation speaks to the ecumenical nature of the New Political Theology conversation, as Metz is a Catholic theologian and Moltmann comes from the German Reformed tradition. Karl Barth made a significant impression upon Moltmann, especially the claim that humanity should not simply wait for the eschaton to take place, but rather, humanity must anticipate it via acts of justice, which he watched Barth do in his leadership of the Confessing Church.

Moltmann’s contribution to New Political Theology opens God-talk to the political ramifications of centering the cross and God’s relationship to the cross within political theology.

Moltmann’s experience of being held prisoner of war by the British during WWII and of having been a soldier in the Wehrmacht deeply influenced his theology. He pushed for the political interpretation of the life and death of Jesus, and, consequently, for a political understanding of Christian discipleship. A political lens belongs not just to particular theological fields, rather, the political must be understood as entrenched in Christian theology and church history. Moltmann emphasizes this in his statement that,

Political Theology was not understood as the theology of the political, but rather it was a designation for every Christian theology and hermeneutical or fundamental-theological category. There is consciously political theology, there is politically un-conscious theology, but there is no such thing as an un-political theology, at least not on this earth and presumably not even in the heavenly politeuma.\(^{71}\)

There is no such thing as un-political theology. This idea is exemplified in Moltmann’s interpretation of Jesus in his work, The Crucified God, which spells out an understanding of Jesus as a political figure. Moltmann claims that Jesus was both a religious and political rebel, and only the two descriptors taken together make any sense in light of Jesus’ historical context. Jesus disrupted and subverted the cultural milieu of Roman imperial theology. Further, Pilate condemning Jesus as a Zealot rebel, suggests that Jesus was a “challenge to Pax Romana and its gods and laws.”\(^{72}\) Whereas Bultmann claims that Jesus-as-political-prisoner was a misunderstanding of his actions on the part of the political authority of his time, Moltmann sees Bultmann’s view as typical bourgeois denial of the crossover of religion and politics.\(^{73}\) Ultimately, Moltmann asserts that “The gospel of Jesus and his public behavior were political in

\(^{71}\) Moltmann, 2.


\(^{73}\) Moltmann, 137.
the extreme... Jesus interfered in this religious and political business to challenge and disrupt its rules, and ‘had to be’ removed.”

Jesus’ words and actions caused political and religious uproar. And Moltmann points out that one can watch the ramifications of this play out directly in the lives of early Christians who were martyred for refusing emperor worship. Moltmann articulates that Christians worshiped a “crucified God” and this should always be interpreted as a political statement. For one, “faith in the crucified Christ” is a faith that defies national, racial, classist power. Further, worshiping a crucified God subverts worldly understandings of power, putting political hierarchies into question. It also reimagines faith as political discipleship always pointed toward “political freedom” and “liberating action.” The church is given a special mission under this view of political discipleship as well. As “institutions for free criticism of society,” the church must always stand for human freedom not on an individual level, but in a social and political sense while at the same time waking Christians from political apathy.

Not only does the symbol of a crucified God provide a political-ethical imperative for Christians, it also shifts theologies of God. In his understanding of the crucified God, Moltmann spells out what happens to the trinity during the event of crucifixion. Jesus is left to die abandoned by God on the cross. But as Jesus experiences great suffering, so too does the Father, even as the two are separated from each other by the rift of the cross. And yet they both undergo

74 Moltmann, 144.
75 Moltmann, 143.
76 Moltmann, 317–18.
77 Moltmann, 328.
suffering out of an outpouring of love for the world, a love which is personified by the Holy Spirit, flowing out to and through the brokenness of the world.

Catholic feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson paraphrases Moltmann’s interpretation of the separation experienced by Father and Son in words that capture the redemptive nature of the crucifixion event: “The cross opens up a great fissure in God’s own being, the Father abandoning, the Son being abandoned. In doing so, the cross not only plunges God deep into the suffering of the world. It also opens a reverse pathway on which suffering travels back into God, there to be redeemed.”\(^7^8\) Moltmann is attempting to convince Christians that God does not necessarily cause suffering, but rather, God suffers with humanity, as greatly as God suffered with Jesus on the cross. This image of God is meant to uncover the promise of divine solidarity with human suffering.

Moltmann’s ethical argument for political engagement among Christians comes from a different place compared to the obediential theologies of Barth, Bonhoeffer and Bultmann. He argues that Jesus’ message and action and even his death on the cross are inherently political and that early Christians followed suit. Today’s interpretations of discipleship and church should be no less political, according to Moltmann, by prioritizing social and political liberation and ecclesial critique of political oppression.

**Johann Baptist Metz**

Johann Baptist Metz (1928-2019), a Catholic theologian, taught by Karl Rahner, did not describe God’s relationship to the cross in the same way as Moltmann did but Metz did indeed uphold Jesus’ solidarity with human suffering. In contrast to Rahner’s anthropological turn, Metz

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emphasizes history over anthropology in his theology. He interprets scripture as “passion story of humanity” and believes that the crux of Judeo-Christian solidarity has always been the process of lament and remembering throughout history. To remember the death and resurrection of Jesus is to keep alive the memory of unjust torture, not allowing it to be covered over or erased from a collective account of history.

The cross becomes a symbol of all forms of torture and oppression humanity suffers under, and remembering the cross is in essence a practice of remembering and not forgetting the countless lives who have been lost, protesting the violent forces at work in the world. The world should be read, then, in a similar way as the Bible: a passion story of humanity with sensitivity to sociopolitical reality. God, in Metz’s view, is not just a God of love, but of justice: historical, temporal justice in this time and this place.79

In defining political theology, Metz claims that its questions should always focus on today’s social and political challenges: “The New Political Theology understands itself as a fundamental theology. It wishes to elucidate the Christian discourse about God in this time. It wishes to be a discourse about God that is sensitive to temporality and in this sense also committed to learning. How do we talk about God today.”80 In Theology of the World (1969), Metz puts forth two primary tasks for a political theology that addresses today’s challenges for Christians, one that is critical and one that is constructive. Endorsing Moltmann’s claim that Jesus’ proclamation was public and political, Metz criticizes how blatantly privatized Christianity has become. Metz wants to expunge the version of spirituality which fortifies a


80 Metz, 16.
private relationship between God and the individual because its blinds Christians to sociopolitical realities around them as well as their call to address these challenges.

Sin and salvation must no longer be kept within the realm of the personal; rather, Metz argues, “It is impossible to privatize the eschatological promises of biblical tradition: liberty, peace, justice, reconciliation. Again and again they force us to assume our responsibilities toward society.” Therefore, the positive task for political theology is to tackle the social and political forces that limit peace and justice in society.81

The kind of Christian spirituality that springs from political theology is one which fosters a “messianic sensitivity to suffering” and drawing from “biblical mysticism of justice: God’s passion as an active compassion, a practical mysticism of compassion.”82 Discipleship as active compassion has as its authority not a sovereign God, but rather the claim of those who suffer under injustice.83

The New Political Theology conversation pulls away from the kind of obediential theo-ethics that were taking place leading up to, and during World War II in Germany among religious leaders in response to fascism. Moltmann’s theo-ethical approach diverges from the Pauline language of the Lordship of Christ over against the lordship of the emperor, and the primacy of obeying God over any political authority. He uncovers the political message and actions of Jesus as a historical figure, and, he images God as suffering with Christ and all of humanity. In doing so, Moltmann is arguing that Christian participation in liberation is the

82 Metz, “Two-Fold Political Theology,” 19.
83 Metz, 20.
definition of discipleship. Meanwhile, Metz interprets the Bible as a collective passion story of humanity, a story filled with cries of suffering against injustice to be remembered, and to provide solidarity with contemporary struggle. Rather than depicting God as a sovereign positioned *over* the temporal sphere, Metz portrays God as a God of justice embedded *in* history. And finally, he claims that Christians are subject to the ethical authority of those who suffer politically sanctioned violence today.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted key elements of Sölle’s theological inheritance and historical context, namely, German political obedience to fascism and the leadership of theologians in response to the crisis of Christian participation in fascism. It also traces how language of obedience to God is used to compel Christians to disobey Hitler and the demands of Nazi fascism. Barth and Bonhoeffer, in ways distinct from one another, want to emphasize that God is the ultimate authority over any other political authority, and that the gospel should be interpreted as authoritative. Bultmann, meanwhile, develops a radical obedience which asserts the claim of the situation that affronts the individual, begging response. Even though his adaptation broadens the picture of the obediential dynamic between God and humanity, it nonetheless utilizes the language of obedience.

After World War II and the fall of Nazi Germany, New Political Theology provides alternative language for God and alternative interpretations of the gospel in affirming the notion that theology must be entirely different after Auschwitz. And so, they advance alternate images of God as a God of justice (Metz), a God who suffers with humanity (Moltmann). The gospel is political (Moltmann) and it remembers and recalls the sufferings of human history (Metz). These alternative names for God and interpretations of the gospel lead to different ways to describe
Christian response to both God and the socio-political realities that cause human suffering in language that speaks beyond obedience.

But for Sölle, this move is not drastic enough. Theologians cannot simply move away from the language of obedience. To side-step obedience would be to evade a crucial conversation that needs to take place among theologians, ethicists, and people of faith. Throughout the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, Sölle notices the remaining shreds of obediential theology, even as God was claimed to be dead in broader culture. These shreds of obedience are exposed in Christians’ complicity with the exploitative nature of capitalism and in compliance with militaristic-imperialist ideologies. Even as capitalist democracy asserts individual freedom and ostensibly deflects tyranny, Sölle is struck by the diffuse power that capital holds over individuals and she surmises that Christian obedience has something to do with the complicit social character she observes in the U.S. and in Europe, especially among middle class Christians who benefit in some way from this economic system.

Adamant that one must peel back the layers of impact that Christian obedience has had on society, Sölle looks closely at how it has formed Christians individually as well as how it carries institutional and political ramifications. Critique is a crucial step before one can create or retrieve alternative language for God, interpretations of the gospel, and ultimately, virtues to live by. The following chapter examines Sölle’s extensive critique of obedience through her concern over the way that it forms Christians psychologically and spiritually as well as for the societal and political impact obedient Christians tend to have.
CHAPTER II
SÖLLE’S CRITIQUE OF OBEDIENCE AND WARNING AGAINST CHRISTOFASCISM

Introduction

In her autobiography, Dorothee Sölle remembers growing up in Cologne in the 1930s and 40s and realizing how her family occupied a sort of middle ground between the “German Christian” Nazis and the Confessing Church in resistance. Describing her parents’ household as “vaguely Christian,” she notes that her cultural upbringing was influenced more by Kant and Goethe than by Luther and the Bible.\(^1\) But Sölle claims that this liberal Protestant, bourgeois cultural environment was as much a building block for Nazism as the overtly fascist “German Christian” movement. She maintains that it is important to recount the various ways in which even “vaguely” cultural Christians complied with fascism. Even though they did not overtly participate in Nazism, their reluctance to question German romanticism perpetuated a nationalistic pull in the hearts of children like young Sölle during that time.

Sölle brings to light the context in which she grew up, one that she is ashamed to recount, but one which she finds it critical to recall. Even though her parents were anti-Nazi, as a young person, Sölle harbored romantic ideology about her country, which her family and educators allowed to flourish, as her journals reveal. The painful process of retracing of these memories leads Sölle to realize hers was a culture of liberal, bourgeois, educated Christians claiming to be

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anti-fascist. And yet Sölle portrays this culture as one which allowed German romanticism to be conflated with nationalism during the *Nazizeit.*

As the daughter of a lawyer, Sölle grew up in a relatively privileged home. Even so, wartime hardship remains etched in her memory, especially the hunger. She writes of lying in bed as a child dreaming of a hot meal while her stomach ached for food.² Sölle also writes of the Jewish woman hidden in their attic for six weeks, who she called “Frau B.” At nine years old, she remembers worrying about “Frau B.” when her family periodically rushed across the street to a bunker, reacting to the sounding of the “Fliegeralarm.” One day, Frau B. said to Dorothee, “don’t worry about me, they will never get me.” And she showed Dorothee a flask of poisonous substance that she kept with her in case the moment arose when she came face to face with Nazi soldiers. Sölle remarks that this was the exact moment in time when she ceased to be a child.³

During this time, Sölle recounts the two languages she and her family became accustomed to speaking. The one language which was spoken at home was openly descriptive of the torture occurring in the *Konzentrationslager,* which held political prisoners, Sinti, and Roma and “homosexuals.” Jews were not necessarily held in these same concentration camps, but rather, were “resettled” first, and eventually tortured and killed, a process which began in 1938 when Sölle would have been nine years old. The other language, spoken outside, was less open. To speak openly was one of the most dangerous things to do, she learned quickly during this time. At age nine, little Dorothee knew what a *Konzentrationslager* was. “There was much I was

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² Sölle, 14.

aware of at that time. Of course, I was not aware of everything, certainly not Auschwitz,”

she remarks.

But the most prominent facet of this time in Sölle’s life, which she brings to light by
highlighting excerpts from her diary, gave shape to her own processing of her historical and
political context during Hitler’s rule, and, shortly after the collapse of the Nazi state. In reflecting
on her own diary from her youth, Sölle claims that it wasn’t just Nazi propaganda that caused
Germans to comply with fascism, but a long held cultural heritage of German romanticism which
served as building blocks for nationalism.5

As an adolescent desperate for meaning, Sölle recounts clinging to what she calls “the
dream of Germany,” which captured her imagination during the Nazizeit, and the years
following. Diary passages from this time paint portraits of beautiful German landscapes and love
for Beethoven. Romantic language and ideas fill the diary, void of political awareness present at
that time. The only hints of political reality which surface describe post-war Germany as the
ultimate victim of the war. Sölle also highlights a diary passage in which she is lamenting over
the discovery of her father’s Jewish grandparent. She is saddened to think how disappointed her
favorite teacher would be to find this out that she is “one-eighth” Jewish.6

Sölle’s reflection on these diary passages many years later express the cultural situation
in which she found herself situated. In addressing the “excessive romantic ideology” reflected in
the diary of her youth, Sölle wonders if this flight from reality was really a survival mechanism

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4 Sölle, 16.

5 German Romanticism was an intellectual and cultural movement in the 1800s and 1900s influencing art, poetry,
music and philosophy which Nazis appropriated because of its nationalistic strains. See, for example: Hans Kohn,

6 Sölle, Gegenwind, 37.
as a young person trying to make sense of what was going on around her. She also wonders about the extent to which it protected her and gave her space to grow, in the midst of a reality that only reflected death… But the fact that she believed that this ideology misled her troubles her the most in her own reflection on these passages. “Some of it is laughable. Much of it is shameful, she admits.\(^7\)

Sölle believes these diary passages from her youth shed light on a mentality present among many Germans who were longing for the materialization of the “German Dream” after losing the First World War, and then during the time of Hitler’s Third Reich. As some Germans clung to German romanticism, they distracted themselves from the atrocity of genocide. Sölle describes this “dream” more as an illusion, and a prison of the mind. To Sölle’s dismay, the dream perpetuated itself even after Germany had lost the war and Europe was beginning to restore itself after fascism’s destruction.

As a young teacher at a Catholic girls’ school in Cologne in the 1950s, Sölle observes the dream covering over her young students’ awareness of their own recent history. It began with the very curriculum she was asked to teach. In the course plan, German fascism was omitted from the curriculum, as history lessons did not extend beyond the year 1914. When Sölle referred to the Nazis once in a lesson, a student returned the next week reporting that her father did not believe the Nazis were so bad. They had built the Autobahn, after all! During her time as a teacher, Sölle thought reflected on the students and their parents who refused to acknowledge their own historical reality. She finally adapted the curriculum so that it included extensive history surrounding Nazism and the Shoah. But it was this liberal, bourgeois attitude among

\(^7\) Sölle, 19.
Christians that remained a significant part of the equation. Why couldn’t this community see that this romantic nationalism should have ended with Auschwitz? She wondered how they did not understand that Nazism was a consequence of their comfortable bourgeois, apathetic, and apolitical lifestyle, the very lifestyle she says that she herself emerged from.⁸

Sölle’s reflections on her upbringing and early years as a young teacher expose the contrast between her parents’ bravery in hiding a Jewish woman in their home on the one hand, and on the other hand, the German romanticism that colored her youth, and the later the political apathy she encountered as a young teacher post World War II. This chapter exhibits how the critique of obedience stems from a complexity of overlapping and contrasting experiences of resistance against fascism, and a tendency toward forgetfulness in her community after the Shoah. Because of these experiences, Sölle’s critique of obedience encompasses the spectrum of ways that theologies of obedience compound the habit of conformity to economic and political structures.

In essence, this chapter explains Sölle’s concern that Christianity has not yet loosened its grip on obedience, even in resistance against and later critique of authoritarianism and fascism. In conversation with New Political Theologians Metz and Moltmann who break from obediential theology, Dorothee Sölle contributes to the political theology conversation writing in response to the long lineage of obedience from which she stems. This chapter illuminates Sölle’s painstaking interrogation of the social character and moral identity shaped by the theological language of obedience—even when it is used to inspire political dissent. While Chapter I acknowledges that Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer worked tirelessly to lead the Protestant church out from

⁸ Soelle, Against the Wind, 24–27.
under Nazi control, it also shows how they both utilize forms of obediential theology to persuade Christians to disobey German political authority. This chapter retrieves Sölle’s critique of obediential theology and her approach to expose the spiritual, psychological, social and political impact that the habit of obedience has, across many forms of Christianity. Further, as a feminist theologian, Sölle is deeply concerned with the hierarchical positions of power that obediential theology reifies.

As this chapter unfolds, those familiar the Frankfurt School will hear echoes of influence throughout Sölle’s thought. The work of critical theorists such as Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse echo throughout her critique of Christian obedience. One can read between the lines and notice glimpses of Horkheimer and Adorno’s concern with the internalized domination that forms the “authoritarian personality” as well as their warning against commodity fetishism in their Marxian critique of capitalist ideology. Marcuse’s concern with subjectivity and the repression capitalism requires of its participants runs through Sölle’s work as a parallel thread.

Yet, no other critical theorist influences Sölle’s writing as Erich Fromm. Sölle refers often to Fromm’s work on the development of authoritarian religion in contrast to humanitarian

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12 It is interesting that Sölle relied so heavily upon a critical theorist who found himself ostracized from his own academic community, the Frankfurt School. As someone who faced ostracization in many facets of her life, perhaps she felt akin to his story.
religion as she uncovers the harmful impacts of obediential theology.\textsuperscript{13} She also weaves Fromm’s Marxian anthropology throughout her own critique of individual Christians’ conformity to consumerist attitudes and practices and leans on his thought again when she reimagines an alternative Christian subjectivity.\textsuperscript{14}

Understanding that the categories of obediential theology within Christianity are extremely broad, it is important to recognize who Sölle is speaking to and about in the following critique that unfolds throughout this chapter. Because Sölle herself is constantly traveling across academic disciplines, political and religious movements, and even across continents, she identifies overlapping connections both in Germany and the US, among Catholic groups as well as Protestants, and even between socialist organizers and the religiously affiliated.

For the most part, this chapter proceeds chronologically through Sölle’s works, so in essence the reader travels with Sölle as she develops this particular critique. At times Sölle is speaking to her own German compatriots continuing to make sense of their forgetfulness of the Nazi catastrophe in the 1950s and acquiescence to the arms race during the Cold War. Later, she develops her critique from her position as a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, observing the rise of the “Moral Majority” in the US and the conflation of Christianity with right-wing policy.

Her critique, however, is not merely directed at the overtly complicit West German citizen unapologetically forgetting the Shoah, or, the US American Christian whose nationalism completely colors their religious identity. Although at times she may be speaking about the more


overt cases of uncritical Christian obedience, Sölle wants to speak to people whose experience and social location overlap with her own. Sölle is a theologian who wants to explore what it means to be a Christian of the “First world,” and more specifically, a Christian who holds just enough economic status and racial privilege to benefit from the system. This is a group of people that Sölle describes as able to evade exploitation and social marginalization, yet they are still not part of the “decision-making class” towards which capital and power ultimately flow.\textsuperscript{15} Sölle is writing to a group of people, who, like herself, are concerned with the more harmful aspects of a capitalist society, but at the same time cannot but participate in that very system. In other words, Sölle writes as someone grounded at the center of her critique, someone who is herself having to constantly question her own participation in the systems of oppression she wants to deconstruct.

In this way, Sölle differs from the critical theorist, Max Horkheimer, who thinks that the philosopher’s job is to articulate the impact of political and economic exploitation for the oppressed, so that they will open their eyes to their own oppressed state and begin to resist it.\textsuperscript{16} Sölle knows that those who experience oppression can and must articulate their own experiences and she wants to focus on her own social group’s awakening to complicity.

This chapter follows Sölle’s critique exposing how obediential theology contributes to masochistic spirituality, perpetuates political apathy and fuels the compulsion to conform to market logic and consumerist ideology. Lastly, this chapter shares Sölle’s warning against the formation of a particular society bolstered by Christian moral systems shaping individuals’ social


character to be obedient and conformist while institutional Christianity supports free-market policy platforms and capitalistic, militaristic forms of globalization. Chapter II then ends considering the extent to which present day Christian nationalism signals the need for critiquing the ways in which Christofascism is alive and well in US society.

The Psychological and Spiritual Impacts of Obediential Theology and Ethics

In one of her earliest published works, Sölle is already writing about obedience. She begins to formulate the psychological and social impacts of the theological language of obedience in 1968 in her work, Phantasie und Gehorsam: Überlegungen zu einer künftigen christlichen Ethik which was translated into English in 1995 and was given the title, Creative Disobedience. This text critiques the overreliance upon the virtue of obedience for understanding Christian faith, discipleship and responsibility and proposes alternative virtues that would ground a more empowered sense of moral agency. In her later works, Sölle spells out further the political implications of obediential language in theology and ethics, not just for historical analysis of fascist Germany, but also in view of contemporary capitalist democracies, especially the United States.

Sölle’s early writing on obedience stems directly from the experience of multiple belongings, all of which required an obedient attitude. She laments in the introduction of Creative Disobedience that, “As a German, a Christian, and a woman, I was brought up in three traditions that demanded obedience.”¹⁷ Along with the constant grappling with her historical context of uncritical and obedient German Christians, her intuition about “male theology” as a woman in a male-dominated field, and her thinking with the Frankfurt School on the

authoritarian personality initially fed her suspicion of the language of obedience in Christian theology and ethics, even when it is used to undergird political resistance as in the case of Barth and Bonhoeffer’s theologies.

As one of the only German women in the academic field of theology, Sölle perceives immediately how language is utilized to wield epistemological power. “Male theology” is a language that upholds an ethos of hierarchical domination in Christianity, and a language that perpetuates a particular methodological status quo in the field of theology, at least as she observes in Europe. In the introduction to the 1995 English translation, Sölle reflects on the fact that when she wrote *Creative Disobedience* in the late 1960s, she would not necessarily have called herself a feminist.

It is not until she begins teaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York that she awakens to her own explicit feminist awareness. In her autobiography, Sölle pays tribute to the feminists at UTS and especially Beverly Harrison for inspiring the blossoming of her own feminist consciousness. Sölle traces her implicit feminist intuition throughout *Creative Disobedience*, and in the following story, one can sense how stifled she feels by the linguistic and epistemological walls that had been erected around what she calls “male theology:”

Of course I knew of some things that I intensely disliked in male theological circles—namely, the springing from one quotation to the next in their writing without the courage to use personal discourse; the almost anal obsession with footnotes, called 'scientific style'; the...craving for orthodoxy and the shelter it offers to the professional theologian; the neglect of historical reflection in favor of glib talk about 'historicity'; the failure to

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18 Soelle, *Against the Wind*, 65. “I owe it to Beverly Harrison that I received the call to Union. She taught ethics at UTS. It is no exaggeration to speak of her as a mother of feminist theology. Tirelessly she supports, counsels, and stimulates women in theology, organizes meetings and conferences. She critiques sexism in all shapes or forms and goes after every personal and institutional manifestation of the exclusion of women. Bev was the first of my women friends in New York…. Beverly and the many younger women at Union who worked with me as tutors asked me again and again what my theology has to do with being a woman. For a long time, I interpreted my theology more politically than in any other way.” Sölle includes a poem in this passage which she wrote for Beverly Harrison entitled, “Seven Paradoxes for Beverly.”
evaluate and reflect on praxis...I also felt a certain lack of candor and honesty, and I sensed no need to be personally exposed to the truth of Scripture and tradition. The theological method almost always started with 'Scripture tells us...' After this I expected a 'but' that seldom appeared. I was angry, though I did not quite understand why. When my friends exposed to me my own latent feminism I learned to understand my anger much better....

She goes on to reflect on how often her anger erupted in reaction to the pressure to obey the arbitrary yet oppressive rules of theological language. Over and over Sölle is punished for disobeying the linguistic rules in her field. In fact, she never holds a full professorship position in a German university and male critics were constantly labeling her work as incoherent and unscientific because it strays from the rules of the theological game.

But Sölle goes further than questioning the obedient language in her field, that is, language adherent to rules and boundaries set by epistemological hegemony. She wants to completely dismantle the language of obedience in theological ethics as well. In Phantasie und Gehörsam, Sölle directly targets theological language that continually upholds obedience as a virtue. Sölle argues that the words one uses in theology are directly linked to history. Words evoke history, and therefore, through language, especially theological-ethical language, “we have to own our history.”

Either theological language remembers, or, it becomes “meaningless religious rhetoric.”

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19 Sölle, Creative Disobedience, xvi.


21 Sölle, Creative Disobedience, x.

22 Sölle, x.
When it comes to history, as a German, Sölle is referring to the historical event of the Shoah, the mass extermination of millions of Jews and other targeted groups by the German National Socialists. Sölle maintains that this particular history judges the language of obedience as no longer usable, further stating that, “Being a German after the Holocaust means that my theological concepts and the words I use to express them have no life apart from their history.”

She goes on to construct an argument against any and all forms of obediential theology, even the language that Bonhoeffer and others use to persuade German Christians to dissent from political authority out of obedience to God.

It is impossible for German theologians to reinterpret obedience in Christian theology outside of the context of the Shoah. The historical fact of individual Christian and the institutional church’s participation in Nazi fascism exposes how multitudes of Christians in Germany were incapable of distinguishing between obedience before humans and obedience in relation to God. Her words strike at the heart of the matter, spelling out how history exposes the damage done through language of obedience, and why this cannot be ignored.

Surely it is no longer possible to speak of obedience…with a sense of theological innocence… Can one demand a particular stance toward God and educate toward that stance, yet simultaneously criticize that same stance toward people and toward institutions? ... I suspect that we Christians today have the duty to criticize the entire concept of obedience, and that this criticism must be radical...It is no longer possible to describe our relationship to God with a formal concept that is limited to the mere performance of duties. We cannot remove ourselves from history if we wish to speak seriously about God. And in our Christian history, our history of the 20th century, obedience has played a catastrophic role. Who forgets this background or conveniently pushes it aside and once more naively attempts to begin with obedience, as if it were merely a matter of obeying the right lord, has not learned a thing from the instruction of God called history.

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23 Sölle, x.
24 Sölle, 9–10.
Sölle is calling for a radical reinterpretation of the ethical response to God’s “will,” and a radical redefinition of moral agency among Christians. She refuses to support the longstanding approach that says obedience is a virtuous response to God’s will, while at the same time, Christians should question obedience in other spheres. Said differently, Sölle cannot see how Christians can continue to habituate themselves to a relationship defined by obedient submission to God, and at the same time practice critique in the face of other human authority whether that be familial, institutional, or political. Thus, the task for theological ethics is, first, to criticize the concept of obedience as a virtue *per se*. Theological ethics must delineate a criticism informed by history, and leveled against all spheres of life, fostering both inner conversion and outer transformation.

*Creative Disobedience* counts the psychological cost of Christian obediential ethics. One of the primary issues Sölle takes up in her scrutiny of obediential theo-ethics is that it can often lead the individual to focus too much on the *how* of obedience, without enough consideration for the *why*. This, of course, is the definition of this form of obedience: following an order without critical questioning. Sölle worries that theological obedience as a habit limits capacity for moral responsibility, even as it has been upheld as the key to Christian discipleship in religious formation across Protestant and Catholic traditions.²⁵

One of the many harms in perpetuating an obediential ethic in Christianity is that it defines the God-human relationship in terms of an irreversible imbalance of power. One person commands and the other obeys out of fearful anticipation of punishment.²⁶ When this dynamic is the primary descriptor of God in relation to humanity, archetypes form in the religious

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²⁵ Sölle, 5–8.

²⁶ Sölle, 11.
imagination so that God becomes “father, ruler, owner, commander” while the individual comes to see oneself as “child, subject, slave, soldier.” These images have become cemented in religious imaginations such that Christians are unable to imagine themselves and God as anything other than dominated and dominating, respectively. An obediential relationship to God creates a narrow view when looking at the role of the individual, who further translates obedience as fitting into a prescribed religious and social order according to one’s position in church and family. Social and familial role-filling is conflated with practicing the virtue of obedience, and Sölle points to Berthold Brecht’s Kalendargeschichten (Calendar Tales) as an example of this.

The main character in one of the stories, a woman of 70 years, realizes she has spent her whole life reacting to “the expectations placed on her to serve her social role.” The woman’s mode of operation is defined by sacrificial obedience to the role of wife and mother, and as a result, she has had very little chance to develop herself as an individual. Sölle is worried that just as obedience is expected of women to fill a narrowly defined social role in European and North American societies, obedience in relation to God will leave individual Christians with an underdeveloped relationship to oneself, and an experience of existential alienation, even leading to “psychic masochism,” the belief that one should strive for suffering, or that suffering is a mark of obedience to God.

27 Sölle, 12.
28 Sölle, 12.
29 Sölle, 27.
30 Sölle, 37.
Sölle does not wish to eliminate the concept of selfless, sacrificial acts from her understanding of discipleship. But she does claim that a person cannot act selflessly unless they have a fully actualized self to begin with. In other words, renunciation of the self should be free, not compelled from the outside. Sölle maintains that “sacrificial acts...have meaning only when they are performed by persons living in harmony with themselves." But, a relationship to the divine that is defined by obedience leaves little room for the individual self. Additionally, obediential spirituality can yield depressive dissatisfaction, a kind of spiritual poverty, because all too often, obedience tends to require the Christian to sever her personal desires, instincts, needs and wants. As Sölle writes, “obedience and unhappiness go hand in hand.” We could say that in sum, subjectivity is almost completely absent in this definition of morality-as-obedience. And this kind of obedience, that “has no telos, loses sight of the purpose," is carried from the religious realm into society by creating a social character that is easily manipulated by authoritarian political leaders. Thinking with Erich Fromm’s framework of authoritarian religion, Sölle is worried that religious obedience drives the perpetuation of the authoritarian personality.

Images at play in the obediential theo-ethical model, of God as sovereign over “his” obedient servants, hold sway over actors in larger society. This is demonstrated in the way that obedience is one of the most prominent mentalities that is habituated across educational, social,

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31 Sölle, 38.

32 Sölle, 37.


34 Fromm, Psychoanalysis and Religion, 35–36. Erich Fromm categorizes authoritarian religion as a framework which holds humanity under the control of an omnipotent higher power who requires submission from an obedient, powerless, and insignificant humanity.
and political spheres. Sölle warns that “God and the establishment, God and the party, God and the ordinances, God and the homeland—all demand woman’s and man’s obedience, and in such an indiscriminate fashion that the individual can hardly distinguish between them.” One of the most powerful facets of the way that the religious ideal of obedience seeps into wider society is the way in which the obediential ethic reinforces the ideal of *peace as order* as in the vein of Plato and Augustine. “If the concept of obedience to God is never spelled out, then it simply shores up the values of the status quo,” Sölle maintains. The status quo, in so many societies, manifests as uncriticized social hierarchies that are sanctioned theologically.

Therefore, an obediential ethic becomes either intentionally or unintentionally conflated with demanding that individuals align with the order of the world, by emphasizing the need to stay in one’s role, in order to prevent chaos. But the cost of staying in one’s social lane is one’s very subjectivity, as Sölle discusses alongside Brecht’s *Kalendargeschichten*. Theological language of obedience furthers social hierarchy, and political authoritarianism, because it denies the individual a healthy sense of self, and thus, stifles the capability to question the order of things. In contrast to Fromm’s concept of “humanitarian religion,” Sölle reminds readers that “The main virtue of an authoritarian religion is obedience; self abrogation is its center of gravity.” Sölle summarizes the danger of authoritarian religion being transferred as a societal phenomenon when she argues that, “…authoritarian religion discourages any willingness to aim at greater emancipation and any critical attempt to rise above the established realities.”

35 Sölle, *Creative Disobedience*, 12.

36 Sölle, xv.


38 Sölle, *Creative Disobedience*, xiii.
Upholding God’s sovereign power incites “a compulsive need for order, a fear of confusion and chaos, a desire for supervision and control.” Sölle’s criticism of theological obedience as both a structure that forms individuals and a virtue to be reproduced individually can be summarized in the following framework which she argues:

There are three structural elements of religious obedience: acceptance of a superior power that controls our destiny and excludes self-determination, subjection to the rule of this power that needs no moral legitimation in love or justice, and a deep-rooted pessimism about humans, seen as powerless and meaningless beings incapable of truth and love.

The claim that the virtue of obedience should be understood within the context of religious and spiritual hierarchy is important. It is not just that obedience can lead to the disintegration of human potential, but it also reinforces power hierarchies within religion, a dynamic that seems to run contrary to the gospel.

The 1973 work, *Leiden*, translated and published in 1975 under the English title, *Suffering*, describes the theo-ethics of obedience to God’s will as offering individual Christians little capacity to respond to suffering caused by systemic injustice (social sin). “Have we been screaming too softly?” she writes as a protester against the Vietnam war, in the introductory essay, expressing a feeling of abandonment by mainstream Christianity. Sölle explores how and why many traditional theodicies of suffering render Christians, especially middle and upper class European and US Americans, incapable of response when it comes to political atrocities, such as the Vietnam War.

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39 Sölle, xiii.

40 Sölle, xii.

“Why couldn’t we [dissenters] show Christians who go to church every Sunday where it is that the crucifixion is happening today?” Sölle wonders, as she frames her intent to interrogate theologies of suffering that portray God as almighty father requiring obedient sacrifice. The following sections go on to tease out the psychological and spiritual impacts of obediential theology on the individual. Why are many Christians incapable of seeing and responding to grave political injustice, such as the Vietnam War? They have been formed by obedience on an interior level. And because of this, they have become either masochistic or apathetic, or both.

Christian Masochism

In her book Creative Disobedience, Sölle had uncovered the kind of God-human relationship that grows out of an obediential theology as one that requires an irreversible dynamic of domination and subordination. In Suffering, Sölle shows that because this dynamic is, by definition, oppressive, it can easily perpetuate “Christian masochism.”

Sölle’s concern about Christian masochism is predicated on the notion that when Christians live out of an ethic of obeying God’s will-as-command, they become habituated to anticipate punishment for disobedience. Thus, when Christians attempt to make meaning out of suffering, it is unfolding out of the obediential dynamic that interprets suffering as part of God’s will and God’s action directed toward individuals in response to sin. This leads Christians to become overly willing to suffer because if suffering is God’s will, it must be pleasing to God.

42 Sölle, 4.

43 Isaac Prilleltensky, “Understanding, Resisting, and Overcoming Oppression: Toward Psychopolitical Validity,” American Journal of Community Psychology 31, no. 1–2 (2003): 195–201. The author of this article defines oppression from a psychological perspective as a dynamic that is comprised of domination, subordination, and resistance.
The logic that follows this thinking is that suffering, then, is useful, and even sought after. Theologies that make meaning of suffering in this vein describe human affliction as breaking human pride, and, demonstrating human powerlessness and dependency on God. Suffering becomes an accepted reality, because it is inevitable, it is a punishment for sins, it is a test, it is an opportunity for purification, it is atonement.\textsuperscript{44}

Sölle further exposes the inherently individualistic nature of these interpretations of suffering, causing Christians to uncritically ignore structural, and socio-political causes of suffering.\textsuperscript{45} This leaves Christians in a state of alienation, where an overwhelming sense of powerlessness and meaninglessness take root in the psyche. First of all, the individual becomes alienated from her own autonomy. If every tragic event is seen as God’s will, then this leads to the belief that she (the individual) has no power over the situation whatsoever. Human powerlessness becomes the avenue through which God’s power is vindicated, so in this frame, it is even necessary.\textsuperscript{46} One is, in essence, “denied the right to defend oneself.”\textsuperscript{47} It becomes clear how this disempowerment yields such a fatalistic view of human suffering as inevitable and acceptable. When suffering is interpreted as a consequential punishment for human sin, meaninglessness overwhelms the person in the sense that one is unable to reason about how to respond to suffering, except, to accept it.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{44} Sölle, \textit{Suffering}, 19.

\textsuperscript{45} Sölle, 18.

\textsuperscript{46} Sölle, 17.

\textsuperscript{47} Sölle, 18.

\textsuperscript{48} Sölle, 12.
By now it becomes clear that interpreting suffering out of an obediential frame renders a particular interpretation of sin, as well. Under this theological line of logic, sin is both universal, and yet, at the same time, an individual problem. Everyone is destined to fall into sin, but, it remains a personal, isolated struggle.\(^{49}\)

Christian masochism operates under a particular image of God-who-commands, or, one could say, *demands* suffering which becomes a kind of “theological sadism.” The logic of “sadistic understandings of suffering” contains three elements including the beliefs that: “1) God is the almighty ruler of the world, and he sends all suffering; 2) God acts justly, not capriciously; 3) all suffering is punishment for sin”\(^{50}\)

One of the most classic scripture stories interpreted as undergirding the view that God asks humanity to prove our faithfulness through obedient, sacrificial suffering lies in Genesis 22, the story of Abraham and Isaac. Sölle exposes how often, interpretations of this passage describe God as “absolute, Superior One” for whom “commands are his form of expression.”\(^{51}\) In hearing and obeying the command to place his son on the sacrificial altar, Abraham is so often viewed as an ultimate exemplar of obedience to God. Sölle goes so far as to contend that Abraham has been lifted up as a father of the faith for this very action of obedient sacrifice. But Sölle finds the whole picture problematic, a problem that is at once ethical and theological. In conversation with Kierkegaard, Sölle maintains that much of this story’s reception history is based on the

\(^{49}\) Sölle, 19.  
\(^{50}\) Sölle, 23.  
\(^{51}\) Sölle, 28.
“suspension of the ethical,” because it assumes that “God takes delight in annihilation” and would require “his” children to regard their own children with the same kind of violence.

This particular interpretation of Genesis 22 is quintessential theological sadism, which “school[s] people in the thought patterns that regard sadistic behavior as normal, in which one worships, honors, and loves a being whose 'radicality,' 'intentionality,' and 'greatest sharpness,' is that he slays.” She goes on to judge that, “The ultimate conclusion of theological sadism is worshiping the executioner.”

Sölle then looks to Jürgen Motlmann’s reinterpretation of a theology of the cross. But she finds it wanting. Emphasizing God as suffering with humanity is not a radical enough move for Sölle because it does not yield a strong enough ethic of moral responsibility. In Moltmann’s formulation of the trinity in response to the suffering of Jesus on the cross, there still exists part of the trinity (the Father) who is allowing, even willing, the suffering of the Son. And, most importantly, it does not lift Christians out of an obediential ethic in a radical enough way.

Sölle’s thought on suffering in relation to obediential theology and ethics is that it is not precise about the various kinds of suffering humanity is subjected to, as well as the various responses that might be appropriate. She especially hones in on suffering caused by structural injustice: “Almost all Christian interpretations [of suffering]… ignore the distinction between suffering that we can and cannot end.”

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52 Sölle, 29.
53 Sölle, 28.
54 Sölle, 28.
55 Sölle, 19.
This is the crux of Sölle’s critique of Christian theologies of suffering and the role they play in obediential theology: The portrayal of God as willing the suffering of his children (theological sadism), and human response to God’s command as acquiescence to all forms of suffering, even opting for suffering (Christian masochism).

**Christian Apathy**

The flip side of Christian masochism is Christian apathy. At first glance, the two do not seem to fit together. While one appears to open itself uncritically to pain, the other is by definition unwilling to or incapable of feeling pain. Sölle’s critique of individualistic spirituality and privatization of religion provides a key to understanding the relatedness of masochism and apathy. Christian individualism forms both masochistic and apathetic social characters. Though Christian masochism seems to open itself to pain as it is interpreted as God’s primary form of communication with the individual, it blocks the ability to perceive and respond to the pain of others. It is a siloed vision of the God-human relationship dynamic which creates a sort of tunnel vision.

The primary component of apathy, for Sölle, is not the mere inability to perceive suffering on the part of the self or the other, it is also defined as refusal to view suffering through a critical lens.\(^{56}\) It is an uncritical consciousness that goes hand in hand with Christian apathy. When suffering is viewed as God’s will, the capacity to feel pain for others deteriorates, and, it curtails responsibility to understand social and political causes of suffering. Sölle goes on to argue how “middle-class consciousness” and economic privilege, combined with individualized Christian theologies of suffering, exacerbate the reality of apathy among Christians. Apathy

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\(^{56}\) Sölle, 38.
functions here, not only to protect from the pain that follows empathy, but to keep “private prosperity” in place. As Sölle maintains, “apathy flourishes in the consciences of the satiated.” Affluence, education and mobility enable emotional segregation from those who suffer systemic injustice, particularly poverty.\(^57\) Working through this definition of Christian apathy and its relatedness to social and economic privilege, Sölle further describes it as “a fear of contact. One doesn’t want to be touched, infected, defiled, drawn in.” An ego-centric, isolated aloofness sets in and builds psychological, emotional, and moral borders between the apathetic and the suffering.\(^58\) In sum, Christian apathy manifests as political apathy, and for Sölle, this is the worst kind of apathy that exists. It reinforces structural systems of injustice and it forgets history, ultimately relinquishing any remaining shred of moral responsibility.

At this point the reader might be wondering, how does apathy relate back to the obediential ethic Sölle is critiquing? Let us return to the relational dynamic depicted in the obediential theo-ethic. In this dynamic, God commands, and the human obeys. It is an irreversible dynamic of (divine) domination and (human) subordination. God is omnipotent, and the human is powerless outside of her acts of obedience. When this dynamic is combined with a theodicy of suffering which understands affliction as God’s will, it forms an individual to be acquiescent to suffering, rather than critical and resistant.

As Sölle demonstrates, apathy is derived from two simultaneous forces: the one force originates with the fundamental belief that I am powerless in the face of suffering because it is an act of God. The other stems from the desire to hold on to socio-economic privilege to look away

\(^57\) Sölle, 40.

\(^58\) Sölle, 40.
from the suffering of others which functions to keep the economic/social status quo in place. In other words, internalized inferiority derived from a spirituality that reifies a domination-subordination relationship to God combined with the internalized superiority, which comes from occupying the higher rungs of the socially defined hierarchies of worth, renders many Christians apathetic, uncritical, and barricaded by their own walls, which have been erected by privilege and cemented in assumed powerlessness.

**Christian Obedience and Conformity to Capitalism**

An ideological critique of obedience within both religious and societal frames seems like an obvious move in view of the history of German fascism. But Sölle is concerned that the capitalist democracy necessitates a similar critique. It is not just that obedience as a virtue is conflated with obeying a charismatic leader (like Hitler), but it also comes in to play in view of increasingly globalized capitalism and ever-expanding militarism. Sölle is concerned that even as a capitalist society becomes less religious, aspects of authoritarian religion remain residual.

This is even truer today in a post-religious, technocratic culture where obedience is seen not in terms of charismatic leaders but in terms of the market forces of the economy, the use of energy, and the growing militarization of societies...But even in the new situation where obedience is preferably spoken of in terms of 'the rules of the game,' the structural elements of authoritarian religion persist...When religion is dying out it is precisely this rigidity that survives; it is the authoritarian bonds that mostly persist in a life understood as dominated by technocracy. 59

The individualistic nature of Western capitalistic democracies, especially Western Europe and the US, actually further the “authoritarian bonds” because a privatized notion of religion perpetuates uncritical obedience. Much of Christian religion that does survive after the “death of God,” becomes privatized and continues to perpetuate uncritical obedience. As Sölle points out,

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59 Sölle, *Creative Disobedience*, xiii.
“Religious concepts such as ‘being saved’ or ‘taking Jesus as my Savior and Lord’ are used without even thinking of translating them into the context of the world.”

By the mid 1970s, Sölle writes more and more in language that reveals her Marxist approach to the crossover of social, political and religious institutions in “first world” society in the United States and Western Europe. More precisely, she becomes overtly suspicious of the ways in which capitalist ideology pervades the institution of Christianity and colludes with Christian supremacy. In two short books on religious experience, *Death by Bread Alone* (1975) and *Choosing Life* (1980) Sölle uses the language of alienation to describe the impact of individual and institutional conformity to capitalist worldviews—something that, as Sölle demonstrates, an already obedient social character falls into all too easily.

**Alienation**

In the postscript of *Death by Bread Alone*, Sölle shares that she writes this book to a specific audience: “first world” Christians. She is convinced that a distinct liberation theology must be crafted for Christians who find themselves largely *benefiting* from, rather than oppressed by, global economic exploitation of the “third world.” Within this specific category of people, Sölle hopes to reach middle-class Christians who find themselves simultaneously complicit with oppressive forces, and at the same time psychologically and spiritually afflicted as a result of conforming to this system and ideology. She notes how such a convoluted social position requires particular attention, remarking that, “This complex and ambivalent situation has the capacity to confuse and paralyze us.” And so, Sölle demonstrates how a critical framework is

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60 Sölle, xv.

61 Sölle, *Death by Bread Alone*, 147.
required, so as to parse out religious elements that perpetuate complicity with capitalist exploitation from religious traditions that are liberative. And again, Sölle points out that this analysis should first and foremost take place on the level of language. “We have to be aware of our broken and corrupted tradition as well as the countertraditions that may help us find a counterlanguage in a world of destroyed and corrupted language.”

For Sölle in the 1970s, because of her observation that “industrial society has excluded and rejected all truths that do not stem from economics,” what she names as a “socialist theology” would be the most apt language for critiquing religious language and its collusion with capitalist exploitation. And so, she embarks upon theological projects that take Marxist critique of capitalism seriously, and in *Death By Bread Alone* and *Choosing Life*, she continues to lay out how exactly the individual is formed by Christian obedience which, for middle class “first world” Christians, lends itself to conformity to consumerist and imperialist attitudes and behaviors.

*Death By Bread Alone* draws out the psycho-spiritual “death” that results from self-alienation brought on by consumerist society and ideology. Sölle plays with the Matthean verse, “Man does not live by bread alone” (4:4) to depict the extent of how dangerous consumerism is to human livelihood. Not only does one “not live;” one dies. The kind of death she is speaking of comes not in the form of literal end of life but in the experience of alienation. Living by bread alone is a direct reference to the attitude that life is defined by producing and consuming. Metaphorically, living by bread alone in the “first world” is an act of over-stuffing oneself while

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62 Sölle, 147.

63 Sölle, 23.
the rest of the world starves; a direct reference to the exploitative nature of global capitalism.\textsuperscript{64}

We choke on our own over-consumption, and insulate ourselves with material goods, producing isolation: from one’s own access to feelings, and from interpersonal relationships that comes with attempting to live by “bread alone.” In this rendition of her critique, similar to that in \textit{Suffering}, there is a pendulum swing in Sölle’s description between describing self-alienation as an apathetic, unfeeling anesthetic while at the same time enumerating painful emotional experiences that also invade one’s inner world: this death can be at times an experience of numbness, but it can also evoke melancholy, purposelessness, emptiness, anxiety, silence, loneliness, isolating grief, boredom, arbitrariness… all of these experiences are a kind of dying-while-living.\textsuperscript{65} What integrates the two sides of the spectrum, of apathy, and of this particular pain of alienation, is the “denial of the inner world.” Sölle shows yet again that with self-alienation, apathy emerges as a boundary between awareness and one’s own inner reality as well. Even if pain is experienced, it is denied.\textsuperscript{66}

Not only is self-alienation a process of denying one’s own experiences of emotional and psychological pain, it also isolates us from our desires and modes of expressing those desires. “One of the most dreadful things that can happen to human beings is to no longer be able to wish.”\textsuperscript{67} This quotation communicates Sölle’s belief that loss of language outside of the capitalist terms of buying and selling is one of the most tragic results of self-alienation alongside the inability to name one’s own desires. Suppression of both emotionality and expression serves the

\textsuperscript{64} Sölle, 14.

\textsuperscript{65} Sölle, 4–6.

\textsuperscript{66} Sölle, \textit{Death by Bread Alone}.

\textsuperscript{67} Sölle, 123.
capitalist system, because one can be easily exploited and directed toward consumption for release of pent-up frustration. This suppression is problematic because it limits emotion and expression to fit a consumerist mold. It also prevents individuals from imagining an alternative lifestyle. As Sölle warns, “the muting of expression is also the muting of the hope for change.”

The banality of consumerism, with its denial-inducing, suppressing effect, leads ultimately to a feeling of despair through meaninglessness. When life becomes anything other than a “quest for meaning,” it becomes deadly.

Death by Bread Alone is not simply a book on religious experience as an intellectual critique, it is evidence of Sölle’s search for allies in the struggle against complicity and conformity. She names this with honesty in her comment that, “…I am writing for my brothers and sisters in the hope of finding brothers and sisters… I am searching for allies in the struggle against death by bread alone. It is the unity of struggle and hope that compels me to write.” I read this paragraph and I imagine Sölle fighting against the muting of emotion and expression both in her “first world” society, and, in her institution as a theologian. In her own personal struggle against isolation, as she writes later on, she had difficulty finding any sense of belonging in the church, because of her leftist political stance. And, in her work alongside other socialists, she finds herself constantly on the defense as a Christian and as a theologian. She laments that, “When socialists I worked with asked about my profession, I used to say, ‘I’m a theologian, but…’ Coming home for me means that I no longer need to add the ‘but.’ I don’t have to

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68 Sölle, 131.
69 Sölle, 133.
70 Sölle, 144.
apologize for loving Christ.” These quotations are evidence of Sölle’s desperation to find a common ground between her Christian communities, identity as a theologian, and her socialist critique that shines through her activism.

Years later, Sölle tells how her tenure at Union Theological Seminary in the US nourished her need to integrate her Christianity with her socialist and liberationist impulse in community with others. But what I find striking here is that Sölle does not hold back from sharing with her readers how she herself experiences that which she critiques. She names outrightly not just her own social location, but shares her own struggles, fears, and difficulties with the political and religious forces she critiques.

For example, Choosing Life, written in 1980 with the original German title, Wählt das Leben, is another short book on religious experience that is comprised of a collection of lectures Sölle gave in Buenos Aires in 1979. Her commitment to self-reflection within theological reflection, which I highlight above, emerges right away in the first lecture, “Faith as a Struggle against Objective Cynicism.” She names the awkward position, given the common tendency towards Euro-centric theology, of holding a European identity while being asked to speak to scholars and religious leaders in Latin America. She recalls how historically, Christian theological pedagogy has operated imperially in which “Europeans are supposed to supply the general truths of faith, and the Latin Americans are to offer specific application.”

Attempting to avoid a colonial theological transaction, Sölle maintains that all truth is “specific and concrete” and so, she tells her audience, “I cannot bring you the theology you need.

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71 Sölle, 145–46.

That would be arrogance and cultural imperialism.”^73 She commits, yet again, to speaking from her own context and experience. “What I can do,” Sölle tells her audience, “is to try to say as honestly as I can why I, a white woman belonging to the middle classes of the First world, need faith.…”^74 Further, she wants to describe what it is like to attempt “to be a Christian in the context of the rich and despairing world.”^75 Thus, giving a speech about one’s theology does not mean relaying objective truths but rather, “I only have to sink myself deeply enough into the piece of earth on which I live.”^76

For Sölle, talking about why she, as a white European middle-class woman, needs faith, is to continue analyzing Christian conformity to consumerist ideology and capitalist structures of exploitation. *Choosing Life* is an important text for understanding how Sölle deepens her analysis of consumerism as the new “occupying power.” She also articulates the psychological impacts this has on Christians in the “First world” by fostering the attitude of “objective cynicism.” This term reflects the tendency to assume that the political economy is the way it is because there is no other alternative.

A further point that this particular text makes concrete is using the terms alienation and sin together to enrich theological reflection on what it means for Christians with racial and economic privilege to participate in supremacy and death-dealing social, political and economic structures. In her account of the influence late capitalism has had in North America and Europe after World War II, Sölle wants to portray the ideology of *consumerism* as the new “occupying

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^73 Sölle, 3.

^74 Sölle, 3.

^75 Sölle, 3.

^76 Sölle, 2.
power” which emerged after Europe’s entanglement with fascism. Christian participation in consumerism, though perhaps less overt, is as dangerous as Christian collusion with fascist policy, according to Sölle.

Recalling Otto F. Walter’s analysis, Sölle highlights his sketch of consumerism as an “anonymous” form of fascism that infiltrates and controls life, work and relationships. It simultaneously undermines public institutions by putting them in competition with capitalist forces.77 “Under the new power [public institutions] have become the agents of that anonymous power; they serve the values which now control our lives and they are only permitted in so far as they subject themselves to these [capitalist] values.”78 Both individuals and institutions are controlled by capitalist values and goals, but not necessarily through violent force, Sölle points out, which is one difference from German fascism of the 20th century. Rather, consumerist ideology is enforced through the powerful mind control of advertising.

The anonymity of consumerism’s power is something that must be met head on with theological analysis. But it had not happened yet, at least in Europe. As Sölle writes this particular lecture, she laments, “In European theology, we have hardly considered the results of this occupation… up to now we have still hardly enunciated any Christian answer to this event.”79 And although there is much to uncover about the way Christianity as an institution has fueled, rather than questioned, consumerist ideology, Sölle wants to yet again peel back the layers in search of how the individual is shaped by this occupying power, as she does with

77 Sölle, 5.
78 Sölle, 5–6.
79 Sölle, 6.
obediential language. Sölle refers to Pier Paolo Pasolini’s suggestion that while fascism may have afflicted the soul, consumerism has suppressed and replaced the soul.\textsuperscript{80} What she is referring to here is Pasolini’s claim that conformity to consumerism requires such a deep level of repression, that the individual forfeits one’s own identity and replaces fuller experiences of being with counterfeit versions of instrumentalized performance.\textsuperscript{81} Sölle claims that what is left there where the soul used to be is a hardened scab called “objective cynicism.”

\textbf{Cynicism}

Cynicism is an attitude that emerges when the individual abandons her psychological and relational health by allowing herself to be distracted by the demands of consumerist life.\textsuperscript{82} It is an ethos that thrives on distraction. Cynicism is what fills the gap so that the individual need not dig deep into one’s own feelings or needs for expression or connection. It is what happens when we become inarticulate and unfeeling as a result. It allows just enough language to justify participation in the system of consumerism, while forcing deeper instincts and experiential truth to lie dormant and out of reach. Cynicism is like a scab that forms over the wounding of alienation, protecting one from the pain of intense feeling and from deep reflection that might reveal how it truly feels to be nothing other than a consumer or producer.

Indeed, cynicism is language that cannot access the meaning of life beyond consuming and producing. “There is only the prevailing superficial, permanently frustrated and easily

\textsuperscript{80} Sölle, 6.


\textsuperscript{82} Sölle, \textit{Choosing Life}, 9.
aggressive mood, which can at any time switch over to a diffused sadness.” The frustration that comes with the inability to access deeper feeling and knowing gives over to extended cynicism, because it becomes one’s only reaction. Loving life, fear of losing life, the tendency to throw life away, this is language that cynicism does not speak. This inner attitude has the effect of allowing economic exploitation to continue both on a global scale but also on the interior level of soul. Sölle claims that the potential danger of resigning oneself to cynicism is the individual person’s contribution to “economic looting of the Third world, destruction of nature, the suppression of liberation movements.” because this everyday cynical consciousness is the mechanism allowing the individual to draw the curtain over militaristic expansion and “overkill,” as Sölle calls it, of imperial global capitalism.

The opposite of cynicism, for Sölle, is “choosing life,” a way of perceiving one’s own connectedness with the rest of life. While the cynic thinks, I’m just doing my part, playing my role, and doing what I can to get along in this life, the person of true faith believes herself to be a part of the whole. But instead of believing that life is and ought to be good, consumerism, by perpetuating the cynical attitude, wants individuals to ignore historical memory and give up eschatological hope. It does the opposite of what Sölle thinks religion is meant to do. Rather than recount history and infuse hope, cynicism blocks memory and is always reinventing various forms of hopelessness. By inciting amnesia and hopelessness, cynicism reproduces itself again and again.

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83 Sölle, 8.
84 Sölle, 8.
85 Sölle, 9.
86 Sölle, 11.
Compulsion

As the language of consumerism tells that life is about *having* which ultimately causes one’s relationships (to self, others, and life) to disintegrate. Even more, one feels compelled to perpetuate the cycle. This is a compulsion to have, to participate in political and economic structures not necessarily of one’s making, “but we affirm them simply by living them.” This is how Sölle defines sin. It is as if “we submit to a superior force,” the force of capitalism, while ignoring the possibility for any other alternative. Sölle goes so far as to suggest that people are constantly “subjected to the lordship of capital.” Though the power of capital is diffuse, it is “all powerful in a double sense: outwardly, where production is concerned, and inwardly as regards to one’s ‘passions.’” People are ruled in a very different way compared to the psychology of fascism, but we they still ruled. And so many allow this power to take control of each faculty; “through our bodies, through our participation in this world, through our conscious or unconscious support for this world [system].”

Just as an obediential attitude towards God yields masochism and apathy, the consequence of submitting to this compulsion to act within capitalist systems creates an experience of alienation. Sölle wants to point out the extent to which a particular kind of spiritual alienation afflicts *even* those people who benefit from racial and economic privilege within the capitalist system. She finds it important to pinpoint how alienation operates among these privileged groups in conjunction with compulsion to block any lasting fragment of critical

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87 Sölle, 11.
88 Sölle, 22.
89 Sölle, 26.
consciousness. Sölle relies on the four types of alienation drawn out by Erich Fromm in Marx’s *Concept of Man*. According to Fromm, we become alienated not just from ourselves, but also from others, from nature, and from our own humanity as a result of submitting to the consumerist compulsion. This plays out in specific ways for people benefitting from the system.

As I have already mentioned, self-alienation occurs as the unwillingness to access one’s own inner knowing and feeling, the neglect of historical memory and the inability to envision an alternative future. Experiencing alienation from nature can lead to ecological destruction because, in Sölle’s words, one is “being trained to destroy and plunder.” Alienation from others emerges as a denial of need for others, and relinquishing the need for relational vulnerability. Finally, alienation from the human species plays out, in the “first world,” as depoliticization, or the detachment from responsibility to advocate for political transformation. This is the worst form of alienation because “we are cut off from the real struggles of humanity.” In reasserting the role of alienation in conformity to consumerist ideology, Sölle is trying to show just how strong compulsion becomes. Individuals are willing to accept the deep estrangement from the connectedness of self, others, and nature, simply to give in to the compulsive draw they feel towards success, property ownership, endless material goods.

The Christofascist Society

The psycho-spiritual impact of obediential theology does not necessarily keep Christians from compulsive collusion with consumerist attitudes. Rather, it can lead many to participate in capitalist systems of exploitation and contribute to the dangerous preconditions for building the [90] Sölle, 34.

[91] Sölle, 37.
kind of society for which Sölle coins a term. When the institutional Christian church converges with the neoliberal conservative political machine to the extent that the two can hardly be distinguished from one another, this instrumentalization of the Christian religion becomes what Sölle condemns as Christofascism. That is, the political and institutional pressure combined with pre-existing uncritical obedience among individual Christians builds a Christofascist society which Sölle describes as a global “Death Machine,” or Menschenfresserpolitik.

The Death Machine operates as the nexus of three particular forms of oppression—racism, sexism and capitalism. Pointing to the ravages of indigenous communities on the part of white colonizers, Sölle contends that the Death Machine uses racism as the primary tool for conquest, rendering the global, non-white other inferior. Fated for either “subjugation or liquidation” under the practice of racist imperialism, communities’ traditions, economies and ways of life have been laid waste by “white rulers.” Sölle’s definition uses sufficiently strong language to connect racism to the greater scheme of the Death Machine: “A system that forces onto members of another race the alternative of being enslaved or being murdered, we call racism.”

Sölle further highlights the role sexism plays for the operations of the Death Machine targeting half of humanity, as specifically sexualized targets in war. Racism and sexism then, for Sölle, make up capitalism’s “bloody allies” which crank the wheels of the “Death Machine.” The Death Machine breeds ecological destruction as well, according to Sölle. Bracing for impending nuclear standoff, Sölle asserts that “the bombs are already falling” especially on those who are

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protesting for alternative energy sources. Sölle records how already in the late 1970s, protesters were being clubbed down for questioning the reliance upon oil and gas as primary sources of energy. As Sölle warns, ravaging the planet and its resources is part and parcel of the mission of the machine of death. To question this is to stand in the way of the Death Machine.

The doctrine of Christofascist ideology, which Christians are fed from both from politicians and pulpits, regards national security standards as sacred, bolstering militarism, racism, patriarchy, and “neocolonial exploitation.” And Christians are distracted from the treacherous effects of such forces because Christian pastors and right-wing politicians manufacture moral dilemmas out of “homosexuality” and abortion while fabricating a war on drugs.

At an institutional level, Christian leaders and organizations serve to propel free market-based policy, gun ownership and property rights, and “religious freedom,” while on an international level, capitalist globalization and military control are condoned for the sake of “national security.” Christofascism is held together by theologically-justified social and political norms which include three primary elements, according to Sölle: moral hegemony, a distinctly capitalist work ethic, and entrenched and binding familial roles. In a Christofascist society, the free press is demonized and national security becomes the most sacred of doctrines. In observing US Christianity colluding with right-wing capitalist policy platforms during her time at Union Theological Seminary, Sölle levels critique against the “moral majority” movement of the 1980s which touts American exceptionalism and glorify the free market. She targets Jerry

93 Sölle, 22.

Falwell as a prime example of disseminating this exact ideology, even preaching the need to “make America number one again.” Furthermore, the danger of Christofascism occurring in a democracy is especially tacit, because, as Sölle observes, just because a leader is voted into office does not mean that they will automatically condemn Christofascist norms.

“We live under a system of terror,” Sölle wrote in 1981, alarmed by the arms race and its imminent destruction of human and planetary life. A Christofascist nation amasses wealth through militarization while securing its borders all in the name of its “god” (the bomb), to the extent that, as Sölle warns, “wealth functions like a wall…our wall is sound-proof so we cannot hear the sounds of the poor and oppressed.” This meta-system of capitalist globalization endorsed by Christian institutions fuels the Death Machine through the violence of racism, heterosexism/patriarchy, and economic exploitation.

**Christofascism in the US**

Sölle’s warning against Christofascism is stark and reading her warning in the 2020s in the US is even starker. The Trump era caused many Christians who were not already painfully aware to wake up to the ways in which Christianity and white supremacy interlock and consolidate power at the highest level of office. Sölle’s writing about walls, censorship of the press, and promises to make America “number one” reverberates after the election of Donald Trump to the office of the United States presidency in November of 2016. After its campaign

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95 Sölle, 138.

96 Sölle, 138.


promised to “Make America Great Again,” the Trump administration used its power to both build walls and exclude the press. The eerie resemblance begs the question, is Sölle’s warning against Christofascism an accurate analysis for understanding the Trump era and the continued fervor to “make America great” that his presidency has left in its wake?

Historians and political scientists have analyzed the degree to which Donald Trump’s extreme and violent rhetoric and policy should be categorized as fascist. Sheri Berman, professor of political science at Columbia University argues that, “An analogy is haunting the United States—the analogy of fascism.” In her essay, Berman illustrates how fascist leaders often promise economic revival while claiming the failures of the democratic state to provide for the social and economic needs of its citizens.\(^9^9\) In this sense, the analogy holds in view of Trump’s desire to “drain the swamp,” or clear progressives from office. Timothy Snyder, professor of European History at Yale University remarks on how the Trump administration had positioned itself in a space outside of facts. Snyder warns that, “Post-truth is pre-fascism…to abandon facts is to abandon freedom.”\(^1^0^0\) Enzo Traverso of Cornell University agrees that “in many ways, Trump does behave like a 21st century fascist.” He continues:

\begin{quote}
Trump presents himself as a “man of action,” not a thinker; he despises intellectuals and does not accept criticism; his misogyny is outrageous; he exhibits his virility with vulgarity and aggression; and he uses racism and xenophobia as propaganda weapons. He wants to expel Muslims and Latino immigrants, depicting them as terrorists and criminals; he defends the police when they kill African Americans, and, by expressing doubts about Obama’s birth in the US, he suggests that African Americans cannot be true Americans. He pretends to defend the popular classes that have been deeply affected by the economic crises of 2008 and the deindustrialization of the country—not by denouncing the main culprit, financial capitalism, but by offering them a scapegoat. His
\end{quote}


Though all three of these analysts would agree that Trump’s style of speech and leadership “recall fascist aesthetics,”\footnote{Traverso, “Trump’s Savage Capitalism.”} they are hesitant to label Trump and his administration with the term fascist. His fascist tendencies remain at a personality level, it is argued, and there is no substantial fascist movement behind him: he is an actor and a member of the one percent who exaggerates his own wealth, not a fascist leader in the strict sense of the word. For now, according to Traverso, Snyder and Berman, the analogy of fascism, when speaking about the Trump era, remains just that—an analogy. But it is an analogy that warns. Donald Trump’s extreme capitalist and white supremacist agenda tends towards fascist implications which are described by Traverso as a “savage capitalism.” “With his nationalist, populist, racist, and authoritarian tendencies, he personifies a form of savage capitalism—a capitalism without a human face.”\footnote{Traverso, “Trump’s Savage Capitalism.”}

In view of the Trump era and the analogy of fascism that it threatened, Dorothee Sölle’s warning of Christofascism stands as an apt warning, especially when taking into account the vast majority of Trump voters were Christians. The fact should not be dismissed that large numbers of white Christians voted for Donald Trump in 2016 despite his fascist personification, and, they continue to believe the “big lie” that President Biden’s victory was a scam. 81 percent of white, evangelical Christians voted for Donald Trump as did 60 percent of white Catholics and 58
percent of white Protestant Christians. Furthermore, Trump’s victory margin among white Christians matched and, in many cases, exceeded the last five elections. The statistics further reveal that 56 percent of weekly churchgoers voted for Trump.\textsuperscript{104}

Christians continued to support Donald Trump’s xenophobic initiatives as well as the extreme rhetoric he sustained throughout his presidency. 76 percent of white evangelicals approved of Donald Trump’s travel ban, an executive order enacted to prevent the entrance of refugees and “majority Muslim” travelers inside the United States. 51 percent of Protestants also supported this ban.\textsuperscript{105} These statistics portray the fact that, despite his own religious ambivalence, Donald Trump systematically garnered the support of Christians in great numbers. This suggests that at least a version of Sölle’s concept of Christofascism pervades American Christianity today in the sense that large numbers of Christians upheld (or at least would not publicly denounce) the values of extreme capitalism, militarism, and xenophobia, which characterize our president.

The analogy of fascism stands as a warning in the writing of historians and political scientists. Taking this analogy seriously leads to the recognition that Christian nationalism is perhaps the most apt way to consider the presence of Christofascism in the US today. In their attempt to explain the 2016 election, sociologists Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry argue that Americans’ orientation to Christian nationalism was the greatest common


denominator underlying the Trump vote, beyond denomination or political affiliation. Whitehead and Perry define Christian nationalism in a very particular way. Although Christian nationalism is not anchored in a set of standardized religious traditions, it does function as a loosely conceptualized Christian identity. In the authors’ definition, they stress that “Christian nationalism is a cultural framework—a collection of myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems—that idealizes and advocates the fusion of Christianity with American civic life.”

Note how the authors quickly qualify what they mean by “Christianity” in their definition, however. “…the ‘Christianity’ of Christian nationalism represents something more than religion. As we will show, it includes assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity, along with divine sanction for authoritarian control and militarism. It is as ethnic and political as it is religious.”

Christian nationalism is a statement about the national identity, history, and roots of the United States of America as decidedly Christian, and the authors show how this identity is cemented in understanding what America is, “…in its self-identity, interpretations of its own history, sacred symbols, cherished values, and public politics—and it aims to keep it that way.” This is not civil religion, the authors argue. Christian nationalism is not seeking to make political policies more “Christ-like,” rather, they “view God’s demands more in terms of allegiance to our national—almost ethnic—Christian identity…America should fear God’s wrath for unfaithfulness while assuming God’s blessing—or even mandate—for subduing the continent

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107 Whitehead and Perry, 10.

108 Whitehead and Perry, 10.
by force if necessary.” This succinct definition of Christian nationalism ties together the main points that Whitehead and Perry want to press upon their readers:

Christian nationalism is a cultural framework that blurs distinctions between Christian identity and American identity, viewing the two as closely related and seeking to enhance and preserve their union. It is undergirded by identification with a conservative political orientation (though not necessarily a political party), Bible belief, pre-millennial visions of moral decay, and divine sanction for conquest. Finally, its conception of morality centers *exclusively* on fidelity to religion and fidelity to the nation.\(^{109}\)

Christian nationalism is being described her as a cultural framework that conflates religious belonging with ethnic and national identification which must be protected. This definition emphasizes fidelity to a very specific idea of what the US is, how it came to be as a nation, and how it should continue culturally with policies that back this vision.

Although many may believe that this kind of cultural framework is to be found only among predominantly white conservative, fundamentalist, evangelical communities, the study exposes the fact that Christian nationalist leanings are represented across denominations and even political affiliations among Christians in the United States. For many white Christians in 2023, Christian nationalism is closer to home than they might think. Communities who harbor ambassadors of Christian nationalist attitudes and beliefs include evangelical Protestants, mainline Protestants, and Catholics. They also include significant percentages of conservatives, moderates, some liberals, as well as people who belong to the Republican, Independent, and, Democratic parties. Unsurprisingly, plenty of resistors and flat out rejectors of Christian nationalism exist within these groups as well.

Denomination and political affiliation are not, actually, the primary predictors of those who espouse Christian nationalist ideology. As the study exposes, while “not all evangelicals are

\(^{109}\) Whitehead and Perry, 15.
Christian nationalists, and a substantial minority reject it,”\textsuperscript{110} it is also true that “one in five Ambassadors [of Christian nationalism] are Democrats.”\textsuperscript{111} Said differently, the authors find that Christian nationalists have a heavy hand in shaping political goals, but they do not always predict political participation, leaning, or affiliation, nor do they predict denomination. It is better to say that Christian nationalism is the predictor for particular attitudes and beliefs. “Far and away the strongest predictor of Christian nationalism is identifying oneself with political conservatism….These two factors are not synonymous, however…. Christian nationalism is often a \textit{stronger} predictor of American’s attitudes about race, gender, immigration, gun rights, Islam, and family/sexuality issues than political ideology.”\textsuperscript{112}

The Three Pillars of Christian Nationalism: Power, Boundaries, and Order

More than denomination or political affiliation, the particular way that US Americans define three concepts link them to Christian nationalism. This is because power, boundaries, and order, are the ideological pillars supporting Christian nationalist ideas, behaviors and political goals. Many people who espouse Christian nationalism saw Trump as security against losing cultural and political control and the positions they enjoy within the racial and religious hierarchies that scaffold US society. These claims of belonging and ownership define this kind of power that fuels Christian nationalism. People voted for Trump too, because they perceived religious and racial “outsiders” to be a threat to their positions of power. Christian nationalists believe that only white Christians, and those who accommodate this philosophy, truly belong as

\textsuperscript{110} Whitehead and Perry, 42.

\textsuperscript{111} Whitehead and Perry, 38.

\textsuperscript{112} Whitehead and Perry, 13.
rightful owners of US American property, protection, and freedoms.\textsuperscript{113} This kind of power, according to the study, not only defines, controls, and protects domestic social hierarchies through racial and religious supremacy, its supremacist vision of the US expands globally. And defining itself as a “Christian nation” ensures that American exceptionalism remains intact.\textsuperscript{114} Power, within Christian nationalism, means upholding racial and religious hierarchy as a means of proving one’s nationalism, justified through claims of Christian national identity.

Whitehead and Perry explain how within Christian nationalist ideology and practice, rigid boundaries hold this sort of power in place.

Christian nationalism idealizes a mythic society in which real Americans—white, native-born, mostly Protestants—maintain control over access to society’s social, cultural and political institutions, and ‘others’ remain in their proper place. It therefore seeks strong boundaries to separate ‘us’ from ‘them,’ preserving privilege for its rightful recipients while equating racial and religious outsiders with criminality, violence and inferiority.\textsuperscript{115} These boundaries crop up in the form of violent border control, but they are also given life when Christian nationalists fear religious “others” and criminalize black and brown bodies for posing a threat to their social, cultural and political security. Thus, Trump’s birther lie, and his promises to crack down on border crossing and crime served as a dog whistle alerting Christian nationalists’ felt need to elect a leader who would protect the boundaries they deemed as critical for securing their “Christian” nation. Christian nationalist boundaries are geographic while also societal and they are racial and religious, protected violently and upheld religiously.

\textsuperscript{113} Whitehead and Perry, 63.

\textsuperscript{114} Whitehead and Perry, 65.

\textsuperscript{115} Whitehead and Perry, 118.
The place of the family, as well as roles within the family, are also heavily emphasized by Christian nationalists in their desire to secure the US as a “Christian” nation. Defining the family by cementing it within a heteropatriarchal mold is believed to heal US society of its ills according to this mindset. For Christian nationalists, channeling Pater Familia is not just about ensuring husbands/fathers their rightful positions as the authorities over obedient wives and children, it also is kept in place by negating LGTBQIA presence in society. Even though “homosexuality” and transgender life are problematized using religious justification, the solution is political, for Christian nationalists. Laws that walk back same gender marriage rights and transgender rights, as well as reproductive rights, are the only way to “heal” the nation through “healing” the family. Order, for Christian nationalism is heteropatriarchal order justified theologically and protected politically.

**Conclusion**

Chapter I reflects with Dorothee Sölle on the leadership of German theologians who utilized obediential theology to convince Christians to disobey Nazi political authority and remain obedient to God. However, Chapter II illustrates how detrimental it can be to mold Christian moral identities around the “virtue” of obedience, because, as Sölle argues, it quickly turns into a political vice, creating a society of uncritical followers obeying politics of domination.

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Not only does Sölle recall the destruction that came with German Christian complicity with genocide and war, which she attributes to the widespread forming of obedient moral identities across denominations, she draws out at length the extent to which obedience can also be detrimental to one’s own subjectivity and moral agency. Later in her writing, Sölle draws a parallel between what obedience looked like in Germany under a fascist state, and the way that conformity influenced moral identity formation in the neoliberal society of the United States in the 1980s. Speaking primarily to Christians who hold dominant economic, political, and social status, Sölle emphasizes how obedience, under a market democracy, morphs into various attitudes such as masochism, apathy, alienation, cynicism and compulsion. Her ultimate concern is not, however, the way in which obedience-turned-compulsion to conform degrades the self, although she does draw this out. Her main worry is that social injustices are ignored, held in place, and exacerbated while Christians become more and more drawn in on themselves through the political vices borne out of obedience. And, as she warns, a Christofascist society will inevitably form as a result.

Therefore, the Christian virtue of obedience should remain under critique, even in democratic societies where authoritarianism has seemingly faded away. Sölle rejects the Barthian proposal that obedience is a path to freedom through grace. And, she turns from Bonhoeffer’s approach to obedience as that which activates a life of faith and the “doing” of the gospel. She even remains resistant to Bultmann’s concept of “radical obedience,” where divine command is replaced with the authority of the situation at hand. It is the very use of the language of obedience that Sölle wants Christians to do away with because of the vast material destruction caused by uncritical Christian followers in the twentieth century.
One could compare Sölle’s rejection of obediential ethics to H. Richard Niebuhr’s proposal for a responsibility ethics in contrast to the Barthian divine command paradigm.\footnote{H. Richard Niebuhr, \textit{The Responsible Self: An Essay In Christian Moral Philosophy} (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 68. Niebuhr takes issue with the use of law and obedience metaphors for understanding sin and salvation within Christian theology and ethics and claims that Christians can indeed live out their discipleship beyond mere obedience to a commanding God. In attempting to take an ethical approach outside of the confines of both teleology and deontology alike, he wants not to ask, what is the goal nor what is the law? But rather, “To whom am I responsible and in what community of interaction am I myself?” The human being, in H.R. Niebuhr’s thought, is the answer to the question, \textit{what is happening}? To respond to the situation (of injustice) is to find that “God is acting in all actions upon you.” For Niebuhr this means that God acts through our own actions when we pay attention to what is happening in our midst and \textit{respond} (126).} Unique to Sölle, however, is the extent to which she stops to articulate the psychological and political impacts of the obedience paradigm. In contrast to Niebuhr, Sölle maintains that the human being is more than responder. She imagines human beings to be co-creators acting in concert with the divine. But before accessing the potential that this imagery offers, she challenges “first world,” bourgeois Christians to take a long and careful inventory of who they have become and how they have been shaped by their moral systems as they stand in relation to social and political structures of domination.

Obedience may be articulated as a tenet of discipleship or a relationship to the divine, but it also has political impact. Dependence upon obedience as a virtue for understanding faith, discipleship and moral agency depletes a sense of self and can result in masochism, apathy and cynicism. In its most dangerous form, Christian obedience gives rise to a Christofascist society centered around violent racist, sexist, and heteropatriarchal oppression, unregulated capitalist exploitation and militaristic escalation, forces that are fervently supported by so-called Christians. Sociology of Christian nationalism displays the presence of Christofascism in the US
today through the obsession to secure particular structures of power, boundaries and order, both culturally and politically.

Chapter III applies the critique of obedience among white-Christians in the US today and extends the critique beyond those who actively support Christian nationalism. To claim that obedience compounds a broader social character requires examination of the ways Christians remain obedient not just to God or religious authority but to political and cultural structures of domination as well. The ideological pillars of power, boundaries and order are rooted in particular colonial histories that reverberate throughout US society, forming a social character and reinforcing a *habitus* of obedience. Understanding the way that social character functions exposes the reality that US Christians who reject Christian nationalism still hold the responsibility to recognize how they continue to live their lives in obedience to structures of power, boundaries and order.
CHAPTER III

WHITE-CHRISTIAN OBEDIENCE TO STRUCTURAL AND RELATIONAL DOMINATION IN THE U.S.

Introduction

“Daily, a little more poison is injected into the minds and hearts of people, a little more conditioning to death. Thinking the unthinkable must be learned.”

“It then occurred to me how far advanced the militarization of our mind is.”

Chapter II ends by reflecting on the extent to which Sölle’s critique of Christofascism remains relevant in the US context and by discussing the prevalence of Christian nationalism and its support by white Evangelical, Catholic, and other mainline Protestant Christian institutions active in the United States in 2023. As someone who has been formed by several distinct iterations of white-Christianities myself, I am particularly concerned with the ways in which white-Christians who publicly reject white and Christian supremacies nevertheless perpetuate habits that reflect a relationship of obedience to structures of domination. Inspired by Sölle, I claim that this is because white-Christians have not dealt with their relationship to obedience and the extent to which they were formed by the idea that morality is fundamentally defined by obedience. This chapter shows how the habit of obedience, stemming from histories of

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3 See the following section for a definition of “white-Christianities” and “white-Christians.”
Christianities that conflate morality with obedience, compounds broader colonial habits of obedience among white-Christians in the US.

First, I ask how authoritarian religion has contributed to the obedient social character in US society. With Erich Fromm, I will explore how social character is formed in connection to authoritarian religion and capitalist culture. With Pierre Bourdieu, I will discuss the ways that the navigation of economic and political structures of domination both reinforce these structures, and, create a particular \textit{habitus} coding one’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Then, through Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s concept of \textit{kyriocentrism}, this chapter nuances the way that kyriarchal ideology both creates structures but also cements certain relational dynamics of domination through religion. Lastly, this chapter traces colonial habits of obedience to power, boundaries and order, accounting for colonial histories of domination; histories which form what it means to be white and Christian in the United States today.

\textbf{Defining \textquote{White-Christianities}}

In this chapter, I prefer to use the phrase \textquote{white-Christianities} and \textquote{white-Christians} not just to describe white people who adhere to Christian beliefs, but to signify the experience of white racial identity interlocking with Christian identity in the United States. I use the phrase \textit{white-Christianities} (rather than \textit{white-Christianity}) because to my mind, \textquote{white-Christianities} take many different forms in the United States today, from unapologetic white-Christian nationalism, to progressive Christianity among white-identifying liberals, and, many various renderings in between. It is the experience of being white in the United States, and the experience of identifying as Christian, a religion that is still arguably mainstream, and therefore normative, in US culture, that binds the significantly disparate ends of this spectrum together. When I use the phrase \textit{white-Christianities} I am also acknowledging how historically,
Christianity has been the religion that was theologically co-opted to provide justification for colonization of the Americas.

White-Christians face the challenging task of scrutinizing the ways that they continue to rely upon and utilize what James Cone refers to as white American theology for meaning-making in liturgies, traditions, and in public life. As Cone argues, white American theology decidedly ignores the history of colonization and slavery to which it is so tightly bound. It further continues to ignore, or view through a limited white perspective, the oppression and violence of racism in US society today, which still seeps through Christian institutions, spirituality, worship and teaching.⁴

For Miguel A. De La Torre, “white Christianity” upholds neoliberal ideology, perpetuates white epistemological norms and sacralizes racist social hierarchies, political marginalization and economic exploitation.⁵ Whereas De La Torre focuses on white Christianity as representative of the majority of Christians who voted for the Trump ticket in 2016 (and continue to support his current lie about the 2020 election), I want to widen the scope in my own definition of “white-Christianities” to encompass a critique of white-Christians who publicly reject Christian nationalism. I will highlight how even liberal and progressive white-Christians still perpetuate patterns of domination through various attitudes and behaviors and the ways in which they organize communities and institutions. These attitudes and behaviors may seem subtle, but they ultimately perpetuate social and political harm impacting those who are non-

⁵ Miguel A De La Torre, Burying White Privilege: Resurrecting a Badass Christianity, 2019, 53.
white and non-Christian. These patterns and habits stem from histories of colonial domination for which white-Christians, regardless of their political stances, must account.

**What Does It Mean to Describe Obedience As A Virtue?**

In taking Sölle’s critique of the Christian virtue of obedience into the context of white-Christianities in the United States today in the 2020s, it can be enlightening to recognize what it means to refer to obedience as a *virtue*. The ethical category of virtue is useful because virtues have been described to form not just what one does, but who one is and vice-versa. In western philosophy, since Aristotle (384-322 BCE), virtue ethics has articulated the ways one’s subjectivity and character are shaped by one’s attitudes, beliefs, actions, as well as one’s surrounding environment. As Aristotle sets parameters around what virtue is and is not, he provides insight into the ways in which habit functions to mold one’s formation as a moral agent.

The influence of action over character is a critical building block for Aristotle’s thinking about virtue. He states rather straightforwardly, “Virtue of character results from habit,” emphasizing the interlocking nature of who one becomes by what they do and how they do it. This means that virtue is not necessarily inherent, and Aristotle argues that one is not born with particular virtues, one must *acquire* them. This reinforces the idea that virtues shape who one is through regular practice, as in practicing an instrument. Aristotle’s claim about the law supports this idea: “Correct habituation distinguishes a good political system from a bad one.” In other words, the law should sway peoples’ actions in a way that makes them good people. But for

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7 Aristotle, 1103b6.
Aristotle, it is not enough to simply obey the law, or repeat the same action over and over; one’s action must be done well. Otherwise, if one repeats an action poorly, it quickly turns into a vice. Virtues (and vices) become an extension of who a person is because they come to reflect one’s inner state in the moment. For example, it is not truly virtuous to do something brave without a courageous inner state, according to Aristotle. Virtues are a choice, they are within a person’s control, and they culminate as the integration of right intention, correct execution, and appropriate outcome. Aristotle claims that one’s actions, character, attitudes, and the outcomes of one’s actions should be held together in integrity in his explanation of the concept of habit. The English term “habit” means more to Aristotle than its present day colloquial meaning. A \textit{habitus} (or \textit{hexis} in Greek) is a durable pattern that becomes a kind of second nature to the way an individual thinks and behaves. Aristotle notes in his definition of \textit{habitus} that it is not something that comes and goes, but is “part of [human] nature and irremediable or exceedingly hard to change.” A habit is virtuous when it is acted out of an “unchanging state” rather than a feeling or an experience, like fortune, that can easily come and go in life. Aristotle remarks further how unchanging habit can become in his comparison between habit and “nature:”

“Indeed the reason why habit is also difficult to change is that it is like nature; as Eunenus says,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{8} Aristotle, 1105b30-1106a15.
\item \textsuperscript{10} Aristotle, \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, 1105a34.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Aristotle, 1105b30. “First, then, neither virtues nor vices are feelings.”
\item \textsuperscript{12} Aristotle, 1100b1-5.
\end{itemize}
‘Habit, I say, is longtime training, my friend, and in the end training is nature for human beings.’”

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 CE) builds on much of Aristotle’s virtue framework, and his interpretation of the relationship between virtue and habit is mediated through distinguishing human virtues from theological virtues which are ultimately needed to achieve happiness in the afterlife. Even though he uses the term “habit” in his definition of human virtue, for Aquinas, habit is not something that becomes second nature through repetition, rather, it is under the command of the soul and can be willed to change from the inside. Aquinas does not believe habits are so durable and lasting as Aristotle claims, and says that ultimately, humans have control over habits and can even act against them.

Aristotle’s definition of virtue through habit is important for this study because it suggests that virtue is not just a good action, it is a process of becoming and fosters the formation of the moral self. Understanding obedience as a virtue involves recognizing how deeply this particular virtue becomes ingrained through habituation, defining not just what one does, but who one is. Robin Dillon points out in her critical character ethics that, because virtues become ingrained habits, it is necessary to look critically at who is demanding which virtues and to what

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13 Aristotle, 1152a31-34.


15 Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, n.d., Ia IIae, q. 55, aa. 1–3.

16 Thomas Aquinas, Ia IIae, q. 52, aa. 1–3a.
In other words, there is often a power dynamic at play in upholding certain virtues. After all, virtues make people who they are, and an uncritical attitude may prevent insight into who exactly people are becoming and what kind of structures they are collectively supporting. For this reason, it is important to question the prominence of the virtue of obedience especially when Christianity reflects authoritarian religion.

**Obedience is Authoritarian Religion’s Cardinal Virtue**

In Chapter I, I outline the ways in which Sölle’s “theological fathers” describe the Christian disciple’s relationship to God in relation to the political authority by calling on the virtue of obedience. Both Bonhoeffer and Barth, in their work as theologians and faith leaders in resistance against Hitler, reformulate versions of the Pauline and Lutheran claim that “Jesus is Lord” over and above all other worldly authority. And, in so doing, they continue to emphasize the priority of obedience for discipleship.

As Chapters I and II demonstrate, Sölle calls theologians and ethicists to loosen their grasp on obedience in defining both moral agency and spirituality because of the legacy of uncritical obedience and its relationship to German Christian support for ethnocentrism, genocide, and war. She claims that it is dangerous to describe God and Jesus with the same authoritarian language used to describe political leaders. In her context as a German woman who grew up during the time of fascism and as an activist and theologian experiencing the consolidation of capitalist democracies in Europe and the US, Sölle finds that the idea of morality as obedience too often becomes political in dangerous and devastating ways. This

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section contextualizes Sölle’s critique of obedience uncovered in Chapter II by fleshing out Erich Fromm’s concept of authoritarian religion, the religious/moral system which promotes obedience as its cardinal virtue.

Fromm was of course not the only sociologist or critical theorist working on authoritarian tendencies in the twentieth century. Theodor Adorno produced a thousand-page collection on the authoritarian personality and was greatly influenced by Fromm’s concept of authoritarian character. In *A Study on Authority*, Herbert Marcuse argues that the authoritarian relational dynamic of God overpowering the obedient human agent limits freedom of the subject. He disagrees with Luther and Calvin that any shred of freedom remains in this kind of dynamic. Marcuse argues, “The individual cannot be simultaneously free and unfree, autonomous and heteronomous, unless the being of the person is conceived as divisible and belonging to different spheres.” Leo Löwenthal proposes that the “Simple American” becomes a political “follower” “in the hope of finding identity and status” but in the end, becomes “an anonymous member of a characterless mass—a lonely cipher in an army of regimented ciphers.” Despite the fact that there were many Frankfurt School scholars theorizing about authoritarianism in the twentieth century, I believe that Sölle grounded her work in Fromm’s study because of his optimistic

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outlook on religion as potentially constructive for personal and social transformation, a view which adapts Marx’s critical view of religion.\textsuperscript{22}

In \textit{Psychoanalysis and Religion}, Erich Fromm shows how socio-political structures inform religious experience while religion, in turn, often reflects and perpetuates social structures.\textsuperscript{23} Despite that fact, Fromm, unlike Marx, holds that religion can have a valuable and constructive place in society and does not want to deny the import of religion in society. Religion, for Fromm, is a given and one should not question whether it should exist. At the same time, Fromm does maintain that religion is a construction fashioned by humans throughout history in diverse ways, therefore, “the question is not religion or not, but which kind of religion.”\textsuperscript{24} Often, religion provides a solution to the “need for a system of orientation” that helps people locate their place in the universe.\textsuperscript{25} Religion can also become an expression of particular attitudes held by groups of people and it is valuable to further uncover the “religious qualities” of political ideologies. Fromm distinguishes between “authoritarian religion” and “humanistic religion” demonstrating how both forms can be found in the same religion, pointing to Christianity as a prime example. Different versions of the same religion can harbor authoritarian or humanistic values, and practices, emphasizing and asserting opposing claims about humanity, God, and morality.


\textsuperscript{24} Fromm, 26.

\textsuperscript{25} Fromm, 24.
In authoritarian religion, obedience is the cardinal virtue and disobedience is the cardinal sin. God demands obedience and humanity submits through obedience. Authoritarian religion’s omnipotent, omniscient God is a symbol of might and force, whose supremacy is validated through sheer power. Humanity, in relation to this image of God, is controlled by this higher power and owes “him” obedience, reverence and worship because of his power over humanity. Outside of the capacity for obedience, humanity is deemed powerless and insignificant, relying on the “grace” of God’s power, accessing strength through surrender to God’s power.

In his critique of authoritarian religion, Erich Fromm expands beyond the idea that virtue is something one can foster on a personal plane, but virtue is also shaped both by the social environment, and by the collective unconscious. Moreover, religion has a great impact on one’s moral identity formation and viewing God as an authoritarian figure has a particular impact on the individual’s moral identity. As Sölle brought forward in her own critique, Fromm shows how defining one’s spirituality and morality by obedience yields experiences self-distain and masochism, lack of responsibility, and irrational justifications for violent actions. As the mind learns that submission is the only way to access connection to God and respond to others, the human grows to despise the self for its own lack of power. Repression calcifies as the psyche respond to the authoritarian role of God and the overwhelming fear of punishment for disobedience. The function of repression warps moral agency, Fromm claims. “Repression is an act of force, of cutting off, of ‘law and order;” Fromm notes, describing how repression functions

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26 Fromm, 35.

27 Fromm, 35–36.

28 Fromm, 35.
to block, eliminate, or overpower thoughts and feelings that authoritarian religion deems noncompliant. The end result is that the individual represses their own conscience, forfeiting their capacity for discernment and deliberation and giving over to obedience.

In authoritarian religion, motivation for obedience comes both from fear of punishment, as well as for hope in reward. Tragedy, both personal and collective, is interpreted as God’s punishment. Experiences of privilege or luck are interpreted as God’s reward for obeying. Obedience also operates not just to oppress and subjugate but also as a connector to power, for those who are obedient.

Submission to a powerful authority is one of the avenues by which man escapes from his feeling of aloneness and limitation. In the act of surrender he loses his independence and integrity as an individual but he gains the feeling of being protected by an awe-inspiring power of which, as it were, he becomes a part.

In this spirituality of obedience, access to power comes through obedience and submission. The reward is the approval of the Father-God and power-through-adjacency comes through yielding to God’s power. In an authoritarian religious dynamic, obedience becomes the primary mode of connection to the divine in addition to defining moral agency.

Aside from the authoritarian spirituality that portrays God as all-powerful over an obedient humanity, authoritarian religion also translates into church leadership claiming authoritarian power by asserting that they harbor the moral authority to demand obedience as well. Fromm comments that,

It is the tragedy of all great religions that they violate and pervert the very principles of freedom as soon as they become mass organizations governed by a religious bureaucracy. The religious organization and the men who represent it take over to some extent the place of family, tribe, and state. They keep man [sic] in bondage instead of leaving him

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29 Fromm, 98.
30 Fromm, 35.
free. It is no longer God who is worshiped but the group that claims to speak in his name.\(^{31}\)

Fromm shows how church leaders become the mediators of God’s authority, and obedience to God is translated into obedience to these leaders. For example, *Quas Primas* (1925) demonstrates the extent to which obedience was demanded of early twentieth century Catholic lay people around the world. Asserting the symbol of Christ’s kingship, the encyclical issued by Pope Pius XI is saturated in language of Christ’s “universal dominion” and lays claim to Christ’s punitive, judiciary and executive power over all that exists.\(^{32}\) The (hierarchical) church is described as having “immunity to the power of the state” because as the “kingdom of Christ on earth,” it is a “perfect society” that will eventually hold sway over all the earth if humanity is to have any hope for peace and prosperity.\(^{33}\) *Quas Primas* makes explicit that submission to Christ’s power through obedience to church leaders and teaching is expected to permeate every level of the human person including the mind, the will, the heart, the body, and the soul.\(^{34}\)

**Obedience within Social Character, *Habitus*, and Kyriocentrism**

As Sölle also observed in her work, the force of domination and the expectation of obedience saturates commands from church leaders mediating God’s will for faithful obedience among believers. But, it also lives within one’s psyche and pervades one’s life. I argue that moral systems of domination have shaped most US white-Christians’ moral identities if not by virtue of institutional power hierarchies, then at the very least by the fact that kyriarchal rhetoric exists in

\(\text{\footnotesize 31 Fromm, 85.}\
\(\text{\footnotesize 32 Pius XI, “Quas Primas,” 1925, para. 18.}\
\(\text{\footnotesize 33 Pius XI, para. 31.}\
\(\text{\footnotesize 34 Pius XI, para. 33.}\

scripture. As a result, white-Christsians then bring these obedient attitudes and behaviors to their social relationships, shaping communities, and political engagement. I will add that in a US context, Christian obedience produces a particular social character among white-Christsians causing violence to those positioned less prominently along the constructed hierarchies of power and worth.

In what follows, I will extrapolate from Erich Fromm’s concept of social character, Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s concepts of kyriocentric structural/subject position to expose the ways in which obedience surfaces not just in relation to a dominating church authority, but in white-Christian submission to various religious, socio-political, and economic structures of domination in broader society. Furthermore, I examine how white-Christian obedience to these structures continues to shape moral identities among white-Christsians beyond overt authoritarianism.

Obedience as a Social Character

Turning to Fromm again, we can make sense of Sölle’s concern over the obedient social character among Christians both in fascist Germany and in light of her perception of Christofascism in the US. And, we can ask how social character functions alongside Christian obedience among white-Christsians today in ways that perpetuate structures and social relationships of domination as they remain a bit more disconnected from extreme forms of authoritarian Christianity.

Social character is a concept that Fromm uses to explain how people have been shaped by particular social, political, economic and religious structures at a deeply personal level and in ways that are seemingly innocuous compared to blunt authoritarianism. Fromm claims that
examining the social character embodied by members of a particular society can aid in diagnosing the health and ability of a society to meet Fromm’s idea of human needs.\textsuperscript{35}

In essence, social character encompasses common character traits, tastes, habits, and patterns among members of society. These traits are patterned around social structures that undergird a society’s culture, economy, and political goals. Social structures are the mechanisms by which a society reflects its political goals and social values, and Fromm emphasizes economic structures within capitalist societies as one of the most basic influences of social relations. Since human survival is dependent upon production of food and resources, Fromm, with Marx, argues that the mode of production in a given society is the very center around which human activity turns.\textsuperscript{36}

Human behavior, then, propels the force of social structures for the function of society, even as our relationship to and interaction with these structures forms the social character, according to Fromm.\textsuperscript{37} In identifying the purpose of the social character, Fromm elaborates, “the social character's function is \textit{to mold and channel human energy within a given society for the purpose of the continued functioning of this society}.”\textsuperscript{38} And, it is behavior that is often acted out “unconsciously” while it is at the same time rewarded externally. Fromm describes how

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{35} Erich Fromm, \textit{The Sane Society} (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1955), 36–65. In \textit{Sane Society}, Fromm defines social character in the context of his argument that an individual’s mental health rests upon whether or not their society is structured in a way that meets the most basic human needs. Therefore, “sane society” is one in which members of society are easily able to satisfy their needs. Relatedness, creativity, rootedness, a sense of identity, and, the need for a “frame of orientation and devotion” are for Fromm the primary universal needs. In contrast, “An unhealthy society is one which creates mutual hostility, distrust, which transforms man [sic!] into an instrument of use and exploitation for others, which deprives him of a sense of self, except inasmuch as he submits to others or becomes an automaton.”
\item \textsuperscript{36} Fromm, 81.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Fromm, 79.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Fromm, 79.
\end{itemize}
gratifying it can be for certain people to behave in line with the demands of the social character. This causes the individual to become almost addicted to that feeling of gratification, and explains the impulse to ignore one’s own conscience.

This social-structural molding and “channeling of human energy” takes place at a variety of levels of human experience, permeating reason, emotion, desire, taste, and habit. Fromm further claims that this occurs to the extent that one often cannot distinguish between authentic thoughts, feelings, desires, and those which are formed through social character. Fromm scholar Rainer Funk provides an interpretation of the depth at which Fromm believes social character to operate in relation to social taboos which function as dividing lines between what is allow to exist in one’s consciousness and what is relegated to the unconscious. Funk explains that, “Taboos are defined, and this plays a role not just in language and logic, but they also impact needs, wishes, affect, discomfort or conflict, perceptions, impulse, fantasy, and they further say whether these are allowed or whether they must remain in the unconscious.”

As Funk summarizes, “each society decides which thought and feeling an individual consciousness is allowed to exist and which must remain unconscious.” This idea suggests that, frequently, people allow only the thoughts and feelings to surface that reflect the values of their culture, economy and politics. Whether this is truly an unconscious phenomenon will be considered in

39 Fromm, 79.

40 Rainer Funk, Das Leben selbst ist eine Kunst: Einführung in Leben und Werk von Erich Fromm (Freiburg: Herder Verlag GmbH, 2018), 98. (My translation)

41 Funk, 97. (My translation.)
the final section of this chapter. Therefore, for Fromm, a vast “social unconscious” exists as collective repression, hiding behind the externalized social character.\textsuperscript{42}

Fromm’s work on authoritarian religion defines religion as one of the structures which contribute to an obedient social character especially in the way that it molds an individual to be self-negating, masochistic, non-responsible for social injustice and most of all, repressive of feelings, thoughts and impulses that diverge from religious and cultural norms. These characteristics of obedience turn up not just through religious belief and belonging, but in participation in capitalist society as well.

Obedience to Anonymous Authority in a Capitalist Society

As discussed in Chapter II, Sölle is concerned with the way in which “even” progressive (white) Christians are caught up in conformity, compulsion, and alienation of participating in a capitalist system. For Fromm, following Marx, the market economy produces a very particular social character in which alienation, conformity, and consumerism saturate human subjectivity. In \textit{Marx’s Concept of Man}, Fromm interprets and utilizes Marx’s concept of alienation in this way:

\begin{quote}
Alienation (or ’estrangement’) means, for Marx, that man [sic] does not experience himself as the acting agent in his grasp of the world, but that the world (nature, others, and he himself) remain alien to him. They stand above and against him as objects, even though they may be objects of his own creation. Alienation is essentially experiencing the world and oneself passively, receptively, as the subject separated from the object.\textsuperscript{43}
\end{quote}

In \textit{Sane Society}, Fromm points out how, in the shaping of the alienated social character, people develop this same disconnected passivity in relation to the social structures that undergird the


\textsuperscript{43} Erich Fromm, \textit{Marx’s Concept of Man} (New York: Frederich Ungar Publishing, 1961), 44.
functioning of society, and they become alienated from the ways in which these social structures influence their very way of life.\textsuperscript{44} Tragically, as Fromm argues, this results in the loss of a sense of self and from genuine relationship to the world, to others, and to nature.\textsuperscript{45}

According to Fromm, a sense of self is often born out of reaction to authority, through either rebellion or obedience. To complicate matters, however, within a capitalist democracy, there is no overt authority to obey or rebel against, Fromm claims, but rather “an anonymous, invisible, alienated authority,” which pervades not as a “demand, neither a person, nor an idea, nor a moral law.” And yet, people are bound by an implicit compulsion to conform to what Fromm calls the big “It”. “What is It?” Fromm answers: “Profit, economic necessities, the market, common sense, public opinion, what ‘one’ does, thinks, feels.” He goes on to describe how ineffable this “It” is, slipping too easily from our consciousness, impossible to rebel against. “The laws of anonymous authority are as invisible as the laws of the market – and just as unassailable. Who can attack the invisible? Who can rebel against Nobody?”\textsuperscript{46} Living by the slippery dictates of “It” and conforming to the common sense of “what one does” creates its own pseudo morality. This habit of going along with “It” dubs virtuous that which is common sense, and any behavior, thought, or feeling that diverges from “It” is like a vice.\textsuperscript{47} Members of a society of conformity punish one another for not conforming to “It” through social ostracization.\textsuperscript{48} Thus, the only shred of a sense of self that one can muster comes out of

\textsuperscript{44} Fromm, \textit{The Sane Society}, 137.

\textsuperscript{45} Fromm, 143.

\textsuperscript{46} Fromm, 152–53.

\textsuperscript{47} Fromm, 158.

\textsuperscript{48} Fromm, 160.
conforming to a culture and economy of consumerism. Furthermore, consumer culture mediates experiences of desire, pleasure, and fun by reinforcing the belief that satisfaction must be immediate, and it can only happen through consuming something.49

The capitalist social character ultimately impacts human ability to reason, to think critically and creatively, and even to love. Fromm explains that reason is something different from intelligence because intelligence takes reality for granted whereas reason is a faculty of critical perception and thought. Most importantly, “reason requires relatedness and a sense of self.”50

The alienated experience is an affront to reason because alienation thrives on passivity, disconnection, and conformity. Fromm ultimately links ethical judgement and action to reason as the capacity for both critical thinking, and relationship, all of which is undergirded by a strong sense of self. Human activity, on the personal level as well as institutional and political levels, should respect the “aim of life” which is to “unfold [humanity’s] love and reason.” To do so requires conscience, which, “by its very nature is nonconforming; it must be able to say no, when everybody else says yes.”51 But conscience can only be formed when we are in touch and in tune with our humanity as people-in-relationship who can think creatively and critically. Social ethics must transform from a fairness-ethics, which supports market logic but does not aid in human or planetary flourishing, to a truly Christian or humanist ethics of neighborly love.52


50 Fromm, The Sane Society, 170.

51 Fromm, 174.

52 Fromm, 173.
The final marker of a capitalist social character is an obsessive need for security. The threat of war, as well as the pressure of “overconformity” shapes human drive for mental and physical safety. But this dream of security is unrealistic, Fromm claims, due to the “conditions of our existence, we cannot feel secure about anything.”53 The task for humanity is not to vanquish insecurity, but to learn how to live with it. Uncertainty and insecurity define one’s life and it is the greatest unfreedom to live against this reality, for Fromm.54

Embodying a capitalist social character goes mostly unnoticed (by those who benefit from the prevailing economic structures, I might add). People simply behave, think and feel certain ways because they seem right or true, when in reality, people are mere mimicking the traits that social character has perpetuated. One common feeling people often notice as a result of embodying this kind of social character, Fromm observes, is a nagging sense of guilt. On the one hand, people often feel guilty when they sense themselves diverging from social expectations of conformity. On the other hand, when people remain in step with conformism, they can sometimes sense a gut-level guilt for their disingenuous life and inability to tap into their truest thoughts, feelings, and sense of self. Fromm describes this double-edged sword of guilt in the sense that “alienated man [sic] feels guilty for being himself, and for not being himself, for being alive and for being an automaton, for being a person and for being a thing.”55 This quotation provides a layer of complexity over the ways that capitalist social character both limits and focuses one’s emotional experience with the experience of guilt predominating.

53 Fromm, 196.
54 Fromm, 196.
55 Fromm, 205.
The concept of social character demonstrates how culture and economy contribute to the way people believe and behave in the world. Even in an ostensibly non-authoritarian society, an “anonymous authority” sways peoples’ thoughts, feelings, and actions. For white-Christians who reject supremacist attitudes, behaviors and politics, the function of social character suggests that they are still being formed by the structures they navigate daily, even if they judge the same structures to be unjust. Pierre Bourdieu, in defining *habitus*, uncovers the nuanced ways in which subjectivities are molded in relationship to structures, both in how they are perceived and the ways they are maintained. With an understanding of this dynamic, we can understand further how white-Christians’ positionalities of domination give shape to the ways in which we navigate and make meaning out of our relationships to these structures.

Obedience to Structures Through *Habitus*

Similar to Fromm’s description of the creation of social character though an “anonymous authority” and perceptions of “common sense,” Bourdieu describes *habitus* as regulated behavior beyond overt coercion or force. As “systems of durable, transposable dispositions,” the conditions that create *habitus* are “principles which generate and organize practices” that exist just beyond the realm of an individual’s conscious thought and behavior, and yet the individual is constantly responding to these so-called “structuring structures” in daily life. Society’s “structuring structures” shape *habitus* while *habitus* reinforces them and become what Fromm describes as “common sense.” And Bourdieu emphasizes that these structures are reinforced in one’s reaction to them, as well as one’s perception of them. Their existence is taken for granted,

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56 Thomas Meisenhelder, “From Character to Habitus in Sociology,” *The Social Science Journal* 43, no. 1 (2006): 62. Meisenhelder explains how scholars who hold on to social realism within sociology prefer the concept of *habitus* as a more apt sociological concept because it does not make any claims about “human nature” and “human drives,” like Freud and Fromm, claiming rather that social relationships and social structures are at the core of subjectivity.
and one perceives them as natural since one cannot imagine anything beyond the way they shape both reality and imagination. In essence, habitus is formed through the submission to the perception of the inevitability of these “structuring structures.”

For Bourdieu, past experiences lie at the base of these structuring structures. Historical conditioning “ensures the active presence of past experiences” in our “perception, thought and action” which people interpret as the correct way of doing things. Through this understanding, the making of social norms is much less a result of a conscious decision about what ought to be or how something ought to be done, but rather an intellectual and physical reflex informed by collective histories of “individual and collective practices.” The habitus, therefore, is not confined to intellect, but exists as “embodied history,” for Bourdieu. People embody habitus as “second nature” and thereby forget that it is a shadow of their historical conditioning, or “the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product.”

Bourdieu would not so much label humans as “automatons” the way that Fromm does in his concern about the alienated social character under capitalism. There is a measure of creativity and freedom in the way people can move around within habitus, and for Bourdieu, it is not so mechanical as Fromm’s picture of the capitalist social character. This makes habitus even less perceptible, however. Bourdieu describes habitus as a state of “conditional and conditioned freedom,” a state which is contained between two poles, neither as uninhibited creativity nor as

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58 Bourdieu, 54.

59 Bourdieu, 56.
automation, or, in his words, “unpredictable novelty” or “simple mechanical reproductions of the original conditioning.”

Interestingly, for Bourdieu, habitus is so durable, that it can characterize group behavior and even outlast the economic and social structures themselves that originally gave it shape. This phenomenon, Bourdieu claims, “can be the source of misadaptation as well as adaptation, revolt as well as resignation.” Habitus, in this sense, truly takes on a life of its own. The following quotation highlights Bourdieu’s concept of habitus as adaptive and yet highly durable in our perception of reality as well as our response to it:

The habitus is the principle of selective perception of the indices tending to confirm and reinforce it rather than transform it, a matrix generating responses adapted in advance to all objective conditions identical to or homologous with the (past) conditions of its production; it adjusts itself to a probable future which it anticipates and helps to bring about because it reads it directly in the present of the presumed world, the only one it can ever know.

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus does not suggest a flat and universal system of perception and reaction, however. He is careful to include an analysis of habitus within the system of symbolic power.

In a later work, Bourdieu explains how one’s positionality in relation to the way social structures scaffold groups of people colors one’s perception of these structures and allows certain groups the power to classify and name them based on their social position. Structures are reinforced and maintained because certain groups hold more power to classify them, perpetuating a “double structuring.” In other words, structures both exist, and are reinforced through the selective perception of habitus.

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60 Bourdieu, 55.

61 Bourdieu, 62.

62 Bourdieu, 65.
when those with social power claim that their point of view on these structures is in fact the official point of view.\textsuperscript{63}

Holding symbolic power (material power that is socially acknowledged and recognized as powerful) is, in effect, the power of worldmaking. This power to engage in worldmaking is primarily held in place through naming and claiming social classifications, which, Bourdieu points out, “often work within dualist operations, masculine/feminine, high/low, strong/weak, etc.” These classifications “organize the perception of the social world and, in certain conditions, can really organize the world itself.”\textsuperscript{64}

Bourdieu claims that the way in which people classify social reality in turn classifies them. If one can claim institutional and “official” recognition to express “official discourse” then they have power on three levels. They have the power to \textit{objectively} name what a person, group of people or a thing is; they can tell people what they should do; and, they can give “authorized accounts” of what happened. For Bourdieu, “Symbolic power is the power of creating things with words. It is only if it is true, that is, adequate to things, that a description can create things. In this sense, symbolic power is a power of consecration or revelation, a power to conceal or reveal things which are already there.”\textsuperscript{65}

Social structures are built by groups with symbolic power while at the same time, they undergird social positions that allot symbolic power. This is an extremely important observation within Bourdieu’s concept of \textit{habitus} because it essentially says positionality matters in regard to


\textsuperscript{64} Bourdieu, 157.

\textsuperscript{65} Bourdieu, 138.
the creation of habitus. Not all people are equal victims languishing under the elusive authority of convention. According to Bourdieu, someone’s social positions either allows them to hold and manipulate the “official point of view,” or they cause them to acquiesce to their lower social status, believing that it is just the way things are. Bourdieu helps me to formulate the question, to what extent do white-Christian moral systems reflect the symbolic power of world-making through authoritarian religion? And, how does white-Christian habitus operate with an obedient moral identity to maintain a level of social domination?

Obedience in a Kyriarchal Democracy

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza helps to address these questions with an overarching concept that she has named as, “kyriarchy.” This term addresses the way that religion both supports structures of domination in society, and, becomes a structure of domination itself. Schüssler Fiorenza’s work on kyriarchy will also help to understand how white-Christians negotiate social/political status through obedience to kyriarchal structures.

Schüssler Fiorenza argues that since antiquity, kyriarchal religion has been entangled with the development of democracies over the centuries. She describes Kyriarchy as “…the domination of the emperor, lord, slave master, husband, the elite freeborn educated and propertied male colonizer who has power over all wo/men and subaltern men.” In Transforming Vision, she adds to her definition, explaining how kyriarchy operates in society, noting that it “is best understood as a sociopolitical and cultural-religious system of domination

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66 Bourdieu, 131. “As perceptual dispositions tend to be adjusted to position, agents, even the most disadvantaged, tend to perceive the world as natural and to find it much more acceptable than one might imagine, especially when one looks at the situation of the dominated through the social eyes of the dominant.” I disagree with this point. The struggle for liberation is a grass-roots struggle against the experience of oppression.

that structures the identity slots open to members of society in terms of race, gender, nation, age, economy, and sexuality and configures them in terms of pyramidal relations of domination and submission, profit and exploitation." The kyriarchal world-view imagines society as part of a pyramidal hierarchy of superiority and inferiority, in contrast to Bourdieu’s emphasis on dualistic social classifications (black-white; female-male, etc.). This worldview also categorizes not just humanity, but it also places the whole cosmos into this pyramidal system of hierarchy that names and enforces superiorities and inferiorities.

Schüessler Fiorenza links the historical context of the kyriarchal language and practices to Biblical rhetoric that reinforce relationships of domination today. This is exemplified in the language of the lordship of Christ, the very language used by Barth and Bonhoeffer to dissuade German Christians from collaboration with the Nazis. As a biblical scholar, Schüessler Fiorenza develops a critical political feminist hermeneutics which identifies rhetoric in scripture that mirrors the rhetoric of empire, and then exposes how this rhetoric is used to reinforce ideologies of domination in a given society. In Chapter I, I describe how biblical scholars argue that it was actually a radical move to claim Jesus as lord over against the Roman emperor. The claim hoped to subvert the power of the political authority and empower early Christians to develop their own sense of community and agency inside Christian community as opposed to seeing themselves as solely loyal to Rome.

Schüessler Fiorenza argues against her biblical scholar contemporaries, stating that claiming Jesus’ lordship over against the Roman emperor’s imperial status simply perpetuates

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69 Schüessler Fiorenza, 11.
the dynamics of domination. Targeting the rhetoric within the book of Revelations, SchüSSLer Fiorenza claims that the language of divine lordship in scripture “re-inscribes the symbolic discourse of Rome's hegemonic colonizing power. It does so by co-opting Roman imperial language for constructing a rival symbolic universe that seeks to unmask the evil power behind Rome in order to alienate its audience from the persuasive power of the empire's hegemonic discourses.”

The danger of co-opting this imperial language lies in the fact that although this early Christian rhetoric replaces the worship of Roman political power with that of Jesus’ name, it still perpetuates language of domination. She notes, "Nevertheless, its co-optation of Roman imperial language and imagery re-inscribes them and thereby shapes Christian imagination in terms of empire." And so, the language of domination that continues as a thread through Christian theology and ethics relates directly back to kyriarchal language found in scripture.

With SchüSSLer Fiorenza’s definition of the function of kyriarchy, one could say Christianity is a structure of kyriarchy with multiple structures of domination running through it. And, kyriarchy also pervades society much more broadly, beyond religion. SchüSSLer Fiorenza describes four main levels through which the kyriarchal system operates: “…first, on the sociopolitical level; second on the ethical-cultural level; third, on the biological-natural level; and fourth, on the linguistic symbolic level. These four levels are interrelated and strengthen each other's power of domination.”

70 SchüSSLer Fiorenza, The Power of the Word, 211.
71 SchüSSLer Fiorenza, 211.
72 SchüSSLer Fiorenza, Transforming Vision, 8–9.
Furthermore, each of these levels is shot through with kyriarchal ideology even within democratic society. It is often assumed that authoritarianism is by nature absent in democratic society. With the election of Donald Trump, the world saw how an authoritarian figure can be enthusiastically elected. (Although it is also important to highlight how US democracy continues to be eroded at the congressional level through the chipping away of voting rights and the proliferation of gerrymandering).\(^73\)

But before Trump was ever a thought in anyone’s mind, Schüssler Fiorenza claimed that democracies can be, and have been throughout history, rife with kyriarchal structures. She claims, “While it is true that democratic power is not concentrated in the person of the sovereign, such power still needs to be spelled out also in political terms of domination.”\(^74\) Bridging ancient democratic societies to today’s versions of democracy and zeroing in on the United States, Schüssler Fiorenza states that, “…it is best to understand [kyriarchy] in the classical sense of antiquity. Modern democracies are still structured as complex pyramidal political systems of superiority and inferiority, of dominance and subordination. As kyriarchal democracies, they are stratified by gender, race, class, religion, heterosexism and age…”\(^75\) This is complicated by the tension of living alongside the promises of democracy, even if they are largely rhetorical, or purely euphemistic, because it leads to the naturalizing of difference, and justifying social


\(^74\) Schüssler Fiorenza, Transforming Vision, 9.

\(^75\) Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Changing Horizons: Explorations in Feminist Interpretation (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 8.
This is because in a democracy, equality is often passively assumed, rather than actively maintained. When we are forced to make sense of inequality and injustice it is easier to label difference or inequality as natural, or else we are left to face the fact our democracy is an utter sham.\textsuperscript{77}

Schüssler Fiorenza emphasizes the fact that it is not apt to define domination solely as structural arguing that kyriarchy means that persons and groups interact through \textit{relationships} of domination as well. Complicating feminists’ frequent emphasis upon relationality, Schüssler Fiorenza observes that “relations are kyriarchally typed” describing kyriarchy as an “always changing net of relations of domination.”\textsuperscript{78} This means that social stratification in a democratic society allows for relationships of domination to weave their way throughout various sectors of society, giving rise to many different versions of injustice such as marginalization, exploitation, and flat-out violence.

Understanding kyriarchy as both structural and relational nuances the conversation of social character and \textit{habitus} especially in a white-Christian and US context. Fromm’s social character provides a psycho-social analysis of how people become who they are in building, maintaining, and interacting with religious, political and economic structures. And, Bourdieu exposes how social positioning matters in the making of \textit{habitus}. Meanwhile, Schüssler Fiorenza

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{76} Schüssler Fiorenza, \textit{Transforming Vision}, 10.
\item \textsuperscript{77} De La Torre, \textit{Burying White Privilege}, 20. De La Torre describes a kind of schizophrenia borne out of American contradictions: “With one mind, Americans claim radical inclusion ‘with liberty and justice for all,’ while with the other mind they reinforce social structures of exclusion to benefit the few through the loss of liberty and justice for the many.”
\item \textsuperscript{78} Schüssler Fiorenza, \textit{Transforming Vision}, 9.
\end{footnotes}
describes the specific patterning of structures in a Christian and US context as kyriarchal both religiously and politically.

Further, for Schüssler Fiorenza, “kyriocentrism” is the ideology that “naturalizes and legitimates” structures and relations of domination. It defines subjectivity in the sense that it sets up particular structural positioning, and, as a result, there arises a “subject position” out of the need to negotiate kyriocentrism as well. Structural positions are those which are assigned to us by virtue of how kyriocentrism interprets a person’s identity markers and relegates them to particular positions on the pyramid system. Subject positions describe how people make meaning out of their structural kyriarchal positions, how they are negotiated, interpret, and related to. Subject positions are spaces in which we people the opportunity to formulate intersubjective critique of the structures that secure their positions. It is from one’s subject positions that they either obey or we disobey the structures that shape their personal and collective lives.

While people have some space to define their subject positioning even as they are also structurally positioned, Schüssler Fiorenza describes how the identity stratifications “such as sex, gender, race, class, or ethnicity are 'common sense,' 'naturalized,' and inscribed on the body…” The constructed social markers that people are placed in to are enforced rather harshly and deviation from these identity slots can yield punishment. The experience of one’s structured positioning within a kyriocentric society or religious community is different based on which various positions of superiority a person embodies. Like Bourdieu, Schüssler Fiorenza describes

79 Schüssler Fiorenza, The Power of the Word, 158.
80 Schüssler Fiorenza, Changing Horizons, 8.
how it matters whether one’s subjectivities are shaped by positions of domination versus subjugation.

Kyriocentric scripts prescribe behavior and grant prerogatives to the members of the dominant groups, whereas subordinate groups may be exploited. Kyriarchal social controls entail rewards for conforming behavior and stigmatization and isolation for aberrant conduct. These disciplinary controls produce personalities that conform to hegemonic kyriarchal standards. Kyriarchal ideology and imagery, the cultural representations of kyriarchal power in symbolic language and artistic production, legitimate and support dominant statuses. In other words, the world is determined by relations of domination which have become naturalized and common sense. Sex/gender is part of such relations of ruling, which also ground other divisions such as class, colonialism, heterosexuality, or race.  

And yet, she goes on to show how these differences in the experience of domination and subordination, of privilege and marginalization, are not necessarily consciously acknowledged by those who occupy dominating positionalities. Later in this chapter, I will discuss the degree to which those inhabiting dominating positionalities are truly unconscious of the impact of those differences, or if they are willfully keeping the acknowledgement at bay.

When Christianity reinscribes kyriarchal ways of being and knowing through scripture, liturgy, and institutionalism, the virtue of obedience feeds into kyriocentric subjectivity. As Sölle demonstrates, Christian theo-ethics does not stand outside of kyriarchy, it either reinforces it, or it stands against kyriarchy as a critique. There is no middle ground. Therefore, white-Christians must take into account the extent to which Christianity has been coupled with the violence of empire-building to create kyriarchal structures, relationships, and kyriocentric subjectivities. For US white-Christians, this context is crucial for critiquing the virtue of obedience. Christians are

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82 Schüssler Fiorenza, 162.
no longer just obeying an authoritarian Father-God, they are perpetuating a sense of self that submits to, and perpetuates structures of domination.

White-Christians can begin to look critically at their moral systems through the lenses of authoritarian religion and especially through kyriarchy, asking what kind of social character and \textit{habitus} is this moral system reproducing? The first step in the process is to be aware of the kind of kyriarchal structures one finds oneself living in relationship with, and what kinds of positionalities one inhabits. In a United States context, white-Christians are faced with the challenge of reading their context and culture of whiteness more critically as they begin to explore their relationship to structures of domination and the extent to which their obedient moral identities compound domination and oppression. The first step in this process is (1) to ask, what are the historical structures that white-Christians submit to and enforce through their submission? The second step would be (2) to interrogate the extent to which they are so “unconscious” of their obedience to these structures.

\textbf{“Structuring Structures” Demand Obedience: From Christian Nationalism to Coloniality}

In view of the reality that white-Christians cannot evade their negotiation of structures and relationships of domination, I would like to argue for a return to Whitehead and Perry’s pillars of Christian nationalism. Through the lens of social character and \textit{habitus}, it will become clear how power, boundaries, and order stand as three main structures that white-Christians constantly negotiate, even as they reject supremacies such as Christian nationalism outrightly.

Before identifying how power, boundaries, and order structure much of white-Christian life, it is crucial to place these structures into a wider context beyond Christian nationalism. For white-Christians, understanding structures and relationships of power, boundaries and order should be contextualized within the concept of \textit{coloniality}. As Bourdieu claims, \textit{habitus} is
historical, meaning, it is “the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product."83 The claim that that habitus is not just rooted in personal past experiences can be extended by emphasizing his notion that habitus is also an intellectual and physical reflex informed by vast histories of “individual and collective practices.”84 White-Christians, from those who participate in Christian nationalism to liberal Christians on the political left, habitually obey structures that find their roots in coloniality.

Tracing Coloniality Through Power, Boundaries and Order

The ways in which white-Christians define and protect power, boundaries, and order are habits that are rooted in coloniality. Coloniality, a term that grew out of colonized and indigenous peoples’ critical resistance against European domination, is both the system and a way of thinking and being that has justified colonization of the Americas. As a system, it continues to operate today as a “complex structure of management and control.”85

Claiming power through both physical force and symbolic violence to order, name and evaluate categories of people and land is a habit that persists in much of Christian culture, practice and moral systems in the Americas. It persists, as decolonial thinkers demonstrate, as a colonial habitus. And, it persists by creating and reinforcing structures of domination in society. Reading Willie Jennings with Catherine Walsh and Walter Mignolo, one can see how power, boundaries and order are pervasive structures that must not be conceptually relegated to extremist groups on the fringes of society, like Christian nationalists. Rather, white-Christians

83 Bourdieu, The Logic of Practice, 56.
84 Bourdieu, 54.
must recognize how these structures are maintained in broader society and especially how they
are theologically ordained and ethically sanctioned through white-Christian moral systems, and
in particular through the tendency to understand morality solely through authoritarian
understandings of obedience. In fact, Walsh and Mignolo claim that coloniality spreads itself
widely across many different ideologies found in the global north: “While the rhetoric and
politics of right-wing nationalism, neoliberal globalism, and progressivisms may differ, each
continues to perpetuate and further coloniality.”

Understanding coloniality will uncover how histories of power, boundaries and order function in Christian thought and practice within white-Christianities in the US today.

Claiming power over bodies and land, drawing and maintain rigid racial and religious
boundaries, and enforcing heteropatriarchal ideals of family, gender, and sexuality are not just
ideals propagated by Christian nationalists but rather, they have a particular history on this
continent, rooted in the violent legacy of colonization including the enslavement of Africans and
their descendants. Moreover, these structures surface today in both structures and habits of
coloniality. This is to say that coloniality is a *habitus* that functions today in both overt and
subtle ways which enforce dominating structures and relationships of superiority and inferiority.

Decolonial thinkers Walsh and Mignolo refer to colonial “habits that modernity/coloniality
implanted in all of us” to illustrate how deeply the obedience lies to coloniality and structures
of power, boundaries, and order that dominate those on lower rungs of the hierarchical pyramid.

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86 Mignolo and Walsh, 6.
87 Mignolo and Walsh, 4.
The authors go on to describe how “coloniality operates upon you, controls you, forms your emotions, your subjectivity, your desires.”

The following sections link the historical patterns of colonial power, boundaries and order with present-day examples of these particular structures and relational dynamics surfacing in white-Christianities presently.

**POWER**

As early as the 1400s, Europeans claimed power over inhabitants of North America and Africa through biological racism which cemented anthropological and cosmological hierarchies of worth. And, as Willie Jennings shows, race theories are rooted in and stem from European Christian theologies. He notes:

> Europeans enacted racial agency as a theologically articulated way of understanding their bodies in relation to new spaces and new peoples and to their new power over those spaces and peoples. Before this agency would yield the “idea of race,” “the scientific concept of race,” the “social principle of race,” or even a fully formed “racial optic” on the world, it was a theological form—an inverted, distorted vision of creation that reduced theological anthropology to commodified bodies.

Jennings goes on to explain how this vision and valuation of creation was seen through the lens of whiteness. “Whiteness from the moment of discovery and consumption was a social and theological way of imagining, an imaginary that evolved into a method of understanding the

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88 Mignolo and Walsh, 147.

89 Paul Harvey, “‘A Servant of Servants Shall He Be’: The Construction of Race in American Religious Mythologies,” in *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity: An Introduction*, ed. Craig R. Prentiss (New York: New York University Press, n.d.), 13–27. See, for example, this chapter, which provides a historical and theological account of the construction of racial categories for the purpose of justifying slavery and land-stealing, and further describes way in which these categories became mythologized through European Christian religion.

world.”  

Whiteness, Jennings shows, became the measure of human dignity, and, it defined European relationship to land. In essence, land possession became a marker of identity through whiteness.

Those who related to the land differently, spiritually, ethically, or with familial understandings, were beings whose humanity was mistrusted as whiteness continued to bind together European Christian identity with land ownership. The claim of white transcendence over and above all other forms of human life and claiming ownership of land fueled this social and theological imaginary as it collected power and force. Through this imaginary, Jennings explains, “being white placed one at the center of the symbolic and real ordering of space.”

Coloniality is a system that, at its base, primarily controls knowledge through the creation of whiteness. Mignolo explains that control over knowledge and knowledge production involves control over establishing both “content of the conversation” as well as the “terms of the conversation.” Controlling knowledge is foundational for dominating people through conceptualizing “domains” in society and nature that coloniality establishes and classifies. He states, “Because of coloniality, control of the terms of enunciation (i.e., control of knowledge) is necessary for controlling the domains, and controlling the domains means managing the people whose lives are shaped by the domains.” Control over knowledge is a dominating structure in that it manipulates how people perceive and understand the world. It is detrimental because it is a

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91 Jennings, 58.
92 Jennings, 59.
93 Jennings, 59.
94 Mignolo and Walsh, On Decoloniality, 144.
95 Mignolo and Walsh, 145.
control that manages what people view as common sense, and leads people to see social structures and say, “that’s just how things are” rather than viewing them critically.

In the United States today, white supremacy functions through epistemological control which is also operative in white-Christian moral systems. As Eboni Marshall Turman and Reggie Williams claim, white-Christian morality can stand as a structure of domination itself when it exerts epistemological control by preserving moral hegemony and universalizing European and white experiences and norms. White-Christians are rewarded for obedience to epistemological power, and through that obedience, ensure their connection to hegemonic power and security. Claiming power often comes with the reinforcement of white-Christian moral hegemony on the ground, reinforcing the impulse to maintain power over and over in communities and institutional settings.

This particularly white-Christian moral habitus often uses non-coercive domination to claim moral authority. In a sociological study that documents examples within multiracial Christian organizations, Samuel L. Perry argues that white Christians often enforce white moral hegemony to “resolve” conflicts over how an institution should organize itself and execute its goals. This study shows how it is a habit among white-Christians to normalize their moral standards, and enforce assimilation to them. Through claiming power via moral hegemony, this reinforces social relationships of hierarchy, by placing white-Christian morality at the center of what is the “norm,” marginalizing others’ moral agency. For example, when a conflict occurs in

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a Christian organization that rooted in racial difference, often times the conflict is resolved through the enforcement of “white moral standards.” Assimilation, rather than understanding of racial differences, tends to cover over conflict in many Christian organizations, according to the study.  

**BOUNDARIES**

Colonial power to control knowledge, order space, claim land, and judge human worth has also always been devastatingly fragile: it is a power that remains in constant need of protection. Boundaries have become structures that have provided this colonial imaginary with perceived security. But Willie Jennings goes on to explain that racial boundaries are rigid because of the displacement that occurred when colonizers shattered North Americans inhabitants’ diverse forms of land-relationship through land-stealing, forced removal, genocide, and slavery. European colonizers renounced their own land-identities in leaving Europe, and their white and Christian identity markers became the only thing on their ontological map underpinning their identity and worth. Displacement cemented racial identity, Jennings argues, when he states that, “The refashioning of bodies in space to form racial existence makes little sense without seeing simultaneously the refashioning of space.” Jennings uncovers why the grip of white identity is grasped so tightly, carving such deep dividing lines between whiteness/Christianity and the racial and religious “Other.” Jennings argues that whiteness

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98 Perry, 98. For example, the author writes that with the Evangelical outreach ministries (EOMs) in the study, the standards for fundraising norms are often created by white EOM leaders in power. These fundraising standards do not accommodate cultural differences around the impacts of fundraising strategies which were documented to cause conflict for EOM workers of color. Rather than attempting to understand why fundraising strategies, such as soliciting funds from family and friends, were not culturally compatible across all EOM workers, the leaders of the organization simply expected EOM workers of color to assimilate to the fundraising strategy.

displaced deep-seated sources of identity, especially land, for both colonizers and the colonized, that whiteness became (for Europeans) the only place left to stand, and the only bodies worth standing from within. Boundaries, therefore, have demarcated (European Christian) identity with a desperation that has almost always turns into violence.

One form of that violence occurred through what Jennings calls “pedagogical imperialism.” Desperation to bolster and justify European/Christian identity often looked like sympathy for the “unsaved” and a perceived need to offer salvation to indigenous peoples. Christianity would spread across North and South America through pedagogy which allowed Jesuits and other Christian “missionaries” like José de Acosta an “evaluative” power to further name and claim indigenous difference and deficiency. Jennings interprets Acosta’s writings to demonstrate how,

He draws theology and theological tradition into an “evaluative” form from which it cannot escape. What comes into effect is a new form of ecclesial habitus in which the performance of theology—in teaching, preaching, writing and other ministry—becomes the articulation of colonialist evaluation. These processes of evaluation carry within them what Acosta perceives as the soteriological and social distance between himself and his student-barbarians.100

Christian pedagogical imperialism rejected the fact of indigenous peoples’ intellectual and spiritual knowing, reinforced colonial pedagogical and religious categories while at the same time shrouded itself in performed sympathy for the unsaved. Catechesis was a violent act of colonial force, categorizing indigenous peoples as “stupid” and “heathen” in one fell swoop through manufacturing and reinforcing white European intelligence and piety.

The invention and maintenance of colonial difference is one way that the control of knowledge creates boundaries in society.

100 Jennings, 105.
Borders are everywhere and they are not only geographic; they are racial and sexual, epistemic and ontological, religious and aesthetic, linguistic and national. Borders are the interior routes of modernity/coloniality and the consequences of international law and global linear thinking.\(^{101}\)

Classification becomes one example of creating a border between “us” and “them.” This “mode of ranking and classifying the planet and people” allowed justification for colonization and slavery, but it is also alive today in the United States through white supremacy.\(^{102}\) Racism becomes entrenched in culture when “racial classifications are not only descriptive but hierarchical…”\(^{103}\) Further, racism operating within colonial difference contributes to a colonial “universal fictions” about the world, fiction maintained as ultimate truth. The danger is not just in the distortion of what is real, rather, it molds our *being* and experience of the world. Mignolo argues that these universal fictions of colonial difference “have an aesthetic power, affecting our senses, driving our emotions and desires.” In other words, colonial difference is a structure of domination that maintains boundaries at the level of our subjectivities.\(^{104}\) Racism and sexism remain, as Mignolo argues, “the two pillars of hierarchical classification of people” as well as the “hierarchizing of regions” such as language of the “third world.”\(^{105}\)

For white-Christians in the US, boundaries are kept alive through what Bonilla-Silva calls "white habitus" in addition to the moral habitus particular to white-Christianities. Bonilla-Silva et. al. show how white habitus is created through boundary-making system of segregation

\(^{101}\) Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 112.

\(^{102}\) Mignolo and Walsh, 185.

\(^{103}\) Mignolo and Walsh, 186.

\(^{104}\) Mignolo and Walsh, 187.

\(^{105}\) Mignolo and Walsh, 191.
or self-selecting and preferring to live and educate oneself among primarily white people and even marry white people. White habitus “shapes racial expressions, attitudes, cognitions, and even a sense of aesthetics.”106 Their study catalogues negative attitudes toward interracial marriage among white people, providing evidence that many white people still continue to feel most comfortable when their sense of racial solidarity remains intact, both in terms of where they live and with whom they form family.107 In other words, white habitus is held together by boundaries. “We argue that ‘white habitus’—racialized socialization processes that facilitate a white culture of solidarity—emerge because of the social and spatial boundaries and isolation of whites.”108

ORDER

Since the colonization of the Americas, power and boundaries were wielded and erected through Christianity and Christian theology.109 Control and maintenance of social order ties back to colonization, specifically around family roles, gender, and sexuality. In fact, the theological ideology that justified the persecution of women who disobeyed their social roles in sixteenth century Europe was adapted for the project of colonization in justifying murder, displacement, and enslavement of indigenous peoples.110 Jennings explains that,


107 Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick, 247.

108 Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick, 248.

109 Jennings, The Christian Imagination, 81. “It would be a mistake to see the church and its ecclesiastics as entering the secular work of the state in the New World, or to posit ecclesial presence as a second stage in the temporal ordering of the New World. No, the church entered with the conquistadors, establishing camp in and with the conquering camps of the Spanish. The reordering of Indian worlds was born of Christian formation itself.”

Christian theological imagination was woven into processes of colonial dominance. Other peoples and their ways of life had to adapt, become fluid, even morph into the colonial order of things, and such a situation drew Christianity and its theologians inside habits of mind and life that internalized and normalized that order of things.¹¹¹

Establishing power through control of knowledge, and, demarcating boundaries through inventing, classifying, and hierarchizing difference are brought together through a patriarchal ordering of society. For Mignolo, patriarchal ideals of family, gender, and sexuality underly and maintain colonial racism and sexism. “Patriarchal/masculine conception of the world and society” undergird our ontology, epistemology, politics and economy. “There is a thin line connecting civil society to the state, the corporations, and financial and religious institutions.”¹¹²

Patriarchy is that thin line, according to Mignolo.

For example, the ideal of the nuclear family continues to be the lens through which every sphere of public life is envisioned and evaluated. “Nuclear family supremacy,” a notion of the ideal model of family, which was used to support structures of racial hierarchy through colonization, continues today, according to Haley McEwen. This function is described to be “based on monogamous marriage between one man and one woman, who create and reside with their biological children in a single-family household.”¹¹³

The function of nuclear family supremacy has been to reinforce “Eurocentric understandings of gender, sexuality, marriage, and reproduction” and have been undergirded by centuries of Christian tradition and theology.¹¹⁴

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¹¹² Mignolo and Walsh, On Decoloniality, 127.


¹¹⁴ McEwen, 32.
McEwen demonstrates how, in an African colonial context, nuclear family supremacy was a tool for colonization, crystalizing the European bourgeois family as ideal and African systems of family as “primitive.” And it was further utilized to “destroy indigenous societies, beliefs, and knowledge systems through reeducation.” In a US context, it is easy to see how nuclear family supremacy connects to forms of Christian nationalism and neoconservatism that upholds the “American family values,” but, it also lies at the root of the marginalization of LGBTQIA+ persons and groups, people seeking reproductive healthcare, and heterosexist cultural norms more generally. For this reason, white-Christians must be hyper-aware of the moments when their communities and theologies reinforce heteropatriarchal attitudes and ways of relating, and in structuring their communities and institutions.

Unconscious, But To What Extent?

The value of accounting for the ways that white-Christians perpetuate structures and relationships of domination through social character and habitus is that these concepts reveal how coloniality and white supremacy saturate “even” progressive white-Christians’ attitudes, behaviors, communities, and institutions. In different ways, white-Christians constantly reenact coloniality, white habitus and authoritarian social character often without paying attention. For Fromm, this supposed inability to perceive one’s embodiment of a particular social character is the “shadow side” of the unconscious. The unconscious is the place where people relegate the feelings and thoughts that do not allow for assimilation into cultural and political norms, hiding them away from one’s active awareness. Fromm is extending the psychological phenomenon of the unconscious (of Freud and Jung) to a collective, social unconscious which covers over the

\[\text{115 McEwen, 32.}\]
thoughts feelings and desires that do not reflect the values of one’s culture, economy and politics. In this way, the channeling of human energy is also a collective project, creating social character, but also creating a social unconscious as collective repression. This idea that the psychological phenomenon is a collective, not just personal phenomenon is compelling to a certain extent. It suggests that human development is not simply an individual, psychic phenomenon. Rather, Fromm emphasizes the psycho-social nature of one’s becoming as both individual, societal and ultimately as a collective process. Bourdieu supports the idea that elements and functions of habitus are unconscious in the sense that people often embody habitus as “second nature.” As previously mentioned, Bourdieu emphasizes the historical conditioning that shapes habitus is not a process that people are necessarily conscious of.116

In view of white-Christianities in the US, it becomes crucial to distinguish what is meant by naming the formation of habitus and social character as an “unconscious” process. This is because, in the US, racism and white supremacy thrive off of “unintentional” violence supported by language of “implicit bias.” Habitus and social character are not concepts to justify colonial attitudes and behaviors, as if to say, white-Christians have been formed by colonial and white supremacist social character, and hence their behavior is unintentional and therefore justified or at least excusable.

Ronald Kent Richardson provides a layer of analysis that accounts for how white supremacy functions at an “unconscious” level. He claims that interpreting the collective unconscious must involve interpreting its white-supremacist overlays. Richardson quotes Frantz Fannon to connect the idea of the collective unconscious to the history of colonialism: “But the

116 Bourdieu, The Logic of Practice, 56.
collective unconscious, without our having to fall back on the genes, is purely and simply the sum of prejudices, myths, collective attitudes of a given group…Jung has confused instinct with habit.”  

Richardson forwards that the collective unconscious is a habitual “submerging of what the white self does not want to face.” He further maintains that when white US Americans do not recognize the harm they are causing, they are making a choice to do so. This action, to “hold off” awareness of the impact of white peoples’ actions and attitudes contributes to the process of what Richardson calls “white supremacist collective unconscious,” or, “WSCU.”

To protect their way of living, understanding and being, white people tend to draw on the “white supremacist collective unconscious” as a defense mechanism when their cultural and epistemological norms are threatened. Functionally, this operates in what Richardson calls a “forestalling” and “foreclosing” process.

White people forestall by refusing to draw out and explore inklings, intuitions, nagging, unsettling feelings or perceptions that might lead to the discover of the white supremacist collective unconscious and possible to an altered view of black people and of the American racial situation. They foreclose when they refuse to explore ideas, evidence, or alternative interpretations that one is fully conscious of.

Richardson does hold that this process happens more as a reflex than by overt reasoning. He notes that, “This reflex is a learned behavior that is assimilated over time by intuition, example, and precept as whites grow into adulthood and kept, for the most part, out of conscious thought.

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118 Richardson, 78.

119 Richardson, 79.

120 Richardson, 80.

121 Richardson, 79.
like Freud’s superego. In America, several hundred years of white supremacist conditioning make it seem like a natural phenomenon.”

This quotation is important because it further contextualizes the ways that colonial habitus and authoritarian social character operate specifically for white-Christians.

To name white supremacy only in its extreme forms is to perpetuate the WSCU. Richardson affirms that “white supremacist collective unconscious” is operative among white people across the social and political spectrum. And, it allows moral hegemony to perpetuate as well, because it places the power to name when something is supremacist in the hands of white people. For Richardson, the primary challenge of dismantling white supremacy lies in the attendance to the reflex to foreclose emotional and intellectual reflection about racist behaviors and attitudes. A parallel challenge lies in confronting the habit of refusing to engage in action to transform racialized harm and violence. Focusing on extremism can actually distract white Americans from their own racist habits.

For Richardson, attending to the white supremacist collective unconscious requires the willingness to access the impulses behind our actions and attitudes. This entails not just intellectual analysis but emotional insight into those deeper recesses that often remain unexplored. He believes that being able share with one another the emotions and thought processes that take place at those deeper levels would encourage public conversations that interrogate internal white supremacist habits.

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122 Richardson, 80.

123 Richardson, 82.

124 Richardson, 85.

125 Richardson, 86.
Richardson ultimately wants to construct a definition of the self that is more readily able and willing to open to the inner life of emotions and thought. He wants to foster “socially conscious self” that enables people to more readily “imagine consequences of their actions because they, by definition, have others in mind.”\textsuperscript{126} It is also spiritually grounded acknowledging interconnectedness and dependence, in which character is shaped through connectivity.\textsuperscript{127}

Both Fromm and Schüssler Fiorenza provide strong support for this process. For Fromm, rationality and relationality come together in his definition of ethics as the combination of reason and love. For Fromm, love is implies these attitudes: “\textit{care, responsibility, respect and knowledge.”}\textsuperscript{128} From defines love as, “the active and creative relatedness of man to his fellow man, to himself and to nature.”\textsuperscript{129} Reason is not disembodied, but rather deeply connected to love through the ability “to react to the dichotomy of [one’s] existence not only in thinking but in the total process of living, in his feelings and actions.”\textsuperscript{130}Intellectuality is not the only sphere of reason for Fromm, but just as important are the modes of feeling and sensing for reason to be productive. When love and reason come together, they are more apt to form a critical, relational, and deeply sensing social character that fosters a society that meets human needs.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza provides yet another layer to describe one’s relationship to and navigation of structures, social character and habitus. She describes “subject positions” as

\textsuperscript{126} Richardson, 88.

\textsuperscript{127} Richardson, 89.

\textsuperscript{128} Fromm, \textit{The Sane Society}, 33.

\textsuperscript{129} Fromm, 32.

\textsuperscript{130} Fromm, 65.
the ontological, epistemological and moral space from which people navigate kyriocentrism. In other words, subject positions describe how people make meaning out of their structural kyriarchal positions, how people negotiate them, interpret them, and relate to them. Rather than fixed character traits, subject positions are spaces in which people have the freedom to formulate intersubjective critique of the structures that secure their positions. It is from one’s subject positions that they either obey or we disobey the structures that shape their personal and collective lives.131

A moral identity formed by obedience habituates white-Christians to believe that they do not have choice in what they do, as if to say, following orders or obeying structures of domination makes an action moral. Even though the concepts of habitus and social character reveal the impulsive, covert nature of acting in concert with white supremacy and coloniality, one should not conclude that white-Christians are morally hopeless. Rather, I claim that white-Christians not only have the choice to disobey moral systems that compound white supremacy and coloniality, they have the responsibility to construct ethical visions that shine bright light on the white-Christian “unconscious" habits and foster new ways of being beyond domination. This project, alongside critical evaluation, is a process Walsh and Mignolo refer to as “de-linking” from the colonial habits are enforced through perpetuating them. White-Christians can refuse to foreclose and forestall the acknowledgement of the oppressive nature of particular moral systems that reinforce obedient portraits of morality.

131 Schüessler Fiorenza, Changing Horizons, 8.
Conclusion

Accounting for the damage that uncritical obedience has caused in the hands of white-Christians may well call for a debate about whether obedience is a genuine virtue or an actual vice. One may not need to look further than Aristotle’s definition of virtue to evaluate obedience as questionable. However, the universal categorization of a virtue may only perpetuate white-Christian moral hegemony. As Bourdieu has shown, claiming the official point of view to name and reinforce classifications as “official discourse” is a function of symbolic power which builds and enforces structures of domination. ¹³²

Robin Dillon provides a feminist analysis of how virtue theory can become oppressive when it meshes with social and political structures of power. Recall her claim that it is important to look closely at who names a character trait virtuous and who thereby benefits from a society or religious community in which a particular virtue is so heavily emphasized. When a concept of virtue cannot be distinguished from social/cultural norms, it becomes a “normalized vice” according to Dillon. ¹³³ She further describes the cycle of oppression stemming from this process in that “Character distorted by vice…enables [dominants] to maintain positions of dominance…and makes it very unlikely that they will resist rather than support social transformation.” ¹³⁴ Dillon emphasizes that critical feminist philosophies of character should continue to examine how character is distorted for “social dominants” who acquiesce to the named virtues, and, how this contributes to socio-economic and political oppression. This

¹³² Bourdieu, *In Other Words*, 157.


¹³⁴ Dillon, 97.
happens even as social dominants may see themselves truly benefitting from a particular moral
system that is in fact oppressive, as Lisa Tessman claims, even though their character
continues to become distorted through the fragmenting of the self (pointing to Claudia Card).

However, character is not fixed or static, Dillon claims, but continually shaped by
“interpersonal, cultural, social, and political dimensions of human living.” Further, character is
shaped by one’s response to and agency within this shaping process by culture, society and the
political. This provides yet another parallel to Schüssler Fiorenza’s description of subject
position, from which one has space to navigate and negotiate their relationships to structures of
domination.

Therefore, in view of the distortion of character that takes place in response to social
conditioning, white-Christians should not disregard the place of virtues and vices in a moral
system altogether, but rather, consider whether there might be particular virtues that would lead
to and shape a fuller sense of agency and solidarity. This would need to happen in a way that
is more tailored to groups’ positionality in social hierarchies. White-Christians would need some
alternative virtues, so to speak, that would allow for Richardson’s “socially conscious self.”
White-Christians would need to foster virtues with awareness of the ways in which Christian

\[135\] Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 77. Tessman argues that people holding social positions of domination see their character traits as acceptable and good; and, they believe their lives to be happy and flourishing even as they carry out lifestyles that degrade the flourishing of others.


\[137\] Dillon, 104.

\[138\] Dillon, 101.
moral formation impacts social character, rather than forestalling or foreclosing on the violent impacts of authoritarian Christian moral systems.

Viewing obedience from within the framework of subject positions, one can make more sense of Sölle’s demand that “first world” and “bourgeois” Christians reject language of obedience and the moral systems that revolve around it. Sölle is not calling for a universal shift, but rather, she is speaking directly to Christians who benefit social, economically, and politically from racialized hierarchies in her harsh critique of Christian obedience.

In view of the ways that power, boundaries, and order operate as “structuring structures” which white-Christians reinforce through their daily obedience to them, white-Christians can understand how the impulses to maintain power, draw and control boundaries, and submit to a heterosexist social order are habits that continue to mold moral identities. For white-Christians, because they may perceive themselves to materially benefit from them, these impulses are entrenched in daily life and permeate one’s attitudes, feelings and behaviors.

And so, navigating structures of power, boundaries and order does not necessarily mean that every white-Christian is a Christian nationalist, but it does mean that white-Christians have been formed and shaped by these structures through colonial *habitus*. In this context, Dorothee Sölle’s warning is even more relevant, that Christians who benefit from global economic exploitation and racial, sexual and religious supremacies must break from the language of obedience within Christian tradition entirely. I join with Sölle to claim that in a US context, white-Christians must confront colonial moral systems and fundamentally interrogate habitual obedience to structures of domination. In the following chapter, I retrieve Dorothee Sölle’s ethical vision of *creative disobedience* to reimagine moral agency in protest against religious and political structures of domination.
CHAPTER IV
RETRIEVING SÖLLE’S CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY AND VISION FOR MORAL AGENCY BEYOND OBEEDIENCE

Introduction

Obedience lies at the heart of authoritarian religion, often saturating definitions of moral identity and moral agency for Christian practice. It does this by limiting the nature of Christian response to God and the world through cementing a singular dynamic of divine command and human obedience, often undermining the individual’s capacity for ethical judgement and discernment of action. As Chapters II and III explain, this dynamic is dangerous when religious leaders take it upon themselves to act as the sole interpreters of God’s will and then demand obedience of their followers. Christians who have either been influenced by spiritualities characterized by obedience to God’s command, or, who have experienced religion as kyriarchal hierarchies of power, can tend to cultivate a habit of obedience that then extends beyond their religious beliefs and practices. Christians who hold social and political power in a supremacist society can weaponize their ingrained obedience through complicity with the socio-political status quo because their *habitus* carries over as obedience to societal structures of domination such as cultural and political hierarchies of power, violent border protection, and the heteropatriarchal social order.

Chapter II spells out Sölle’s concerns about the habit of obedience when it limits the capacity for moral agency, especially among “first world” and “bourgeois” Christians who tend to maintain masochistic, apathetic, conformist, alienated, cynical and compulsive attitudes and
behaviors as a result of navigating (and in many ways benefitting from) capitalism and militarism that shape North American and European societies. Sölle argues that Christians cannot always resist domination with obedience because it perpetuates a dynamic of domination between humanity and the divine that too easily repeats itself in cultural and political conflict. The main problem with theologies of domination is that they cause Christians to conflate faith, discipleship, and morality with uncritical obedience.

Sölle is mostly interested in what theology brings to bear on Christian response to suffering and injustice, especially among Christians who hold economic, racial, sexual or otherwise political power. Her ethical contribution is focused on identifying an alternative virtue beyond obedience for defining Christian moral agency. She argues that if solidarity is to be the goal for Christian practice, then defining faith, discipleship and morality through the language of obedience will fail more often than not when it becomes a habit that diminishes conscience and critical reflection. Moreover, conflating morality with obedience allows Christians with economic privilege and social power to worship a God in their own image and practice obedience to the political status quo.

If solidarity is the goal—that is, solidarity with those who suffer the structural violence of racial, religious and sexual and gender supremacies—then Christians need to draw on their reimagined theologies of cooperation with the Spirit to embody alternate virtues beyond obedience. Many Christians already find themselves in complex situations of conformity to heterosexist, racist, capitalist norms. Thus, resisting these norms requires a virtue that will challenge Christians to break from the habit of complying with these norms. It requires a virtue that will expand Christian imagination beyond life in service to these structures. And it requires a virtue that recalibrates one’s sense of self and sense of agency in ways that are sensitive and
responsive to the ways many people sustain the violence and harm of structural domination in
religion and in broader society. Christians need to become disobedient in critical, constructive,
and creative ways.

This chapter demonstrates how Dorothee Sölle’s constructive theology extends from her
critique of divine domination to a search for language beyond theologies that center obedience
and dominating models of God such as God as Father, Ruler, King and Lord. I show how, in her
theology, Sölle imagines God as animating Spirit and life force with which humanity is invited to
cooperate. Highlighting her political hermeneutic of the gospel, this chapter articulates Sölle’s
feminist political theology as asserting a Christology that emphasizes Jesus’ life not as obedient
martyr and sacrificial lamb but as pointed towards the transformation of social and political
structures for liberation in history. I underscore how Sölle’s political theology reinterprets
concepts of sin, forgiveness and hope beyond atonement theologies. And, I emphasize how her
poetry offers theologies of response to a world of suffering and injustice and recasts Christian
faith and practice beyond obedience. Ultimately, this chapter argues that these particular
theological moves showcase Sölle’s critique of theologies that assert a picture of the divine and
the cosmos taking hierarchical form. Furthermore, these moves disrupt how these theologies
imagine God as all-powerful ruler requiring obedient atonement and sacrifice of Jesus and his
followers.

Finding New/Ancient Theological Language Beyond Divine Domination

Sölle’s exposure of the harm and violence that result from the language of obedience
within certain Christian theologies exposes the great need for a new language that can express
experiences of faith, God, and morality. Therefore, a primary task for theology and ethics is to
continue to search for and implement language that is liberative. Sölle claims that language that
reinforces obedience is often a language of hegemonic control revolving around the dynamic of
divine domination. This is especially true when obedience is couched within atonement
teologies that interpret “God’s will” as necessitating sacrifice and suffering. Christians need to
pay close attention to the language they use to express their spiritualities and in community
rituals and practices, because language can also be a form of domination. Elisabeth Schüessler
Fiorenza accentuates the feminist ethical import of paying close attention to language used
within Christian theologies in the sense that, “…language is always already an exercise of power
and an action that either continues kyriarchy or seeks to interrupt it.”¹

Crafting a new theological language is part of protesting Christian theologies and
practices that reinforce cosmic hierarchies of power, domination and oppression. Moreover,
these “new” languages and forms are inspired by constantly new and evolving ways of being and
knowing while also finding rootedness in ancient Judeo-Christian traditions. Sölle is passionate
about the potential for alternative rhetorical expression and interpretation beyond the “language
of domination” because she is adamant about the ethical import that language carries. “Whenever
we escape the language of domination and attempt another language—that is, learn to hear,
understand, and speak another language—the linguistic creation, the new development of
language, is a source of power and encouragement…”² Language beyond theologies that center
human obedience reacting to an all-powerful God have the potential to yield more responsive
and responsible action in the face of suffering and injustice.

¹ Elisabeth Schüessler Fiorenza, Changing Horizons: Explorations in Feminist Interpretation (Minneapolis: Fortress
Press, 2013), 123.

² Dorothee Sölle, On Earth as in Heaven: A Liberation Spirituality of Sharing, trans. Marc Batko (Louisville, KY:
First and foremost, Sölle’s theology demonstrates a radical protest against hierarchies of power, both in religion and society, and the way that they interlock to compound structures and cultures of domination and oppression. In view of the reality that US and European Christianities often perpetuates the Death Machine, Christofascism, and Menschenfresserpolitik, Sölle interprets the potential for religious practice as an expression of a critical NO against these structures. For Sölle, religion harbors potential empowerment to protest the many violent forces of domination that shape our socio-political reality:

When we dismiss religion as superfluous, incomprehensible, prescientific… we blunt our protest. We hinder its expression. We relativize it, limiting it to the confines of what can reasonably be demanded… The religious interpretation of injustice is a protest that cannot be relativized… We are afraid of religion because it interprets rather than just observes. Religion does not confirm that there are hungry people in the world; it interprets the hungry to be our brethren whom we allow to starve.3

During a time when philosophy proclaimed the death of God, Sölle is arguing that Christians are not called to detach themselves from religion, but rather, to mine the tradition for its elements of protest against many forms of death.

In the context of a capitalist society, death can come in the form of alienation. In Chapter II, I describe at length the way that obedience as conformity in a capitalist society yields alienation. But it is worth reinforcing this claim here, in view of religion as protest against death. “This is the hell that swallows us up in the very midst of life as we go about the motions and routines of life. Death is the wages of sin, the consequence of inauthentic life. It means to be so estranged from others that we can trust no one.”4 Alienation truncates relationship, yielding a

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4 Sölle, 6.
very low quality of life for individuals, and superficial interpersonal relationships. And, it goes hand-in-hand with institutional violence. One’s estrangement from oneself, others, and the planet becomes a willful ignorance against the ways that this system kills, tortures, impoverishes and exploits at a material level in order to keep this alienated existence in place. Because of this cycle, “There is no end to the ways in which we can destroy life.”

Sölle speaks of the way Christ becomes coopted in order to narcotize Christians against the painful reality of their participation in the death machine. “This Christ doesn’t disturb or threaten our armaments industry and he even gives some semblance of meaning to our comfortable daily routine.” Many peoples’ lives are saturated by forms of alienation, deadening their quality of life and making it nearly impossible for countless others to survive. Sölle warns that people become “necrophiliacs” in the process: a people who are obsessed with death. And, this gives shape to Christians’ image of God, who is also unsurprisingly ambivalent about human suffering. “We necrophiliacs worship God as a being whose purpose is to preserve, not create; to govern, not change; to protect, not liberate. We think of God as some kind of nonpartisan being…” Again, Sölle refers to the many forms death can take while still alive and this experience becomes exacerbated when Christian theology images God as impartial to or reinforcing these forms of death.

Christians can protest this image of God by stressing God’s constant fueling of life. And this must become a political statement and have socio-political impact. The God of the religion

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5 Sölle, 7.
6 Sölle, 10.
7 Sölle, 10.
of protest is not bi-partisan, wanting everyone just to agree. Rather, “the God of whom the Bible speaks is not nonpartisan. [God] is highly partisan. [God] has taken sides with life against death. [God] despises death and fights against it wherever it shows itself, against death by napalm, starvation, by bread alone, by whatever stifles and strangles life.”

The purpose of religion, especially in the context of Christianity, for Sölle, is to take a stand for life. “To believe in God is to take sides with life and to end our alliance with death.” Taking sides with life requires that one’s very relationship to and practice of religion takes the form of protest; even and especially practices of prayer.

Reflecting on the work of James Cone, Sölle articulates how liberative theological language runs contrary to language of obedience within theologies reflecting dynamics of domination.

The language of theology challenges social structures, because it is inseparable from the suffering community. A theology which does not articulate the suffering community, does not speak from it, think from it, feel from it, is de facto a theology of oppression. Theology cannot be neutral or avoid taking sides with either the oppressor or the oppressed.

Sölle’s idea that God is partisan, God takes sides with life, runs parallel to Cone’s claim that theology cannot remain neutral.

What is lost when Christians employ language of domination is the very essence of the Spirit’s presence, and the potential to harness the Spirit’s freedom as a flow of energy against violence and oppression.

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8 Sölle, 10.
9 Sölle, 10.
The revolutionary spirit of the gospel—its fundamental criticism of property and violence, its criticism of military force and supreme power—is silenced. Instead, the ordering…spirit-avoiding institution is desired.”

Sölle’s theology is one that emphasizes the Spirit of God as animating and life-giving force, one that humanity can participate in. However, the church often stands in the way of this great potential of energy for liberation. She calls church authority “tamers of the spirit” arguing that when order is preferred over liberation, the institution is worshipped rather than the Spirit of God.

Those who are without spirit and the ecclesiastical tamers of the Spirit are interested in order above all. Their focus is on the institution and order. They prefer to interpret our text as follows: ‘Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is order’ [instead of freedom].’ The worship service runs rote, women are silent in church, and the verbs that belong to this kind of spirit are persevere, conserve, guard, and defend.

In other words, maintaining institutional order is a habit of authoritarian religion that constructs a God of power and domination. Sölle shows how creating a counter-language against domination empowers communities to enact solidarity rather than be swept up in morality-as-obedience.

This process carries a multi-directionality. Cultivating new language is of course about expression, but it also involves a particular interpretation of Christian practice inspired by a political interpretation of the gospel.

A Political Hermeneutic Reinterpreting Sin, Forgiveness, and Hope Beyond Domination Theology

Sölle formulates her contribution to political theology in a way that fosters religious, spiritual, and theological language beyond the theological and moral systems that perpetuate the

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12 Sölle, 93.
obedience paradigm and, in so doing, run counter to structures of political domination. In her political theology, Sölle extracts Christian theological language from the atonement paradigm where obedience becomes most dangerous and through which God demands violent sacrifice. She writes the monograph, *Political Theology* in reaction to Christian interpretations of scriptural rhetoric that reinforces violence, war and exploitative and unjust political actions on the part of the state, which are then left unquestioned by many Christian churches. On the other side of the spectrum, Sölle is also articulating her political theology as a theology that shores up conversation between faith and politics, thereby rejecting “apolitical escapism.”

In her definition of political theology, Sölle emphasizes the relevance of interpretation:

“Political theology is… a theological hermeneutic, which, in distinction from an ontological or existential point of view, holds open an horizon of interpretation in which politics is understood as the comprehensive and decisive sphere in which Christian truth should become praxis.”

This interpretive method defends against both interpreting scripture to condone imperial violence; and, as an anesthetic against social and political injustice. It thereby counteracts theologies that perpetuate the divine command and obedience paradigms within Christian theology.

When reading the gospel, Sölle encounters a Jesus whose example goes beyond obedience and sacrifice. “Jesus demands a completely awakened self-consciousness and a completely open acceptance of others…Obedience in the sense of maintaining an established order was not sufficient for Jesus. He expected us to engage in changing the world--and it was to

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14 Sölle, 59.
this end that he set free our Phantasie.” Sölle’s Christology is one which interprets the life of Jesus in constant response to the suffering of those made vulnerable by political domination and social marginalization.

As noted in Chapter II, Sölle formulates much of her political hermeneutic in conversation with Rudolf Bultmann. Bultmann’s dialectical approach involves allowing a socio-political event or situation of injustice to pose a direct question to the individual Christian, begging response. The individual then looks to the gospel to encounter the *Kerygma*, the absolute truth of the command of Christ for the answer to the situation. In contrast to Bultmann, Sölle wants to learn from the historical Jesus, rather than being subject to the “command of Christ.” Sölle is worried that Bultmann’s interpretation of *Kerygma* perpetuates the dualism many Christians reinforce between Christ and the world, a dualism that learning from the historical Jesus helps to deconstruct. She is also concerned that Bultmann’s method of hermeneutics creates a dualism between faith and politics, as though participation in the political realm is somehow below the goal of faith.

Instead of relegating Christ to a conceptual realm beyond the socio-political reality of human life, the gospel is directly centering liberation *in this world* and in history. It encourages partisanship, a bias toward the oppressed, poor and those who mourn. It is the aim of political theology to shine light on social roots of what Sölle calls “political brutalization.” Political theology is a social criticism that ushers in the “liberation of all.” In reaction against those who

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17 Sölle, *Political Theology*, 32.
18 Sölle, 67.
criticize this kind of political theology as mere social critique and political goal, Sölle says that political theology moves beyond this step. Political theology does not represent mere theologically grounded politics. Rather, it is a critical theology of interpretation which serves as a standard by which social structures must be judged.\footnote{Sölle, 56.}

Bultmann’s emphasis on existential philosophy is important for Sölle’s political hermeneutic. Rather than leading to Bultmann’s so-called “Kerygmatic neo-orthodoxy,” in which the reader is bound to interpreting and obeying the command of Christ, theology actually has the potential to center around self-actualization. Sölle’s interpretation of Bultmann includes protecting against privatized and individualistic theology by acknowledging one’s historical context and fostering socio-political consciousness in the search for existential meaning. In conversation with Bultmann’s theology, Sölle concludes that both the personal and the socio-political are transformable, and the gospel affirms this reality.\footnote{Sölle, 47.} Sölle draws the concept of subjectivity into a collective frame beyond an individual understanding of the meaning of life, and beyond an individual understanding of faith and discipleship. A political theology guided by a pre-understanding of “authentic life for all people” is to be addressed in terms of political and economic conditions, and, social hopes.\footnote{Sölle, 60.}

Sölle goes on to describe the method of her political hermeneutic as a multi-directional reading of the gospel. Again, one should take the words and actions of the historical Jesus seriously, because she believes that “to renounce the historical Jesus is to renounce the political

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\footnote{Sölle, 56.}
\footnote{Sölle, 47.}
\footnote{Sölle, 60.}
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Jesus.” This does not mean that the gospels provide a blueprint for personal and social transformation. Rather, they provide evidence that Jesus transformed his reality through liberative word and deed. A political hermeneutic reads the gospel through the lens of Jesus’ active life, attempting to discern the political and social values Jesus stood for and against. Then, the reader takes into account their own socio-political context, “reading” it through the lens of the political implications of the gospel. In community, the reader discerns with others how to respond to socio-political realities in a way that creatively transforms, just as Jesus did in the gospels.

In essence, Sölle’s reaction to Bultmann’s theology expresses three pillars on which she builds a political hermeneutic: Jesus as a historical, and therefore political figure; the ‘absolute’ reality of one’s socio-political context, and the importance of individual transformation alongside social transformation.

In *Political Theology*, Sölle remarks that “the manner in which Jesus thought and acted de facto broke open and transformed the social structures of the world in which he lived.” This vision of Jesus guides Sölle’s treatment of the concepts of sin, forgiveness, and hope, as part of her political hermeneutic. She wants to give an account of Christian theology in a way that centers and takes responsibility for the participation in structural sin among Christians, especially Christians of the global north who have benefited from the exploitation of neocolonialism and global capitalism. Sölle has Christians with economic and racial privilege in mind when she

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22 Sölle, 38.

23 Sölle, 65.
defines theology as “faith seeking action,” and is in many ways indicting European and North American Christians for their complacency about and participation in forms of global oppression and exploitation, centering this reality as the political reality she reads the gospel against.

To do political theology “from the side of the oppressor” requires a particular understanding of sin according to Sölle. With an eye to the havoc wrought by western imperialism as manifested in global capitalism, Sölle defines sin as apathy and collaboration. Members of the “first world” sin by showing apathy to the suffering of their global neighbors. Sölle is deeply concerned that traditional understandings of sin as “original”—something that simply exists, and about which nothing can be done—tends to make Christians feel powerless in the face of injustice. Further, Sölle’s understanding of sin as collaboration with the machine of oppression calls individual Christians and the collective church to acknowledge its legacy of participation in economic and political exploitation. This concept of sin is a direct response to traditional concepts which tend to cover this reality over. If sin remains a private issue between the individual and God, but has no bearing on society, it reinforces the socio-political status quo.

In light of Sölle’s definition of sin as apathy and collaboration, forgiveness takes on new meaning as well. Forgiveness has traditionally been described as something God bestows upon an individual for a sin committed. But for Sölle, forgiveness is essentially a “political and social concept.” Forgiveness is social reconciliation which requires conversion, and transformation. Personal conversion from apathy to responsibility is the first step of forgiveness, according to

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24 Sölle, 3.
25 Sölle, 89.
26 Sölle, 93.
Sölle. This is followed by a collective conversion from collaboration in sinful social structures, to creative transformation of society.

Sölle is concerned about the socio-political ramifications of sinful apathy and collaboration, she is also deeply worried about the anthropological implications sin has for members of the global north (as uncovered in Chapter II). The sinful system of exploitation, particularly global capitalism, defines humans as consumers. This is troubling to Sölle, because it deadens the impetus for conversion. For this reason, Christian life as faith-seeking-action must include individual actualization alongside social transformation.

Hope is yet another concept that Sölle writes about through the lens of her political hermeneutic of the gospel. For Sölle, hope is not something one prays to have, rather, it comes with participation in transforming society. Her particular focus on hope is framed by the claim that “no one can be saved alone.”27 For Sölle, one cannot make theological pronouncements about hope in general, rather, hope is expressed when privileged Christians realize their complicity in oppression and convert themselves to the work of transforming political structures. I don’t believe Sölle sees hope as something that reaches back from a future of completion, pulling humanity toward itself as Moltmann does.28 Rather than a theological theory, hope is practiced by working for justice. In other words, “first world” Christians, as Sölle refers to them, cannot have hope unless they take responsibility for perpetuating hopeless situations for exploited communities.

In On Earth as in Heaven: A Liberation Spirituality of Sharing, Sölle lays out four steps

27 Sölle, 60.

to her political hermeneutic in a way that Christian communities might adopt. She describes this method as explicitly “grounded in different liberation theologies,” which clearly has an impact on her theo-ethical thought and praxis.29 She names the steps as, “praxis, analysis, meditation, and renewed praxis.”30 Sölle emphasizes that the process begins with “the context of our lives, our experiences, our hopes, our fears, our ‘praxis’” rather than starting with the reading of scripture.31

Praxis: The first step of Sölle’s political hermeneutical process is “to make us see the Cross,” and to look closely at our immediate context asking, “who is victimized?” One allows oneself vulnerable exposure to the truth of the situation and opens oneself to connect to the feelings that arise when one does look and listen.32

Analysis: The second step is “to name the Beast” and to “recognize the Principalities and the Powers.” This is where the hermeneutical process leaves the personal and enters the institutional and political. One can ask critically, who profits from the victimization as observed in step one?33 Steps one and two fuse together, creating the context comprised of both “the narrative and the analytical.” Sölle instructs that “We read the context (steps 1 and 2) until it cries out for theology.”34 In other words, one can ask, where does my context represent a break in peace, justice, or hope?

29 Sölle, On Earth as in Heaven, x.
30 Sölle, x.
31 Sölle, x.
32 Sölle, x.
33 Sölle, x.
34 Sölle, xi.
Meditation: The third step finally involves reading scripture “out of our thirst for justice.” Analysis of one’s context should provide the background for reading the gospel in a way that allows one to search for ways that might draw closer to God’s dream for humanity. Drawing on inspiration from scripture about how to practically respond, (“because the analysis of our situation shows us that we need God”), one can move to the fourth step.  

Renewed Praxis: “What the theologian should learn here is to dream and to hope.” For Sölle, this fourth step is about renewed understanding of how one’s context is challenged by the pulse of the gospel. Step four is an opportunity to embody and recognize how “Our imagination has been freed from original sinful bondages and we are empowered to imagine alternative institutions.” Sölle envisions this final step as the beginning of change and transformation. “Only this last step discloses the text and makes us not only into readers but into ‘writers’ of the Bible. We say to each other, ‘take up your bed and walk,’ which is a necessary step in any liberation theology.” The last step of this process is the next step in a life committed to integrating personal and political transformation.

Sölle’s political hermeneutic provides a response to Elisabeth SchüSSLer Fiorenza’s call for “an emancipatory-political and liberation-theological paradigm of interpretation.” Christians are presented with the challenge to read their socio-political contexts with the same fervor and seriousness with which many Christians tend to read scripture. The process involves critical socio-political analysis but it also involves vulnerability as openness to feeling and

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35 Sölle, xi.
36 Sölle, xi.
37 Sölle, xi.
38 SchüSSLer Fiorenza, Changing Horizons, 129.
sensing what it is like to “read” one’s contexts and the situations of one’s local and global neighbors.

This particular political hermeneutic of the gospel is a process of ethical reflection beyond an obedience paradigm that interprets God’s commands or the demands of a religious authority and simply reacting with obedience. It involves paying close attention to contexts of social and political injustice and reading the gospel as a source of guidance for transformative liberation. It is also based in a Christology that resists an atonement theology of Jesus’ obedience to God’s command to sacrifice himself for the redemption of humanity. Instead, it presents a Christology that interprets Jesus’ actions in response to the suffering of his neighbors and the political injustices created by empire.

As a political hermeneutic, Sölle’s theology emphasizes the process of moral discernment over against a dynamics of obedience. Christians are invited to “read” both their cultural and political contexts alongside the gospel, centering on Jesus’ acts of healing, stories about justice and liberation, and his example of risking his life by standing against imperial domination. Attention and critique are involved in this process as well as discernment about the appropriate, justice-centered action. Rather than allowing religious authorities to interpret God’s will to then obey, Christians authorize themselves to interpret the needs of their local and global neighbors and glean inspiration and motivation from Biblical stories of liberation.

A Theology of Yearning for Freedom

Theology should point towards freedom, not obedience. Sölle’s concept of freedom interlocks with her understanding of the relationship between liberation and responsibility. For Sölle, personal freedom is contingent upon collective freedom, and the process of acknowledging this fact takes particular form for Christians in dominating social positions. Sölle weaves her
personal longings and hopes into her theological work on the concept of freedom. Here, she narrates her own yearning for freedom:

I would like to live differently from the way I live now. I would like not to cheat people in other countries when I buy bananas by defrauding them of their wages. I would like not to steal when I drink coffee. I do not want to belong to this band of murderers and thieves that our economy represents. I do not want hunger to continue forever. I do not want to live in a system that has proven itself unable to alter hunger in the last thirty years… but instead makes weapons, weapons, weapons. I am not free as long as I live in these conditions.\(^{39}\)

Sölle’s longing for freedom was expressed through her activism in the transatlantic peace movement, which informed her theology. Writing about freedom in the context of the arms buildup, freedom becomes a material reality: freedom as freedom from bombs, chemical weapons, the arms industry. “Freedom, true freedom, has become for me an intense yearning for a freedom from the most dreadful scourge of humanity, war.”\(^{40}\) Sölle’s “intense yearning” for freedom came with her belief that her own freedom is bound up in the freedom of others. This is not a unique concept of freedom, but, being a member of the “bourgeois middle class” and global north, the yearning for freedom takes a specific form. This is because the lifestyles, and economic structures of the global north create un-freedom for those whom these systems exploit.

Therefore, Christians of the global north are also un-free in a particular way. Sölle laments the condition of participating in unfreedom:

We live in a prison because we build prisons. We still live in destruction because we are involved in the exploitation of others and profit from it. As long as we treat our mother earth as we do, where we exterminate species of life, another of our brothers and sisters, plants, or animals every day, we are not free and the Spirit of Christ is not with us.\(^{41}\)

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40 Sölle, 96.

41 Sölle, 97–98.
This comment is powerful because it claims that Christians of the global north, Christians who tend not to be as impacted by structures such as the carceral system are in reality constructing collective unfreedom, a condition that is at one material and spiritual. Sölle returns to the Holy Spirit as enlivening the thirst for freedom among Christians. She re-emphasizes that freedom is not just an idea but a reality, and if Christians are to pay close attention to their own hopes and desires, they become aware that they are bound up in collective hope for material freedom.\(^42\)

Finally, Sölle writes that each generation must look closely at their contexts and their hopes and dreams and define what freedom means to them.\(^43\) It is both a right and a duty, she claims, to formulate a concrete concept of freedom that becomes a goal out of a community’s thirst for collective liberation. And to Christians who find themselves occupying social positions which allow them to benefit materially from the collective experiences of un-freedom, Sölle begs us to consider, “Where do we find this Spirit in our world—in our part of the calm, sated, so-called peaceful free world? I will not give an answer here to this question; you have to find the answer yourself. There is no other way.”\(^44\)

Sölle’s concept of freedom draws on several planes of experience--affect, critical analysis, and material reality. Freedom is a felt sensation, a desire that must be tapped into to have genuine expression. For Sölle, to sense one’s desperate thirst for freedom is the first step toward collective liberation. And it comes in relationship to recognizing the disproportionately violent costs of unfreedom for the global community. For Christians of the global north, to be

\(^{42}\) Sölle, 97. “Where the Spirit is, there grows liberation. There grows also the combative desire for liberation and the experience of greater concrete freedom, which are not yet visible in our violent conditions.”

\(^{43}\) Sölle, 95.

\(^{44}\) Sölle, 97.
unfree is to primarily be caught up in the systems that cause violent unfreedom for others. Recognizing this relationship uncovers the concrete structures and realities that cause unfreedom (war, global capitalism, heteropatriarchy, racialized violence, and the list goes on). To name and claim struggle towards freedom is to dismantle concrete structures of domination in the concrete. This requires looking closely at how unfreedom is exacted upon one’s global neighbors.

Poetic Theology of Response

A theology that employs political and multidirectional discernment is a theology that imagines humanity not as obedient servants or followers but as critical, reflective, and responsive to both the gospel and the political challenges in their midst. Sölle shows how poetry can offer a means to reach for language beyond academic rhetoric and ecclesial doctrine and expresses emotional, spiritual and embodied knowing. Sölle’s poetry expresses a theology in attentive response to the call of the gospel and the world beyond obedience.

If Christian theologies of domination and obedience tend to foster to feelings of apathy, powerlessness and contribute to, rather than resist Christofascist culture, what alternative modes of being Christian exist? Sölle answers this question through her poetry, and she maintains that, in a certain way, all Christians have the capacity to be poets to reach beyond theological language of domination and obedience. Sölle finds in this art form an alternative language to resist the language of domination that becomes monopolized by the Death Machine. She contends that prayer itself is a form of poetry because it expresses creatively the dynamism of movement between one’s theologies and one’s experiences and longings. As a theological

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46 Sölle, 32.
method, poetry refuses to be dominated by determinant language, holding open space for mystery and expressing multiple forms of knowing.

Sölle’s poetry expresses three primary experiences of being inspired by the spirit of God animating response to the world. First, through her poetry, Sölle demonstrates careful and concerned attention to the world. Second, poetry articulates a pained and determined response to human and planetary suffering and injustice. Third, poetry articulates what it takes to sustain the work of justice despite perceived failure and in view of the long haul toward liberation.

Attention

In various instances, Sölle makes clear that to be a poet is to be equally aware of one’s own inner life as well as one’s political reality. Inner awareness involves acknowledging one’s own desires, hopes, dreams, and fears in response to the world. Referring to Franz Kafka’s image of literature as an axe that breaks the ice of the soul, Sölle argues that the poetic impulse should do just that: chip away at the heart hardened by Christofascist patterns, freeing the forces that exist there.47 In a television interview which aired in 1982, Sölle describes her method of doing theology as one which consistently begins with poetry, because poetry enables her to discern the inner movements of the heart and mind. Poetry, she tells the interviewer, has been a life-long attempt to express what is within, to consider inner responses to the experiences and people she encounters. Poetry allows her to articulate with precision what her own heart voices.48 In this case, the poetic method provides a pattern for unveiling inner truth which otherwise lies dormant.

47 Sölle, 32.

48 Dorothee Sölle, Theo Christiansen, and Johannes Thiele, Dorothee Sölle Im Gespräch (Stuttgart: Kreuz, 1988), 92.
Attending to inner experience can often involve discomfort and agitation. In a poem titled “My Wishes,” Sölle demonstrates that paying attention to one’s desires can reveal one’s own daily acquiescence to the political and economic status quo. Once the poet taps into the desire to break free from her various traditions of obedience, she is rarely left alone and begins to feel as though she is being constantly attacked by a pesky swarm of birds.

My Wishes

My wishes are like sparrows
impudent cacophonous birds
I’ve shooed them away many times
occasionally I’ve even downed one
with my analytical slingshot
and I’ve simply made up my mind
to live without sparrows
on a city courtyard for example
artificially lit and not particularly dirty
I can find pretty things
to buy and wrap I carry them
from one end of the subway
to the other
why not live my life in peace one day like the next
without these pests
innocently they come back
descend on me and occupy the land
how many times have I shooed them away
impudent cacophonous birds
you my wishes like sparrows

Despite the temptation to shoot down desires with rationalizations, the poem tells a story of relentless “pests.” Efforts to return to a trivial, consumerist life (carrying pretty things around aimlessly) are interrupted by constant nagging. This poem describes how, once one’s desires are uncovered, one finds it even more impossible to conform to the mold created by structures of domination. One is tortured by pesky desires for an alternative way of being. This poem is an

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image of constant reminder of one’s desires that life should not be trivial, despite one’s efforts to shoo them away. This poem suggests that one’s desires, once given attention, have the potential to inspire resistance to the Death Machine.

Not only does Sölle’s poetic theology display attention toward the inner life, it also extends an outward gaze toward political reality. The process of opening one’s eyes to reality requires an interpretation of sin not as a private phenomenon, but as manifested in harmful social structures. A vantage point is cleared by situating oneself in the context of Sölle’s definition of sin as “collaboration with systems that operate our industrialized world,” and by forging self and social criticism.50

But how exactly does one sharpen one’s skill of attending to reality? Sölle’s poetic theology suggests a process which allows for a kind of conscientization for people who are privileged enough to be able to ignore many forms of social and political injustice. For Sölle, the poem serves as a space from which to reflect upon encounters with people and places that have made an impression upon her. As a dedicated activist, Sölle often found herself in many various spaces of protest, confrontation, and resistance; spaces where the Death Machine had garnered collaborators en masse, wielding massive suffering. Take, for example, her experiences reflected upon in Of War and Love, where she describes her travels to Latin America where she collects first-hand accounts from the families of the disappeared. Sölle’s encounters in Brazil, Guatemala and El Salvador made lasting impressions on her work as a theologian. To concretize these encounters, she wrote poetry about them. On television, Sölle further explains how poems that

50 Sölle, Political Theology, 92.
attend to the political injustice she witnesses allow her to relive the encounters, and push them to the forefront of her consciousness, further informing her theology and activism.\textsuperscript{51}

The poem, in this sense, provides an opportunity to relive moments of witness to the impacts of the Death Machine. It functions as a repetitive memory that is not allowed to recede from one’s consciousness. Using this poetic framework of attention, this poetic theological method encompasses witnessing the impact of social sin, taking stock of the ways in which one collaborates with it, and allowing what one has witnessed to take up space in one’s consciousness, informing one’s actions in the world.

Further, Sölle’s poetic theology facilitates fluidity between the two categories of the inner and the outer. The flow between the inner and the outer is a kind of definition for prayer, because as Sölle maintains, prayer, must not remain encased in the private sphere. “Everything inward seeks outwardness,” she claims. “Poetry and prayer are attempts, so to speak, where the separation of public and private, outward and inward become unnecessary and cease to matter.”\textsuperscript{52}

The attention intrinsic to poetry and prayer does not provide solace, but rather, like a swarm of sparrows, pecks at the human being, waking her from the paralysis brought on by the fear of fear. It causes her to notice her own desires, and fears, and, places the reality of the Death Machine in full view.

\textbf{Collective Outcry}

The intersection of the inner and outer life, of public and private reality, is further accented by a second attribute constitutive of Sölle’s poetic theology. After paying attention to

\textsuperscript{51} Sölle, Christiansen, and Thiele, \textit{Dorothee Sölle Im Gespräch}, 92.

\textsuperscript{52} Sölle, “Breaking the Ice of the Soul,” 32.
the inner desires, fears, and hopes while simultaneously facing political reality with eyes wide open, there must be an appropriate response that resists the temptation to become paralyzed by the “fear of fear” (Chapter II). If fear of fear renders the Christian numb and speechless, then a poetic response allows the full force of feeling to break the silence in reaction to suffering caused by the Death Machine.

Sölle’s poetic antidote to the fear of fear manifests itself in the act of crying out in reaction to destruction caused by the Death Machine. To illustrate the critical nature of crying out, she draws upon Mark 9:14-28, the story of the epileptic boy and his father. Sölle locates hope in the moment when the father cries out in the face of the seemingly hopeless situation of his son’s demon possession. Sölle highlights the moment when the father cries, “I do have faith. Help the little faith I do have!” as a moment of resistance to the fear of fear. For Sölle, the father’s scream tips the story into completion, jarring Jesus to treat the boy. “There is hope in the father’s cry. If we cry loudly enough, there will be hope in our cry too,” she remarks. It should be noted that this is not a call for presumptuous over-confidence, nor is it an underrepresentation of the foreboding task at hand. It is merely a call to scream out in anguish when one feels pain, so that hopelessness does not have the last word. If silence in the face of tragedy renders the human being powerless, then crying out in pain and fear puts her in touch with her power to react.

Sölle speaks about her poetry as an instrument with which to voice her own cry. As she tells her interviewer, poetry allows her to express her feelings of fear and despair, rather than truncating their momentum. Most remarkably, Sölle discloses her intent to write poetry as

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53 Sölle, Of War and Love, 31.
spoken word, rather than for silent reading. The audible quality intended for her poetry accentuates this second attribute within Sölle’s poetic theology: poetic outcry must be communal and public for effective resistance against the Death Machine to take root.

The nature of crying out together in reaction to the suffering that one encounters through attention becomes for Sölle the very criteria for Christian prayer. In an essay entitled “The Deprivatized Prayer,” Sölle asserts, “Prayer becomes deprivatized and political when we identify with and express the pain and hope of those with whom we live. We express these pains and hopes, this hunger for the reign of God, and they become our ultimate concern [Tillich]).

Sölle’s poem, “Saturday Before Easter, 81” exemplifies such crying out. This poem is in reaction to people she encounters in El Salvador who suffered the immense pain of the disappearances of their family members. The poem becomes an expression of pain and despair after witnessing these stories as well as the movement toward community and away from paralysis. The poem does not pretend this process is easy, rather it is itself is a cry, while it also demonstrates how to cry out in fear together with others.

Saturday before easter ’81

Oh when
will the graves finally be empty
the exhuming of victims unnecessary
the pictures gone
of children sprayed with a new poison
that turns the skin black and peeling
and makes the eyes sink into their sockets

54 Sölle, 92.

oh when
will the graves finally be empty
of mutilated bodies
in el salvador

When I first became a christian
I wanted to see christ
striking me down on the road to damascus
I pictured the place something like göttingen
the empty tomb was no more than a fairy tale
for the unenlightened

Now I’ve been becoming a christian
for a long time
and I have occasionally seen jesus
the last time was an old woman in nicaragua
who was learning to read she was beaming
not just her eyes but also her hair thinned by age
and her twisted feet
she was beaming all over

But I’ve also grown poorer
depressed I scurry through the city
I even go to demonstrations
half expecting courage to be passed out there
and I’d give anything to see
the other half of the story
the empty tomb on easter morning
and empty graves in el salvador⁵⁶

“Oh when/will the graves be finally empty/of mutilated bodies/in el salvador,” the first stanza

pleas. The theme of Easter’s empty tomb seems to mock the El Salvadorian graves waiting to be
exhumed so that victims might finally be identified. Rather than encountering Jesus in his
resurrected glory—this is the Saturday before Easter after all—the poetic voice observes Jesus
on the streets of Nicaragua personified by a woman she passes by with twisted feet. And yet, her
despair persists; it is not abated by the sighting of Jesus.

At first glance, it seems that through this poem, Sölle is almost resigning herself to hopelessness. However, there is a refusal to turn inward to deal with pain silently, to be paralyzed by despair. The poem expresses the turn outward, “scurrying through the city” attending demonstrations, and looking to the collective for courage. The poem ends in one last cry: “and I’d give anything to see/the other half of the story/the empty tomb on easter morning/and empty graves in El Salvador.” This picture of hope against the fear of fear is burdened by despair, but longs to envision a kind of mass-resurrection. With subtle acknowledgement that there will indeed be an end of the story, the poem cries out with agony while attempting to holding out for the empty tomb and justice in the face of these empty graves.

Sölle’s poetry is an expression of crying out together with others fosters a relationship to pain different from the fear of fear which renders the human being silent and numb. Collective outcry becomes a poetic tool in resisting the Death Machine. In this way, the act of crying out is subversive, because it keeps injustice audible.

**Steadfastness for Solidarity**

Crying out in the face of the Death Machine helps to relinquish the Christofascist obsession with security. When someone no longer succumbs to the fear of fear which leaves them scrounging for security, then they are the position to pursue the work of resistance. Although resisting the Death Machine does not promise safety, Sölle expresses in her poetry a way of being that is not stopped by insecurity and vulnerability. It is a way of being that demands that communities cry out together in pain, rather than stifle their voices and numb their feelings.

If collective outcry fosters active resistance, then how does poetic theology inform action? While Sölle’s political theology demands political action of every Christian, the poetic
impulse elicited by Sölle’s work prescribes how Christians are to engage in active resistance. For Sölle, a poetic way of being in the resistance embraces the cost. To go unarmed into the resistance against the Death Machine renders one exceedingly vulnerable. And, in certain desperate times, much agony is to be expected. In one of her essays reacting to the mass disappearances in Latin America, Sölle submits to the seeming transience of hope but calls for sustained struggle despite a darkening future. “I have no political analysis of resistance to offer that justifies hope. We have to expect the worst, for a while. But I know from the tradition that sustains the struggle and suffering people of El Salvador that terror will not have the last word.” Here, Sölle portrays an attitude of acknowledging despair while also carrying a sense of hope.

For Sölle, action, even if clouded with doubt, is a way of being in the resistance and is sustained by spiritual engagement in *compassio*. Borrowing from thirteenth century mystic, Mechtild of Magdeburg, Sölle draws on the concept of *compassio* to illustrate further the suffering inherent to resistance. When “anguish about unliberated life” is meshed with the agony brought by placing one’s body in the struggle of resistance, *compassio* becomes the operative way of being. “Compassio means, in the first place, suffering with the crucified Christ,” Sölle elaborates. She further expands the understanding of the phrase “Christ crucified” arguing that the cross is operative whenever the Death Machine encroaches on life. “Eventually the great majority of humankind hangs on the cross of empire and, …with her species and elements our mother earth, too, hangs on the cross of industrialism.” The imperative to suffer with Christ implies that the Christian life involves a suffering with our human and non-human neighbors.

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Sölle, 99.
This interpretation does not condone a seeking out of suffering, but rather recognizes that resisting domination intrinsically yields agony. And, it is the only way forward if hope is to be attained. “Without compassion, there is no resurrection,” Sölle states.  

Steadfastness as the third attribute inherent in Sölle’s poetic theology is illustrated in the poem, “Play me a song about rosa, anna, and rosa.” The poem functions to remember the sustained resistance embodied in Anna Walentinowic, Rosa Luxemburg and Rosa Parks; three 20th century women who struggled against the Death Machine, despite the physical pain it cost them. These women’s lives, memorialized in Sölle’s poetry, demonstrate action that “remains in inconsolability,” a spiritual approach to resistance that sustains itself with an element of realism that nonetheless proceeds in its vulnerable smallness.

Play me a song about rosa, anna, and rosa

Leave me alone with your identity crises
stop your introspective strumming on the guitar
play something else
play a song about peace
play about our comrades in the struggle

Sing about anna walentinowic
crane operator in danzig
sing of the strike and why it broke out
and don’t forget rosa parks
don’t ever forget that she stayed seated
for each one of us no matter how white our skin
stayed seated in the bus in alabama
where blacks were not supposed to sit

Sing about women
just looking at them makes me stronger
makes me laugh


59 Sölle, The Silent Cry, 155.
solidly built like anna the crane operator
who scared them so much they fired her to avoid trouble
a preventive layoff from her job on the crane

Don’t forget our great sister rosa Luxemburg either
she came from anna’s country
that small country thirsting for freedom
split and gagged occupied and possessed
beaten and raped
but never subdued
sing about rosa
and about the spontaneity of people
she believed in
like anna the crane operator

Did you see her picture
sing another song about anna
about the hope of the dock workers
for meat and the right to defend themselves
for bread and roses

Anna walentinowic
the papers don’t carry your story
because people here don’t know
what it means to be a woman
a human being
a crane operator
who makes strikes possible
because we’re still expected to admire sweet little bunnies
not a woman with a laugh like anna’s
with four children now and then
a preventive layoff

Stop your introspective strumming on the guitar
play something else
play a song about peace
play about comrades in the struggle

I’m tired of all this whining
play me a song about anna and the two rosas
play about real people
about women strong and vulnerable
caring for others and independent
fighting for you too in the teller’s cage at Chase Manhattan bank
for all our sisters
play about bread and roses
play about the price of meat and a free labor union
play against steel helmets and what’s inside of them
play against atomic missiles and what’s behind them
you can’t arrest the sun
   it shines
you can’t censor the roses
   they flower
you can’t keep women down
   they laugh

   Play about rosa luxemburg
   play about rosa parks
   play about anna walentinowic
   play about our sisters
   play about us

For Sölle, engaging *compassio* is the only way to foster *life* in resistance to the machine of death even though it requires vulnerability: “Only life that opens itself to the other, life that risks being wounded or killed, contains promise. Those who arm themselves are not only killers; they are already dead.” Sölle attributes these qualities to Parks, Walentinowic, and Luxemburg in her poem who remained steadfast in their struggle.

Through her political hermeneutic and in her poetry, Sölle’s theology builds itself around the claim that Christians cannot resist domination with obedience. This is because it tends to perpetuate a dynamic of domination between humanity and God. Christians need to reimagine themselves beyond the dynamics of domination in order to disrupt the way in which the habit of obedience bleeds over to conforming to political structures of domination. In the search for new language, theology needs to reconceive of the human-divine dynamic beyond domination and

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obedience. Sölle has done this in her theology by amplifying the historical Jesus’ response to the way in which empire makes certain individuals particularly vulnerable. She reinterprets key theological concepts through the theological lens that imagines humanity in response to God’s spirit and the reality of suffering and injustice in history. And, through poetry, expresses embodied experiences of engaging in the call of the gospel through attention, response, and action. Theology should be poetic – a crying out about injustice, a mobilization for solidarity and a conception of God as life energy with fueling human action.

**Transforming the Obedient Habitus with Creative Disobedience**

Dorothee Sölle authors her work, *Creative Disobedience* as a vision for morality and discipleship that extracts itself from moral systems that revolve around divine domination and human obedience. As previous chapters have argued, Sölle, as a German, a Christian, and a woman, cannot fathom a moral theology that uses language of obedience. Recounting her own national history of fascism, genocide and war, and the uncritical obedience that caused so many Germans to follow the Nazi program, she claims that using the concept and language of obedience in any context, and especially within moral theology, is “meaningless religious rhetoric without remembrance and therefore without hope.”

But this dilemma and this need to remember the ways in which Christians have been too obedient is not confined to a German context. Rather, she goes on to claim that “Blind obedience in which people surrender their reason and conscience to someone else is not limited to specific nations; neither is collective shame for the deeds of one nation. There is even an international solidarity among those who feel ashamed about what their governments have done in their

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62 Sölle, *Creative Disobedience*, x.
name.”63 Writing for a broader global audience of Christians who want to account for their own national and religious participation in destructive political forces, Sölle draws together and responds to the shadowy impact of obedience within national, religious, and sexual traditions in this book.

As emphasized in Chapter II, Sölle exposes the way in which obedient habits extend beyond authoritarian demands of “charismatic leaders.” Christians are also continuously obeying “market forces of the economy, the use of energy, and growing militarization” which she describes as technocracy.64 Obedient social character can cement “rigid individualism” as well. She judges that, “Authoritarian religion with its dichotomic perspective of ‘us’ and ‘them’ furthers the illusion of an individual salvation.”65 The confluence of economic and religious individualism completely evades the Judeo-Christian call to participate the justice of God, with God. And, it presupposes that Christians can achieve salvation through individual obedience and privatized faith.

And in the sexual sphere, too, Christians must move beyond obedience in order to break away from gendered structures of exclusion and violence. This begins with reformulating one’s images of God that consolidate male power. Sölle wants to move toward mystical traditions that emphasize “being one with the whole.”66 Rather than worshipping God because of “his” power, the emphasis becomes being one with God. This is where her movement from obedience to solidarity is theologically located: Sölle claims, “Here our relationship to God is not one of

63 Sölle, xi.
64 Sölle, xiv.
65 Sölle, xv.
66 Sölle, xix.
obedience but of union; it is not a matter of a distant God exacting sacrifice and self-denial, but rather a matter of agreement and consent, of being at one with what is alive. And this then becomes what religion is about. When this happens solidarity will replace obedience as the dominant virtue.”

In writing *Creative Disobedience*, Sölle articulates virtues that would cultivate habits that foster disobedience against both religious and political domination. “Beyond obedience there is resistance,” Sölle claims. As Chapter II explores, Sölle provides a detailed critique against the varieties of social character that obedient habits reinforce. And Chapter III explores the ways Christians might understand how obedience compounds white supremacy, coloniality and persists through kyriocentrism. These are paradigms that Christians cannot simply extract themselves from by merely denouncing them. Christians are obligated to response.

Sölle articulates virtues for Christians to cultivate that stand against obedient habits both in politics and religion. Taken together, these virtues form a moral vision of “creative disobedience.” In essence, these are virtues that would allow Christians to more easily participate in liberation, including political acts of civil disobedience and other forms of solidarity. Freedom as spontaneity, *Phantasie* or imagination and self-fulfillment are core habits that Sölle wants Christians to foster through spiritual and moral practice.

When Sölle argues that, “solidarity will then replace obedience as the most important virtue,” she is referring to a process of *forming oneself in community* to express and perform

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67 Sölle, xix.

68 Sölle, xxi.

solidarity. This section provides a close reading from Sölle’s book, *Creative Disobedience* in which Sölle provides moral counters to obedience, describing how discipleship should center around dispositions of freedom, imagination and self-fulfillment.

**Spontaneity, Imagination, and Self-fulfillment**

*Creative Disobedience* requires that personal liberation take place alongside socio-political liberation. Transforming the structures dominating one’s context requires that Christians are able to act spontaneously in their response as opposed to acting out of duty or command. Spontaneity is like an energy that sets into motion one’s response to the needs of one’s neighbors. I interpret Sölle’s use of spontaneity as a sort of intersubjective movement between the self and the other/s as an act of freedom that inspires freedom. In her words, Sölle describes spontaneity as “The power [one] needs to change things, to discover, to invent, to set things in motion… This spontaneity in turn inspires new freedom.”\(^70\) Spontaneity acts in contrast to allowing Christians to fall into the cultural status quo or the political order of things by living in a constant state of reaction to punitive God or leader. Spontaneity is an act of freedom, and Sölle believes that “it is precisely this spontaneity for which Jesus sets us free.”\(^71\)

Spontaneity is another way of describing the kind of responsiveness that Sölle wants Christians to foster. It counteracts an obedient mindset which tends not to facilitate movement between critique and response. Becoming more spontaneous as a moral agent involves giving space for individual and communal discernment about an injustice and deciding on effective and creative responses to mitigate the harm of the injustice.

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\(^71\) Sölle, 27.
This leads to the need for Phantasie or imagination as core components of becoming creatively disobedience. Phantasie, in German, translates both to “fantasy” and “imagination.” I interpret Sölle’s use of the term as utilizing the capacity for fantasy to imagine material change for social and political transformation. Participation in liberation is a creative act. A person can express their full self-hood when they create something, not when they are obeying, sacrificing, or consuming. However, this is a very different concept of self-fulfillment or self-realization than consumer culture puts forth. Self-realization for creative disobedience is key for personal and social flourishing, according to Sölle. In her words, “Liberated humans are builders of well-being, they are in control of all the possibilities at their disposal and not only experience it but also create it.” Yet again, Sölle wants to free Christian moral agency from obedience and entice her readers to consider the freedom to imagine and create beyond the limits of authoritarian religious norms for morality.

In order not to interpret that gift of imagination and the creative act of liberation through a consumerist lens, Sölle turns her readers to the example of Jesus of Nazareth as a model of someone who is imaginative and creative. Traditionally, Christianity remembers Jesus as fundamentally obedient and self-sacrificial, the picture of self-denial. But to see Jesus this way is to ignore a central tenet of discipleship according to Sölle. Sölle responds to scholars who wish to redefine Jesus’ example of obedience as a “discerning” obedience or a “radical” obedience. She claims that “these additions…almost explode the concept of obedience because so little is

72 Sölle, 47.
73 Sölle, 47.
left of keeping commandments. Both conscious discernment and radicality give rise to a spontaneity which the concept of obedience is no longer able to contain.”

*Phantasie*, as imagination and creativity in action would be a far better description of Jesus’ life, beyond obedience and self-sacrifice. Jesus “burst established boundaries” through his ministry and story-telling. He did not tie himself to duty but encouraged those around him to see things differently. “In the power of his world-transforming Phantasie he set aside the boundaries of nations, of social classes, of education, of sexual distinctions, of religions.” Jesus’ imagination came “rising out of this joyous self-realization” as a “person most conscious of his own identity.”

Imagination is an expression of spontaneity and freedom. If moral systems of obedience have the tendency to maintain the established order, Jesus’ way of life demonstrates a creative, imaginative insight into how life is and how life could be, especially for those who suffering from unjust social and political norms and structures. Imagination arises out of encountering one’s neighbors and one’s world with both realism and idealism, seeing it for what it is, and having the courage to dream about what it could be. Christians limit their awareness the moment they allow their imaginations to atrophy, Sölle contends.

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74 Sölle, 50.
75 Sölle, 57.
76 Sölle, 52.
77 Sölle, 56.
78 Sölle, 56.
79 Sölle, 52.
Having the capacity to create and imagine requires that one has a fuller awareness of one’s own identity beyond obedience to God, religious leaders, or political authority. This becomes another core component of *creative disobedience* for Sölle. Self-fulfillment means wholeness of self, integration of one’s identities, and a commitment to self-knowledge and self-discovery on the way to political and social liberation. Akin to Valerie Saiving,⁸⁰ Sölle emphasizes fullness of self as a requirement for the capacity to give of oneself. Removing Jesus from the classic portrait of sacrificial obedience, Sölle claims that, “this is what we can learn from Christ. The more fully one is aware of one’s own identity, the easier it is for him to let go of himself.”⁸¹ She portrays Jesus not as clutching tightly to duties and commands, but moving through life with open hands.⁸² Through fulfillment, Christians can liberate themselves from the boundaries of the social and political status quo. Rather than a series of duties, life becomes an adventure toward personal freedom through creatively and communally constructing collective liberation.⁸³

With her concept of *creative disobedience*, Sölle wants to construct a moral vision that places *Phantasie* or imagination, creativity at the center of virtue. Imagination allows love to calm the chaos of order. “This *Phantasie* has nothing to do with filling out already existing structures. Its whole aim is rather to discover, make visible, and disclose that which is

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⁸¹ Sölle, 58.

⁸² Sölle, 59.

⁸³ Sölle, 60.
invisible.” Sölle, 66. I interpret “that which is invisible” as the new structures and relationships one can create out of expressive agency rather than a repressed sense of self.

Sölle’s concept of creative disobedience to theologies and politics of domination puts forward a concept of moral agency beyond obedience. In this way, creative disobedience responds to the theological question, how does Christian belief in a God with whom one may cooperate in the project of liberation inspire ethical reflection and action? For Sölle, creative disobedience represents the imperative for Christians to form themselves in community to act in solidarity out of freedom, imagination and a fuller sense of self.

**Conclusion: When Prayer Becomes Protest**

Under the belief that Christian life, political engagement, and theology are inseparable, Dorothee Sölle, along with Fulbert Seffensky, Marie Viet, Heinrich Böll, Klaus Schmidt and Egbert Höflich gathered an ecumenical group of lay people as well as theologians, clergy, and activists together for a liturgy that incorporated information, meditation, discussion and action. The first meeting took place in 1968 at St. Anthony Church in Cologne at 11pm. Inspired by the Worker Priest Movement in France which was comprised of a process of lute et contemplation, the Politische Nachtgebet, or, political liturgy, provided a space for a teaching centered on a specific justice issue, meditation of some kind, discussion, and, plans for action in response to the injustice.

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84 Sölle, 66.


Eventually, the group was no longer allowed to meet at St. Anthony, because they were too radical for conventional Christianity. The Catholic hierarchy called the group “blasphemers” and “degrading to the house of God.” So, despite the fact that over a thousand people filled the church, the group was forced to continue finding various spaces in which to meet.

From 1968-1972, the group met monthly under the dictum that “Theologisches Nachdenken ohne politische Konsequenzen kommt einer Heuchelei gleich. Jeder theologische Satz muss auch ein politischer sein. (Theological reflection without political consequences is hypocrisy. Every theological statement must also be a political statement).” As a result of the Politisches Nachtgebet, similar prayer and action groups sprang up all around the Cologne area.

Sölle wrote a creed that became formative for the group and also characteristic of the public theology she aimed to do. The first stanza provides insight into the theology underpinning the Politisches Nachtgebet as indicative of the task Sölle had in mind for Political Theology: “Ich glaube an Gott/der die welt nicht fertig geschaffen hat/wie ein ding das immer so bleiben muss/der nicht nach ewigen gesetzen regiert/die unabänderlich gelten/nicht nach natürlichen ordnungen/von armen und reichen/sachverständigen und uninformierten/herrschenden und ausgelieferten.” (I believe in God/who did not create the world as completed/like a thing that must always remain as-is/who does not rule by everlasting laws/held as unchanging/not according to natural order/of poor and rich/professionals and uniformed/governing and powerless.)

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89 Wind, Lukens, and Rumscheidt, Dorothee Soelle: Mystic and Rebel, 45.
The “Politisches Nachtgebet” exemplifies Sölle’s anti-domination theology and an embodiment of *creative disobedience*. At their first meeting, they offered teachings, meditation, prayer and discussion, and they located the “Crucified One” in war-torn Vietnam alongside the oppressed. Rather than remaining obedient to the situation, the group implemented their imagination for protesting the war. Together, they took to the streets and waved banners that proclaimed “Vietnam is Golgatha” with a refusal to be a church that uncritically followed destructive policy.\(^90\)

Sölle’s anti-domination theology and development of *creative disobedience* was meant to be a public theological project that inspired Christians to participate in God’s justice, not a theology that merely proposes radical ideas but remains bound by book covers. However, taking her theology into the public sphere was costly for Sölle. Not only did she face condemnation by the church, the university system rejected her radical stances as well. In Germany, Sölle was never granted full professorship at any university. Theology departments perceived her as too radical. In one moment in time, she was able to work at a German university in the literature department, but, she was not granted employment for the following year. Finally, she found a home at Union Theological Seminary in New York where she taught from 1975 to 1987.\(^91\)

Though the risk was great, and consequences were many, Sölle did not give up employing her critique of theologies of domination and embodying *creative disobedience* throughout her life.

*Creative disobedience* is a feminist intervention and as such, it is a bridge between the critique of structures of domination and the dreaming of new ways of being in resistance and

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\(^90\) Wind, Lukens, and Rumscheidt, 72.

\(^91\) Wind, Lukens, and Rumscheidt, 98.
solidarity. Sölle’s anti-domination theology which culminates in the ethical concept of *creative disobedience* is informed by her honest account of her national history, and in direct connection with her learning from US colleagues in feminist and black theology especially at Union Theological Seminary where she taught.

Sölle’s theology is a constant search for language that inspires participation in liberation and applies a decidedly political hermeneutic to the gospel and the world, one which critically examines where domination is at play culturally and politically, and, inspires response to the violence it causes. Sölle’s poetic theology demonstrates how the poetic process incorporates multidimensional attentiveness to both personal and political experience; expresses communal pain as outcry against injustice; and provides sustenance through the painful processes of disobedience.

*Creative disobedience* is then an ethical concept that is centered in theologies that animate Christian participation with God and it is a commitment to a vision of discipleship that is poetic and political. *Creative disobedience* inspires moral agency not by following a command, but by acting out of freedom; not by duty but imagination; not through self-negation but through self-fulfillment. *Creative disobedience* is a process of becoming; a series of virtues that help Christians develop practices that lead not to obedience but solidarity. *Creative disobedience* is a way of being in resistance to religious and political structures of domination.

Through poetry, prayer, protest and other endless forms of disobedience, Sölle offers *creative disobedience* to foster the capacity for Christians to become more and more creative in their disruption of theological and political domination. In light of this alternative concept for moral agency, the following chapter asks what should *creative disobedience* look like in a
present-day US context? More specifically, what are the critiques and what are the practices that comprise *creative disobedience* in the context of progressive white-Christians?
CHAPTER V
CREATIVE DISOBEDIENCE FOR PROGRESSIVE WHITE-CHRISTIANS IN THE U.S. TODAY

Introduction: Denouncing Christian Nationalism is Only the First Step

This study began with attempting to understand Sölle’s concern that in her context, the theological language of obedience is inappropriate in view of the way in which fascism flourished with an obedient citizenry. Tracing the language of obedience back from Sölle through her “theological fathers,” Barth, Bonhoeffer and Bultmann, to Calvin, Luther and finally to Paul, reveals a tradition in Christianity that is rooted in a history of constant negotiation with imperial domination. Obedience may provide some promising attributes for morality but in the context of an authoritarian society, exploitative capitalism, and militarized state force, obedience too often becomes a dangerous habit in response to both religious and political domination.

In other words, when Christian concepts of morality are defined by obedience to God through obedience to religious authority, even when that religious authority might be instructing Christians to disobey violent political goals, the moral habit of obedience out of fear of punishment too easily becomes indistinguishable from conformity to dominating societal structures of capitalism and militarism. Sölle warns that the Christofascist society would be the tragic result of a theology of domination and an ethics of obedience couched within a system of political domination.

In a present-day US context, Christian nationalism is the most striking example of the ways that Christian obedience and political domination interlock. I argue that denouncing
Christian nationalism must include the acknowledgement of the historical and ideological roots of Christianity’s history with political domination rather than simply distancing oneself from Christian nationalists. This is because, as I argue in Chapter III, obedience to power, boundaries and order are broader than Christian nationalism, with deep roots in colonialism. To be white and Christian, even for progressives, is to be constantly and intimately negotiating certain forms of power, boundaries, and order.

This chapter examines how progressive white-Christians (PWCs) might take the leap beyond denouncing Christian nationalism and embody creative disobedience against power, boundaries and order in their own communities and in relation to their religious traditions. This way, they might be equipped for disobedience against these structures as they exist in broader socio-economic and political contexts of violence and domination.

I adapt creative disobedience as a process of accounting for and responding to Christian histories of obedience to theological and political domination. PWCs can and must do this by becoming adept at critique, rather than obedience, and creatively embodying disobedience through practices of delinking and re-existing outside of kyriarchal and colonial habits of obedience to power, boundaries, and order.

This chapter begins with defining what I mean by progressive white-Christians for the purpose of clarity about who I think belongs within this category. I then explain my rationale for emphasizing the need to develop the habit of critique as part of the process of creative disobedience. And, I explain how decolonial language of delinking and re-existing can ground the process of creative disobedience among PWCs. The heart of this chapter centers around identifying specific habits that PWCs have formed particularly in obedience to structures of power, boundaries and order, even as they publicly reject Christian nationalist ideology.
Critiquing the way Christians negotiate their relationship to these structures would be the first step in delinking from them. Finally, I suggest practices that Christians might adopt in order to embody *re-existence* beyond obedience to power, boundaries, and order.

**Defining Progressive White-Christians (PWCs)**

Sölle addresses her critique of obedience in multiple directions: First, her critique stands as a warning against *Christofascism* which Sölle watched rearing its head in the 1980s in the United States as Christian leaders preached messages that sounded less like gospel and more like ideology propping up nationalism, militarism and capitalism. Second, she addressed middle-class and wealthy Christians of the global north who found themselves benefitting from the social, political and economic violence upon which society was built during the Reagan era. Sölle located herself within this group of people and was vocal in her roles as a theologian, religious leader, and activist, about maintaining honesty and accountability for reckoning with past and present participation in violent systems.

What can be learned from Sölle’s method of address is that she places herself within the (theological, religious and activist) communities that she critiques and she calls her readers and listeners to attend to the reality of *Christofascism*. Even as her audiences may ideologically and actively reject tenets of *Christofascism* itself, Sölle wants to marshal discussion around the warning that it presents. This is because for Sölle, *Christofascism* is not a crisis taking place within insular extremist groups. Its ideological tentacles have a far reach and cause real violence around every corner of our social and political landscape.

This chapter adapts Sölle’s style by warning progressive white-Christians that Christian nationalism is not as far away as they would like to believe. In fact, there is danger in the act of distancing oneself and one’s community from Christian nationalism because it neglects the
reality that Chapter III sheds light upon. That is, through coloniality, white habitus, and kyriocentrism, white people influenced by almost any form of Christianity cannot ignore their attachment to structures and relationships of power, boundaries and order which are the very pillars, in extreme forms, of Christian nationalism.

And so, as a progressive white-Christian myself, I want to address communities that comprise progressive white-Christians to warn and to galvanize disobedience against the not-so-distant structures and relationships of domination that we continue to reinforce through our spiritualities and in our communities.

I define white-Christians at length in Chapter III and to this definition I want to add progressive. I define progressive white-Christians both in the sense of the political and the religious. Politically, I use the term “progressive” as a rather broad umbrella term to include liberals and leftists alike. In terms of the language of Pew Research Center’s political typology, I am including the Outsider Left, the Democratic Mainstays, the Establishment Liberals and the Progressive Left.¹ Basically, this group comprises a very broad spectrum of Christians who are very unlikely to vote for a Republican ticket at a local, state or federal level. Progressive white-Christians are also “progressive” in their religious beliefs and practices. This definition given by Rebecca Todd Peters and Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty conveys some basic social and theological tenants of many progressive Christians:

The term ‘progressive’ has long been used to represent an understanding of Christianity marked by an awareness of social sin, a consciousness of institutional and human potential and shortcomings, and an emphasis on the church’s mission to engage the world. While progressive Christians support charitable actions to meet the immediate needs of people in crisis, their deeper concern is to transform the social systems and economic structures of society that marginalize people and the natural world. Progressive

Christians draw on a variety of rich resources (Christian teachings and tradition, science, experience, social sciences, philosophy, etc.) to better understand society’s problems so that we can work in collaboration with others to help our society, our world, and the church move toward God’s vision of a new earth.²

Many progressive Christians claim their religious identities as non-conservative and non-fundamentalist. My use of the term, “progressive white-Christians” also include, for example, Christians who may embrace liberative, womanist, feminist and queer theologies. Many progressive white-Christians participate in the political realm in solidarity with Black and Brown lives, de-escalating violence against migrants, LGBTQIA liberation, expansive reproductive rights, anti-militarism and environmental protection and restoration. My definition of progressive Christians includes Christian anarchists as well, such as the many Christians who belong to the Catholic worker movement, for example. Although many within this group do not participate in the political processes such as voting and other forms of political advocacy, their communities and work are strong political statements about interpretations of living out the gospel in response to local poverty and global militarism.

I also include in this definition of progressive white-Christians both Christians who participate in the institutional church, and, Christians who have left their institutions to form their own Christian, ecumenical or interspiritual communities. Within this term, I also include Christians who have multivalent understandings of their tie to the Christian church according to their denominational belongings, and, those who may have multiple denominational belongings, or none at all.

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A short definition of the way in which this chapter utilizes the term, progressive white-
Christians refers to Christians who are both politically, and religiously non-conservative, openly
reject white-and Christian-supremacies, and at the same time identify as white and/or are
identified by social and cultural norms of racial hierarchies as white. (See Chapter III, “Defining
White-Christianities”).

It is important to be specific about the group of people that I include in my label of PWCs
because of the tendency for some progressive Christians to want to bypass a self-reflexive
critique due to their external and very public commitments to social justice. However, I want to
stress that just because certain PWCs may consistently show up and even place their bodies on
the line as allies and accomplices with liberation movements, the habits around power,
boundaries and order remain deeply ingrained. This calls for very close attention to the ways that
these habits emerge in PWCs’ communities. Because of the US context and history of coloniality
and the Christian tie to kyriarchy, there is always work to do to critique and transform PWC
habits of obedience to structures and relationships of domination.

For PWCs, critiquing Christofascism is only the beginning. It is important to
acknowledge Christian nationalist ideology and to fight against its insidiousness and violence in
the public square. But if PWCs are going to interrogate their more intimate relationship to power,
boundaries and order, the critical attitude must become a habit of creative disobedience.

**Fostering the Habit of Critique**

Accounting for histories of Christian obedience to theological, religious, and political
domination helps Christians look out for how these histories surface in the present. But to do
this, Christians need to adopt the habit of critique. The US Christian context of kyriarchy,
coloniality, and white supremacy drives the necessity to become critical of Christian participation in structures of domination.

This process overshadows the pursuit to find redeeming qualities in the potential for obedience within Christian moral systems. More than practicing obedience to authority or God; Christians need to become critical of when a domination dynamic arises in theologies, liturgies, institutions, and communities so that they can respond even more effectively to political domination in broader society. Otherwise, PWCs stand the risk of continued complacency in their comfort with the violence that stems from the political and economic status quo. Critique is the first step for PWCs to self-reflect on their own obedience to power, boundaries, order.

Developing critique guards against the impulse to distance oneself from Christian nationalism. Critique becomes a process of acknowledging how Christianity, white supremacy, and coloniality are intertwined, historically and presently. Because PWCs cannot extract themselves from this reality, the work of progressive white-Christians entails continuous and vigilant critique of the structures and relationships of domination that exist in our moral traditions and religious communities in the context of broader political realities.

Michel Foucault’s definition of critique applies well to the context PWCs in the US, because he is retrieving particularly European histories of religious and political assertion of authority which were then carried over to North America with colonial conquest. Foucault highlights one moment in history among many, in the sixteenth century, when both church and government claimed power to govern through asserting the moral authority to control the production of knowledge and practiced the gatekeeping of “truth.”

Governmentalization through domination occurs in this context when those religious or political authorities claim the moral authority to decide what is true in order to legitimize their
own power. Foucault claims that, as systems of governmentalization within both church and state arose, the question of “how not to be governed” also emerged. At a very basic level, Foucault defines critique as “the art of not being governed quite so much.”

Because knowledge production is utilized by those who govern in order to assert power and control people, Foucault defines critique as the practice of authorizing oneself to question what they know to be true and how this particular concept of truth functions to cement power dynamics in the church and/or political contexts of authority. Through this lens, the practice of critique involves “the movement by which the subject gives himself [sic] the right to question truth on its effects on power and question power on its discourses of truth…” In other words, the spirit of questioning what is true and why one believes something to be true inherently involves questioning the authority that keeps this truth in place. Because in a European historical context, power has, in many instances, been justified through constructions of rationality and reason, critique further involves the awareness of the limits of what is deemed as rational, especially in the way that it can be a source or force and power.

Critique becomes crucial for what Foucault refers to as the “desubjugation of the subject” which I interpret as the process of understanding oneself as a self out from under the domination of the ways that authorities in power manufacture “truth.” Critique is not just an analysis of oneself in the context of moral, epistemological and political hegemony, however.

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4 Foucault, 32.
5 Foucault, 32.
Critique also includes “the art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability.” As an art of “voluntary insubordination,” critique inspires concrete actions to stand against these forces of power as well.

Foucault describes critique as a virtue, meaning, critique is not just a mental exercise, it is a practice and a habit that has the potential to form one’s character. When habituated as a regular practice, critique becomes an internalized impulse to question who authorizes whom to govern and what kind of truth claims those in power are asserting in order to control and enforce hierarchies of power. Critique also comprises the actions one takes to live outside of concepts of reason that cement power, and, to move against and not remain within power hierarchies set down by religious and political authority.

Critique exposes the cracks within the dominant frameworks and inspires the idea that one might exist outside of this way of being or knowing. Disobedience becomes the psychological, spiritual, emotional and embodied expression of critique.

Along with becoming a moral virtue, critique could also be seen as a spiritual practice. Sharon Doetsch-Kidder, for example, claims that criticism can and must be a spiritual practice for activists in her study, Social Change and Intersectional Activism: The Spirit of Social Movement. As a result of her many interviews, Doetsch-Kidder summarizes that “loving criticism” is central to the spirituality of activists in “antiracist queer feminist struggles for justice.” Doetsch-Kidder describes a practice called “loving criticism” that she names as common among people who are intentionally overlapping their spiritualities with their activism,

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6 Foucault, 32.

letting one motivate and inform the other. According to her findings, this concept of loving criticism has five main components. Loving criticism “(1) honors our roots; (2) accepts our shared humanity; (3) accepts our power to change our lives and the world; (4) faces conflict with kindness; and (5) nourishes us through positive action.”

Honoring of roots would take a different form for PWCs, and they can return to the project of accounting for obedience to histories of domination. Even so, PWCs could learn from this particular vision of critique as a spiritual practice as well as a virtue.

**Decolonial Language for Creative Disobedience**

A virtue lens shows how a theology of obedience can become a moral habit as well. When Christians form themselves primarily through theologies of obedience, they tend to become obedient people. As the practice of certain virtues orient people towards their goals, they also come to form one’s character. It is not just that one believes in obedience to God, rather, when Christians define morality as obedience to an authority (even if the authority is God), they develop an obedient character. The danger is that Christians could be more likely to practice obedience in other political and cultural contexts as well.

Studies of *habitus* and social character show how religious and moral systems are not constructed in a vacuum. Religion is part of a larger social matrix setting values and forming character. When economic systems, culture, and politics reflect domination, and Christians concurrently form themselves through spiritualities and moralities that reflect a domination dynamic, they become more likely to obey dominating forces if obedience is the primary moral virtue shaping their moral agency. This is because obedience is often couched within moral

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8 Doetsch-Kidder, 22–23.
systems that imagine God as all-powerful ruling over the cosmos. Meanwhile, US society shapes a particular social character around capitalism and coloniality while kyriarchy continues to saturate large parts of Christian theologies, traditions and institutions.

All of this is to say that Christians need to acquire practices that contrast kyriocentrism and coloniality beyond obedience and beyond theologies that uphold dynamics of divine domination. Decolonial thinkers suggest practices of delinking and re-existing outside of coloniality. Through this lens, creative disobedience can become the process and practice of critiquing white-Christian historical and present-day obedience to domination and reformulating Christian moral agency as disobedient to domination and creating new ways of being.

The language of decolonial thinkers Catherine Walsh and Walter Mignolo to delink from structures of domination and to re-exist as something other is most apt in the context of US Christians fostering creative disobedience. Walsh and Mignolo extend from Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, arguing that coloniality is a habitus and describing how structures of domination shape not just our society and polity, they shape who we are and how we understand the world. Therefore, Walsh and Mignolo argue for the process of delinking from these structures at the most intimate levels of the self in community. It is also a process that involves finding creative ways to re-exist in contrast to the ways in which structures of domination mold our social lives.

In the words of Walsh and Mignolo, “decoloniality undoes, disobeys, and delinks” from the colonial matrix of power. And decoloniality is not solely a negative function; rather, Mignolo argues, “undoing is doing something; delinking presupposes relinking to something

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else.”\textsuperscript{10} It is a praxis, and it is a creative effort towards rebirth and new growth. Walsh employs beautiful planting metaphors to depict the process of becoming something different outside of the domination paradigms of coloniality. She claims that, “The praxis of decoloniality…is just this: continuous work to plant and grow an otherwise despite the borders, margins and cracks of the modern/colonial/capitalist/heteropatriarchal order.”\textsuperscript{11}

As a woman based in North America carrying European ancestry, Walsh further emphasizes the constant vigilance it requires to dedicate oneself to this kind of growth as a process of nurturing certain seeds while throwing others away. “It is this sense that decoloniality can be understood as a process, practice, and project of sowing seeds; of cultivating, nurturing, and growing, always vigilant of what the Zapatistas refer to as the Storm brewing… the continual reconstruction of the coloniality of power.”\textsuperscript{12} To this definition of \textit{re-existing}, Mignolo adds, “Re-existence follows up on delinking: re-existence means the sustained effort to reorient our human communal praxis of living.”\textsuperscript{13}

Delinking from structures of domination and re-orienting one’s “human communal praxis of living” is the very process that ushers in social, political, and ecological liberation. And, as Mignolo argues, it is a process that \textit{everyone} participates in, regardless of one’s positionality in relation to structures of domination. Mignolo speaks of those who “enunciate” and therefore bring into being and reinforce sexual and racial hierarchies, and of those who are “enunciated” and are therefore directly and violently harmed by these very structures. “Decoloniality of

\textsuperscript{10} Mignolo and Walsh, 120.
\textsuperscript{11} Mignolo and Walsh, 101.
\textsuperscript{12} Mignolo and Walsh, 100.
\textsuperscript{13} Mignolo and Walsh, 106.
knowledge and of being, therefore, aims at the liberation of both…”14 This idea that
decoloniality can and must occur across all of the various positionalities in relation to structures of domination calls in PWCs to participate in the process as well.

In essence, the struggle for liberation is this very process of de-linking and re-existing:
“…Liberation is through thinking and being otherwise. Liberation is not something to be attained; it is a process of letting something go, namely the flows of energy that keep you attached to the colonial matrix of power, whether you are in the camp of those who sanction or the camp of those sanctioned.”15 This quotation affirms that the struggle for liberation can and must come from all sides and positionalities.

The language of delinking and re-existing to describe decolonial practices of disobedience to colonial and kyriarchal domination will be adopted in the last section of this chapter and I will draw out what some of these practices may look like for PWCs. But first, I spell out concrete critiques of the ways in which habits of obedience may emerge in PWC’s communities.

**Critiquing Habits of Obedience**

“Delinking means you do not accept the options that are available to you.”16

Obedience is not just a history, it is also a habit (Chapter III). Even as PWCs may have broken away from Christian traditions and institutions that violate justice, PWCs carry habits related to obedience into their communities and broader social networks. The three main

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14 Mignolo and Walsh, 148.

15 Mignolo and Walsh, 148.

ideological pillars of Christian nationalism as identified by Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry are not just exclusive markers of Christian nationalist extremism but rather characterize a broader US white-Christian social character of obedience to forms of power, boundaries, and order (Chapter III). In this section I show how obedience to structures of power, boundaries and order and the way that PWCs perpetuate kyriocentric relationships of domination contribute to particular habits that they continue to reenact and embody. Identifying habits related to Christian obedience to forms of power, boundaries and order provides targets for the process of delinking and re-existing through cultivating creative disobedience against these structures. This critique is an important part of the process of creative disobedience because the particular habits described below diminish Christians’ moral agency and negate the capacity to participate in effective solidarity.

In other words, identifying habits that result from continued obedience to forms of power, boundaries and order means that while Christians continue to critique the theologies and spiritualities that bolster authoritarian religion, they are vigilantly detecting occasions when spiritual and community practices repeat patterns of domination as well. This process involves critiquing the ways authoritarian theology and spirituality have become internalized, and, making explicit particular ways in which they become externalized through habits. This section combines Sölle’s theological critique against obedience with critiques of Bourdieu, Fromm, and Schüssler-Friorenza to make the following claim: As people who have been formed by kyriocentric systems of morality and as participants in white supremacist culture and in coloniality, PWCs must ask, what are the habits that form as a result of Christian obedience to power, boundaries and order?
Power and the Habit of Disempowerment

As argued in Chapter III, power exists as an ideological pillar that continues to govern social character in a US context, especially among white-Christians, because of the confluence of white habitus, coloniality and kyriocentrism. According to Erich Fromm’s theory of authoritarian religion, theologies and spiritualities that imagine God as all-powerful result in human disempowerment. Feminist theologians’ critiques have shown the extent to which people (especially women and marginalized communities) have internalized inferiority resulting from theologies that hold these ontological hierarchies to be natural. Sallie McFague expresses this succinctly in her claim that, within the “monarchical model” of God, “God can be God only if we are nothing.”  

Dorothee Sölle’s critique of “Christian masochism” shows how Christians play out their oppressive relationship to the divine and internalization of inferiority through self-punishment, hierarchalization and fragmentation of parts of the self, and, a solipsistic world view that cuts off outward-facing empathy and responsibility towards local and global neighbors (Chapter II). Studies in social character and *habitus* suggest that although Christians may no longer believe in an all-powerful God, or actively participate in authoritarian religion, a history of Christian kyriocentrism results in ingrained attitudinal and behavioral habits that reflect obedience to power structures in one form or another (Chapter III). These important critiques beg the question today: how are PWCs systematically and habitually disempowering themselves and their sense of moral agency?

One can examine how and to what extent the habit of disempowerment plays out by looking at Christian spiritual and community practices. Within Christian community, an example

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of a concrete question that evaluates the extent of Christian habitual disempowerment asks, who are the people that we authorize to preach the word of God and why? This question strikes at the heart of Christian obedience to kyriocentrism, because it exposes the practical ways Christians continue to limit epistemological, hermeneutical and homiletical privilege to certain “authorities.”

PWCs could learn from womanist theologian and Episcopal priest, Kelly Brown Douglas, for example, who, from a womanist critique, challenges how epistemological privilege to produce and disseminate knowledge becomes instantiated and “legitimated by the standards of white patriarchal academy.”18 Consistently authorizing one or a few academic experts or religious authorities to speak to and for the community is a habit that establishes “discursive power” over against lived experience, embodied knowledge, and knowledge stemming from each person’s unique interpretation of the world, the gospel, and the divine. Taking Brown Douglas’ critique seriously suggests that assigning hermeneutical and homiletical privilege to one or a few people in a community neglects the potential for community to foster “authentic knowledge” together, which she defines for womanist theology as knowledge “which challenges dominating power, including the complex discourses that help to maintain such power.”19 Brown Douglas is speaking specifically about knowledge fostered from the ‘taken-for-granted’ lives of black women (in reference to Patricia Hill Collins). “To privilege this ‘taken-for-granted’ wisdom further means that womanist scholarship must steadfastly affirm that authentic knowledge is that knowledge which is intimately connected to life sustaining and liberating

activity. It is that which contributes to ‘survival and wholeness of entire peoples,’ particularly black people.”

PWCs can critique the ways in which their community functions to promote knowledge from the “white patriarchal academy” by valuing one certain forms of knowledge and devaluing others.

Because Christians may not be able to see a way outside of building power hierarchies, they may fall back on relating to one another according to relationships of domination. For this reason it is even more important to identify the habit of reinforcing discursive power, especially among PWCs. Christian communities do this by authorizing one or a few people to speak in Christian community and this habit disempowers most members from expressing their own interpretation of the gospel, the world, and their lived and embodied experiences. This habit reinforces the idea that one person or a few people’s voices and ideas matter over the majority of community members’ voices and ideas. But this pattern to authorize one or a few to speak can result in the individual belief that, what I have to say is less important, so I will stay silent.

Personal agency is thereby suppressed by this habitual practice.

In the context of PWCs, they are not only disempowering themselves, they are reinforcing the systematic disempowerment of voices who may represent marginalized identities. By selecting and privileging one or a few to speak to or for the community, they are by default habitually marginalizing other voices. Ultimately, this habit reflects the systematic practice of

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20 Brown Douglas, 147.

21 McFague, Models of God, 67. Again, in her critique of the monarchal model of God, McFague argues how pernicious and ingrained spiritualized hierarchies become in the context of the broader dualistic paradigm: “The hierarchical, dualistic pattern is so widespread in Western thought that it is usually not perceived to be a pattern but is felt to be simply the way things are.”
social marginalization by denying someone’s capacity to participate and leading to, for example, feelings of “uselessness” and the “lack of self-respect.”

Disempowerment is a painful personal experience, but disempowering others is also a habit that white people in the US continue to perpetuate as part of a culture of systemic racism. The habit to disempower is easily compounded by racial uses of power that run through US social norms and cultural practices. Ibram X. Kendi defines racialized power as “the power to categorize and judge, elevate and downgrade, include and exclude.” This claim can be taken to suggest that even as PWCs may tend to habitually disempower themselves, the process of elevating certain authorities to lead, teach and preach is also a process of exercising power to judge certain people to have the capacity to lead, teach, preach, and by default, (even if unintentional) categorizing others as incapable, and thereby excluding their expression and inherent wisdom.

This is not to say that individuals in Christian communities who have extensive experience in ministry or the study of theology should be kept from speaking. Indeed, these experiences provide rich resources to the community. Disempowerment happens when the authorization of these individuals to speak de-authorizes others to contribute their ideas and experiences. As Foucault and Brown Douglas have warned, when certain forms of knowledge become elevated over others, Christians can find themselves obeying a limited view of knowledge that is valued versus knowledge that is devalued. In this way, knowledge becomes a

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22 Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2011), 55. At the end of her discussion of the material harm marginalization from basic resources causes, she also briefly highlights the non-material repercussions of social marginalization.

power structure that Christians continue to obey. This pattern is part of a deeply ingrained colonial habit to control both the content and the terms of the conversation. In this context, to disrupt the habit of disempowerment is a necessity. And for PWCs, this entails the reversal of a habit stemming from a long history of valuing certain kinds of knowledge; what one might call “expert,” over other kinds of knowledge, including lived experience and embodied knowing and knowledge coming from traditionally marginalized identities.

Boundaries, Repression, and the Weaponizing of Emotions

If PWCs are going to value knowledge beyond patriarchal ideals of expertise, PWCs need to further contend with the ways that political ideologies of security connect to the process of walling off access to and truncating the expression of personal emotional experiences. In a militarized, carceral society, boundaries and borders are believed to maintain security against potential threats to national economy, identity, and “way of life.” Historically, as Chapter III underscores, the prominence of borders has come with the colonial claim of the threat of difference. Borders are created to keep threats of safety out and borders are both physical and ideological. Today in a US context, ideologies of security hold racial capitalism in place, justifying violence against “dangerous” racialized groups and individuals for protection of white, wealthy individuals, as well as the property of corporations and government agencies.

As Chapter III shows, border-keeping is a historical, colonial practice deeply embedded in culture and policy in the US today. By virtue of living in a carceral state, the political

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24 Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*, 144.

25 Mignolo and Walsh, 112. As quoted in Chapter III, “Borders are everywhere and they are not only geographic; they are racial and sexual, epistemic and ontological, religious and aesthetic, linguistic and national. Borders are the interior routes of modernity/coloniality and the consequences of international law and global linear thinking.”

maintenance of borders to protect against threats to security influences the personal as well. As this carceral state polices racialized bodies deemed dangerous threats to security, the individual learns to police themselves from going outside of boundaries kept by cultural and social norms. On a personal level, the individual protects oneself against interior parts of oneself and internal experiences of knowing that may jeopardize one’s safety. Queer people know all too well how dangerous it is to recognize and express desire and body-knowledge.

As Chapter III explores, social character functions to “mold and channel human energy” towards the functioning of a specific form of society.27 When the society is one founded on ideologies of security, it relies upon a social character that perpetuates repression. In a capitalistic society, for example, one learns to repress one’s truest emotions, desires, tastes and even reason in order to conform to the “anonymous authority” in Fromm’s words. Particular forms of emotional and embodied knowledge become a threat to one’s own safety when they go outside of societal and cultural norms. In authoritarian religion, the individual learns to police one’s own emotions, needs or desires in a constant effort to evade potential punishment. Certain people can touch power through obedience by securing safety from punishment for deviating, thereby finding themselves in line with, and beneath the wings of, the power of the God or the religious or political leader or economic system that we obey.28 In this way, repression, or, obedience to internalized borders becomes a perceived form of safety. The habit of repression represents the personal and internalized response to the perfect storm that is the confluences of political ideologies of security, capitalism, and religious authoritarianism.


To internalize a political system and culture obsessed with militaristic definitions of security involves the habitual perceiving of one’s own emotions as a security threat, leading to compulsive repression. However, the near opposite is also true: under the logic of security, one’s emotional responses can become weaponized, especially the emotions of white people. White people can unleash their emotions to maintain a violent border between the self and those perceived as a threat. According to sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, emotions can be racialized and function to keep violent racial borders in place. Through white habitus, white people learn “how to fear bodies seen as different, dangerous, and inferior, and to empathize with those seen as members of the in-group.”

Resmaa Menakem explains how under the “myth of white fragility,” white people tend to perceive themselves to be extra vulnerable to non-white people. This threat is felt in moments of discomfort or fear, moments which, in reality, may not be actual threat of safety. However, the response is an emotional and physical one which signals alarm. This alarm signal can be so sensitive, that it may even go off when white people are simply being challenged on an issue of racism in the context of a discussion. This alarm triggers what Robin Di’Angelo calls “defensive moves,” which are internalized habits that cause white people to lash out with verbal violence.

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30 Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2017), 99. “The deadliest manifestation of white fragility is its reflexive confusion of fear with danger and comfort with safety. When a white body feels frightened by the presence of a Black one—whether or not the actual threat exists—it may lash out at the Black body in what it senses as necessary self-protection. Often this is a flight, flee, or freeze response triggered by the activation of the ancient trauma that began as white-on-white violence in Europe centuries ago.”

or with the attempt to harness control over the conversation by crying, defensiveness, fleeing, or blaming, to name a few examples.  

In situations of racial harm, white-Christians may also find themselves rising to defend their own innocence (rather than attending to the one who was harmed) out of the impulse to protect themselves from condemnation and punishment. This dynamic compounds the “good/bad binary” which Robin DiAngelo emphasizes as an obstacle for white people in accessing empathy for racialized harm they may have caused. The “good/bad binary,” a white-cultural belief that to be racist is to be forever condemned to the label as a bad person deserving of permanent social ostracization, is used as an excuse not to engage when white people are called out for racist behavior. Layla Saad explains further why white people’s tendency to want to hold to blamelessness, even in a superficial way, blocks the capacity for authenticity even as they collaborate in racial justice projects: “This desire to be seen as good, by yourself and by others, prevents you from looking at the ways you unknowingly participate in and are part of white supremacy because of your white privilege. Your desire to be seen as good can actually prevent you from doing good, because if you do not see yourself as part of the problem, you cannot be part of the solution.”

Acknowledging the good/bad binary can help white people value the impact of their actions over the intention that they may have had. This centers the person’s experience who is harmed rather than clutching on to the need to defends one’s own innocence.

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Living one’s life centered around the ideologies of security warps one’s emotional experiences and creates particular habits impacting one’s expression of these ways of knowing. The constant felt need for security causes a person to either repress or weaponize their emotional experiences. Certain emotional boundaries are either completely walled off, or, on the other hand, they can be sources of violence. Christian communities should pay attention to moments when either repression or emotional lashing out occurs.

Questions to ask of one’s community include: Are there certain emotions or experiences that are silenced? Silencing in the context of Christian community only serves to perpetuate the habit of repression. Some Christian communities may think of themselves as progressive, where, for example, queer people are visible and incorporated, yet, the culture of the community silences the topic of queerness. In these spaces, queerness is neither denigrated nor praised. It is simply not spoken of. But this sort of unwritten agreement functions as a border because it keeps people from being able to bring their full story and their full selves into the community. Silencing functions to devalue and exclude queer and trans stories, doubling down on the felt need to further repress emotional and physical experiences for safety.

On the other side of the same coin, a community should also pose this question: What community work is being done around racial justice, and are white community members willing to face their emotional habits related to white fragility? When community members are feeling insecure, they also tend to lash out with harsh emotional reactions, or, flee from the activities that may cause them. As Christian communities work to become antiracist, there should be extra attention given to understanding the “myth of white fragility” in order to reverse the impulse to lash out, and, to protect community members who are being harmed by these emotional reactions.
Even though internalized emotional borders of repression and the habits stemming from white fragility feel like rather personal experiences, they must be attended to in community. In the pursuit to empower everyone to speak, communities need to practice accessing and expressing emotional and somatic knowledge in ways that are both honest and nonharmful. Communities can also work together on reversing how white people have learned to relate to emotions when they feel challenged or sense discomfort.

The Compulsion to Order

In tending to emotional experiences and embodied knowing, Christians, especially PWCs, need to let go of the compulsion to maintain “order.” According to the sociology of Christian nationalism, guarding the social order means policing peoples’ sexuality, cementing rigid gender roles, and uplifting the nuclear family as the center of morality and locus of moral norms. But the internalization of a sense of “order” in relation to sexuality and gender as well as gender roles runs deeply through much of Christian tradition and culture, even in progressive circles. This process of “internalizing the order of things,” as Willie Jennings describes it, originates from histories of colonialism which prescribed sexual and gender norms and cemented the idea of the nuclear family which manifests as “nuclear family supremacy.”

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“patriarchal/masculine conception of the world” is kyriarchal a worldview but also a history that most Christians need to account for.

Pervasive kyriocentrism represents the need for PWCs to critique the ways in which habits formed around maintaining heteropatriarchal order shapes their own communities. At an institutional level, this may be a bit simpler to detect; the firing of gay and lesbian Catholics for their sexual identities is an obvious example. At the same time, it would be important for individuals to trace their own obedience to kyriarchal definitions of order, and especially their internalization of heteropatriarchal norms. Of course, many radical Christian communities have formed in reaction to the way in which BIPOC, women, queer and trans people are excluded and harmed in church spaces. And yet, individual Christians need to deal with the ways that Christian histories of heterosexism bring to bear on every Christian community. Most peoples’ Christian upbringing has caused an internalized sense of order around gender and sexuality, something that takes years to unlearn and heal from. Because divergence from heterosexuality has been condemned on a theological and spiritual level for so many centuries and across so many Christian denominations, one can assume that the extent to which most Christians have internalized this theologically-based relationship of domination (between “the church” and those who fall outside of heterosexist norms) runs deeply through to the core of one’s being.

Christian histories of obedience to order carry with them internalized sexism, and internalized anti-queer and anti-trans attitudes. These are forms of oppression that have been spiritualized and theologized across a broad spectrum of Christianities. Simply stated, many

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39 Laurel C. Schneider and Thelathia Nikki Young, *Queer Soul and Queer Theology: Ethics and Redemption in Real Life* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 6. Schneider and Young describe the theology of heteropatriarchal oppression and the way that redemption is conflated with integration back into heteropatriarchal order. “Non-normative sex or
Christians have been indoctrinated with the idea that their salvation depends upon their adherence to certain forms of “order.” This level of internalization suggests that the habit to cling to “order” is pervasive because it is linked to a habit that stems from a deep and ontological fear of divergence from the norm. The compulsion to maintain “order” is a habit many have learned for the protection of their bodies and their souls and this habit requires keen and deliberate critique.

The vigilance with which Christians have learned to play a sexual or gendered role and remain within the “natural” order of things is a habit that may bleed out from beyond roles that relate strictly to sexuality and gender. Therefore, the impulse to want to keep order can emerge differently across various communities. Even the most radical Christian communities can tend to replicate kyriocentric relationships. The way a community orders itself may habitually reflect authoritarian religious hierarchies. Christians communities may fall into adhering to a hierarchical decision-making process, or draw on kyriocentric patterns for prayer and liturgy. Communities might ask themselves, Does the community tend to revolve around a singular leader or leaders who define the community? Is communal prayer reinforcing hierarchies of worth by allowing only certain people to perform rituals?

Another way that communities can examine their habit to conform to kyriocentric order is to discern the nature of their relationship to the “institutional church.” Some Christian communities will find themselves asking the question, what will our relationship to the
institutional church be? And sometimes, even if a Christian community is not tied directly to the institutional church, it may still feel constricted by local or global church hierarchical interpretations of what it means to be Christian, or the criteria required for worship to be valid. Regardless of how the community decides to define its relationship to these broader institutional forms of church, it is more important to identify its reasons for the chosen form of relationship. For example, the community might want to examine whether it remains tied to the greater institutional hierarchies out of fear of punishment, backlash, or further ostracization. These reasonings flag a participation in a kyriocentric relationship of domination. Whether or not a community chooses to remain in such a dynamic is for the community to decide. However, it is important that communities identify their participation in these forms of relationships so that they can be clear about their reasonings and work to reverse compulsive patterns that fall into kyriocentrism.

Without knowing it, communities may maintain a particular version of organizational “order” out of habit and fear that diverging from a sense of order will lead to the disintegration of the community. And this is for good reason. Christian histories of obedience to heteropatriarchal order have led to an internalized sense of fear that one’s body and soul are at stake when they do not comply with kyriocentric “order.”

**Delinking and Re-existing Through Practices of Creative Disobedience**

As long as PWCs repeat habits that obey power, boundaries and order, they become disempowered, security-obsessed, and overly concerned with “order.” This is problematic because it diminishes one’s moral agency and it also limits the capacity to effectively participate in solidarity with the liberation movements that PWCs may care deeply about. While the previous section demonstrates critiques of PWC obedience to power, boundaries and order, this
section spells out *practices* that cultivate creative disobedience. Through these practices, Christians can form each other to be emboldened, vulnerable, and collaborative.

**From Disempowered to Emboldened**

When PWCs gather in community to pray and reflect on the responsibility to respond to the gospel and the needs of their local and global neighbors, they need practices that move them beyond the compulsion to recreate power hierarchies that disempower them from contributing their own experiences and embodied knowledge. PWCs need practices that weave individual stories together to foster collective wisdom and community discernment about what their call to action will be. Reversing the habit to of disempowerment and authorizing one or a few experts to consolidate and limit agency requires that they position their bodies in formations that symbolize and enhance radical inclusivity. And it requires that the implementation of talking and listening practices that override the privileging of the agency of one or a few people. PWCs can bypass individualistic notions of self-empowerment through implementing practices by which they *embody one another* to speak truth into the community. They can pray together in a community formation that reflects a concept of moral agency that is in creative cooperation with the love and justice of the divine. PWCs can denounce their compulsion to obey and enforce power hierarchies by forming new structures for community prayer, transforming the individual sense of moral identity beyond obedience and authorizing each member’s agential status as needed and important for community discernment and action.

The implementation of talking circles is an example of a concrete practice communities might adopt for their communal reflections and prayer. Rooted in many various indigenous cultural practices of governing and community decision making, talking circles demonstrate indigenous epistemologies that tend to uplift relationality and narrative over power and singular
authority.\textsuperscript{40} In other US contexts, talking circles have been adapted for restorative justice practices, conflict transformation, and mutual aid projects. As such, they have become effective tools for addressing and repairing harm beyond the retributive approach to justice, and, they are used for assessing community needs and strategizing to meet those needs.

In a spiritual community, coming together to reflect on and interpret the call of the gospel and the world, talking circles could provide concrete opportunities to embody intersubjective theology and foster multi-vocal agency. Dorothee Sölle outlines three primary components of intersubjective theology in her introductory text, \textit{Thinking About God}. She argues that the making of theology should be a community event which agrees to the following principles: No one idea or person dominates the dialogue; it is a process of constant exchange to which everyone contributes; and each person should maintain flexibility to allow themselves and their ideas to change.\textsuperscript{41} Talking circles provides a structure that opens to and accents each person’s contribution, overriding the tendency to disempower one another’s agency.

In their book, \textit{The Circle Way}, authors and circle facilitators Christina Baldwin and Ann Linnea describe talking circles as “…a gathering of equals, people who set aside external, hierarchical positions that categorize and separate them.” They further explain how circles provide a democratic structure for contribution to and discernment of community wisdom. For


Baldwin and Linnea, the circle is “an energetic social container capable of helping a group draw on wellsprings of insight, information, and story that inspire collective wisdom and action.”

Traditionally, talking circles involve the placement of peoples’ bodies into a circle. Often there are ritualistic objects in the center of the circle that symbolize the community’s values and motivations for coming together. A talking piece is passed around the circle which symbolizes the right for the person holding it to speak, and the expectation that she will receive silent and active attention from the rest of the community. The primary practices of talking circles, according to Baldwin and Linnea’s method, include attentive listening, intentional speaking, and contribution to the well-being of the group.

The three primary principles in a talking circle include rotating leadership, shared responsibility, and reliance on wholeness. The circle supports a narrative approach to meaning-making and is described as a “container for ‘catching stories’” and is a method for “creative self-educating and self-organizing community.”

For PWCs, talking circles provide a practice that has the potential to allow for the embodiment of disobedience to power hierarchies and the tendency to disempower themselves or others by authorizing only the “experts” to speak on their behalf. Communities literally place their bodies in a shape that symbolizes wholeness over against kyriocentric versions of liturgy that place people into pyramidal hierarchies. Consider, for example, the way in which churches

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43 Baldwin and Linnea, 72–76.

44 Baldwin and Linnea, 76.

45 Baldwin and Linnea, 95.
are often designed to place parish members in pews like spectators who passively receive while the church leaders proclaim from a pulpit, symbolizing their authority to preach.

Talking circles lead communities away from privileging one form of knowing and deauthorizing other forms. As a narrative practice, talking circles invite stories of life experiences and embodied knowing. As a relational practice, talking circles are focused on synthesizing themes from individuals’ stories to weave a story about the whole community. In the context of Christian community, talking circles are an apt form for *practicing* intersubjective theology because they structure dialogue to promote all voices and to minimize domination of only a few voices or ideas.

Furthermore, talking circles can provide structure for PWCs to continue to *critique* ongoing obedience to power. There is a method within the practice of talking circles that attends to the “shadow” or in other words, “any covert energy residing in the group.”46 This practice allows for the group to identify topics or themes that are left unexplored. For white-Christiaans who tend to “forestall” and “foreclose” their own experiences of complicity with white supremacist actions and attitudes, this practice would make a habit out of uncovering that which they compulsively tend to cover over. Attending to the “shadow” within a talking circle practice includes asking questions such as, “Are topics being avoided? What assumptions or behaviors are not addressed? What power issues are not explored?”47 This practice intentionally explores ways that persons, ideas, or topics are marginalized in order not to face them. It is a way to say out loud that which remains silent and continue to delink from the tendency to protect power.

46 Baldwin and Linnea, 129.

47 Baldwin and Linnea, 129.
PWCs need to cultivate practices that shape community gatherings around inclusion rather than authority. These practices would place bodies in shapes that de-centralize one sole leader, and they would authorize the expression of agency for each participant. But such forms and practices do not come naturally. As Chapter III explains, many Christians live their lives in constant obedience to power hierarchies through social character. When Christians gather in community to pray together, they must be explicit about shifting the practices they engage in away from hierarchies.

Together, Christians can implement tools that re-train them to embody the habits and attitudes that create an emboldened community, rather than disempowering individuals from sharing their knowledge. Talking circles are one format for dialogue and reflection that spark disobedience to hierarchal ways of being together in community. This is a tool thatcultivates the embodiment of inclusion and equal voice. That is, participants place their bodies in a shape that symbolizes inclusion rather than hierarchy. In a talking circle, there is no pulpit and there is no audience. There is no front or back, no platform from which an authority teaches or preaches while listeners passively and silently absorb information. This is because, as a communal body, participants take the shape of a circle, which symbolizes a centering around the common goal to authorize each voice to speak. Through the practice of talking circles, individuals are simultaneously emboldened to express their agency, as they also practice yielding to and respecting the agency of all other community members.

After centuries of obeying spiritual and moral authority, from divine command to religious leadership, Christians, especially PWCs, need not only theologies but practices that redirect bodies and minds away from obedience to power. Talking circles are an apt example because they allow for both the emboldening of one’s agency, and, they form the habit of
practicing humility and empathy. This has the potential to over-ride habits of white habitus and white fragility that reinforce habits such as speaking over others or using one’s emotions to take control.

Talking circles would support decentralized liturgical prayer, especially for reflection of scripture or sacred readings. Rather than authorizing one leader to preach, each and every voice might exercise agency and gospel truth might be woven together with each person’s life experiences in a symphony of hermeneutics. Although talking circles are just one example of practices that have the potential to shift our habits revolving around power, they remain an accessible practice for emboldening collective agency and discerning about community action in response to broader societal structures of domination.

From Repression to Expression and Emotional Responsibility

Security-seeking habits create borders around interior experiences, reflecting the ideologies of security that many people simultaneously submit to in the political realm. This necessitates the cultivation of practices that move people from repression to expression. For white people, there is a difference between expression as the response to security/fragility and expression springing from vulnerability. But speaking vulnerably becomes impossible when people build boundaries around their deep interior experiences. And these interior boundaries, held in place though the mechanism of repression, are built within oneself and between one another. As Fromm has shown, repression is the mechanism that is part of both authoritarian, and capitalist social character, confining expression to the non-taboo feelings, needs and desires that only function to support political and economic power.

Identifying this border-building mechanism of repression as a habit reveals how PWCs need *practices* that allow them to be vulnerable both with themselves *and* with others.
Vulnerability, in this sense, can become a habit that provides access to and expression of the inner experiences that have been walled off by the compulsion to remain secure. Vulnerability can allow for PWCs to take responsibility for the “white supremacist collective unconscious” discussed in Chapter III. It is an antidote to the habit of “forestalling” and “foreclosing.” As Ronald Kent Richardson describes, the impulse to forestall and foreclose happens when white people refuse to “draw out and explore inklings, intuitions, naggings, unsettling feelings or perceptions” in response to participation racial violence, whether that be interpersonal or structural.48

Vulnerability becomes a habit and method of taking responsibility for the ways that one builds walls around inner knowing through repression, forestalling, and foreclosing. Vulnerability is a practice of accounting for, and ultimately taking responsibility for the feelings, thoughts, needs, desires that are dampened in service of the norms of whiteness. Kelly Oliver describes the need to develop a sense of responsibility for the “unconscious,” or that deeper knowledge that one tends to forestall and foreclose. Oliver argues for a development of responsibility for the unconscious as a moral obligation: "To make responsibility radical enough, that is, ethical enough, we need a notion of the unconscious, which makes us responsible even for motives, desires, and fears unknown to us."49

*Creative disobedience* includes the practice of vulnerability as access to and expression of the interior experiences of emotional, spiritual, somatic knowledge. This is another practice

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that PWCs can implement in community in order to become more fluid in attending to and take responsibility for emotional and embodied experiences while also growing the capacity to receive the emotional and embodied experiences of others.

Developing the capacity to access and sense internal experiences of knowing is important because it overrides the habits of repression, forestalling and foreclosing. This calls for a practice of becoming vulnerable to crucial emotions, thoughts, needs and desires that may be shining light on the emotional impact of continuing to obey structures of domination. Dorothee Sölle exemplifies this particular practice of *creative disobedience* through poetry, as Chapter IV spells out. Sölle utilizes poetry for spiritual and emotional attention and expression, and as a practice of meaning-making both for her theology and her activism.

Sölle is of course not alone among poet-activists who name how poetry allows for expressing the internal movement and fuels and informs activism. Poetry, according to Adrienne Rich, is an “instrument for embodied experience” and a “rearousal of desire” that leads to “the task of acting on that truth.”

Audre Lorde names how poetry can tap into the “incredible reserve of creativity and power” behind those dark, “ancient and hidden” recesses of our internal worlds.

Kelly Oliver, again speaking to the ways in which even our psychic life reflects

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50 Adrienne Rich, *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 13. “A poem can’t free us from the struggle for existence, but it can uncover desires and appetites buried under the accumulated emergencies of our lives…It’s not a philosophical blueprint; it’s an instrument for embodied experience. But we seek that experience, or recognize it when it is offered to us, because it reminds us in some way of our need. After that rearousal of desire, the task of acting on that truth, … is ours.”

51 Audre Lorde, “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” in *Teaching Black*, ed. Ana Maurine Lara and Drea Brown (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2021), 125. “This is poetry as illumination, for it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless—about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge (precedes) understanding… These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, an unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling.”
coloniality, refers to the “intimate revolt” that poetry represents in allowing individuals to recover psychic space for resistance against the ways colonial forces have limited one’s internal experiences of thought and feeling. Communities can embody more poetic practices of vulnerability that help them to access and express deep, internal knowing against the impulse to repress.

In my EncounterPoint community, our liturgies center around what we call “Sacred Conversations.” We celebrate the liturgy of the word, reading together the Sunday gospel alongside other literature or art that allows for an expanded interpretation of the gospel, such as poetry, a song, or a quote. Reading scripture alongside other art forms like poetry helps our community to reflect on gospel themes at a level that is conceptual but also at a level that is emotional, somatic and spiritual. It helps us to touch into the parts of ourselves that we tend to repress. Poetry, as a holistic expression of the author’s heart, mind and soul inspires our community to allow the author’s longings and embodied truth to touch into our own often repressed knowing.

After reading scripture and poetry, we open the space for everyone to speak into the circle their own contemplation on how the gospel is inviting their reflection on their own experience and the needs of the world. This combination of gospel and poetry authorizes a level of sharing beyond intellectual observations. We find ourselves speaking heart, body, and soul-centered language, a language we tend to repress in our everyday lives. We hold space for tears,

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52 Oliver, The Colonization of Psychic Space, 173. "Ultimately, the intimate revolt that sustains psychic life through creativity and imagination is an essential form of resistance against the colonization of psychic space that results in depression and psychic (if not physical) death."
laughter, and even silent moments when a hand on the shoulder suffices to express heartfelt communion.

Our Sacred Conversations provide an alternative model of security. Rather than protection through borders, we practice offering one another openness and safety that allows people to be vulnerable and to share knowing from the heart, mind and body in reflection on gospel themes. This process slowly undoes the learned habit to repress emotions and body-knowledge in order to secure oneself from cultural, economic and political alienation or harm.

Repression of feelings has its own significant repercussions and violent impacts especially for those who are non-white. Repression builds a wall between white-Christians and those who are harmed by racism because it blocks their ability to feel and sense their own response to acknowledging complicity. On the other hand, white-Christians can also tend to lash out, causing harm to the person/s they perceive to have triggered our fragility.53 White people need to be aware that the violence of white-lash is more than interpersonal, it has historically fueled racist policy as well.54 Therefore, it is crucial that white-Christians become habituated to attending to emotions.

Practices of attuning to emotional and body sensations can help PWCs recognize their habituation to patterns that maintain security and repression and the ways that they harm others even as they work for justice. It is crucial to notice the pain one feels in engaging with situations of injustice, especially when looking at one’s own complicity and lineages. For white-Christians, this is an important skill to hone so that they can learn to attend to emotions in ways that to


54 Carol Anderson, White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide (Bloomsbury USA, 2016).
prevent harming non-white people in their community. Ruth King provides a helpful tool for collaborators in racial justice that allows for the integration of the mind, heart and body in racial justice work. She teaches the “RAIN Practice” which includes these four steps: “RECOGNIZE: What’s Happening?… ALLOW: Can I Be with What’s Happening?… INVESTIGATE: How Am I Relating to What’s Happening?… NURTURE: How do I Care for This Distress?”\(^{55}\) This is an example of a practice that provides a way for PWCs to examine how their internal processes may inhibit the more external, public work of racial justice.

*Creative disobedience* involves practices of vulnerability that allow access to the interior movements and that attend to the deepest feelings and needs of the other. These practices would counteract the tendencies PWCs have learned to repress feelings and ignore what the heart, mind and body are wanting to express. PWCs need to cultivate practices, together in community, that form habits of vulnerability against habits that perpetuate boundaries out of the compulsion to feel secure.

**From Order to Collaboration through Mutual Aid**

Rather than keeping order, PWCs can cultivate structures of collaboration that yield solidarity and care. Communities can take on a mutual aid model to create structures and relationships beyond the compulsion to comply with “order.” This would involve changing the way that communities operate beyond hierarchies of power and allow them to create new community practices that keep members from falling back into the regular habits that reinforce structures and relationships of domination.

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In a manual written for organizers, Dean Spade defines mutual aid as a form of solidarity. “Mutual aid gives people a way to plug into movements based on their immediate concerns, and it produces social spaces where people grow new solidarities. At its best, mutual aid actually produces new ways of living where people get to create systems of care and generosity that address harm and foster well-being.”  

Mutual aid projects “directly meet people’s survival needs and are based on a shared understanding that the conditions in which we are made to live are unjust.”

Mutual aid is decidedly antiauthoritarian. There is no one boss, leader, or even a small group of decision makers. And this goes directly against the habits we form in authoritarian culture:

Most people have never been to a meeting where there was not a boss or authority figure with decision-making power. Most people work or go to school inside hierarchies where disobedience leads to punishment or exclusion. We bring our learned practices of hierarchy with us even when no paycheck or punishment enforces our participation so even in volunteer groups we often find ourselves in conflicts stemming from learned dominance behaviors. But collective spaces, like mutual aid organizing, can give us opportunities to unlearn conditioning and build new skills and capacities. By participating in groups in new ways and practicing new ways of being together, we are both building the world we want and becoming the kind of people who could live in such a world together.

Mutual aid is only successful when communities adapt a habitual mindset and practices for solving community problems and meeting community needs. It requires that they transform the way they understand and practice community care. Dean Spade identifies particular habits

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56 Dean Spade, Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next) (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2020), 2.

57 Spade, 7.

58 Spade, 16.

59 Spade, 17.
that mutual aid corrects through restructuring community and reimagining community practices in response to community need. For example, mutual aid requires a shift in mentality around community activism away from an understanding of charity toward a reconceptualization of solidarity. Spade argues that charity can become a top-down model of addressing community needs because it sometimes places power in the hands of one group to decide who deserves aid and how much aid they deserve. The charity model further exacerbates the way in which “elite donors” hold power over not-for-profits who become willing to perform their charity according to donor’s demands because of their dependence upon funding. “Elite solutions to poverty are always about managing poor people and never about redistributing wealth.”

Spade even argues that the charity model perpetuates a sense of apathy to human suffering because it reinforces the idea that “giving back” by volunteering at a charity can keep our deeper concerns about systemic problems of injustice at bay. Rather than making structural change, often times, for these reason, charity simply cements the status quo. “Keeping people numb to the suffering in the world—and their own suffering—is essential to keeping things as they are.”

Mutual aid is a model that encourages participants to feel the full range of emotions in the face of local and global injustices. It is a model that tells us our rage, fear and despair are appropriate responses that cannot simply be alleviated through occasional volunteering. Mutual aid invites engagement among each member and erases the line between “giver” and “receiver”. Alongside the fear, rage and despair, Spade affirms that mutual aid can also be “deeply satisfying and connective, creating caring relationships, raucous celebrations, and an enduring sense of

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60 Spade, 26.

61 Spade, 28.
purpose... it is *more* engagement that actually enlivens us—more curiosity, more willingness to see the harm that surrounds and, and ask how we can relate to it differently.”

Mutual aid disrupts habits that reinforce order and power hierarchies by encouraging alternative practices of leadership and decision making. Instead of installing one person or a small group of leaders by default, mutual aid projects revolve around “horizontal decision-making structures.” These structures bypass the tendency for there to be one leader or small group of decision makers who demand that participants follow their goals and rules. Hierarchical leadership can often deplete broader participants’ feeling of belonging and can lead to burnout both for the leader or leaders who hold all or most of the responsibility, as well as the participants who become disaffected by the lack of empowerment to make decisions or to exhibit leadership.

Having regular conversations about “group culture” is another practice that allows for habits to be rewired. “We can make intentional decisions to change group culture by having conversations about a group’s tendencies and methods, talking about what is working and what is not, reflecting on how our own behavior can match what we want to see, and influencing each other.” Direct dialogue about the practices a community sets into place and evaluating not only their effectiveness but also whether they reflect community values can help members create a consciousness around habits that support solidarity versus habits that reproduce domination.

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62 Spade, 28.
63 Spade, 67.
64 Spade, 70.
65 Spade, 71.
Practices of mutual aid include consensus decision making processes that involve collaborating on proposals about what the group discerns for next projects. It also includes the creation of teams to work on those projects. Leadership is in constant rotation and new people are welcomed through processes of listening to their concerns and empowering them to cultivate immediate feelings of “co-ownership” and “co-stewardship.”

Mutual aid practices work to eliminating perfectionism and installs “cooperative leadership” over against “domineering leadership.” Mutual aid further upholds the different between “working compulsively” and “working joyfully” so as to minimize the tendency for martyrdom to motivate projects, and instead upholds practices of boundaries, reasonable goals, mindfulness, nurturance, balance, trust in one another and even humor in the work. Dean Spade calls for continued building of mutual aid projects that are needs-focused and imaginative beyond the structures of domination that we often allow to guide even our activism work:

> We must imagine and build ways of eating, communicating, sheltering, moving, healing, and caring for each other that are not profit-centered, hierarchical, and destructive to our planet. We must practice co-governing, creating participatory, consent-based ways of cooperating that are not based in militarism… Mutual aid work plays an immediate role in helping us get through crises, but also has the potential to build the skills and capacities we need for an entirely new way of living at a moment when we must transform our society or face intensive, uneven suffering followed by species extinction.”

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66 Spade, 96.
68 Spade, 99–100.
69 Spade, 128–29.
70 Spade, 148.
Mutual aid is an example of intentionally disrupting habits and practices that go against habits that keep order. In other words, it is an example of identifying specific structures that the community utilizes out of an unexamined obedience to particular forms of “order.”

Christian community can take on elements of mutual aid to practice being together differently. Spade’s manual for mutual aid provides concrete practices that help to alter habits from compulsively recreating and reinforcing power hierarchies to creatively conceiving of new ways to embolden leadership, make decisions, and address community needs beyond structures that perpetuate authoritarianism and domination. Christian community could also adapt the mutual aid model as a form of spiritual care. Christians can practice meeting one another’s spiritual needs beyond practices that reinforce authoritarian concepts of God and hierarchical models of community.

**Conclusion: Theological and Ethical Considerations for Creative Disobedience**

My reinterpretation of creative disobedience suggests the need for methods of theology that are critical and multi-vocal. This dissertation has demonstrated the pitfalls of speaking about the divine-human dynamic with language of domination while simultaneously expecting Christians to revolt against political domination and violence in the social realm. Dorothee Sölle spent her theological career accounting for the obedience paradigms used by her “theological fathers” to galvanize disobedience against Hitler while at the same time she grappled with widespread support of fascism among Christians. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza exposes this same pitfall in the Pauline claim that Jesus is Lord over against Caesar. As Chapter I describes, Christian leaders have historically attempted to motivate Christians to resist unjust and violent political authority using a domination theology. Many times, it has worked. But there have been too many tragic examples of Christian participation in imperial violence of war, genocide, and
land stealing to continue using an obedience paradigm especially forms of obedience that degrade the capacity to critique authority.

Therefore, a theology that fosters *creative disobedience* would necessarily include a continuous theological process of vigilant critique. This critique would center on detecting theological language of domination as it arises in Christian scripture, worship, tradition, and especially concepts of morality. As I have argued, Christian moral systems are not simply conceptual; they form who Christians become and how they behave both religiously and politically.

Language of divine command and human obedience are not the only occurrences of theologies of domination that emerge across Christian communities and traditions. PWCs can make use of sociological studies of Christian nationalism and its ideological pillars of power, boundaries, and order to interrogate when theologies protect or reinforce these structures. Together in community, Christians can become adept in detecting language that reflects hierarchies of power, us versus them boundaries, and language bolstering a heteropatriarchal social order. Rather than uncritically adopt and repeat such language, Christians must authorize themselves with the creative license to retrieve or create new language that expresses an anti-domination concept of the divine-human relationship. Moreover, they can theologize about how this anti-domination relationship motivates their community’s solidaric connections with their local and global neighbors.

Theology that motivates *creative disobedience* should also be a multi-vocal reflection on how the gospel and those connections of solidarity inform one another. The community creates theology when it adapts practices that allow everyone to speak about their own embodied and lived experiences in the light of gospel stories of liberation. The form of this language is not a
command. It can and should take a more poetic shape as in collective liturgy, prayer, and protest. Rather than authorizing one or a few people to make theological meaning, Christian communities can engage in theology together.

Christians can do this by implementing a political hermeneutic of the gospel, where concerns about current social justice issues are read through the lens of scripture stories of liberation, and vice-versa. Individuals in the community would attend to their embodied knowing and lived experiences to express how they feel moved by the call of the gospel and the needs of their neighbors. Centering non-dominating images of God, the community might discern how they are called to respond and plan concrete actions for steps of response. This is liberation theology in practice, with special attention to community construction of anti-domination theologies of the divine-human relationship.

Ethics inspired by *creative disobedience* includes accounting for Christian histories of obedience to domination, critique and delinking from obedient habitus, and cultivating practices that shape Christian moral agency in a way that fosters the capacity to build solidarity rather than perpetuate dynamics of domination. While Chapter III provides examples of accounting for Christian obedience in the context of colonial histories, this chapter provides examples of critiquing habits formed around structures of power, boundaries and order. With an eye to power as a structure of domination, I suggest in this chapter that PWCs need to examine how the habit of disempowerment plays out in communities through authorizing only one or a few experts to make decisions, define the community, and to speak to and for the community. Habits of repression are formed in response to security ideologies that require violent boundaries and borders. The political fear of insecurity is internalized and one’s own emotions become a security threat under this ideology. The habit of obedience to order often shows up through the
maintenance of kyriarchal structures and relationships like hierarchies and rigid conceptions of how liturgy should look.

These habits like disempowerment, repression, and obsession with order can only be transformed through concrete practices. *Creative disobedience* becomes the process of cultivating alternative practices that allow for the cultivation of new ways of being. PWCs have the potential to embolden one another rather than to continually disempower each other. Beyond repression and white-lash, PWCs can learn how to attend to and express emotional and somatic knowing while taking emotional responsibility for the tendency towards white-fragility. And, PWCs can work to imagine Christian community beyond kyriarchal order. Mutual aid practices are examples of ways that Christians can structure community around solidarity and care, rather than power, boundaries and order.

The ethical model inspired by *creative disobedience* takes seriously how internalized Christian obedience becomes, especially in view of political and economic structures of power, boundaries, and order. It is a model that refuses to look away from not just *how* the constant navigation of power, boundaries and order causes Christians to behave, but it looks closely at *who* Christians become when they remain in uncritical obedience to structures and relationships of domination both religiously and politically. Christians can creatively construct ways of being that are fundamentally disobedient to the violence of kyriarchy, coloniality and white supremacy via personal transformation that is at the same time political protest to the social character these structures impose upon us. Creative disobedience for progressive white-Christians goes far beyond denouncing Christian nationalism. It is an active, critical, creative, personal, political, and poetic way of being in disobedience against the Death Machine.
CONCLUSION

My journey with Dorothee Sölle began with a curiosity about why she was so adamant to critique the language of obedience within Christian theology and ethics. Simultaneously, I was inspired by her theological methods as both a poetic and public witness to what it means to be a Christian in a Christofascist society. This project highlights Sölle’s crucial feminist intervention within political theology that is as creative as it is critical. Sölle does not stop at the critique of obedience, she imagines what Christian moral agency could become beyond a dynamic of divine domination and human subservience. This imagining is rooted in a self-reflexive process of accounting for the political structures that influences one’s moral formation. It involves imagination that accounts for the ways that embodying authoritarian and capitalist social character harms one’s local and global neighbors. Sölle’s poetry imagines and reaches for ways of being Christian outside of the impossible situation of constant participation with the “Death Machine.”

As a white-Christian myself who has been formed by many various religious experiences from evangelical fundamentalism to progressive Catholicism, I am even more convinced after this study of the importance of attending to ways that Christian moral systems reinforce social character stemming from white supremacy, coloniality and kyriocentrism. Christians must examine the kind of obedience that has been asked of them through uncovering their particular theological lineages of obedience. They must critically evaluate how the habit of obedience continues to pervade their institutional structures and relational dynamics. In their effort to denounce Christian nationalism, progressive white-Christians can refuse to distance themselves
and courageously identify how obedience to power, boundaries and order surface in their own theologies, concepts of morality, and community practices.

The practices of creative disobedience that I suggest in Chapter V are not necessarily prescriptive in the sense that I mean for them to be universal practices for all communities to adopt. Rather, I want to demonstrate creative disobedience as a process for communities to critically evaluate the particular ways that structures and relationships of power, boundaries and order surface. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza’s concept of kyriocentrism highlights how domination is not just structural but it is also relational. Communities can peel back the multiple layers of both structures and relationships that repeat power hierarchies, security mindsets that create rigid boundaries, and a compulsion to maintain a particular order. The process of creative disobedience allows communities to become more attentive to concrete instances where these structures and relationships of domination arise whether that be in a liturgical context or in the way that a community organizes itself. Therefore, the process of creative disobedience will have different outcomes for each community based on those particular ways that communities form patterns around power, boundaries and order.

Critique is part of the constructive flow of creative disobedience. Critique becomes the locus of discernment for communities as they reflect on how to creatively disobey their compulsion to repeat patterns that cement power, boundaries and order. Communal critique in this sense gives rise to imagining new practices that form a community to embolden one another and express emotional and embodied knowledge while also taking emotional responsibility.

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1 Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Transforming Vision: Explorations in Feminist The*logy (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 9.
Critique gives rise to creatively fostering a community that imagines new structures of solidarity and care.

Creative disobedience is also a political process because it develops practices that will allow progressive white-Christians to more effectively participate in intersectional activism. Teleological ethics asks, what is the goal? And virtue ethics asks, who are we becoming as we work toward the goal? Creative disobedience is a political virtue ethics and a process of forming oneself and one’s community to be the kind of people who are more effective in achieving political goals that promote liberation. Creative disobedience is a process whereby white-Christians disrupt white habitus and refuse to repeat patterns that harm their co-conspirators. Rather, they are emboldening collaborators to speak out; they are no longer obsessed with security but open to and responsible for emotional and embodied knowledge, and they are resisting the compulsion to uphold traditional forms of order by collaborating to create structures of care and solidarity instead. Rather than repeating habits of obedience to power, boundaries, and order, PWCs can form one another to collaborate as supporters of movements for political transformation through becoming creatively disobedient.
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Dr. Matteson completed her Bachelor’s degree at Nazareth College of Rochester in 2008 where she studied both Anthropology and German Literature and Language. She then spent almost three years participating in Americorps through the Sisters of St. Joseph Volunteer Corps. Through this experience, she became inspired to study theology after encountering story after story of peoples’ persistence to survive hopeless obstacles presented by the deeply unjust health care system in the early 2000s. In 2014, she completed a Master’s of Arts in Theology at Catholic Theological Union and wrote her thesis which is entitled, *Where Was God When Segrario Needed Him? Atonement’s Answer to Suffering and a Trinitarian Response*. Ministry experiences including her work at the Bernardin Center at Catholic Theological Union, campus ministry at Saint Xavier University, and community building at the Port Ministries, led Dr. Matteson to become interested in pursuing the question of ethical participation in social justice efforts, especially among Christians who identify as white. Dr. Matteson graduated from the Integrative Studies in Ethics and Theology program at Loyola University Chicago in 2023. At present, Dr. Matteson is an instructor for the theology department at Loyola University Chicago and is co-editing a book entitled, *The Business of God: Theological and Ethical Reflections on the Church-Industrial Complex*. Dr. Matteson is a member and co-founder of EncounterPoint, a Chicago-based community that offers opportunities and space for people to collaborate on spirituality and social justice initiatives. She is also an organizer with Edgewater Mutual Aid Network.