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Divine Power, Divine Excess:
A Marginal Hope

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M.Div., Emory University, 2005

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Abstract

Divine Power, Divine Excess:
A Marginal Hope

By Jessica M. Smith

This project is an examination of divine power on the margins of the institutional Church. To approach the margin, I examine the Christian micro-narratives of three women from different historical periods whose lives are all marginalized by the institutional Church. They include the early twentieth century painter Séraphine Louis, nineteenth century preacher Jarena lee, and fourth century contemplative St. Macrina. By examining these women's narratives in the ecclesial margin, I aim to demonstrate three things. First, it is to honor these women's lives and their stories that figure as more minor in the history of Christianity. It is to celebrate the ecclesial margin as a rich space for encountering the divine regardless of its relationship to the institutional center. Second, it is to articulate how divine power appears as an "excess" in the ecclesial margin. God responds to the margins with more than what is expected. Divine power excessivly flows through beauty, the Biblical narrative of salvation history, and the mystery of the holy. The third aim is a therapeutic one, namely a proposal that the Church continue to practice its life together in the knowledge that Christians worship a God of excess. Such knowledge counters what Paul Ricoeur calls "the logic of equivalence," an operational logic that often results in a disposition of institutional anxiety and uncertainty. This knowledge and reflection on both the wisdom of the ecclesial margin and the generous and hospitable nature of divine power might foster an institutional attitude of continued humility and hope for the Church.

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Preface

My first sustained sense of marginality was when I first realized that my own queer self and The United Methodist Church in which I grew up were not going to coincide so well. The closer I came to my queer sense of self, the farther I came to imagining myself as someone who could represent the Church in any authoritative, ordained position. I inferred from its documents, amendments, and general positions that I would not be welcomed as a clergy person of the ecclesial institution.

From the most recent 2012 *Book of Discipline* of The United Methodist Church, constituting the official law and doctrine of the more than 11 million member denomination, a simple paragraph states in legal terms who can and cannot be ordained. As it is written:

> While persons set apart by the Church for ordained ministry are subject to all the frailties of the human condition and the pressures of society, they are required to maintain the highest standards of holy living in the world. The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching. Therefore self-avowed practicing homosexuals are not to be certified as candidates, ordained as ministers, or appointed to serve in The United Methodist Church.[1]

The Church's polity on ordination necessarily does not address me personally. Yet, it affected me personally. I had to negotiate this impersonal statement of policy at the level of the individual.

If I wanted to represent the Church as clergy, I knew that my own position in Church would always be something to be negotiated. Those who desire to be ordained in the ecclesial institution and the leaders who want to smuggle a queer person into the Church

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[1] The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (Nashville, Tenn.: United Methodist Pub. House, 2012), Paragraph 304.

have to simply not ask the question of sexuality in order for that person to be ordained by the ecclesial institution. As the Discipline is mindful to note, a "self-avowed practicing homosexual" is a term for those who: "openly acknowledges to a bishop, district superintendent, district committee of ordained ministry, Board of Ordained Ministry, or clergy session that the person is a practicing homosexual."[2] If you are not a "self-avowing" homosexual, or "openly acknowledge" one's homosexuality, or "practice" (whatever that means) homesexuality, then one is able to speak the institutional words of the Church, and administer the sacraments.

For me, it was a choice between two silences - the silence of not seeking ordination and living on the margins of the ecclesial institution or the silence of my identity in order to seek ordination. I chose the former.

The Church's institutional words pushed me out of its center. Over the course of seminary, I slowly found myself sitting on the edges of worship space, far from the table or the pulpit. I was not to distribute words or the bread and body of Christ if I could not hide part of myself to others. Gradually, I drifted further and further from that table. Instead, I found a desk and arranged other's lives in seminary, helping them move into ordained ministry. Sometimes, I was a brief respite for those being pushed into the margins. I found myself in a hospital room as a chaplain with a young African American girl who couldn't speak, praying with silence and song. Slowly, I found spaces outside of the words of the Church and to my delight discovered other bodies in the margins. Slowly, I found peace and holiness at the margins.

Beyond my physical marginalization, I also moved theologically. I didn't have to

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[2] Ibid.

give up words entirely, but just the words of the Church, and admittedly many of the central symbols of it. I became suspicious of the Trinity, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, any doctrinal terms for God's presence and activity in the world, because, for me, they were the language utilized by the central institutions that had silently rejected me. For a while, I just had to quiet my association or attention with these terms, and find other ways of talking to my brother and teacher Jesus. While never absent from my conversations necessarily, my identification with Christ certainly receded given my community's concern for the ability to represent him before God and the human community. My mediating capacities were blocked precisely by my unspoken queer identity. So, I spent a lot of time in small prayer houses, in silence and candles, dwelling in a single word and then even letting go of the word itself trying to dwell in the holiness of the dark.

My story on the margins is not the only one to be told; it is hardly unusual. In the hushed conversation in a pastor's study or as a passenger in a youth pastor's car, others are told that they cannot be who they are and be an active member - let alone an ordained clergy member - in the church. Some silently rejected slink back to hidden places in the dark. Some don't find creativity there, but rather just madness. They escape themselves through drugs, violence, and self-destruction. Others push further into visibility and intelligibility while it is "killing them inside."[3]

Certainly, "gay" life (not necessarily a queer life) is increasingly accepted in mainstream U.S. life, including mainstream Christian life, and perhaps such an identity won't be the target of rejection in the future life of the church. Or at least not in such a

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[3] A few years ago, a woman in a church circle used this phrase to describe her experience as a closeted lesbian.

concentrated fashion. This inclusionary move in the U.S. ecclesial life is not the end of the story, however. In fact, this project demonstrates that an inclusionary logic is not the final solution to marginality.

Rather, this project recognizes that the next wave of rejection is already cresting and will come crashing down on another "dispensable" life, tossed about by deep the riptide of institutional norms and powers. And the space of the margin, a chaotic murky realm, always include more than only those who experience discrimination, but also those who find creative power, a new story, and holy living there. The margin is not devoid of divine power, but rather divinity lives there excessively. This hope in divine power at the margins is where this project begins.

Reading the Margin for Divine Power

The Cappadocian virgin-widow Macrina lies on her deathbed in a darkening sparse room. Her younger brother Gregory covers her with a dark cloak, yet the glory of God shines through. A widowed African-American mother, Jarena Lee, who has left her son with relatives, stands ecstatic with seraphic joy preaching to a crowd in pre-bellum Northern Pennsylvania. After a long day of cleaning houses, an older twentieth century French woman Séraphine Louis walks up a flight of stairs to enter an upper room. She remains there most of the night painting as the angels surround her.

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As gestured in the above motifs, divine power emerges in a variety of settings – on a deathbed, in a field preaching, or in the devotional upper room in a country town. These three motifs are representative of the ecclesial margin, the edge or limit produced by the institutional church. This project recognizes a pattern of silence and painful rejection by the ecclesial institution in lives found on the ecclesial margin. At times, the margin is a dangerous place where unseen violence and oppression can occur. However, it is also a place where divine power can manifest in lives that exceed the norms, practices, discourse, and roles of institutional life. Those in the margins express a logic of divine excess through their creativity, through visions and dreams, and through their holy hidden means.

Divine power overthrows and overflows the limits of ecclesial institution's power of perception and operation. God's power is excessive; God's excessive response is an offer that is more than what is perceived as possible or expected.

In this chapter, I explore the nature of power, institutions, and margins. I then turn to

a more explicit discussion of the church as being both an institution and a community of individuals in Christ. Building on the thought of Paul Ricoeur, I propose there is an inherent tension between the sufficiency of the Church as an institution that orders its life together and the Christian claim that God in Christ is a God of excess and generosity. Finally, I outline how one might listen to the ecclesial margin for divine power through studying the Christian micro-narratives of Séraphine Louis, Jarena Lee, and Macrina.

My aim in this exploration of these women's narratives in the ecclesial margin is three-fold. First, it is to honor these women's lives and their stories that figure as more minor in the history of Christianity. It is to celebrate the ecclesial margin as a rich space regardless of its relationship to the institutional center. Second, it is to articulate how divine power appears as an "excess" in the ecclesial margin. Divine power manifests beyond the expectations and normative practices of the ecclesial center. The third aim is a therapeutic one, namely a proposal that the Church continue to practice its life together in the knowledge that Christians worship a God of excess. The divine logic of excess counters, according to Paul Ricoeur, "the logic of equivalence"[4] whose operational logic often results in a disposition of institutional anxiety and uncertainty. This knowledge and reflection on both the wisdom of the ecclesial margin and the generous and hospitable nature of divine power might foster an institutional attitude of continued humility and hope for the Church.

Power, Discourse, Individuals, Practices

I work from the assumption that power is not identical to institution. Power is the

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[4] Paul Ricœur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 279.

energy that courses through the relationships between discourse, individuals, and practices.[5] I understand discourse to be the grammar system of language that orders and regulates knowledge in a given community. Individuals are embodied persons who interact and engage the discourse. Practices are "cooperative activities whose constitutive rules are established socially."[6] They tend to have standards of excellence associated with them that then evaluate the degree to which an individual participates in the practice.

Power is that which names the relationship or situation among these three entities. Power can be distributive, diffuse, and weak, or it can be centralized, highly charged, and restrictive. As Michel Foucault notes power functions within various configurations and situations:

> Power (*pouvoir*) is not an institution, and it is not a structure, and it is not a certain capacity (*puissance*) with which some are endowed: it is the name that one gives to a complex strategic situation in a given society.[7]

The distinctive aspect to Foucault's understanding of power is his assertion that power is not a substance or capacity. Rather, power is a quality of the situation between the system by which we order and regulate knowledge, the embodied persons who make up and are situated in this system of knowledge, and the regulated roles by which individuals practice or live out or express themselves in this system of knowledge.

Institutions: Center and Margin

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[5] Here I am indebted to Michel Foucault for his insights on power. For more on Foucault's reading of power, see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd Vintage Books ed. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1995). *The History of Sexuality*, 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1980).

[6] Paul Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 176. For more on "practice," see Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

[7] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 93.

Institutions are understood as that which structures relationships between discourse, individuals and practices. As Paul Ricoeur writes, institutions are "structures of living together" and serve a distributive function for communities.[8] For Ricoeur, the idea of distribution "denotes a feature fundamental to all institutions, to the extent that they govern the apportionment of roles, tasks, and advantages or disadvantages between the members of society."[9] The institution governs or regulates the share of roles among individuals.

Similar to the arrangement of power, the particular distributive arrangements of institutions vary from highly centralized arrangements to more diffuse, and loose ones. In one institution, for example, a few individuals administer and enforce particular discourses and practices, as well as practice particular roles under strict discursive terms. Under such a form, power is also more centralized and concentrated in a few roles. Other institutional arrangements may leave the discourse, practice or individual in a fairly loose and diffuse distribution. There may not be a clear role of administrator or the duties of the administrator, for example, may be held by a multitude of persons. The main role of institutions, however, is to assist in maintaining an order to the distribution of discourse, individuals, and practices. Correspondingly, the power that flows between given situations between individuals and practices may be more diffuse and less concentrated.

The Margins

However institutions distribute discourse, individuals and practices, the institution also has a very distinct quality because of its distributive quality. Therefore, the

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[8] Ricœur, *Oneself as Another,* 194.
[9] Ibid., 200.

institution will always produce a margin. The distributive quality of an institution produces a margin as the limit or edge of the institution. *Institutional margins* refer to the edges or outskirts of the institution's central structures. These margins are generated by the institution through the function of normative discourse and the arrangement of community in the institution.

The function of the institutional margin parallels the function of a textual margin in that, like a textual margin, it frames the center. In a literal sense, when one reads a book, the margin is the border that frames the text on the page. The margin draws the eye away from itself and directs the gaze towards the center. Words could be arranged randomly across a page. However, in order for semantic meaning to exist, the words need to be arranged in a block of text bordered by a margin.[10] The margin's "emptiness" is in fact a necessary element for the center to operate effectively, despite the center's uneasy relationship to the margin.

However, the institutional margin includes an additional factor besides the arrangement of words. It also includes the physical and social space in which persons live. This institutional margin, therefore, is not blank but rather a space where persons live.

The margin, relative to the center, of an institution does not hold a strong concentration of institutional power; the center determines or regulates the social arrangements, practices, and discourses of the community. The margin participates in the discourse, practices and social arrangements, and may even resist particular aspects of the

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[10] For more on the significance of meaning making at the level of the sentence versus the level of the word, see *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976).

central authorities' dictates and regulations; the institution's rules and guidelines are not determined by the margin, but rather the margin's response can only be one of resistance, transgression, or agreement to the center's position.

Due to the relationship of power and knowledge, the kind, form and subject of knowledge produced by an institution's center and margins also depends upon the distribution of power. Here, power relates to the situation of the bodies, practices, and discourse. The center of the ecclesial institution has a more concentrated form of power and therefore can effectively distribute and disseminate particular forms and kinds of knowledge of the institution (i.e. church policies, sacramaents, social teachings). Those on the margins, in contrast, may produce knowledge, but such marginal knowledge is rarely known or seen by others of the institution, because the margin has a more loose and diffuse form of power.

An Imperfect Distribution

As a human structure of living together, there is a further difficulty with institutional life, namely that institutions are more than neutral arrangements of social life. We arrange practices, discourse, and individuals in institutions to protect (often rightly) ourselves from the violence and despair in this tragic world. Institutional moral order is based on, according to Paul Ricoeur, the logic of "equality" or "equivalence."[11] It is the logic that wants a punishment to fit a crime or for a right to be wronged according to the measure of the mistake.

Institutional practices, rules, and regulations are built on our desire to separate what is good and what is evil, what is right and what is wrong. To recognize the forces of evil

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[11] *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, 279.

and the forces of good in the world are vital for our survival. To try to protect our lives through order is a reasonable effort and an important impulse. We create moral order through our institutional life of laws, rules, speech and practice.

The Church as Institution

The Church as an institution faces similar challenges as any institution. I understand the institutional Church to be that which governs the Church by its oversight of the operation of the Church body in a given historical period. The polity, ecclesial judicial bodies and ordained clergy of the Church to administer, maintain and uphold the operation are all included as elements of the institutional Church. At the same time, the Christian tradition is made up of more than the regulatory practices, doctrines, and systems of governance; it is a living body of persons dynamically engaged in the divine life of God in Christ.

The Church is both a complex institutional structure as well as a community of individuals in Christ. At its best, the truth of the Church in its institutional life assists the human beings' encounter between self, others, and God. The institutional life and the living body of the Church ideally are integrally related to one another. The rituals, rules and doctrines give a believer a structure of experience and language for the life of faith.[12] Liturgical practices including the proclamation of the Word and the celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy are integral to the formation of Christians. Through these rituals,

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[12] See Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). In it, she describes doctrine as "the signposts (rules, orders, assumptions) that direct and structure Christian thought and action" (16). Doctrines can also be described as concepts that form and shape both individuals and communities. In this sense, she argues, they are like "theological dramas" that "function like loose but nonetheless definitive scripts that persons of faith perform; doctrines are the dramas in which we live out our lives" (17).

Christians are connected across history to previous and future generations of Christians. The walls of the sanctuary hold the pews, the lectern, the alb, the robe, the cross, the bread, the wine, the text, the hymnbook, the candles, the organ, the piano, the screen, and the words. Central authorities in the church display and perform worship prominently in the life of the Church.

These rituals are hopefully ways to remember the story of Christ, to remember and taste and touch the work and life of this great teacher, master, and incarnation of God. The stories in Scripture are recounted, enacted, recalled, and performed in many different ways.[13] Through the preservation and enactment of these symbols and stories, the individual can access the revelatory proclamation of a suffering, incarnate, infinite, and mysterious God.

Divine Power and Divine Excess

Divinity itself, however, is not identical to the institutional church. The term "God" or divinity references that which is beyond our discursive reasoning. Discursive reasoning is the way the mind understands and interprets the structure of being. We know or reason through distinctions and contrasts. As Wendy Farley writes, "Beings are the same as themselves and different from others. They have their own separate and distinct existence. They come into being and pass out of it. God is not a being, even a super-being. God is not a being at all."[14] God is not defined according to contrasting characteristics because the language of either/or, up/down, here/there are simply

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[13] Again, see Jones, for a thorough illumination on what she calls the "eight distinctive features" of the church as community, most of which reflect its relationship to remembering and performing the Scriptures, ibid., 155-59.

[14] Wendy Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away: A Theology of Incarnation* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 65.

inadequate to the divine. If God were a being, then God would be more one place than another. One would be able to find God according to the discrete objective observation that humans use to orient themselves to the world. Kathryn Tanner writes, "God is not simply opposed to the characteristics of human beings but beyond any such contrasts." [15] Since institutions are part of the structure of being while divinity is not, then the divine power and institutional power does not correlate proportionately.

Additionally, if part of institutional life is to regulate and order speech, practice, and regulations, then the Church as an institution is challenged to both regulate speech and practice while also proclaiming a God whose operating logic is not a normative one, but rather, as Paul Ricoeur argues, a "logic of excess" of "superabundance," of "generosity": "It is the logic that one hears in the voices of the prophets, in Jeremiah, in Ezekiel, and in the Psalms." [16] This is the logic of a God that will not simply act in forms of punishment or retribution, but rather in acts of generosity.

For Ricoeur, Jesus' level of discourse exhibits the logic of excess through the form of parable or proverb. As Ricoeur writes, the "extravagance of parable or the hyperbole of proverb" is intended to open up our view to a different ethical "imagination."[17] For Ricoeur, the imagination is the "intention of dominant direction. Our imagination is the power to open us to new possibilities, to discover another way of seeing, or acceding to a new rule the instruction of the exception."[18] Our imagination orients us toward a general way forward. Turning the other cheek, giving one's cloak off one's back, going the

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[15] Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology*, 1st Fortress Press edition. ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 11.
[16] Ricœur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, 279.
[17] Ibid., 281.
[18] Ibid.

second mile, are all, in Ricoeur's reading, excessive and "extreme."[19] He takes these responses of Jesus as not prescriptive but rather as a pattern of orientation by which God disorients the hearer from a normal response to a situation toward imagining "new possibilities."[20] God is a God of excess in the sense that God responds beyond the expected or normal response.

As Paul Ricoeur writes in his reflections on the logic of God, "No rule emerges. But something like a pattern does. And this pattern is that of a sort of excess of response in relation to the response that is normally expected."[21] Divine power disorients our imagination and, as Ricoeur notes, "clashes head on with the logic of equality or equivalence that "our everyday exchanges, our commerce, and our penal law."[22] Our everyday systems of logic that normatively orient our imagination in the direction of ordered punishment and retribution, "market economy,"[23] and simple everyday order of relations is challenged by this new logic of "excess" and "superabundance."[24]

Beyond the prophets, the psalms, proberbs, and parables, there is then the daunting incarnational act of the divine Word living and then dying on the cross. The cross is a powerful display of an unexpected logic, a display of divine activity as divine weakness: "For all God's power, God only gives Christians the sign of divine weakness, which is the sign of God's love."[25] Taking on the humiliation of the cross and emptying God's self in death displays the utter graceful and excessive logic of God in love for humanity and

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[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., 283.
[24] Ibid., 279.
[25] Ibid., 288.

creation. It is the logic of a both divine and human person suffering, taking death into God's self, and living. The Word of Christ brings us to a place where human reason is dumbfounded. The incarnation, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ are so incomprehensible that human logos are in awe of the power of the Word. Rachel Muers understands Bonhoeffer's reading of the Word in its Christological sense as being a Word that is also a *counter-logos* to ordinary word. With the embodiment of the Word as Christ, Bonhoeffer understands that the logology of Christ is also counter-logos.[26] The life in Christ is one that testifies to a logic that is beyond the logic of retribution and punishment found in the penal code or market economy.

If the logic of God exceeds the logic of equivalence, then it becomes all that more challenging for the institutional Church to regulate roles, speech and practice while at the same time following this God of excess.

Marginal Theology

Given this tension between the institutional nature of the Church and its proclamation of the Christian God of excess, I suggest that the ecclesial margin is a rich space to consider the nature of divine power operating in excess. The margin, relative to the center, of an institution does not hold a strong concentration of power; the center determines or regulates the social arrangements, practices, and discourses of the community. If divine power flows independently of and even at times counter to how power flows among institutional power, then it follows that the margin, as a relatively weak location of power in institutional structures, is not necessarily weak in terms of

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[26] See Rachel Muers, *Keeping God's Silence: Towards a Theological Ethics of Communication* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2004).

divine power.

Because of the disproportionate presence of divine power and institutional power at the margins, the margin also has a different relationship to knowledge. The presence of divine power in the margins produces a kind of knowledge about the divine that the institutional center may not access. This then means that the knowledge produced by the margin, as in the thought, practices, and structures of meaning are relatively unknown and therefore less powerful to the center, but may not be so in relation to divine power. This is not to claim that the center of the institution is not also a place where divine activity occurs, but simply that the kind of knowledge that the ecclesial margin produces is distinct from that of the center. Further, I propose that the margin does hold a particular ability to express this divine logic of excess.

Rebecca Chopp notes the nature of the margin tends to have fluidity, movement, and openness in its vulnerability and fragility. In discussing the proclamation of freedom in Luke 4, Chopp notes the way that the margins are particularly positioned to receive divinity: "The margins receive, not because of the purity of their innocence, not because they are figured as closer to God, but in their openness, their emptiness, their positionality, their fluidity, in which God appears."[27] The institutional margin is not an easy space, but is rich with moments and possibilities for movement and awareness of divine power. Rather than expecting the margin to be a place of deficiency or pure subjugation and silence, we might try to investigate its theologically rich textures, sounds, and architecture more deeply. There may be knowledge of divine power that the

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[27] Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 55-56.

margin knows which the center cannot. To more fully describe the nature of the divine, I propose we need the margin to illuminate that which the center does not and cannot reveal about divine power.

The margin is a diffuse, multi-dimensional space where persons are neither necessarily in agreement with one another nor in the margin for the same reasons. The circumstances by which persons end up at the ecclesial margins vary. While there are a variety of reasons why persons may live in the margin, the ecclesial margin is especially attuned to expressing divine excess because of its inherent discord with the central ecclesial institution's roles, regulations, and discourse. If divine power is excessive, then it also exceeds what is imagined as possible. The institutional center holds an allegiance to what is normative while excess is about what is beyond or "more than"[28] what is perceived as possible. The margin is a space whose openness and fluidity may receive this divine excess and generosity with welcome and thanksgiving.

I examine in this study three general categories for marginalization as representative of how the margin exceeds the normative rules and regulations in the institutional Church. These conditions of marginalization include madness, discrimination, and exceptional holiness. These three conditions are not exhaustive categories, but do represent three diverse forms of marginalization.[29]

Some live on the margin because they are simply unable to remain in the dominant discourse. Living outside the normative structures of language, these lives are deemed a

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[28] Ricœur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, 281.

[29] I have considered neither the Asian, African, or South American contexts nor the margin between different religious traditions (i.e. Hindu-Christian; Muslim-Christian, etc.). The three situations I have selected represent three forms of marginality within the Christian church institution: discrimination, madness, and exceptional holiness.

surd, a voiceless or muffled sound. They are incomprehensible to the logic of the dominant discourse, so persons become unheard because they do not speak or know in normative forms. In the case of illogical or delusional minds, persons can be deemed mad because their understanding of the world sounds confused compared to the dominant perspective.

There are various claims about the meaning and significance of the term madness. Madness has been considered a neurological diagnosis based on scientific study and observation, a form of social control for those who do not fit inside the discourse of reason, or an unfortunate mislabeling of those inspired and possessed by the truth of divinity.[30]

For our purposes, I understand madness as a term designated for either a condition of an individual or a term for an institutional process that seems to be outside of reason or is un-reasonable. Madness can be read in a close dialectical relationship with Reason. Reason is the category of logic that might is made clear through its antithetical relationship to madness, a form of discourse or behavior that appears illogical in a particular iteration within a set of norms or practices.

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[30] For a discussion of the biologically based diagnosis of madness, see Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Many Forms of Madness: A Family's Struggle with Mental Illness and the Mental Health System*, ed. David Ruether (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010). Ruether helpfully notes that seeing visions, for example, is understood in certain contexts as religious significant: "Hearing the voices of invisible others is also a common experience in many religious traditions, these invisible others being identified with God, gods, Christ, saints, and angels," (49). Ruether also helpfully raises the question of how social and cultural responses to persons with mental illness may contribute to their overall well-being or increased paranoia or mental illness. For the discussion of how madness has changed over the course of different epistemes in Western culture, see Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, ed. Jean Khalfa, trans. Jonathan Paul Murphy and Jean Khalfa (London ; New York: Routledge, 2006).

For those who live with mental illness, the individual does not experience the world in ways coincident with and verifiable by the community and due to the individual's perception of the world are dangers to themselves and/or to others by the community. Community institutions including the church, the psychiatric community, and the scientific community responds to such persons through observation, naming, services, and support.

Others end up on the margin because of institutional discrimination. For example, Min-Ah Cho notes, as a bilingual Korean woman, her identity conflicts with the church's norms: "My ethnicity and gender have been considered marks of 'otherness' in the long history of Christianity, and the ideologically constructed images of the Western male God always make me feel impeded and abashed."[31] She notes how the "language manufactured in the church tradition" cause her to "mumble" and feel "alienation at times" even when the church (and the academy) wear a "friendly face."[32] At times, it asks her to "represent" her ethnicity and gender as a marker of diversity. This "othering" by the community freezes her into a particular identity. This sense of being asked to "occupy" one "territory" as she calls it but always traversing more than one sphere causes a disruption and conflict between her own individual identity and normative church discourse. The result is an unease or tension between her place in the church and where the church wants her to be, as she puts it: "Always traversing more than one occupied

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[31] Min-Ah Cho, "Corpus Christi, to Be Eaten and to Be Written Questioning the Act of Writing in Hadewijch of Antwerp and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha," ed. Don E. Saliers, et al. (Thesis Ph.D. Emory University 2011., 2011), 3-4.

[32] Ibid., 4.

territory at a time, I am in search of a proper place but remain perpetually improper."[33] Cho's frustration, shame, and defiance of the institutional language demonstrate how the institution marginalizes particular individuals through its essentializing and normative discourse.

Finally, there are those who run to the margin as an alternative space. At times, we forget the beauty and delight in anonymity, darkness, quiet. For queer theologian, Marcella Althaus-Reid, one might think of the margin as not just a border or limit but also a "leading edge" of joy, beauty, and dissent from the center. As she writes:

> It is even wiser, from this Queer ecclesiological perspective, to make people at the margins the people of God, those who are at the leading edge and not simply those who are at the receiving end of a central institution. From affective relationships at the margins to a sacred understanding of God and God's people as marginalised (*sic*), comes also an appropriation of joy and beauty in life and the empowerment of dissent, the Queer dissent.[34]

For Althaus-Reid, the "queer dissent" includes the saint: "Holiness…becomes a category of the marginalised, when we consider that the saint is meant to be an outsider of society, not in the sense of failing to participate actively in the political life of her community, but due to her dissenting role."[35] Part of the ability to be holy involves being set apart on the edges of society and, in some cases, the church order. The margin is not just a reception area for those pushed out of the institutional center. It is also a place in the church that persons run towards to seek the brilliant darkness of God. In order to enter into a contemplative mode, many find that living on the margin is a critical space to occupy.

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[33] Ibid.
[34] Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2003), 162.
[35] Ibid., 160.

Finding the Margin

Given the structure of the margin in all its diversity, the challenge of speaking about the margin lies approaching persons on the margins on their own terms. This practice of bringing the margin to awareness involves a delicate balance. Time functions as the distance between the center of the institution and the marginalized life that then gives the life back to be read and spoken about. The study needs to reflect the temporal distance inherent in the margin and yet needs to bring it into awareness. If one brings the existential experience of the margin into view too closely, one may lose its conditions, appearances, and sounds. The margin bears particular qualities that can disappear and even flee our gaze.

To take an example from the natural world, the margin can be like the haze that appears on a mountain range at twilight or dawn. When the sun rises on a mountain range, the sun's rays burn off this evanescent dew eventually. The haze is no longer there. It only exists at the moment when one time of day changes over to another, and is really most recognized when one is at a distance from the mountain range itself.

Our more direct interaction with a margin can also cause its evaporation. If a fire is smoking, you can bring your hand to the cloud rising up from the flame, dissipating the smoke until it is thin and less distinct. Its quality as smoke has shifted, however, in the attempt to interact with it. Certainly, we need the sun to rise, and the smoke and mist to dissipate, if only because we need to hear and see another quality of life. The delicacy of the margin, however, means that we have to approach the margin without dissolving its character in the interaction itself.

In an ecclesial context, I'm curious about what happens after the devotee has heard

the words of institution, walked to the altar, received the elements of the bread and wine, and has turned her back to the altar. She returns to her seat in the back pew of the church. She may even be standing on the outskirts of the church, overhearing the words and songs of the sanctuary. What does the discourse and language that drifts and situates itself on the outer rim of the community sound like? How might we hear what appears to be the mumbling, broken and fissured sounds coming from the margin as the sounds of the divine presence?

Human occupation of the margin makes interacting with the margin all that more complicated. The interaction between self and other influences the character and experience of both persons. At the point of direct eye contact and an address of a question, the margin is gone. The person in the margin is no longer an outline in a landscape, but has entered into a discursive exchange. Once a conversation starts, then she is more informed by you and you informed by her. The interpersonal, immediate exchange can therefore cause the marginal dimension to shift to the edges or periphery of the encounter. It is like trying to chase down something that is inherently going to slip away if we try to chase after it directly. This does not mean that we can't find the margin, but just that there are some critical factors that help us maintain its quality as margin.

The practice of finding the margin is similar, I argue, to the way a film places some necessary distance between the observer and the observed in order to convey a particular affect of mystery and marginality. The cinematic camera offers a dramatic understanding of what it means to approach this enigmatic sphere.

In the movie *Séraphine,* for example, director Martin Provost ends the biopic with a shot of the aforementioned older woman sitting as a silhouette right at the horizon where

the large sky and the long field meet at a horizontal line. A large tree is her companion. You can see the outline of the chair and her legs, her nose, and her hat. You can hear the rustle of the leaves as the wind blows across the field. As someone watching the film, you cannot yell to her or cry out asking her who she is. The woman on the horizon is a dark outline because she sits on the horizon. You cannot see her face. You do not know if she is smiling or crying. You do not know what she sees. But you do see her outline - quiet, unharmed, and participating in the beauty of the horizon.

You hear the sound of wind blowing her hat across the trees and the field. And yet, the spectator's experience of the scene precludes an inter-personal encounter with the character in the scene. The camera carefully maintains a distance from the outline on the horizon. It does not pan into a close up of her face or her dress. We don't know the exact texture or make of her skirt, or the color of her shoes. Her face is turned away from the camera.

The film is a visual metaphor for the disposition I hope to take in relation to the margin. These include a conscious measured distance from the experience of marginality, a respect for the ways that the margin appears through an indirect approach of observation, and that the marginalized life might only be recognized in retrospect.

Moving beyond the visual metaphor of cinematic observance, hearing the margin becomes more complex when we consider who may be addressed. If the recollections and expressions of the margin are not written for the institutional center, but to a friend, to others who are marginalized in a similar position, or to God in a devotional form, then it may be even harder to understand the meaning of the address. The author may be writing, painting, or praying without regard for the institutional center.

Taking all of these elements of the marginalized life into account, then, I suggest a general posture for undertaking this search for the margin. As in the practice of mindfulness training, the reader of the margin might loosen her epistemological frame from facing the central institutional structures of power, and rather soften her gaze to build an awareness of the outer rim of the institution – the margin. While one can never fully gaze upon the margin, for it then it loses a quality of its marginality, one can find a way to ease the attention from the point of view of the center to then diffuse one's attention to the edges of an institution, and attend to the knowledge it may yield.

The Christian Micro-Narrative

One way to "soften the gaze" and become aware of the experience of the those on the ecclesial margin is to look for artifacts left by those on the margins, I suggest working with Christian "micro-narratives."[36] Narratives can be understood as the plotting of action over time.[37] Micro-narratives provide a way to consider both the presence of marginalized lives and difficulty of representing Christian lives in the ecclesial margin. Narratives of a whole life maintain the necessary temporal distance between the marginal life and the reader or analyzer of the margin to maintain the subject matter as marginal. Furthermore, as the term "micro" suggests, the subjects of these narratives are specifically of those who do not directly contribute to the grand history of Christianity.

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[36] Thanks to Jeorg Rieger's "Theology and the Power of the Margins in a Postmodern World," for the term "micronarrative" in *Opting for the Margins: Postmodernity and Liberation in Christian Theology*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 192.

[37] For more on narrative as it relates to the self, see MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Also, Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, Paperback edition. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). As Richard Kearney writes, "But no matter how distinct in style, voice or plot, every story shares the common function of *someone telling something to someone about something*." Richard Kearney, *On Stories*, ed. Corporation Ebooks (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002), 4.

The lives recalled in the micro-narrative are all relatively marginal figures. These lives are largely forgotten, only found in these small, fragmentary recollections from others or through their own writing.

Additionally, Christian micro-narratives are connected to Christian revelation and informed by the larger tradition of the Christian story. These narratives presuppose a biblical faith. In his essay, "Naming God," Paul Ricoeur notes, "what is presupposed is that faith, inasmuch as it is lived experience, is instructed – in the sense of being formed, clarified and educated – within the network of texts…This presupposition of the textuality of faith distinguishes biblical faith ('Bible' meaning book) from all others."[38] For the micro-narratives of Macrina, Jarena Lee, and Séraphine, the Biblical witness influences and instructs their texts. In this sense, all three accounts of their lives fall under this idea of a Christian micro-narrative. This is not to assume that Scripture is some sort of ahistorical litmus test for theological margins or any other theological discourse. Certainly, any interpretation of Scripture is historically situated and reveals as much about our own existential, historical, and moral questions of the day as it reflects upon a previous one. When one interprets Christian micro-narratives, then, Scripture informs such an interpretation through a play of inter-textuality.

St. Macrina, Jarena Lee, Séraphine Louis

Given the above discussion of the structure of institutional center and margin and divine power, I examine three Christian lives and their narratives for their marginalization, their relationship to the divine, their relationship to the ecclesial institution, and their gender.

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[38] Paul Ricoeur, "Naming God," 218.

All three lives selected are women. This preferential option for women's lives is in part an assumption that women (however defined or constructed) are not granted central roles in the ecclesial institution. Often the distributive nature of the church as institution disproportionately distributes women's lives to the margins. Sexism and patriarchy, for example, cause many women to find themselves on the margins of the church body.[39] For Rebecca Chopp, the silencing of "women, persons of color, and other oppressed person" is due to the centrality of "ongoing practices, discourses, and language" that force these groups to one of three options: "to conform to ongoing practices, to babbling nonsense, or to not speaking at all."[40] In the church, Rebecca Chopp argues that the root of gender oppression is a "social-symbolic order" that is based on a binary opposition between men/women. The symbol of woman, alongside many others, function as a defining, silent, and unseen margin of the church:

> marginal also means the effacing of women, for women are not men, and hence are not really present and can be overlooked; in this sense marginal means having no substance, containing nothing, the emptiness of the margins.[41]

This study hopes to negotiate the margin as margin while also recognizing that the margin and the lives in the margins are only "empty" from the point of view of the center.

All three narratives reflect access to divine power when their respective ecclesial institutions were undergoing a major shift in its overall structural organization and societal influence. In the case of Séraphine, the early twentieth century saw the Christian

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[39] Such objectification of course extends beyond the church body. Feminist theorists including Luce Irigaray remind us in a psychoanalytic framework that the ability for some to speak is predicated on a pre-discursive space often marked and signified by women/chaos.

[40] Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God*, 7.

[41] Ibid., 15.

Church in France begin to have its epistemological authority questioned due to the psychiatric and modernist discourse. The church was becoming increasingly marginal as an authority for diagnosing human behavior. In the case of the AME church, one sees the rise of a new church denomination that is faced with creating a "structure of living together"[42] that is distinct from the white Methodist church. In this sense, the AME church was just beginning to structure itself when Lee experiences her call to preach. Finally, in the fourth century, the early Church was still struggling to articulate itself as the Church even as it began to be officially recognized by the Roman Empire.

In each of these cases, the church institution faced critical questions of its own rules and regulations. These negotiations prompted an articulation and negotiation of roles and regulations. During these critical moments when the Church institution could have been open to hearing from the margins' knowledge of divine power, the institution itself remained relatively deaf to the sounds of wisdom coming from the experiences of these women. I am interested in hearing from these narratives in an effort to hear again the qualities of divine power and divine excess that these narratives offer.

The study orders its discussion of each life against the flow of history chronologically. I begin with Séraphine as the most recent figure in history, followed by the nineteenth century figure Jarena Lee and finally to the fourth century life St. Macrina. Going against the historical logic of time resists one from ever trying to associate one life's marginality to another. There may be a temptation to think that there is some sort of root or foundational moment in which marginalization became part of the tradition, and if we just reached back into time, we would locate the moment, thus "solving" the problem

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[42] Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 194.

of why this pattern of not recognizing new forms of divine power repeats. Looking back through history while not following historical time hopefully allows the reader to both consider each life as its own unique manifestation of marginality and divine power while at the same time, recognizing that such a relationship persists through different eras and places.

The following chapters will examine each life in detail, but here is a brief introduction to each one.

Séraphine Louis

Séraphine Louis lived part of her life in a convent, part of her life in a small town Senlis, and ended her life in an asylum. Her art circulated around the world as part of the French naive movement of the early twentieth century. Housekeeper by day, Séraphine spent her nights painting in her upstairs apartment in Senlis. World War II cut short Séraphine's life as an artist. She painted over eighty pieces in a twenty year span. Her paintings are composed entirely of flora and fauna, and they are painted in a variety of colors. Many of them portray a vase or container with bouquets of flowers. None of her art features human figures. Her patron Wilhelm Uhde was forced to abandon his support of her. She became increasingly apocalyptic in her worldview, and was eventually committed to an asylum, and died.

I was first drawn to Séraphine's narrative thanks to the biopic directed by Martin Provost. The film portrays a quiet, independent woman who lives and paints in a small town with little speech. She wanders the fields outside her town, and does housekeeping by day. Her inspiration to paint by the angels suggests a divine awareness to her life; she was deeply formed by the Catholic Church and lived in a convent. She also chose to

leave the convent. She is a marginal figure in her relationship to faith. This proves illuminating for me in thinking about what knowledge she held of divine power in light of this position.

Historically, her prolific production of art occurred right before the two world wars. I see her life and her work as sitting on the cusp or edge of the era of modern warfare. I also see her life living out the margin between the religious and the secular. The rise of the psychological field of knowledge grew throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, and Séraphine's life is caught up in this new mode of knowing – the psychiatric. This cross-section of epistemes – the religious, the psychiatric, and the political – all impinge on her life while she sits on the edges of each. In the midst of this margin, her art speaks of a beauty and symmetry to the natural world that somehow she felt inspired to paint. This is the material by which she points to an aspect of divine excess.

Jarena Lee

African American preacher **Jarena Lee** was denied ordination by the Church and found a sense of freedom in preaching. Born in Cape May, New Jersey in 1783, she spent much of her life travelling through the U.S. Northeast and Midwest. She, like Macrina, had a close relationship with a formative ecclesial figure, in this case, Bishop Richard Allen, the bishop of the newly formed African Methodist Episcopal Church. In spite of her position as a sought after preacher traveling over 2,000 miles, Lee was never ordained by her denomination, and was never able to preach below the Mason-Dixon line.

Jarena Lee's stunning dedication and perseverance is enough to make one want to

write about her. How did someone so strong live through such uncertain and difficult situation of discrimination and oppression? Jarena Lee also lived on many edges – geographic, political, and religious. Geographically, she preached and spoke along the Mason-Dixon fault line between the U.S. North and U.S. South. She lived politically on the edge because of her relative political freedom. She was not owned as were other African-American women in the South, and yet, she was also not fully free in the North, without voting rights or property. Third, she was religiously very connected to the central power male dominated leadership in the newly formed AME church, and yet she was not one of them due to her gender. In this way, Lee was close to the center of a denomination, and yet also denied full participation. This political, geographic, and religious marginality was not the final story for Lee; rather, she reads the narrative of the Christian life as a vision that exceeds the limits of discrimination and offers her a present and future hope in God.

Macrina

In his work *The Life of St. Macrina*, fourth century bishop Gregory of Nyssa tells a story of his elder sister **Macrina** and her formation of an alternative community in the countryside of modern Turkey. As Gregory recounts, at the young age of twelve, Macrina claimed for herself the title of virgin-widow after the man to whom she was betrothed who died before they were wed. She refused other suitors, and subsequently declared herself to be wedded to her deceased fiancé. She remained "by herself" as both a virgin and a widow.[43] After her father died, Macrina convinced her mother Emmelia and her

[43] Gregory, *The Life of Saint Macrina*, trans. Kevin Corrigan, Peregrina Translations Series, (Toronto, Ont.: Peregrina, 1989), 24.

brother Peter to move from urban Neocaesarea to the their family's rural estate of Annesi in Pontus. With Macrina at the helm, they converted the family estate into a welcoming, Christian retreat and ascetic community where men and women could pray, worship, and live together. Macrina and her family renounced their wealth and lived in community with people of diverse class backgrounds. By the end of her life, Macrina's healing powers drew people from far away to the community. Gregory writes extensively about visiting his sister on her deathbed.

I reach back to the fourth century to consider the life of Macrina, because while issues of marginality are often read in modern terms as relative to issues of identity, I want to probe back to the early part of Christian tradition to wonder at how the margin has always been with the tradition, even in the beginning. The Church itself was still emerging as a universal entity. Macrina represents a mixture of being well-educated, and from a wealthy family, and yet choosing voluntary poverty. She lived on the edges of economic wealth, and yet benefitted by her nobility. Finally, her story intrigues me due to its author. Gregory of Nyssa chooses to write about his elder sister in a theologically rich reflection. To write about a female exemplar of the Christian faith unlike a hagiography but rather a meditation on the presence of the divine in human life is a powerful counterpoint when read through a female subject.

The Difficulty of Writing the Margin

As noted above the margin as margin makes it very difficult to know. None of these micro-narratives are identical to the actual experience of the subject's life. Rather, they are a rendering of memory and history shaped and forged together. The fragmented

nature of accounting for a life influences how each narrative contributes to understanding an aspect of the margin and divine excess.

Séraphine Louis' Fragmentation

Witnessing to Séraphine's life is difficult in at least three ways - her own questionable reliability as a narrator, the simple lack of historical data about two distinct periods in her life, and the institutional bias of those who write about her. The details of her birth and her childhood up through her time in Senlis largely come from the record of the medical intern who documented interviewing Séraphine. Because much of her testimony came from her time in the asylum, it is very difficult to verify the story that Séraphine gives. When she was in the asylum, she mentioned her time in the convent, briefly and with great suspicion. From the recording an intern in the asylum on November 2, 1933, "…she says that jealousy was the predominant character of all the sisters and, for quite futile causes, blood flowed. She would have seen the Valentine sister murdered by Sister Angelique because of coffee."[44] She also speaks about how Séraphine understands herself to be a secret agent of the police. How is the truth of a life told when one's own mind becomes a shadowy space, an unreliable narrator and a place of delusion and fantasy?

In addition to the record of the medical intern, Séraphine also wrote letters at the end of her life. These letters include references to her childhood interwoven with apocalyptic warnings of Satan's wrath coming on earth. It becomes difficult, therefore, to know how much of what she says about her life comes out of her situatedness in an asylum. Would

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[44] « Aussi nous dit-elle que la jalousie était le caractère prédominant de toutes les soeurs et que depuis pour des causes assez futiles, le sang y coulait. Elle aurait vu la soeur Valentin assassinée par la Soeur Angélique a cause du café. » Marie Ortas-Perretti, "Séraphine, Peintre Aliénée" (Thèse de doctorat 1965), 15.

she have described her experience in the convent differently had she been asked at a different point in her life? She was, after all, deemed to have severe mental debility at the point when she gives these testimonies.

There are also severe gaps in her story. Historian Pascal Corpart writes that there are two lost "traces" of Séraphine's itinerary. The first gap includes her whereabouts between 1876 to 1881, when she was the ages of 13 and 17 years old. The second gap is the intervening time between when she left the convent and when she appears in the Senlis census record in 1906: "However, it is impossible to say that it is in 1901 that Séraphine, whose presence on-site is regularly attested to by the registered population census in Clermont, actually leaves the scene to stand on her own feet because, for the second time, her trace is lost."[45] Certainly, she must have left the convent before September 1903, when the ministry of the interior ordered it to close. From about 1903 onward, the picture of Séraphine Louis' life is a bit clearer in terms of where she lived (i.e. Senlis) and where she died (i.e. in the asylum in Clermont). According to the interview in 1933 in the asylum, Séraphine worked as a domestic in various places, first in Saint-Just-en-Chaussée, a small town in northern France, and then in Senlis. She reappears in the census records in 1906 in Senlis.

Because the details of her life are so murky, biographers at times have reported the details of her life incorrectly. J.P. Foucher gives the wrong name and place of the convent in which she spent an estimated twenty years of her life. Uhde misdates the time of her

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[45] « Toutefois, impossible d'affirmer que c'est bien en 1901 que Séraphine, dont la présence sur place est régulièrement attestée jusqu'a cette date par les recensements nominatifs de la population clermontoise, a vraiment quitte les lieux pour voler de ses propres ailes car, pour la seconde fois, sa trace se perd. » Pascal Corpart, "La Veritable Vie De Seraphine De Senlis," *Vivre en Val-d'Oise*, no. 108 (2008): 68.

death, claiming that she died in the asylum in 1934 as opposed to her official death in 1942.[46]

The third difficulty reflects the biographers and historians own biases interpreting her life. Those who have written biographies of her all have particular interests at stake in writing their account. H.M. Gallot a psychoanalyst who knew and met Séraphine Louis wrote a biography on her. These accounts, however, depend on a particular psychiatric evaluation of her life and are therefore an interpretation.

Wilhelm Uhde, the art collector, wrote about his experience of discovering her, and his style is highly based in creating a myth around Séraphine herself, including making associations with her work and Rousseau and her life and Joan of Arc, also accused of madness and witchcraft.

As all of these writers and biographers indicate, the institutional language of the art world, the psychiatric world, and the religious language used by Séraphine are symbols and language that makes it difficult to "write the truth" of the life of Séraphine.[47] For the purposes of this project, the truth of Séraphine's life lies in what it says about divine power in the margins. There may be other "truths" in her life; but this is the one that I will be tracing through both what is said, and what is pointed to but not made into speech. One way I will be reading her life is through her artwork in addition to the testimony given by her and her benefactor and medical staff. Her artwork speaks in that it produces meaning through the medium of visual representation. As art was reportedly the vehicle by which God called her to use, this is the place where we might look to understand her

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[46] Wilhelm Uhde, *Five Primitive Masters*, trans. Ralph Thompson (New York: Quadrangle Press, 1949), 98.
[47] Mark Jordan, "Writing the Truth," *Practical Matters*, no. 6 (2013).

speech on divine power. It will be a work of translation, given that I am writing an analysis in light of a visual work. It will also be an indirect presentation of divine activity in that Séraphine did not explicitly say that her art was a reflection on divine encounter, but rather my interpretation of her work. But, I believe that the work of her art gives room for an interpretation of what she understood as divine inspiration. What did God desire her to show, and what kind of divine excess is suggested in this particular kind of inspiration?

Jarena Lee

Jarena Lee's life is written in two autobiographies. She gives two accounts of her life – a shorter, earlier version and a later, extended account. Both offer us a coherent account of her life. With little political or social capital as an African American woman, she nonetheless found a way to write herself into the history. Lee bravely defied those who repeatedly tried to deny her an oral and written public platform. Lee preached on the road, reporting in her journal that in the year of 1835 she travelled 721 miles and preached 692 sermons. In addition to her vast preaching life, she also bravely wrote her story.

Lee self-published the *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee* in 1836 with an additional 1000 copies printed in 1839. In 1844, Lee tried to find support from the AME church's Book Committee for the publication of a new expanded edition of her autobiography. But the committee refused. Undettered, and despite that the Committee forbid traveling preachers from publishing pamphlets or books without formal approval,

she financed the printing of her second version.[48] She expanded the 1836 edition in the 1849 volume *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel Revised and Corrected from the Original Manuscript* which differs, not merely in its title, but also in its content. The latter text emphasizes new aspects to her work and life in a different form – the travelogue. Her efforts at self-publishing demonstrates her "persistence in joining the public discourse despite resistance by the Book Concern."[49]

What we know about Jarena Lee as preacher and evangelist is limited to her own narratives. We do not have records of her church attendance, nor is she mentioned in any great detail by those she references in her work, including Bishop Richard Allen and Zilpha Elaw, a fellow itinerant preacher. We only gain historical knowledge of her through her testimony. The only historical record we have of her is from her two self-published narratives.

Yet, even while Lee's text is a historical written document produced by her, the text itself is not a "pure" reflection of Lee's thoughts, intent, or perception, because of her own authorial position as an African-American woman. Her ability to write and be read by white literate culture as well as her own social mobility was dictated by the race politics of the day. For example, Lee's own experience of social discrimination comes in her description of encountering the hospitality of a white family. In Lee's 1849 text, she

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[48] Jarena Lee, "The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," in *Sisters of the Spirit : Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1836), 6.

[49] Frances Smith Foster, *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 74.

remarks how a particular white family - the Lewelens - invited her to dinner "not as one of their hired servants, but as a companion."[50] Lee's encounter suggests positive racial integration. Yet, her need to point this detail out shows the degree to which race still defined social boundaries even if they were occasionally crossed.

Additionally, a common way that black writers maintained an open readership was by obscuring their own particular history over against the spiritual aspects of their narrative. The genre signifies the kinds of literary modes in which racialized bodies had to work in order to speak in public arenas. As many scholars of history have noted, the black spiritual autobiography of the antebellum era was a powerful way of creating a public that might consider the freedom and dignity of African Americans. Black male spiritual autobiography was particularly interested in addressing white readers, and arguing for, as William Andrews writes, "the necessary intellectual groundwork by proving that black people were as much chosen by God for eternal salvation as whites."[51]

Both versions of Lee's narrative pay short shrift to her upbringing or even how her parents came to live in New Jersey. We don't know much about what her parents did for a living. Instead, Lee emphasizes her spiritual experience of conversion and sanctification over and against any sort of normative claim on her childhood and adolescent development. In addition to its emphasis on spiritual experience, Lee employs the spiritual autobiographical trope of the author as God's instrument. Lee writes, "The Lord strengthened his feeble instrument in the effort to win souls for Christ, for which my

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[50] Lee, "The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," 26.

[51] William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 7.

heart at this time was heavily burthened."[52] As Smith Foster notes, in spiritual autobiography, this sort of description acts as an "apologia" for her authorship.[53]

Jarena Lee's life is written through the hermeneutical grid of white dominant tropes of her day. Because Jarena Lee was not documented other than her own writing, it becomes difficult to get a clear view of her. One would think that her own testimony proposes a clear and direct view of her. But, really, to use a visual metaphor, this view lacks the kind of "double" vision that two camera angles can bring. She alone can choose what and how she tells her story without contradiction or retort from anyone else. Her text is not a straightforward account of her life. It is not a naïve retelling. Rather, the text has one explicit goal, to instruct others in the spiritual life, and two implicit ones, specifically to defend women's call to ordained ministry and to persuade white readers about the dangers of racism.

Macrina

Unlike Jarena Lee who chose to write about her life, or in the case of Séraphine's generated artistic renderings, Macrina's life is mediated through the words and motivations of another author Gregory in two works *The Life of Macrina* and *On the Soul and the Resurrection*.[54] The first text is a narrative of her life told after her brother goes to visit her as she is dying. The second is a dialogue in Socratic form between Macrina and her brother as she is lying on her deathbed.

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[52] Jarena Lee, "Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," in *Spiritual Narratives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1849), 29.

[53] Foster, *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892* 60.

[54] Gregory, *The Soul and the Resurrection*, ed. Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood, NY: Crestwood, NY : St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993).

In both cases, Macrina's life remains something that we hear through her brother's voice. Both texts are laden with his particular theological perspective for the human life. The text also exemplifies the complexity of reading the margin from the center as the author Gregory's voice plays a strong role in the body of each text. The narrative text's fuller title reads "From Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa, A Letter on The Life of Saint Macrina [to the monk Olympius]."[55] Taking this text as an event of exchange from Gregory to his friend Olympius, Macrina's authorship is absent in the text. Macrina did not have any power in relationship to how this text was constructed or whether her story (or stories) should be told. What does Macrina think of her life? What does she have to say about why she moved from Neo-Caesarea to Annesi to live a life of equality and hospitality with others? Who is God for Macrina? These are not questions that the text can answer. What does it mean for a bishop of the Church to write an elegaic epistle about an ascetic community and their female founder?[56] The politics of writing theologically about this woman's life means that what Gregory says about Macrina may not fully reflect her historical life. Again, however, I am reading these texts to reflect upon how divine power appears in the life at the margins. This means that the text does not have to be a text that relates the particular historical details of Macrina correctly, but rather how the life gives

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[55] *The Life of Saint Macrina*, 21.

[56] As historian Elizabeth Clark helpfully remarks on the situation of contemporary feminist interpretations of early texts:
"It seems clear that we must move beyond the stage of feminist historiography in which we 'find' another forgotten woman and throw her into the historical mix. The current moment is considerably less celebratory in its conclusions: we cannot with certainty claim to hear the voices of real women in early Christian texts, so appropriated have they been by male authors." Elizabeth A. Clark, "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a Feminist Historian after the "Linguistic Turn"," *Church History* 67, no. 1 (1998): 30-31.

forth meaning about the nature of the divine on the margins.

All three narratives are marginal in that the text does not give us the life itself, but rather an account of a life. The micro-narrative account of a life maintains the shadowy existence of marginality while also giving us an outline or echo of the life itself. Reflecting on his own memoir, Edward Farley warns of this very tendency from a writer's perspective to turn the subjects of writing into objects. As he writes, this "cognitive over-confidence" in the appearances in a narrative is "an erasure of others because it empties them of their mystery, possibility, and infinite and ever changing complexity: in short, their concreteness."[57] A "naïve" reader may equally assume that the character we meet on the page is the person in actuality. This may cause one to idealize the person without recognizing that the text is a rendering of a life. This is not to say that something of the life does not persist through the narrative, but I want to maintain and bring to awareness the distance between the life itself and the account of the life. The gap between the narrative and a life is true regardless of one's situation; this gap between the narrative and the life on the margins becomes that much more difficult to reconcile. Those that write about the marginal life, even those who write about themselves, have to negotiate rules and regulation of speech that also produced their marginality. Writing about a life on the margins inevitably has to negotiate power relations that kept the life on the margins in the first place. In order to write and be received, one must in some way speak the language at the center. This means that to decipher the truth of a life on the margins becomes that much more complicated and obscure. In the case of Séraphine,

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[57] Edward Farley, *Thinking About Things and Other Frivolities : A Life* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2014), xv.

testimonies of her life are particularly challenging to sift through because she is a denizen of the dark; institutional language is reaching to bring meaning to a life that is found to be in shadow, in ambiguity. Traces disappear and reappear without much ability to be verified by either the one who lived it, Séraphine, or those who are invested in particular epistemes to read her life. For Jarena Lee, racial and gender politics restrict how she can write about her life. For Macrina, her brother's theological perspective and position in the Church dictates in part how Gregory writes about his sister's life.

For the purposes of this project on the divine in the margins, the truth of a life lies somewhere between what is written and what happened in time. It also lies beyond the particularities of a life, and is more about the meaning that issues forth from a whole life. So, there are two truths including the truth of the historical life, and the truth of a whole life. These are different things. The truth of the historical life refers to the activities, thoughts, and actions of a person in time. This kind of truth can never be fully known or captured because any perspective on a life is limited and contextual in its reception of that life, including one's own perception. This is especially true for those on the margins. At the same time, the truth of the whole life refers to the meaning made in light of the historical life. This truth can be made and re-made through reflection and interaction with the testimony of a life. Once again, one cannot give a full and complete truth to a life, but one can say something true about a life. This is the hope and intent of reflecting upon these historical lives.

These three historical lives, then, will remain fairly remote from the reader in this analysis. There will be more unknowns and gaps; there will be moments in the text or

testimony of a life that remain unclear as to its veracity concerning the historical life. Gaps and absences in details, in intent, and motivation remain difficult to account for.

Certainly, rather than illuminating this figure, particular testimonies can cover over and further obscure the actions, thoughts, and intent of a life. Words are certainly necessary but they are not always illuminating. Like the necessity of the institution to carry the divine symbols to an individual, the very ability for us to locate Séraphine as the author of her paintings, the ability for us to recognize her creative and generative marginal darkness comes from the same sources that also obscure and cover over her by trying to speak about her. This means that we must sift through the testimonies to make meaning of the life. This does not make the testimonies superfluous or unnecessary, but rather cannot be received without careful reflection upon them.

Conclusion

The following chapters will consider more deeply how each of these lives reflects this logic of excess in the divine. Each life inhabits the discourse and power of the institution and also expresses divine excess. The micro-narrative of Séraphine Louis shows us how divinity inspires beauty and creativity while madness drives one from institutional life. Jarena Lee re-writes her sense of self through the Biblical narrative's account of salvation history; in the company of divine power, she finds life, liberty, and community on the margin in the face of ecclesial and social discrimination. Finally, in the story of Macrina divine excess lives in the brilliance of a marginal and Christian holy life free from institutional conflict.

Hearing from the Margins

There are three aims to listening to these narratives: a) to honor the stories of these women and their communities b) to hear for expressions of divine power and divine excess and c) it is a challenge to the institutional church today to reconsider its own relationship to societal power and how it might hear from these prophetic voices on the margins as an opportunity to re-orient its own anxious relationship to power and influence.

There is something whispering or buzzing on the outskirts of institutions. From the perspective of the center, this buzzing and speech may sound like dissent. But, from the margins, this sound and speech is not just an expression of dissent but creativity, not just chaos but sacred power, not just despair but liberty being found. It is a sacred buzzing, a sound from the horizon that we can ignore but would be missing out if we did.

The margin is not a closed order. It is a precarious, ambiguous space on the edge of the discourse of institutional life. Relying on the order of the center to interpret the margin's meaning pays short shrift to the margin. This practice of listening to the margin may become difficult if all our attention is focused on the center. Bringing our awareness to the margin deepens our sense of the rich pattern of God's generosity and logic of excess toward humanity and creation.

Séraphine Louis:
Chaotic Mind, Beauty, and Divine Power

> *From the fact that we take the divine love as being also wisdom it follows, first of all, that we cannot possibly regard all finite being in its relation to our God-consciousness except as (whatever else be the meaning we give to the term 'world') an absolutely harmonious divine work of art.*[58]

This first chapter examines marginality as madness and the presence of divine power in beauty. Séraphine was a prolific artist in the middle of her life. During that period of time, she was a housekeeper in rural Senlis, France. Largely on the margins of social life, Séraphine Louis heard the following command: "Séraphine, you must paint!" Inspired, she painted in her upper room apartment at night. She went on to paint over eighty pieces of art. She found divine power in the form of beauty inspiring her creativity. Her art reflects a vision that is inspired by the ordinary natural world. Yet, Séraphine's artwork reflects a vision that is not a clear representation of anything observable in everyday life. Rather, her devotional and religiously inspired art reflects a vision of life that exceeds what is presently visible. Séraphine expresses a vision of life – echoing Biblical motifs of trees in Genesis and Revelation - that incorporates aspects of the ordinary natural world and yet transforms it into a vision beyond what is easily identifiable in ordinary life.

Drawing on Séraphine's life and art and the work of Catherine Keller, Paul Tillich, and Edward Farley, this chapter explores divine excess as beauty and its implications for understanding marginality. Divine excess can appear as the expression of beauty in the

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[58] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith / by Friedrich Schleiermacher ; Edited by H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh : T. & T. Clark, 1976), 733.

midst of chaos. Beauty is born out of and not against the turbulent and deep darkness of chaos. Divine power flows through beauty and inspires human lives in the margins. Séraphine's artwork, theologically, communicates dreamlike visions of activity that derive from natural life. Theologically, this can reflect the ways in which divine power expresses itself in a beauty that can inspire. Beauty can lead to one's recognition of the divine excess offering life beyond what is presently available.

At the same time that her art offers us a vision of life in beauty, Séraphine's life demonstrates that divine excess can offer inspiration, but it may not ultimately save one from the contingencies of life, both personal and institutional. Her creativity was also contingent on the realities of where she lived. Her most visibly active periods of creativity involved living on the edges of a small town of Senlis. Before she began painting, she spent twenty years living and working in a convent as a lay person. Afterwards, she spent the last ten years of her life in an asylum suffering from severe paranoia and mental instability. Her creative period in the town of Senlis was bookended by a relatively uncreative period in a convent and an asylum.

Social marginalization

Séraphine lived on the margins of social, institutional, and ecclesial life. For the most part, these margins of social and institutional life were very difficult places for her, while the marginality experienced during her time in Senlis suggests a positive space for creativity and divine power.

First, she began her life on the economic edges of society that produced a darkness that she speaks of with difficulty. She was born in poverty in a very rural area of d'Arsy in 1864. She was the youngest of four children. Her mother worked as a maid and died

soon after Séraphine's birth. Her father died when she was six years old and she ended up moving to Paris at 13 years old to work as a domestic. Scholars note that Séraphine references this time of being a domestic as her "dark work."[59] This may be taken to mean that she understood domestic work to be "dark work." Also, as a vulnerable teenager alone in a large city, one might imagine that there were those who may have taken advantage of her. Regardless, she eventually left Paris and lived in the Convent of Charity of Providence in Clermont for twenty years, beginning in 1881 at the age of 17.[60]

A convent has its own institutional structure of order, and within this particular order, she lived on the edges as a domestic. The convent was not a creative time for her, and one that she did not recall fondly. From the recording of an observation by an asylum intern on November 2, 1933, "…she says that jealousy was the predominant character of all the sisters and, for quite futile causes, blood flowed. She would have seen the Valentine sister murdered by Sister Angelique because of coffee." [61] The level of paranoia and fantasy that she lived with at this point, however, makes it unclear how much this time in the convent was difficult and how much was born out of her own fantastical storytelling at the end of her life. It is also unclear why and under what circumstances she left the convent, but she left and soon moved to Senlis.

It was then in Senlis that Séraphine appears to have produced a massive amount of work on the borderland between divine inspiration and madness. She remained on the

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[59] H. M. Gallot, "Séraphine, Bouquetiére 'Sans Rivale' Des Fleurs Maudites De L'instinct " *L'information artistique* 5, no. 40 (1957): 12.

[60] Corpart, "La Veritable Vie De Seraphine De Senlis."

[61] "Aussi nous dit-elle que la jalousie etait le caractere predominant de toutes les soeurs et que depuis pour des causes assez futiles, le sang y coulait. Elle aurait vu la soeur Valentin assassinee par la Soeur Angelique a cause du café." Ortas-Perretti, "Séraphine, Peintre Aliénée," 15.

social and economic margins as a domestic. The townspeople of Senlis thought of her as the "town fool." According to H.M. Gallot, who interviewed townspeople, "During her lifetime, one did not take her seriously. The object of ridicule by the children and a shrug of the shoulders by adults, one liked her all the same since one had endured her for a long time, that is up until her last extravagances."[62] Séraphine's unusual behavior kept her at the margin of her community in Senlis as well.

She possessed eccentric and unexpected mannerisms when interacting with others. As H.M. Gallot, a psychiatrist who knew Séraphine writes: "She sometimes took on a mysterious air as she was responding a question, burst out laughing for no apparent reason, and then left abruptly in the middle of a conversation."[63] When interacting with Séraphine, her general physique and manner betrayed a literal darkness in her clothing and obscurity of mind. While her canvas was full of color, her preferred attire included "long dark skirts, a black hat (a boater/canotier), and over her blouses, she pinned a small grey or black pelerine. She wore man's shoes or slippers."[64] She was an enigma who painted in an upper room in her apartment at night, while spending time cleaning houses during the day.

The "Public Outburst"

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[62] "De son vivant, on ne l'avait pas prise au sérieux. Object de la risée des petits et du haussement d'épaule des grands, on l'aimait bien tout de même puisqu'on la supporta très longtemps, c'est-a-dire jusqu'a ses extravagances dernières" Gallot, "Séraphine, Bouquetiére 'Sans Rivale' Des Fleurs Maudites De L'instinct " 5.

[63] "Elle s'enfermait chez elle pendant plusieurs jours de suite pour travailler et la lumière brillait tard dans la nuit a ses fenêtres. On l'entendait chanter des cantiques jusqu'a deux heures du matin. Elle prenait parfois un air mystérieux, éclatait de rire sans raison apparente, répondait a cote de la question et s'en allait brusquement au milieu d'une conversation." Ibid., 15.

[64] Françoise Cloarec, *Séraphine : La Vie Rêvée De Séraphine De Senlis* (Paris: Phébus, 2008), 48.

Eventually, her time in Senlis would also end. At sixty-eight years old, she became consumed by the prospect of celebrity and bridal fulfillment; she was found in such a state of fantasy that Séraphine's marginal status in the community could no longer hold, and she was taken into custody. In 1932, the police were called in to respond to Séraphine's public outburst. According to the regional newspaper *Le Courrier de l'Oise* in an article entitled "Débilite mentale":

> On Sunday evening January 31, the police filed by the police commission's wrecking service a certain number of furniture objects (paintings, drapes, caskets containing metal cutlery, etc.) that had been left and found in the street (Thor-Montmorency road) in Senlis. It was some of the furniture of Ms. Séraphine Louis, 68 years old, self claimed painter and resident of 1, rue du Puits-Tiphaine of Senlis. Inspection of these various objects immediately allowed for the discovery of the source. A survey made it possible to see that the person in question, haunted by a fear of poisoning, refused to take any food, removed the furniture from her home with the intention of leaving on an adventure. M. Rasmer, police commissioner, had her admitted to the emergency department of the hospital of Senlis. Dr. Bolot, forensic pathologist, made the examination. This legendary figure of Senlis, attended by mental debility, will without a doubt be moved to an asylum for the elder care where all that is necessary will be provided. For this ill person became unable to direct and behave herself, and meet her most basic necessities of life.[65]

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[65] "Dimanche soir 31 Janvier, les gendarmes déposaient au service des épaves du commissariat de police un certain nombre d'objectés mobiliers (tableaux de peinture, draps, écrins contenant des couverts en métal, etc. etc.) qui avaient été déposes et trouves sur la voie publique (cours Thoré-Montmorency) a Senlis. Il s'agissait d'une partie du mobilier de la Demoiselle Séraphine Louis, 68 ans, se disant artiste-peintre et demeurent 1, rue du Puits-Tiphaine a Senlis. L'inspection de ces divers objets permit immédiatement d'en découvrir la provenance. Une enquête permit de constater que la personne en question, hantée par las phobie de l'empoisonnement, ne voulait plus prendre de nourriture, déménageait son mobilier de chez elle dans l'intention de partir à l'aventure. M. Rasmer, commissaire de police, la fit admettre d'urgence à l'hôpital de Senlis. Le Dr. Bolot, médecin légiste, fut commis pour l'examiner. Cette figure senlisienne légendaire, atteinte de débilite mentale, sera sans doute dirigée sur un asile de vieillards ou tous les soins qui lui seront nécessaires lui seront prodigies. Car cette malheureuse devenait incapable de se diriger et de se conduire elle-même, et de pourvoir a ses besoins vitaux les plus essentiels." Ibid., 124-25.

This "legendary figure" threw her belongings onto the street at night, proclaiming that she was leaving Senlis. As the report notes, she is unable to "meet her most basic necessities of life."[66] Séraphine had stopped eating and was disposing of her things as she believed she was heading on an adventure. Séraphine was wracked by paranoia, fear, and fantasy. She feared that others might poison her. And she believed that she was to marry someone long since dead.

Séraphine is eventually diagnosed with megalomania or narcissistic personality disorder and sent to the asylum in Claremont. Megalomania was understood as rooted in severe paranoia. As historian of psychiatry Susannah Wilson writes, "paranoia is a state where the subject moves successively from feelings of depression or disappointment, to feelings of persecution, and finally to ideas of grandeur, or megalomania." Megalomania was also seen as something born out of wrong thinking:

> That megalomania results from delusions of grandeur is usually thought to be via a process of erroneous reasoning: the subject feels she is being persecuted, and therefore deduces that this must be because she is a person of great importance.[67]

When in the asylum, Séraphine's apocalyptic language possesses a level of delusion, paranoia and grandiose ideas indicative of her diagnosis of megalomania. In the asylum,

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[66] One of the more recent suppositions is that in fact, the breaking point was the way her benefactor Wilhelm Uhde left her without funds. Her sense of grandiose fame had grown during the period when Uhde provided funds for her, and the collapse of that support was too much of a break for her. See Laetitia Jodeau-Belle and Jean-Claude Maleval, "Le Sacrifice Fait Dieu De Seraphine De Senlis," *L'Evolution psychiatrique* 76, no. 4. In it they write, "Within this perspective, our concern will especially be to show how the public success and recognition of the artist and her work have not been beneficial to her." (618). Their primary source for evaluation however is Alain Vircondelet, *Sèraphine : De La Peinture ♯ La Folie* (Paris: A. Michel, 2008).

[67] Susannah Wilson, *Voices from the Asylum: Four French Women Writers, 1850-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 191-92.

she spoke actively of the fiery, apocalyptic time. She wrote multiple letters to the police of Clermont during her time in the asylum, one of which included the belief that Satan was reigning over the world. In her letter to "Mr. le Chef" of the police of Clermon (oise) on September 17, 1936, Séraphine writes about this apocalyptic time. God has called her "Séraphine my daughter, my most faithful servant of the universe."[68] Understanding herself to be the most faithful servant, she goes to explain how Satan will submit the elect to temptation. She writes,

> We are under the reign of Satan; it is appalling. The powers of the heavens will be shaken. The stars will fall, Satan arrives to tempt the elect; it is said those who will be tested lacked bread, Satan changes stones into bread for the children of darkness.[69]

For her, the reign of Satan had already begun. She believed that Satan will appear to triumph, as many will turn away from God. Taken more symbolically, her apocalyptic discussions in the asylum may be indicative of her own experience in the asylum. Additionally, Séraphine's prophetic apocalypticism is chilling considering her words come on the eve of the Shoah.

Her artistic production once in the asylum was measurably reduced. It is unclear how much she painted once she was in the institution. According to Hans Körner, the asylum did bring her paintbrushes and paint encouraging her to paint as a therapeutic measure. In 1936, she wrote to the Chief of Police saying that God had spoken to her warning her that two of her works that are in the closet of her room should be moved out of the asylum.

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[68] "Séraphine ma fille, c'est ma plus fidèle servant de l'universe." Ortas-Perretti, "Séraphine, Peintre Aliénée," 25.

[69] Ortas-Perretti, "Nous sommes sous la règne de Satan, c'est épouvantable. Les vertus des cieux seront ébranles. Les Etoiles tomberont, Satan arrivera à tentés les élus puisqu'il est dit ceux qui seront éprouves manquèrent de pain, Satan changera les pierres en pain pour les enfants des ténèbres." Ibid., 23.

God had warned her that the war was coming and would bombard the asylum. She wanted to protect the two works. In the same letter, she describes that she had painted a room in the asylum, "with flower pots, and bouquets and green plants."[70] She also reports that she paints smaller works and works on wood. However, at the same time, Séraphine laments that the asylum: "this is not a place that one works in the Arts…And here I miss all of my work."[71] While she may have continued to paint, she did not paint as "work." Rather, she painted in smaller ways and no longer on large canvases as she did previously. Art historian Hans Körner notes that none of her recorded artistic works come from this time in the asylum. Significantly, Séraphine was never released once admitted. Her remaining in the asylum is not an unusual reality at the time. As historian Wilson writes, "the role of the asylum remained ill-defined" and that these institutions became "a repository for those rejected by society."[72] Many persons who were difficult to manage, illiterate, or elderly were at risk to be institutionalized. Uhde never visited her in the asylum. She died in the asylum in 1942.

Séraphine's Marginality and Creativity

It is difficult to say why exactly the asylum diminished her "work" of painting and what caused her to have such a public outburst in the first place. Part of the marginality of Séraphine's life comes from the mystery of causal links between her art, her history, her madness, and her devotion. She was certainly very prolific during the time she lived in Senlis, and was clearly creatively inspired during this time. In light of this question of the

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[70] Hans Körner and Manja Wilkens, *Séraphine Louis 1864-1942 : Biografie/Werkverzeichnis [Biographie/Catalogue Raisonné]*, ed. Manja Dr Wilkens, trans. Annette Gautherie-Kampka (Berlin: [Bern]: Dietrich Reimer Verlag 2009), 126.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Wilson, *Voices from the Asylum: Four French Women Writers, 1850-1920*, 4.

situation of the margins, it is significant that Séraphine's time in Senlis was the most creatively generative and deeply connected to the sacramental sense of the world. Her ability to create coincides with a particular kind of marginality.

However, why and how she was no longer able to live with such an attention to artistic expression is a little unclear. Perhaps she needed the room to wander through fields that her time in Senlis afforded her. Perhaps the demand to account for her life in words by an asylum intern was the form of communication that was sanctioned in the asylum while in Senlis she did not have to account for much through words. Perhaps, her life was simply going to be too difficult to maintain, as she grew older.

It may have been as simple as the fact that she felt too old, as Ortas-Perretti suggests at one point. Later, Ortas-Perretti takes a psychoanalytic reading of the situation arguing that the safety of the asylum walls replaced the protection of her artwork. She reads Séraphine's artwork as a kind of "magic" that "protected herself from others and her self."[73] The walls of the asylum "replaced" that barrier. Ortas-Perretti writes: "she is safe; she no longer paints."[74] By Ortas-Perretti's reading, the asylum becomes a safe place for Séraphine because it becomes the thing that protects her from herself and others.

Critics have also argued that Uhde's efforts to bring Séraphine into the center of the art world in France may have actually aggravated Séraphine's mental instability. In trying to bring meaning to the shadowy appearance of Séraphine, Uhde sheds light on Séraphine's life through drawing connections between Christian saints and modern art giants. Wilhelm Uhde's "discovery" of her may have actually aggravated her grandiose

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[73] Ortas-Perretti, "Séraphine, Peintre Aliénée," 64.
[74] Ibid.

associations. Laetitia Jodeau-Belle and Jean-Claude Maleval argue in their article, "Le sacrifice fait a Dieu de Séraphine de Senlis" that in her "public success and recognition" was "not beneficial to her."[75] The attention and financial support made Séraphine more vulnerable to the kind of "break" she had in 1932. In the case of Séraphine, the joy of painting was overwhelmed by the pathos of fantasy.

In 1927, Séraphine's work was displayed in an exhibit in Senlis, and, according to Uhde, her artwork was the only purchased out of the exhibit. Uhde was convinced that he had "discovered" a great artist, comparing her to Van Gogh. Uhde recalls his meeting and experience of Séraphine in a highly mythical and legendary tone. In his recollections entitled *Five Primitive Masters* (1949), he recounts the stories of five painters who he championed and that he understands to be part of the primitivist school – Rousseau, Vivin, Bombois, Bauchant, and Séraphine. In it, he draws particular parallels between Séraphine and Joan of Arc. He invokes a nostalgic picture of Séraphine as being like "the shepherdess of Assy as a sort of younger sister to the shepherdess of Domremy. Séraphine brought to her work much the same sense of mission that inspired Joan at Rheims, and died in spiritual torture much as Joan died in physical torture at Rouen."[76] His desire to conjure a legend around Séraphine communicates an interpretation by Uhde of how the myth of the peasant artist sparked popularity in the early twentieth century primitivist interest in the art world. He is also quick to draw resonances between Van Gogh and Séraphine:

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[75] Jodeau-Belle and Maleval, "Le Sacrifice Fait Dieu De Seraphine De Senlis," 618.
[76] Uhde, *Five Primitive Masters*, 93.

> She worked courageously within the most restricted limits. She knew nothing of the history of the arts, and had no inkling of the relationship between her leaves, fruits and flowers and old Gothic tapestry or Gothic glass in cathedrals. A few decades earlier, Vincent Van Gogh had begun to work with much the same religious zeal and lonely sense of destiny; Séraphine had no inkling of him, either. In most respects, of course, their work is quite dissimilar. But both are distinguished by intense emotional fervor and extraordinary color harmonies. Van Gogh's blazing sunflowers and cypresses are products of the same strange botany as the trees and flowers of Séraphine.[77]

He generates interest in her work by generating excitement about the woman behind the artwork itself.

Adding to the mystery of Séraphine, Uhde's first encounter with her art may have been a bit more pedestrian than he describes in his biography of her. It appears that, contrary to his claim that his first encounter with her art was a casual encounter in Senlis in 1912 at a friend's house, he originally spotted her work in a Paris shop. His claim that she had "no knowledge of the history of art" is also highly speculative. It is known that she ordered paint from a local shop owner, Charles Hallo. Certainly, she had some sense of the value of her own work considering that she was trying to sell it in Paris. Uhde exaggerates Séraphine's "unutterably lonely" and unknown existence as a way of giving his "discovery" of her all that much more weight and importance. In an earlier interview in 1946, Uhde had remarked that he had discovered her painting in the window of a photographer. Whatever the inconsistencies, as Körner remarks, "it is certain that Uhde did not acquire the still life of Séraphine Louis in a private context, but in a commercial

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[77] Ibid., 94.

setting."[78] Why the inconsistencies in the story? In 1949, Uhde may have been trying to elevate the fervor for Séraphine's art and his own legacy in the art world by giving her a kind of mystique. So much more attractive to the art world might be a mythos of a naive country autodidact who is discovered as an art genius by happenstance than a pedestrian encounter in a commercial shop.

He became her benefactor providing everything she needed. He writes that "a truck running between Paris and Senlis brought her the supplies" she wanted.[79] As Jodeau-Belle et al. write, "The fulfilling of what she needed by Uhde (objects, paints, money) and her recent popularity placed in peril the structure of balance for Séraphine."[80] Soon after providing these things, Uhde had to ask her to economize. The depression in the 1930's caused him to have to cut back on how much he provided for her. Uhde returned to Germany, and the dissolution of funds placed her back in financial trouble. In Séraphine's case, her popularity and connection to the economic system with her artwork actually placed a lot of pressure on her wellbeing. She was not able to recover when such popularity diminished. The tumultuous tides of an economic recession and war washed away her hopes for fame.

Art as Devotional Act

In light of this precarious and tumultuous life, it is clear however that Séraphine's

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[78] "il est certain qu'Uhde ne fit pas l'acquisition de la nature morte de Séraphine Louis dans un contexte prive mais dans un cadre commercial." Körner and Wilkens, *Séraphine Louis 1864-1942 : Biografie/Werkverzeichnis [Biographie/Catalogue Raisonné]*, 46.

[79] Uhde, *Five Primitive Masters*, 93.

[80] "Le comblement de Uhde par l'avoir (objets, peinture, argent) et sa toute récente popularité mettent en péril l'équilibre de la structure de Séraphine," Jodeau-Belle and Maleval, "Le Sacrifice Fait Dieu De Seraphine De Senlis," 625.

artistic production communicates a religious attention to the beauty of creation. Séraphine's artwork was a devotional act to God. When asked why she painted, she explained that she heard the voice of an angel command her to paint, "Séraphine, you must paint!" She understood her work of painting as a devotional act with rituals and prayers directed to God. Gallot reports; "She shut herself up in her home for several days to work and the light shone into the night at her windows. One could hear her singing hymns until two in the morning."[81] She believed that her painting was a holy act; a divine inspiration. Her upper apartment is intimately tied to divine devotion. At night, in the upper room of a small town, she creates art not within the framework of institutional work but rather to express religious devotion. Her inspiration to paint arises from a religious command.

For Séraphine, understanding the world's sacramentality resonates with her formation in a Catholic town. Her life in Senlis was never without the symbols of the Christian tradition surrounding her and heavily influenced how she thought about her life. The sisters of St. Joseph de Cluny, an order of charity established in 1823 in Senlis, were a prominent feature in the town. Some of the sisters according to Wilhelm Uhde, Séraphine's benefactor, visited with her frequently.[82]

From photographs of the town, one can see the cathedral dominating the landscape of the center of town. Francois Cloarec includes some beautiful descriptions of the Notre Dame of Senlis. The cathedral portal was covered in images of Mary and the angels. The linteau or top of the door frame depicts Mary's dormition on one side and her assumption

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[81] Gallot, "Séraphine, Bouquetiére 'Sans Rivale' Des Fleurs Maudites De L'instinct " 15.
[82] Körner and Wilkens, *Séraphine Louis 1864-1942 : Biografie/Werkverzeichnis [Biographie/Catalogue Raisonné]*, 28.

on the other. Angels hang in the arcades. The margins of the physical space of the church symbolize the very beings from whom Séraphine gained inspiration to paint.

Additionally, her name bears religious significance in the term seraphim.[83] The angelic order traditionally known as the seraphim are the highest order of the angels. They are displayed with six wings. In Isaiah 6, the seraphim are a hybrid being who guards the throne of God. They both speak to the human beings but also mediate between the human and the divine; they deliver messages to the prophet while simultaneously praising God's holiness. Hans Körner notes that the name Séraphine is not necessarily unusual for the day. Regardless of its uniqueness, however, a name can form a person. Séraphine's name reflects and connects her to a figure close to God and mediates messages between God and humans.

Divine Power, Creation, Beauty

Beauty has a long history in the tradition of both religion and philosophy. For some, beauty draws the human being towards the Good and is an important hermeneutic for knowing the divine. Others resist it as a sufficient means for describing the divine. For Thomas Aquinas, beauty is deeply related to the good. The good "is esteemed beautiful." The good is what we desire, according to Thomas, while the beautiful is what we know to be pleasing to the eye of the beholder. The beautiful, for Thomas, is specifically that which has "right proportion" and is related to hearing and sight. We know the beautiful and desire the good.

An emanationist model of Divine power understands the beauty in the world as that which draws the human being into contemplation of that which is beautiful beyond the

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[83] Ibid., 22.

physical, and ultimately brings the human being to contemplate the knowledge of the Source of beauty, the divine. As Bonaventure writes, "all the creatures of the visible world lead the spirit of the contemplative and wise man to the eternal God."[84] The entire world is made in the image of God such that the beautiful things of the sensible world draw one into contemplation of the invisible Source, which emanates Beauty throughout creation.

For Reformed theology, creation is beautiful and functions as that which praises God, yet should not be confused with God. The beauty of creation functions doxologically. However, to attribute beauty to God is what Barth, for example, calls an "ancillary" concept. As Karl Barth writes,

> In view of what the biblical testimony says about God it would be an unjustified risk to try to bring the knowledge of God under the denominator of the idea of the beautiful… The Bible neither requires nor permits us, because God is beautiful, to expound the beauty of God as the ultimate cause producing and moving all things, in the way in which we can and must do this in regard to God's grace or holiness or eternity, or His omnipotent knowledge and will.[85]

For Barth, beauty is not a primary attribute of God, but rather related to God's glory. The biblical witness testifies to God's glory but not God's beauty.

While human beings might hold miscalculations of the divine presentation, divine power as beauty might also offer a balance against those more dominant models of God that can equally serve as idolatrous representations for God. The language for God as beautiful offers an alternative vision from the monarchical and juridical views for the

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[84] Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God*, ed. Philotheus Boehner and Stephen F. Brown (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1993), 34.
[85] Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, *Theological Aesthetics : A Reader* (London: London : SCM Press, 2004), 316.

divine. Not only understood as King or Judge, God is also relating to the world as Beauty. This realm of the beautiful enters into a new register or realm of considerations beyond the juridical or monarchical model. [86] As theologian Edward Farley writes, "the iconoclasm that locates divine activity primarily in language, history and politics tends to suppress beauty in the processes of nature and to eliminate it as a theme of piety, narrative and interpretation."[87] Relating to God as beauty emphasizes a different element of the divine, one that is not necessarily associated with the events in political life, but emphasizes instead that ever-present and constant power of creating and consummating the world. Beauty's utter immediacy and ever-presence in creation reflects divine power.

If God desires relationship with God's creation, then it seems fitting that divine power relates to the human being by offering the beauty of creation as an impetus for the human being to desire what is beyond the self. Attention to beauty in the natural world allows us, as Murdoch writes, "to clear our minds of selfish care."[88] As she writes, when I am "looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious to my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige."[89] Nature in its beauty is there to arrest us out of our own reverie, as when, for example, a "hovering kestrel" comes into her view. For her, this ability for something as ordinary as a "kestrel" to bring us to attention and cause our inner preoccupations to "disappear" makes the natural world the "most accessible" form of beauty that can get us out of ourselves.

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[86] See Edward Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic* (Aldershot, Hants, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001).
[87] Ibid., 10.
[88] Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1992), 104.
[89] Ibid.

Theologian Edward Farley articulates the moral benefits of beauty as careful self-transcending attention to the other in bringing what one sees into display. Farley notes that when one acknowledges the other, and acknowledges that the other acknowledges back, that exchange includes the beauty of the other: "Ethical self-transcendence is this orientation to being, to any and all genuine others in their distinctive reality, complexity, mystery and even danger. Further, it should be evident that one cannot be consentingly oriented to the other and at the same time be indifferent or obtuse to its beauty."[90] Acknowledging the beautiful of the other is an ethical activity.

Simone Weil connects this ecstatic ethical experience of beauty to the divine power understanding the movement out of the self-preoccupation as an invitation for deeper relationship with the divine. For her, as with many other theologians and philosophers, beauty is an immediate and ever-present approach to the divine. Weil writes that "the beauty of the world is the commonest, easiest, and most natural way of approach" for God to penetrate the soul. "The soul's natural inclination to love beauty is the trap God most frequently uses in order to win it and open it to the breath from on high," she writes.[91] For Weil, God desires relationship with the divinity within each soul. Beauty of the world functions as the ever-present invitation by God into a deeper power of divinity luring the soul in beauty.

For Weil, beauty serves as the "mouth of a labyrinth" whereby the soul might enter deeper and deeper into the very heart of divine communion. She describes this journey as one that enters into a deep unknowing whereby the soul gains entrance through beauty

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[90] Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic*, 97.
[91] Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, ed. Joseph Marie Perrin, 1st Perennial Classics edition. ed. (New York: New York : Perennial, 2000), 103.

but soon stumbles in the dark:

> Worn out, with nothing to eat or drink, in the dark, separated from his dear ones, and from everything he loves and is accustomed to, he walks on without knowing anything or hoping anything, incapable of even discovering whether he is really going forward or merely turning round on the same spot….if he goes on walking, it is absolutely certain that he will arrive at the center of the labyrinth. And there God is waiting to eat him. Later he will go out again, but he will be changed, he will have become different, after being eaten and digested by God. Afterward he will stay near the entrance so that he can gently push all those who come near into the opening.[92]

The world is beautiful as it suits "our sensibility" luring us into the deep communion with the power of God ever-present and immediately inviting us to enter into God. The beauty of the world is "like a sacrament" whereby God "dwelling in our soul" connects to "the love of this beauty" of the world and "goes out to God present in the universe."[93] Beauty of the world functions as that means by which the divinity within each of us relates to the divinity that is "really present" in cosmic beauty.

Séraphine's Art as 'Numinous Realism'

Séraphine's style of art might fall under the category of what Paul Tillich terms "numinous realism." This form of art attends to the ordinary in the world: "ordinary things, ordinary persons, ordinary event."[94] It depicts them however with an element of the numinous, making them "strange, mysterious, laden with an ambiguous power. It uses space-relations, body stylization (*sic.*), uncanny expressions for this purpose. We are both fascinated and repelled by it. We are grasped by it as something through which ultimate

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[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Paul Tillich, "Art and Ultimate Reality," in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (London: SCM Press, 2004), 212.

reality mysteriously shines."[95] Tillich names painters like Cezanne and Braque as presenting this numinous realism.

Tillich articulates that numinous realism correlates to "religious sacramentalism."[96] For him, religious sacramentalism "shows ultimate reality as present here and now in particular objects."[97] The sacramentality of the world, as bearing an element that shines through an ordinary object appears in Séraphine's work.

At the height of her artistic production while living on the edges of Senlis and wandering the fields, Séraphine found natural beauty as her subject matter for her work. With the exception of a few pieces that include flags (i.e. "Le drapeau américain" and "Le drapeau American et le drapeau français avec le Sacre Coeur"), Séraphine's work de-centers the human subject and makes nature her subject.

In Séraphine's early work, she painted still portraits of fruit and flowers; the presentation was simple and detailed in form and content. Her format was likely influenced, according to art critic Hans Körner, by "botanical dictionaries."[98] She took long walks through fields to reach one of her benefactors Wilhelm Uhde's residence in Senlis.[99] One can imagine her finding inspiration for her artwork while walking through the fields, picking up leaves and observing the natural landscape for its beauty.

The natural world "spoke" to her in painting. Art critic Marie Ortas-Perretti notes that in one particular image "Grenades" (See Figure 1 below) the fruit resembles eyeballs

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[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Körner and Wilkens, *Séraphine Louis 1864-1942 : Biografie/Werkverzeichnis [Biographie/Catalogue Raisonné]*, 52.
[99] Uhde, *Five Primitive Masters*, 97-98.

plucked out of the eye. One might imagine the optic nerve hanging behind.[100] Certainly, paranoia might contribute to Séraphine's depiction that the plants were "looking" back at her. But there is also a suggestion that she "sees" them and her acknowledgement of them relates to the power of being seen by the other.

Séraphine acknowledges the "life" that is in the natural world just as it is acknowledging her life.[101] Similarly, Simone Weil writes, "Every true artist has had real, direct, and immediate contact with the beauty of the world, contact that is of the nature of a sacrament."[102] The sacramental act of creating art is connected to the sacrament of drinking in the beauty of the world and expressing that beauty in "true art."

Her artwork evolved from more simple portraits to vertically oriented meditations on the cycle of life and death to more complex diagonally oriented pieces. In her middle years of painting, Séraphine painted bouquets of flowers, fruits, and leaves in more complex arrangements. Typically, a large dark vase sits at the center of the work, with a bouquet stemming out from the base.[103] A monochromatic background sets off a flower or fruit arranged in the center of the canvas, floating out from the background. Perspective, Ortas-Perretti writes, "is virtually absent," as the piece lacks any landscape

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[100] " 'Fruits' ne présente-t-il pas plutôt que des fruits, des yeux vus par leur face postérieure? Pendant au bout d'un nerf optique? Comme si Séraphine avait tire sur les yeux et les avait rabattus contre le tableau pour ne plus être regardée," Ortas-Perretti, "Séraphine, Peintre Aliénée," 63.

[101] Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic*, 94-96.

[102] Weil, *Waiting for God*, 107.

[103] According to Ortas-Perretti, some (including herself) see her preoccupation with the dark circular vase to be a preoccupation with the womb. As she never had any children that we know of, it seems that she may have been drawn to representing a symbol of the womb. However, at the same time, it seems such an assessment is presuming to interrogate the unconscious of Séraphine, something that is not in the purview of this project nor is there any explicit reference to this idea from Séraphine herself.

or background. Ortas-Perretti suggests that these bouquets function like icons, moving the viewer to de-center the self to focus on something beyond. According to Ortas-Perretti, the iconographic form comes from the strong vertical orientation of the bouquets situated in the central axis of the canvas: "Cosmogenic creation on the central axis [sic] could mean the abolishment of the personality of the author in favor of her identification with God."[104] The iconographic element also comes from the stillness in the painting. The leaves stand still – alive and yet not part of any organic context.[105]

Numinous realism can also be seen in Séraphine's works with more theological titles - "L'arbre de vie" ("The Tree of Life", see Figure 2 below) and "L'arbre de paradis" ("The Tree of Paradise", see Figure 3 below).[106] Each painting is quite different in its composition; yet both offer haunting images of life and vision.

As recalled in the Book of Genesis, the Tree of Life stands in the center of Eden, untouched by humanity, and guarded by cherubim with a fiery sword. The Tree of Life represents that which humanity is denied, a hope of immortality. It recalls a mythical beginning that is beyond the wages of sin and death. The tree that Séraphine paints is a vision of a dreamlike reality, an image that appears to be a tree, but is in fact unlike any tree that can grow in ordinary life. It is made mysterious, and strange by its composition.

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[104] Ortas-Perretti, "Séraphine, Peintre Aliénée," 61.
[105] Ortas-Perretti writes, "Aucun air ne circule." Ibid.
[106] For the purposes of this study, I am assuming Hans Körner's reading of both the title and orientation of both paintings. These are under dispute, however, in the scholarly record. In the work of H.M. Gallot, the piece that I refer to as the "Tree of Life," is entitled "The Flowers of Paradise." However, I am taking the title as the museum of art and archaeology names it. Additionally, in H.M. Gallot, the work, "Tree of Paradise," is oriented upside down from how it is oriented in Körner. The orientation of the "Tree of Paradise" by which Körner presents the piece seems to be in agreement with the way Ortas-Perretti reads the painting so I will take that orientation as the way I read the painting.

Deciphering the "Tree of Life," with its numinous realism, is like trying to recall a dream or an idea of something known in this world, but yet not quite exactly like it. The image is murky, imagistic, and abstracted from ordinary trees and leaves. It is a dream like image, a vision of fire and water, dark and light, but in new configurations.

One's attention is drawn to the center of the tree. The tree is tall and broad. Its symmetrical branches extend from the center of the image out to either edge giving the tree a sense of stability and strength. The bursts of fiery leaves have clear edges and closely defined shapes within the tree. But the fiery bursts in the darkened top of the image are more blurry and untethered from any branch. This brings the tree into focus as the more defined and clear image, while the background remains blurry and uncertain. Like many of Séraphine's pieces, the image lacks perspective; the tree hovers in the canvas, devoid of any clear sense of place. Moving from the bottom to the top of the canvas, the background is an alternation of black, then white, then evening blue and then black. The dark black bottom of the canvas rises up on each side of the tree like two dark hills. The tree sits perfectly center in the bottom of the valley that forms between the two hills. The top band mixed with blues and blacks dips down at the center almost as in a crescent shape that could fit perfectly into the dark mass below. A white gaping band separates the two halves of the top and bottom. In the middle stands the tree. Its branches break downward through the dark bottom half, and grow upwards into the top while the bulk of the tree acts like a lattice over the white background. This life, surrounded by darkness on both ends, and standing in the white light in the middle, shields the viewer from a full encounter with that background.

The center branches grow leaves that are identical in color to the canvas' bottom and

top swaths of darker blues and blacks. The center branches reflect somehow that the same quality of darkness that appear at the bottom and top of the canvas also is present at the very heart of the tree itself. The lower and upper branches are composed of prickly leaves painted a beautiful golden, yellow and red fiery color. At the top of the canvas, these same fiery balls burn brightly against the dark blue background. The top mirrors the bottom of the canvas with a long line of drooping fiery red and green abstract balls. Each element of life contains an element of its opposite. The dark elements include flecks of the fiery golden life while the white middle background contains elements of the dark blue and black edges. In the canvas, the image is always intertwining the dominance of dark and light and yet never fully separating them - dark contains light elements while light contains dark elements.

The mysterious and dreamlike quality to the tree deepens as one inspects the tree's roots more closely. The trunk of the tree is not a clear band of wood, but rather like a twisted rope made up of leaves and branches. It is as though the tree draws up the colors and elements of the very bottom of the tree and swirls upwards (and down) in a dizzying twisting rope-like motion up into the chaotic and prickly bursts of fiery shapes.

Light and dark coincide in this blazing image of the tree of life. The fiery blazing leaves are surrounded by darkness. Darker color emerges from the blue celestial color found in the center of the tree, to the darkness in the ground, to the mixture of dark and light blue above the tree. A small band of light watery blue cuts across the very bottom of the image, hugged by darkness on either side. The tree doesn't quite reach this watery river like image. The water flows by the tree, where grassy green, yellow, and red flecks of color appear beside it.

Theologically, this Tree of Life expresses a tree that is outside the confines of regular time, and yet the coloring of the tree and its leaves evokes different calendar seasons – the seasons of green new life, the autumnal yellow and fiery red, against a barren dark earth. It is a tree that both reflects elements of a current age, but also lives beyond any one particular experience of a tree in time. This tree stands covering the entire canvas, living against the dark and the light, and also drawing on these contrasts in its own composition.

In all, this tree is strange and even uncanny. Its shape reflects a tree in the everyday world, and yet it does not reflect how one understands trees in this life. The uncanny dimensions suggests that Séraphine sees a beauty that is both born of this life but also suggests a vision of life that encompasses the cycles of decay and new life, of dark and light, fire and water as all elements of growth and life beyond that which one is bound to see here. The image calls upon the viewer to see life as more than opposing contrasts, but as integral connections that perhaps even promise that a life immortal.

This tree is made up of elements of this life that appear to be so starkly opposed. The fiery balls do not consume the tree but burn brightly upon the tree. It is a strange image for a tree to be blazing and not be consumed. Yet, one may recall that indeed this is precisely how God reveals God's self to Moses. Terrified, Moses encounters a burning bush with the divine proclaiming, "I AM WHO I AM." In the Biblical story, fiery branches reflect the presence of God. Life – perhaps even divine life - expressed in the inspired painting is a life that is wholly strange, impossible, and even a little terrifying.

In contrast to "The Tree of Life," the "Tree of Paradise" reflects a different kind of divine excess through its composition, size, and content. This piece along with two other

works is very large in size approaching 1.5 meters in height.[107] The sheer size of the work brings a magnitude to the subject.

Additionally, the painting's composition shifts in its orientation from her previous work. Whereas many of her works maintain a vertical orientation along the central axis of the canvas, the "Tree of Paradise" constructs the main orientation of the tree juts out along a diagonal axis. The tree trunk made up of a series of bright reddish, brown waves begins in the lower left hand corner of the canvas and leads the eye upwards to the center where a flourishing of yellow, black, blue, red, and orange tinged leaves flow out from the trunk filling the top third of the canvas. However, in contrast to this diagonal movement, a bright swirling swath of blue moves from the bottom center of the canvas up towards the tree trunk, crisscrossing it in the opposite diagonal orientation towards the upper right side of the canvas. The watery blue streaks of color create an up and down movement within this blue streak of color. While the tree juts out in one direction, the watery blue juts out in another.

The overall effect of this different orientation is an image not of stability, as in the Tree of Life, but one of dizzying movement. The perspective of the viewer appears slightly above the tree peering downward. Less like an icon, the viewer is closer in perspective to this tree than the Tree of Life. In the foreground, large leaves splay out in all directions with a variety of color. On the bottom third of the canvas patterns of leaf shapes fall down and up on each side of the blue stream. It creates a dizzying effect upon the eye, with movement swirling throughout the piece.

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[107] Körner and Wilkens, *Séraphine Louis 1864-1942 : Biografie/Werkverzeichnis [Biographie/Catalogue Raisonné]*, 98.

Just to the right of the center of the canvas, a leaf resembles a dark blue eye wide open framed by a brown/black edging like eyelashes. Looking down on the tree, leaves falling like tear drops down into the watery flow below. Bits of blue drops fall into the bright blue water below; they appear to be both tears and also leaves. The eye in the tree is watching and looks back, perhaps even crying though much of the tree is flourishing in a wild and colorful way.

Körner reads the almond shaped eye sitting in the middle of the tree trunk as the representation of Christ. He argues that the 19th century saw a rise of an association between the Tree of Life and Christ. He admits that Christ is more often represented as the "sacred heart" of Jesus in both Séraphine's work and her piety, he argues that to see the eye at the center of the tree as "Christocentric" is not a contradiction, but only strengthens the Christocentric dimension of the work.[108] This interpretation does not seem warranted, in my view, for two reasons. First, many of Séraphine's previous works contained leaves that had an eye included. That there is a single eye in the center of the work does no necessarily warrant an association with Christ. Additionally, as Körner himself names, the titles of Séraphine's works were not her own, but rather titled by Wilhelm Uhde and his sister Anne-Marie.[109] While there may be Christ like resonances with the eye and the tree of life, I am reluctant to draw such a direct interpretation from her work. While we might consider that Uhde had a close relationship with Séraphine and her work, it is unclear to what extent he influenced the titling of her work.

Whether the work is Christological or not, there is an observation that while the Tree

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[108] Ibid., 20.
[109] Ibid.

of Life stood bright and intimidating, the effect of one's perspective on the Tree of Paradise is much more intimate. The viewer is closer to the Tree of Paradise. In the midst of all the movement and brilliant color, the eye is drawn to that central eye with its falling tears. Her subject decenters the human being, and yet also contains a haunting gaze that stares back at the viewer, inviting the viewer to engage with the work.

From my reading, the Tree of Life stands in fiery brilliance yet distant; the Tree of Paradise, in contrast, is "closer" to the human life in that it looks back at the viewer with tears. It appears that the brilliance and color of the tree grows out of the flowing waters filled with its own tears. Beauty and suffering coincide in the ecosystem of the Tree of Paradise. If a vision of divine power and brilliance is communicated in the Tree of Life, the Tree of Paradise, a future place, communicates, in Séraphine's vision, the relationship between suffering and beauty. What is more, this suffering and tears is part of the gaze of the tree looking back at the viewer from the canvas. Suffering and beauty are not isolated and static effects, but rather exist alongside a recognition of one suffering beautiful thing to another. If there is a divine vision in her work, then one may suppose that the eye looking back is the eye of one who sees us and cries with us feeding the watery depths and the brilliant colorful tree. In a symbolic reading of the work, Paradise is born out of its own tears.

Séraphine's art is clearly born out of a vision of attention to the natural world. Her work was not just an imitation or reproduction of what she saw, but an effort to communicate her vision of the world. As a divine meditation, Séraphine communicated the life of the natural world and a sense that it has a vibrancy to it that one might attend to as part of the divine activity in the world.

Conclusion

The beauty in creation is not always calm or pacifying. Farley writes and Séraphine's life exemplifies, beauty and creativity arise in the midst of a chaotic and murky life. The turbulent waters of life yield what Farley calls, "scary beauty."[110] This is the beauty that is not simply antithetical to that which confounds, confuses, or destroys. Rather, beauty is that which arises out of the elements of chaos. Rather than presuming that divine power creates against the chaos, one might think of divine power as creating from the chaos.

Catherine Keller, in her tehomic theology, also argues for this relationship between chaos in a theology of creation. Taking such varied sources as the story of Job, Melville's tome *Moby Dick*, and the ever turbulent words of Genesis, Keller argues that divinity is intimately related to chaotic waters when creating. She interprets the words of Genesis 1:2 to say: "and the earth was *tohuvabohu* and darkness was on the face of *tehom* and *ruach elohim* was vibrating over the face of the waters."[111] She argues that *tohuvabohu* is not easily translated. "*Tohu* connotes biblically the uninhabitable, unformed condition associated with the wilderness of desert" while the whole phrase is an "indefinable singularity."[112] *Tehom* means "deep," "ocean," or "chaos."[113] Read carefully, with attention to the Hebrew, Keller argues, that God was breathing or vibrating over the chaotic waters in creation. This is not a creation that is born out of void or emptiness, but a rich, deep, turbulent dark. The beauty of creation is born out of dark and murky waters. Divine power hovers over the waters to create the order and proportion of creation.

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[110] Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic*, 103.
[111] Catherine Keller, "The Lost Chaos of Creation," *The Living Pulpit* (2000): 4.
[112] *Face of the Deep : A Theology of Becoming* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2003), 183.
[113] "The Lost Chaos of Creation," 4.

Creativity and chaos are not at war with one another, but are rather intimately related.

As Paul Tillich writes, the arts are one way that human beings both experience and express "ultimate reality." While God is not identical to ultimate reality, ultimate reality is included in the "idea of God." The expression of art also "makes ultimate reality manifest."[114] In human beings work to express what is hidden, i.e. ultimate reality, it also becomes a way of manifesting ultimate reality in the production of the arts.

The expression of ultimate reality in the arts, however, is indirect, partial, and incomplete both because it is appears in the world and also because it is expressed through the human being. Any human arts production also reflects this close relationship between chaos and beauty in the human life. Farley writes about dancing as displaying this always precarious relationship between our physical ability to express the hidden element of ultimate reality and yet also be always susceptible to the inexactitude of human, bodily expression of such an ultimate reality: "One cannot experience one's own graceful body in motion without also understanding the elements against and through which it makes its efforts – the ever-present possibility of failed bodily acts in the face of gravity, weakness, miscalculated spaces and accidental environmental events. These persisting, ever-present elements of chaos are beauty's pathos."[115] The emergence of an expression of ultimate reality is always intertwined with and emerging from the depths of both ultimate reality and the depths of precarious life in motion.

Séraphine relates to God in the beauty of creation as an immediate opportunity to experience a quality of life beyond the self. Constantly in the midst of an uncertain,

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[114] Tillich, "Art and Ultimate Reality," 210.
[115] Farley, *Faith and Beauty: A Theological Aesthetic*, 102.

unpredictable mind and in the midst of the monotonous work of housekeeping, Séraphine's life produces artwork, ordering elements and exquisitely designing color and shape, as an explicitly devotional act to God with the natural world as her subject. Séraphine's life and work are a clear illustration of such a relationship between a murky, chaotic, and unpredictable life and the illustration of beauty.

What does appear to speak clearly is the import of her artwork itself. In the time that she painted, it seemed as though the darkness and the light were always expressed together. As in the work "Tree of Life," one observes that the theme of darkness bookends the bottom and top of the canvas. In the "Tree of Paradise," darkness does not return at the top of the canvas, but the tree weeps as it stares back at the viewer. Suffering, life, and darkness intermingle in a dynamic and fluid manner in Séraphine's work.

Divine power remains in the chaotic life of the world and can inspire beauty and creativity. Just as God hovered over the deep waters, breathing life over it, Séraphine brings forth beauty from the chaotic life of her mind. Seraphine's beautiful creative expression inspired by divine power does not hold against the tide of madness, but her marginal witness remains. Her art expresses a deep and beautiful order, proportion and symmetry. It expresses a careful attention to the natural world through rich and complex colors. Divine power inspires beauty in the margins of a chaotic and unpredictable life.

Séraphine's attention to beauty as divine inspiration raises an alternative vision of divine power for Christian thought; her art and life relates to how beauty creates out of chaos. This suggests that divine power is immediately present to us in an excessively generous mode of beauty. Not only creating and consummating the world, God is present

in the daily beauty of the world that is persistently and immediately available to catch the human eye.

Figure 1. “Les Grenades,” (1915) S. Louis,

Figure 2. “Tree of Life” S. Louis, (1928),

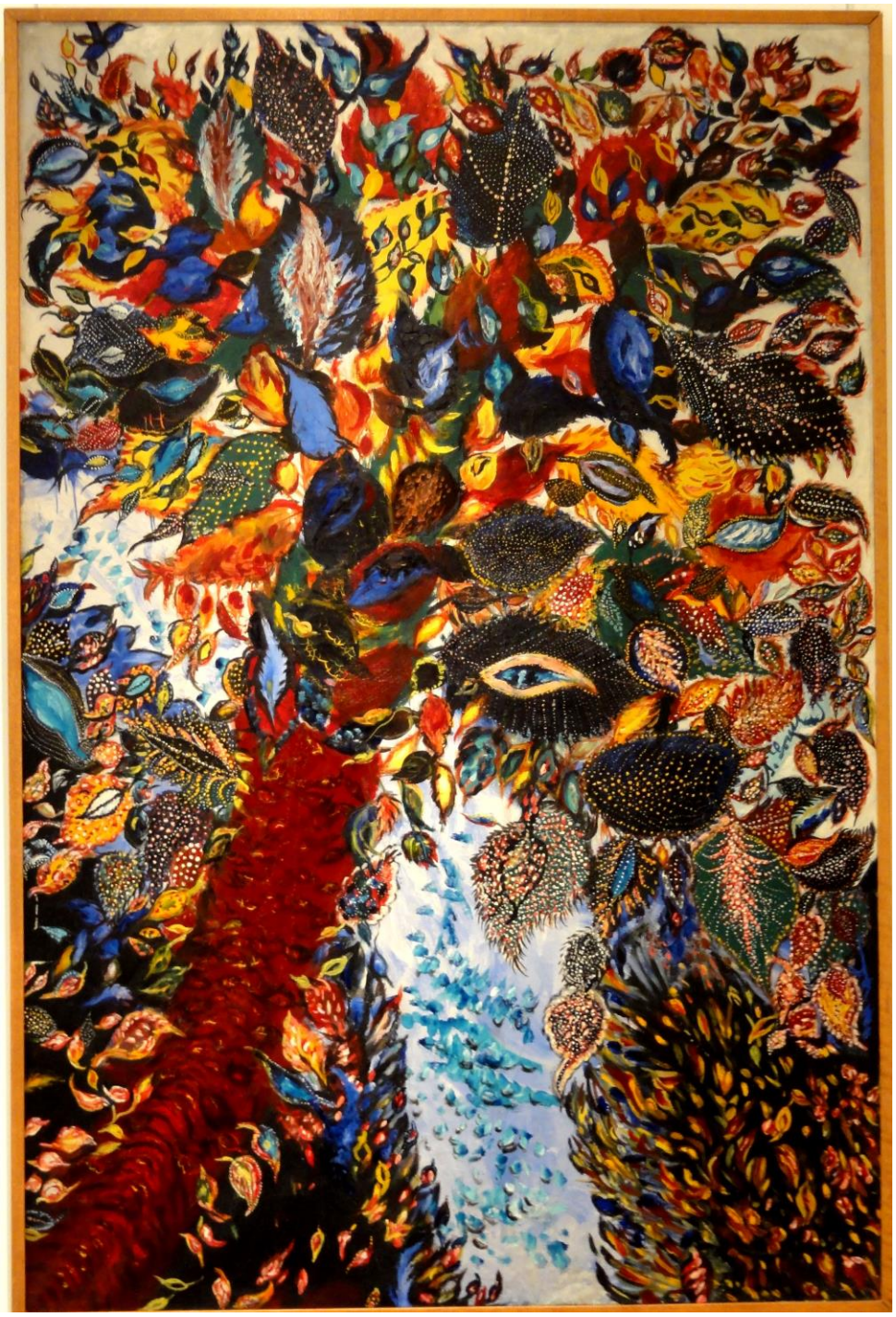

Figure 3: “Tree of Paradise” (1928-1929), S. Louis,

Writing Jarena Lee:
Divine Power Exceeds Discrimination

> *"O how careful ought we to be, lest through our by-laws of church and government and discipline, we bring into disrepute even the word of life."*[116]

Jarena Lee was born in Cape May, New Jersey in 1783. She left her parents at the age of seven to work sixty miles from her home. She married Joseph Lee, a preacher, and had a child. As a result of an ecstatic religious experience, she felt a call to preach. The church ,however, did not recognize Lee's call to ministry due to her gender. After her husband died, Lee travelled extensively, reporting in her journal that in the year of 1835 alone she travelled 721 miles and preached 692 sermons.

Her passion for preaching and teaching continued in the written form. She wrote her autobiography twice. The AME Book Concern, the publishing division of the AME Church, rejected Lee's autobiography for publication.[117] Lee was not deterred by this institutional denial; rather, she published it herself. Lee self-published the initial twenty page 1836 version entitled *The Life and Religious Experiences of Jarena Lee, A Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel Revised and Corrected from the Original Manuscript, Written By Herself,* totaling 2000 copies by 1839. She later published an expanded version in 1849 entitled *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel*.

Racial discrimination and sexist ecclesial institutions moved Lee to the margins of

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[116] Lee, "The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," 36.
[117] Joycelyn Moody, *Sentimental Confessions : Spiritual Narratives of Nineteenth-Century African American Women* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 56.

both church and society. Racist and sexist structures further influenced Lee's writing; she had to defend her authorship in the face of discriminatory audiences and she did so by adhering to the conventional form of a spiritual autobiography, emphasizing her Wesleyan piety, and her rationality.[118]

Yet, Lee's writing also exceeds the confines of convention. Indeed, she re-writes her identity in light of the Biblical narrative of salvation history – the creation, death, resurrection, and Pentecostal pattern of the Christian life. For Lee, the Biblical narrative expresses a divine power that is more than the story of discrimination. Divine excess comes to Lee through the power of a Biblical narrative. The "world of the text," as Ricoeur writes, enables Lee to interpret her life beyond that of a racist and sexist structure. [119]

Lee's Marginality

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[118] For more on Wesleyan soteriology, see Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation : John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998).

[119] It is beyond the scope of this dissertation's argument to fully explore the nature of biblical hermeneutics. Carter argues that Lee understands that the Biblical canon is "a story whose meaning inheres in itself. Canonical meaning requires no external supplement. Because the canon is coherent and contained in this way, entry into any one story at any on point bring on into the story as a whole, for any one part of the story is tied intertextually to every other part of the story." J. Cameron Carter's asserts that Lee's biblical hermeneutics is definitively innovative and not modernist in its approach. As Carter notes, biblical scholars including "Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and Robert W. Jenson" have all critiqued contemporary readings of scripture for modernity's refusal to "read Scripture as a contained narrative, the refusal to be converted into its story." For more on biblical hermeneutics, see Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974; repr., revised); George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine : Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 1st edition. ed. (Philadelphia: Philadelphia : Westminster Press, 1984); Paul Ricœur, *From Text to Action* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1991). For more on Ricoeur's biblical hermeneutics, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur : A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Lee's race and gender limited her movement in the world and in the church. Her race kept her from travelling very far into the U.S. South as slavery was still legal there. Even in the North where slavery was abolished and the international slave trade had been terminated, racial prejudice ran deep. Lee reports that she had a conversation with a white man who "did not believe the coloured (*sic*) people had any souls."[120] Ontological assumptions about racial difference ran deep.

Racial politics not only permeated the culture, but also the politics of ecclesial life. For Lee, the division between black and white congregations affected ecclesial life. Lee narrates how she struggled to find a community of faith, noting the ethnic background of the church she sought out. As she writes, she started to attend "the English Church, the pastor of which was an Englishman, by the name of Pilmore, one of the number who at first preached Methodism in America."[121] But soon, she discovered that "there was a wall between me and a communion with that people, which was higher than I could possibly see over."[122] Certainly, the "wall" of discrimination and racism is a division that influenced her ability to participate in this "English" community.

The African Methodist Episcopal denomination that Lee eventually joined arose out of racial tensions, and is historically predominantly African-American. St. George's Church in Philadelphia began requiring African-Americans to sit in the gallery for worship. In response to such increased tensions, African-Americans led by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones walked out of St. George's church in 1787. Richard Allen

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[120] Lee, "Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," 19.

[121] "The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," 28.

[122] Ibid.

eventually founded and became the first bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Lee joined a church that was African-American rather than "English," demonstrating how race was a major determinant of church life in her day.

Dominant gender norms were also inflected with racial politics and affected Lee's life in the church. Cultural expectations of black motherhood and women's domestic responsibility coupled with a rejection of women's ministerial authority in the African American Methodist tradition placed Lee in a marginal position in the church institution.[123] Lee's formal options for being a leader in the AME church were limited to playing a supportive role for the black male leadership. Peterson writes, "Lee's relationship to the AME Church is of particular interest for it illustrates the ambiguous, if not inferior, status accorded women by black male institutions in the ethnic public sphere."[124]

As the historian Richard S. Newman contends, in his close study of Richard Allen's life, the main sanctioned role of AME women was to uphold black respectability by tending to the domestic sphere and assisting in the welfare of the community's needs. Newman observes that part of the pressure for the AME Church in its beginnings was to demonstrate to the white dominant culture that they were of a "civilized" state equal to

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[123] Emilie Townes argue that Lee's social situation in the church and society is not a unique story in the nineteenth century but that "many Black and White women…experienced an ecstatic religious experience in her call, and fought against the traditional notions of women's image." Emilie Maureen Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory : Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville: Nashville : Abingdon Press, 1995), 34. While not unusual, Lee represents many who occupied this marginal space in the nineteenth century. Being marginalized may not be unique but is particular.

[124] Carla L. Peterson, *Doers of the Word : African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 74.

their white households. In this way, black families and black communities sought to uphold white values of domesticity and civility as a way of proving their equality to their white counterparts.

As part of this display of religious piety and domesticity, African American women in the church dressed and supported the male leadership in their appearance of respectability according to white norms. Newman describes Bishop Allen's wives, for example, as representative of the "'black republican mother': the iconic black woman whose domestic-sphere work, religious piety, and self-sacrificing dedication to communal uplift symbolized early African American femininity."[125] As a consequence, for many, African American women's roles in their churches were seen as "working alongside" their male counterparts, ensuring that the men had proper public presentation in their clothing as well as bearing the responsibility for upholding a proper home.[126]

Jualynne E. Dodson relates that women supported the appearance and welfare of the black church delegates. Women darned clothes and made sure that their husband's appearance was neat and presentable. Allen's wife - Sarah Allen - along with other women sat in a room together, while the men deliberated on denominational matters:

> Then [the women] began a campaign of mending, darning, stitching, and sewing…they were attending to the observable details by which white society seemed to judge whether or not blacks were a 'civilized' people, ready to be accepted and respected as equals in the human family.[127]

Politically, such practices ensured the respectability of the black community when it

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[125] Richard S. Newman, *Freedom's Prophet : Bishop Richard Allen, the Ame Church, and the Black Founding Fathers* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 75.
[126] Ibid., 76.
[127] Jualynne E. Dodson, *Engendering Church : Women, Power, and the Ame Church* (Lanham, Md.: Lanham, Md. : Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 43-44.

was under the suspicious, denigrating eye of the white majority. It also gave women a separate sphere where they could speak among themselves and actively participate in the formation of the denomination. This informal cohort of women quickly became an important organization in the life of the AME Church known as the Daughters of Conference, a group officially recognized in 1828.[128] With an established sphere of church life, the central doctrinal and power of the institution was left to men. Women were not allowed to be ordained in the denomination until the mid-twentieth century.

Lee experienced this very discrimination within the church when she felt a call to preach. When Lee approached Bishop Allen about her call, Bishop Allen remarked, that a Mrs. Cook, a Methodist, had previously asked for this same permission to preach, and was granted by a local pastor the right to exhort and hold prayer meetings. Women preaching, however, was something that, "our Discipline knew nothing at all about…that it did not call for women preachers."[129] The church discipline prohibited her from being officially recognized in the church as a leader and preacher. As Peterson writes, "thus, Lee could never become an integral and authoritative member of its organizational structure but was obliged to remain on the periphery."[130] With Allen, however, Lee did enjoy a special relationship. She traveled with Allen, and he invited her to preach at

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[128] For more on the disputed and difficult relationship of women to the public sphere, see Janet R. Jakobsen, *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference Diversity and Feminist Ethics*, ed. Inc NetLibrary (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998). Also, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent the Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[129] Lee, "The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," 36.

[130] Peterson, *Doers of the Word : African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)*, 74.

Bethel in the 1820's.[131]

This special relationship however made Lee dependent on the central leader of the institution for access to pulpits. After Allen died in 1831, Peterson writes, Lee's access to pulpits in Philadelphia were largely cut off with the ascendency of Daniel Payne in church leadership. Payne opposed "uneducated women preachers like Lee" from taking public central roles in the AME denomination.[132] As a result of this resistance, much of Lee's exhortation occurred in alternative spaces.

Her ability to exhort and preach was limited paradoxically to constant motion as an itinerant preacher. To allow a woman to be placed in a particular community as the sole preacher and minister was simply out of the question for her denomination. As she writes, "I was desired to speak in the colored meeting house, but the minister could not reconcile his mind to a woman preacher – he could not unite in fellowship ….he had said he did not believe that ever a soul was converted under the preaching of a woman…" [133] When her husband Joseph Lee died, she then had to leave her children in order to preach; Such a life was not easy; she remarks, "I spoke for the people there, but soon had felt the cross so heavy. Perhaps it was occasioned through grieving for the past, and my feelings of loneliness in the world."[134] In 1831, almost thirty years after her conversion story, Lee still remains lonely and destitute. She remarks that she felt "like a poor pilgrim indeed; and wandering throughout this world so wide; having to travel among strangers, and being poor and destitute; I was sorely tempted. My money was gone, my health was

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[131] Ibid.
[132] Ibid., 75.
[133] Lee, "Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," 24.
[134] Ibid., 33.

gone, and I measurably without a home."[135] With nothing to her name, she does not have a place to call her own. Lee endured a "geographic self-marginalization whose power lay in constant mobility and in the habitation of those liminal spaces opened up by the Second Great Awakening," Peterson writes.[136] The fervor of the camp-meeting became a way for Lee to exhort. It was the space of the fields and schoolrooms that Lee was able to live with the power of the margin. For her, the community of God resides wherever it can live. As she writes, "for many times deceitful persons will set the Church on fire but can't burn it up. Moses saw it as a bush in a flame, yet not consumed."[137] With nothing to her name, Lee lived off the kindness and generosity of those she visited. She persisted in the margins, preached, praying beside sickbeds. She led worship in fields, market houses, schoolrooms and occasionally congregational spaces.

Even within these opportunities, however, Lee faced sexism in these marginal spaces. As literary scholar and historian Frances Smith Foster notes, Lee was accused of not being a "natural" woman because she was preaching: "Here I found some very ill-behaved persons, who talked roughly, and said among other things, 'I was not a woman, but a man dressed in female clothes.' I labored one week among them."[138] Her call to preach was not affirmed by the main institutions of the church nor the culture of her day.

White preachers who did not think it proper for her to preach challenged her repeatedly. She was locked out of churches in towns that thought she shouldn't be

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[135] Ibid., 61.
[136] Peterson, *Doers of the Word : African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)*, 75.
[137] Lee, "Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," 53.
[138] Ibid., 23.

allowed to preach by white preachers and she was "locked out…amid cries of 'shame.'"[139] Lee reports that she was painfully criticized by others, and denied entrance into particular churches to preach. As she writes, the Methodists "did not open their Church" for her to preach in Newcastle, because she was "not licensed" to preach.[140]

Lee's experience of discrimination both in her culture and in the church marginalized her and constrained her freedom to speak and to move in the world. Her work caused her to live on the border between male and female expectations. A latent divide persisted between women who tended the domestic sphere - tending to the clothing, and welfare of their community - and Lee - the itinerant preacher who both was associated with women in the AME organizational life, but also set apart by her call to preach.

Conventions of Style and Form

The spiritual autobiography typically foregrounds spiritual experience over and against family history, physical descriptions, education, and even particular dates and times. Other than the place and date for when she was born, Lee spends little time writing about her childhood; she does not name her parents nor very much about why or how she was employed where she was. By the second paragraph of the autobiography, Lee begins describing her inner spiritual experience with God and reflections on her spiritual state, including her sense of sin.

Lee also emphasizes the "quest" or "journey motif" that scholar William Andrews notes is a hallmark of black spiritual autobiography of the time.[141] She records where she

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[139] Ibid., 26.
[140] Ibid., 25.
[141] Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760-1865*, 7.

travelled and the number of people at a meeting, She describes herself as well as a "poor pilgrim…wandering throughout this world so wide; having to travel among strangers." [142] The motif that the life is a journey or a quest remains as part of the landscape of her autobiography.

Like her male counterparts, Lee wrote in a genre that allowed her to speak:

> African American women writers knew, as did the Others, that the public was not inclined to grant such authority to those of their sex or race. African American women could not and did not overtly proclaim the importance of their speech as 'historical and intellectual event.' They knew that their very acts of writing tested social attitudes toward their intelligence and their historical situations. In transgressing social conventions, they faced condemnation as "un-natural" beings.[143]

A common way that black writers maintained an open readership was by obscuring their own particular history over against the spiritual aspects of their narrative. As many scholars of history have noted, the black spiritual autobiography of the antebellum era was a powerful way of creating a public that might consider the freedom and dignity of African Americans. Black male spiritual autobiography was particularly interested in addressing white readers, and arguing for, as William Andrews writes, "the necessary intellectual groundwork by proving that black people were as much chosen by God for eternal salvation as whites."[144]

In addition to the form of her text, her piety can be viewed as deeply conventional.

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[142] Lee, "Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," 61.

[143] Foster, *Written by Herself: Literary Production by African American Women, 1746-1892* 17.

[144] Lee, "The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," 27.

Lee's narrative is decidedly Wesleyan in its logic of salvation.[145] Her instruction on the nature of Wesleyan sanctification came through a man named William Scott. "He told me the progress of the soul from a state of darkness, or of nature, was threefold…First, conviction for sin. Second, justification from sin. Third, the entire sanctification of the soul to God….He then inquired if I would promise to pray for this in my secret devotions."[146] She suffers, prays, is saved, and then lives out of the sanctification.

For Wesley, repentance is the experience of realizing one's sinfulness and asking for forgiveness. It is the moment when one is initially converted to Christianity. In the opening pages of her text, we see a clear "hyper orthodoxy' in her text as she describes her experience of personal sin. She begins recalling her state as a "wretched sinner."[147] When she left her home at seven and lived as a servant maid with a "Mr. Sharp" the lady of the house asks her if she has finished her work, she lies and says she has. She writes that it was then that: "the Spirit of God moved in power through my conscience, and told me I was a wretched sinner."[148] Second, justification is when one experiences Christ's sacrifice as freeing one's own self from the sin that one cannot overcome alone. Lee experiences this at the moment when she hears a sermon from Richard Allen at the age of twenty-one. Finally, sanctification is the point of spiritual perfection. It is the culmination of a life lived in Christ. For Wesley, sanctification was both an event in one's life and an ongoing process of continual renewal and pursuit of perfection. Lee recounts her sanctification as being a prayerful moment four years after her experience of justification.

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[145] Ibid., 15.
[146] Ibid., 33.
[147] Ibid., 27.
[148] Ibid.

Through recording her life in terms of this extreme piety, Lee's authorship and story becomes more difficult to dispute or disregard by other Christians.

In addition to its highly conventional form as spiritual autobiography, her text defends her rationality. In the beginning of her text, she writes that she does realize that her wrestling with Satan, her fears and encounters with God might be construed as "fiction, the mere ravings of a disordered mind."[149] Later, she even writes about how a woman does end up drowning due to an unstable mind. In the longer version of her autobiography, she describes a woman who does not survive the voices calling her to death. A woman, who was called "insane" on board a boat, feels that people are talking and saying they want to hurt her. She considers drowning herself, and Lee and another woman stay "strove to comfort her," but in the morning, she was found to have jumped overboard.[150]

Lee's defense of her rationality further undergirds her as a trusted author. Throughout her text, she works to defend her rational mind in the face of being written off by a reader as "insane" or of "unsound mind." The constraints of discrimination cause her text to have to establish her own rationality against others. Rhetorically, this keeps the reader from discounting her as some "lunatic."[151]

The conventional forms allowed Lee to be heard as a legitimate, rational author; The Wesleyan orthodox soteriology implicated any white Christians who might read her autobiography. The form and style of her autobiography served her to gain legitimacy by

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150 Lee, "Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," 86.

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her audience.

For a project working on margins, the text's conventional form, defense of rationality, and Wesleyan theological orthodoxy appears to forego any resistance or difference in her work. But her text also did more than reinforce conventional form and theology; she also opened up the biblical world and the form of the spiritual autobiography to then supersede societal and ecclesial constrictions on her identity and marginal position. The rationality is a warrant for her to express her ecstatic experiences of the divine that are beyond discursive reasoning.

Christian Narrative

Lee's identity on the margins was re-written through her understanding of the Biblical world. Lee enters the Biblical world as a means of reshaping her current one, subverting its racialized and gendered economy.[152] She defines herself in relation to the larger Christian narrative, rather than her racial identity. She narrates her self through the main Biblical motifs of creation, crucifixion, resurrection and Pentecost. God functions as an ultimate authority. The Biblical narrative functions as the landscape within which Lee is able to narrate her life beyond the expectations of repressive societal structures.

Creation

For Lee, the power of God works vigorously to preserve her life before she is even fully aware of God.[153] In the opening pages of her autobiography, she emphasizes the

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[152] Lee's engagement with the text might be understood as what Paul Ricoeur calls entering the "world issued from the text." See Ricœur, *From Text to Action*.

[153] In Wesleyan theology, this idea of God's prevenient grace entails the understanding that God is present before we are even conscious of God's presence. Fro more on the theology of prevenient grace, see Runyon, *The New Creation : John Wesley's Theology Today*.

way that God preserved her life. In 1804, at the age of 21, Lee becomes distressed after hearing a sermon by a Presbyterian minister on the nature of sin. She becomes so overcome by the reality and question of sinfulness, that she begins to despair. She considers drowning herself on the banks of a river: "there was a deep hole, where the water whirled about among the rocks; to this place it was suggested, I must go and drown myself."[154] It was only, according to her, the "unseen arm of God" that her thoughts "by some means, of which I can give no account, were taken entirely from this purpose."[155] A divine force kept her from "self-murder." Lee names God as the mysterious source of her salvation.

In the midst of social repression and isolation, Lee persisted in life. The Spirit functions as a power that upholds all that is created, including Lee herself. In contrast to the lack of a "saving community," Lee cites the Spirit of God as being a preserving force in her life. As Lee writes, "the Spirit of the Lord never entirely forsook me."[156] Even before she is consciously convicted of her self in relation to God, she understands that the Spirit of God is constantly "striving with" her.[157] She is insistent that it was God's "gracious power" that converted her soul. Against the isolation of racial discrimination, Lee finds the Spirit present at the edge of the dark precipice of nothingness.

Christ's Temptations, Crucifixion and Resurrection

While God's general ability to keep her from drowning herself remains with her, she emphasizes how her journey with God continues to be filled with temptations. God's

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[154] Lee, "The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," 28.
[155] Ibid..
[156] Ibid.
[157] Ibid.

ability to be with her to preserve her life does not remove her sense of guilt and shame, and her temptations persist.

From her time of conviction of sin, Lee searched for church community and finally finds Rev. Allen's church. She attends a service at Bethel with the "head cook" in the house in which she is working at the time.[158] Upon hearing the first words of the sermon from Richard Allen, three weeks later, Lee describes praying to God in the words, "*Lord* I *forgive* every creature."[159] Upon this moment, Lee's entire being is transformed:

> That instant, it appeared to me, as if a garment, which had entirely enveloped my whole person, even to my fingers ends, split at the crowns of my head, and was stripped away from me, passing like a shadow, from my sight – when the glory of God seemed to cover me in its stead.[160]

It is at this moment that Lee sheds the identity of sin, and lives covered in the "glory of God."[161]

Lee's words of forgiveness identify her act of forgiving others as necessary for her removal of sin. Just as God forgives through the Son of God, so Lee forgives. In this way, Lee mirrors or takes on a Christological identity as her means of resisting theologically the racist and sexist constructs of her identity.

For four years after her conversion, Lee continues to experience a terror of doubts. She is again tempted to kill herself: "Here I was again tempted to destroy my life by drowning; but suddenly this mode was changed, and while in the dusk of the evening, as I was walking to and fro in the yard of the house, I was beset to hang myself, with a cord

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[158] Ibid., 28.
[159] Ibid., 29.
[160] Ibid.
[161] Ibid., 29.

suspended from the wall enclosing the secluded spot."[162] She then rushes into the house and is again tempted to "plunge my head" into a "standing vessel of water." By the "redeeming power" of God, Lee does not listen.[163] Whereas the previous earlier temptation to drown herself had been saved by the "unseen arm of God," Lee attributes the more intense experience of encountering Satan with a kind of battle of her life between Satan and the redemptive power of God.

She then describes having her "eyes opened" to the precipice from which she was saved:

> Then the awful gulf of hell seemed to be open beneath me, covered only, as it were, by a spider's web, on which I stood. I seemed to hear the howling of the damned, to see the smoke of the bottomless pit, and to hear the rattling of those chains, which hold the impenitent under clouds of darkness to the judgment of the great day.[164]

Still terrified after seeing this vision, Lee prays in a room that night. As she prays, she reports seeing the following vision: "sitting in one corner of the room, Satan, in the form of a monstrous dog, and in a rage, as if in pursuit, his tongue protruding from his mouth to a great length, and his eyes looked like two balls of fire; it soon, however, vanished out of my sight."[165] J. Cameron Carter argues that Lee writes about her suicidal temptations in a way that echoes the temptations of Christ in the desert:

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[162] Ibid., 30.
[163] Ibid.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Ibid., 31.

> Lee is a shrewd reader of Scripture, because the description of her trauma is a retelling of the gospel accounts of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. According to the synoptic record, Christ was subjected to 'satanic' harassment, culminating in his temptation to commit suicide by throwing himself down from an elevated plain (cf Matt. 4:1-11; Mark 1:12-13; Luke 4: 1-13). As Jesus was tempted to cast himself down, so, too, Lee entertains casting herself down.[166]

Lee exegetes her terror at being tempted by despair and doubt as a "recapitulation" of Jesus' temptation as a way of writing her self into the unfolding narrative of Christ's life.

Her wrestling with the terrors of temptation are finally resolved when she physically dramatizes the acts of Christ dying and being resurrected through her account of her sanctification. Her sanctification mimics the experience of Christ's cruciform death and

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[166] J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 331. An alternate reading of the encounter with satanic forces may also have African traditional religions as an influence as well. As Peterson writes, "Her repeated fantasies of suicide by drowning, although represented from a Christian point of view as satanic temptation, may also express the conviction of newly arrived Africans that death by drowning would ensure a return to one's original local place in Africa." Lee's experience with encountering a dog "not only reflects the low status of the dog in African folklore, but relates more specifically to African-American popular beliefs about animals…Not only the dog an omen of death…but is was often viewed as the devil himself in disguise." Peterson, *Doers of the Word : African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)*, 84.These influences reflect how Jarena Lee's spiritual life lived on the margin between African and African-American spiritual belief and Christian narrative. Her conception of divine power, then, was also born out of African traditional beliefs.

resurrection.[167]

Leading up to her sanctification, Lee is visited by William Scott, an African-American man whom she describes as one who often visited "the sick and distressed" in the African-American community.[168] Scott instructs Lee to pray for sanctification, and she listens. The account of sanctification mirrors Christ's death and resurrection, as Carter argues. Lee finds a "secret place," at "four o'clock in the afternoon," an hour prior to the Biblical account of Jesus' Good Friday experience. With her "bowing down," she enters Good Friday and Holy Saturday. She offers repeated petitions for sanctification, bowing and rising and praying for sanctification. Suddenly, like a "bolt of lightning" darted through her, and she sprang up, and exclaimed, "The Lord has sanctified my soul."[169] But the human community does not hear her. Like the resurrection of Christ, her own experience of resurrection is not witnessed by other humans, but rather the angels and Satan: "There was none to hear this bu the angels who stood around to witness to my joy – and Satan, whose malice raged the more."[170] This experience of the divine comes to Lee on the margins of human community.

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[167] Certainly, this identification with Christ and redemptive suffering in womanist theology is hotly debated. See Delores Williams' Sisters in the Wilderness in which she writes, that women should question "the value in oppressed black women identifying with Christ through their common suffering through cross-bearing. Black women should never be encouraged to believe that they can be united with God through this kind of suffering. There are quite enough black women bearing the cross by rearing children alone, struggling on welfare, suffering through poverty, experiencing inadequate health care, domestic violence and various forms of racism and sexism," (Sisters in the Wilderness, 169). For an alternative view, see JoAnne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood?: The Cross in the African American Experience* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998).

[168] Lee, "The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," 33.

[169] Ibid., 34.

[170] Ibid.

Satan argues with her and causes her to doubt, but a voice reassures her and says, "*thou art sanctified!*"[171] Her subsequent posture of standing up to pray with outstretched arms and raised head signifies resurrection Sunday, which is the moment which she employs the language, 'I rose.'"[172]

Lee's bodily position appears both cruciform in its posture, and in her risen state, a posture of resurrection. As she writes, The "first I knew of myself," says Lee, "after [the experience of prayer] I was standing in the yard with my hands spread out, and looking with my face toward heaven."[173] According to Carter, "her outstretched arms and raised head," creates the shape of the body on the cross."[174] He reads Lee's bodily postures throughout her sanctification as formed through a *triduum mortis* or the three mysterious days between Christ's death and resurrection.[175] Her cruciform experience changes her sense of self, transformed into one that has passed through an experience of suffering into a space of resurrection.

She enters a different reality in Christ. As Carter writes, "The flesh of Jesus is a social reality, a space into which one enters by the action of the Spirit."[176] Through the Spirit, Jarena encounters a cruciform experience that then grants her a new sense of self. By participating in bodily postures and the Spirit of God, Lee incorporates Jesus' body into her own. This then transforms her body from being condemned to racialized and

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[171] Ibid.
[172] ibid.
[173] Ibid.
[174] Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* 336.
[175] Ibid.
[176] Ibid.

gendered discrimination to a body that is in covenant with God. She understands herself to be transformed into one identified with the flesh of Jesus. This covenantal flesh makes her no longer bound to the identity that moved her to the margins of society, but she is now identified with God's covenant. Through being in the world in the "way of Christ's flesh," Carter suggests that Lee now lives in "God's covenant."[177] This covenant began with the covenant of Zion, according to Carter, and is opened to all through the work of Jesus of Nazareth: "He is the Jew who draws those who are not Israel into YHWH's promises with Israel. What she [Lee] intuits is that YHWH's promises to Israel are God's promises to and with the world."[178] Lee's identification with Christ's body becomes the way that she is able to reconfigure her body as in Christ and no longer read as racialized flesh but rather part of the body of Christ.

Post-resurrection

Out of this experience of resurrection in Christ, Lee is empowered to preach in the Spirit. She recalls Mary Magdalene's encounter with the resurrection of Jesus as a foundation for preaching: "Did not Mary first preach the risen Saviour (*sic*), and is not the doctrine of the resurrection the very climax of Christianity – hangs not all our hope on this, as argued by St. Paul? Then did not Mary, a woman, preach the gospel? For she preached the resurrection of the crucified Son of God."[179] Mary, Lee argues, is the first proclaimer or preacher when she runs and tell the disciples that Jesus had risen. Like Mary, the power of witnessing to a resurrecting power of God is a power that calls her to

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[177] Ibid., 338.
[178] Ibid., 315.
[179] Lee, "The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," 36.

speak and proclaim this good news. Divine power is the excessive promise of resurrection.

Movement in the Spirit

Just as Christ gives her a new identity in God, the Spirit allows her to move with liberty. The Spirit of God rooted in Pentecostal imagery gives her freedom of movement. The presence of God is associated with movement of life as opposed to the rigidity of death. When institutional powers restrict one's movement (literally in Lee's case), the Spirit's powers as movement forms a new way and a new reality out of the otherwise death-dealing situation. As Jürgen Moltmann observes, the Spirit's affirmation of a person is particularly life giving for those on the margins: "In this experience of God they also experience their own indestructible and inalienable dignity, so that they can get up out of the dust."[180] For those marginalized by discriminatory practices, the hope of God bringing life-giving movement is a liberating hopeful symbol of God.

Lee utilizes the Biblical symbols of fire and wind, what theologian Jürgen Moltmann calls the "movement metaphors" to describe her encounter with the Spirit. Jürgen Moltmann writes, the wind relates the divine to "the living compared with the dead, and what is moving compared with the things that are petrified and rigid. God's spirit is the breath of God's life, which gives life to human beings and animals."[181] In early descriptions of her preaching, Lee uses the language of wind recalling Acts 2 to describe an experience she has when preaching: "One whole seat of females, by the power of God,

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[180] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life : A Universal Affirmation*, 1st Fortress Press edition. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 3.

[181] Ibid., 279.

as the rushing of a wind, were all bowed to the floor at once."[182] Lee's preaching in the Spirit brings movement of life to those who are otherwise petrified by the terrors of racism and sexism. As Moltmann writes,

> They describe a movement that sweeps people off their feet, which possesses and excites not only the conscious levels but the unconscious depths too, and sets the men and women affected themselves on the move towards unsuspected new things.[183]

The symbol of fire conveys the Spirit's communicative property. In the book of Acts, the holy tongues of fire give the disciples the power to speak across difference and divides. The effect of the Pentecostal moment is that persons from a variety of backgrounds are understood and hear one another. As Moltmann writes: "Fire warms us, and we pass on the warmth."[184] It is a flame that ignites new speech and new forms in community.

Lee understands her gift to preach in fiery terms. She writes when she preached to a larger congregation: "My tongue was cut loose…the love of God, and of his service, burned with a vehement flame within me – his name was glorified among the people." [185] She becomes free to speak and free to move through the gift of the Spirit. In preaching, she "had liberty," a liberty that lifts her up as she hears the people "groan" around her.[186]

From the perspective of those marginalized, the Spirit is a force for life in the face of situations where there appears to be no chance for movement.

The Spirit of Pentecost brings movement that is deeply prophetic and redemptive.

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[182] Lee, "Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," 18.
[183] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life : A Universal Affirmation*, 278.
[184] Ibid., 279.
[185] Lee, "The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," 48.
[186] Ibid.

Lee's text reaches back to the early prophetic passages of the Hebrew Bible in the midst of recalling Pentecost. She echoes Isaiah's experience of being called to be a prophet: "The Lord touched my tongue as with a live coal from his altar."[187] In this moment of preaching, Lee ties together the rushing wind of the Spirit of Pentecost with the Spirit of God present in Isaiah's prophetic call. Thus, the Spirit of prophecy is also the Spirit of redemption.

Lee deftly reminds the reader that the call to prophesy has always cut across gendered lines. The epitaph of Lee's autobiography comes from the book of Joel: "And it shall come to pass…that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons, and your *daughters* shall prophecy."[188] Lee's reference to Joel through Pentecost connects the Spirit to, as Carter articulates, "all flesh of both 'your sons and your *daughters*,' as priestly or ministerial workers."[189] In seeking to explain the events of Pentecost, Peter in the Book of Acts quotes the above passage of Joel. The Spirit of God poured out at Pentecost is seen as a fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel.

Through the Pentecostal moment, her itinerancy, and her ecstatic encounters, the margin becomes not only a place of rejection, but also a place of new and unexpected community. The community involves persons from all walks of life, all different racial backgrounds, anonymous women and men, angels, and the eschatological community. The margins are filled with a variety of persons who become community for Lee.

Persons from a variety of backgrounds are understood and hear one another. As Lee

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[187] "Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," 71.

[188] "The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," 27.

[189] Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* 328.

writes: “the Lord poured forth his spirit among the people. Though, as I was told, there were lawyers, doctors, and magistrates present, to hear me speak, yet there was mourning and crying among sinners, for the Lord scattered fire among them of his own kindling.”[190] Persons from all different social backgrounds – magistrates, doctors, lawyers listen to an African-American woman – Lee- granting her authority and power to be heard. The highly learned professions listen to the woman who had “never had more than three months” of schooling.[191] Her preaching also results in moments of racial reconciliation. In Lee's 1849 text, she remarks how a white family - the Lewelens - invited her to dinner "not as one of their hired servants, but as a companion."[192] She eats dinner with white counterparts.

From the Pentecostal moment, the Spirit is filling Lee’s life. She understands the Spirit to be present with her in worship. It is both a prophetic, revelatory moment as well as an eschatological one. Lee describes worship engendering this kind of vision and hope:

> when the love that true believers enjoy at such scenes made the place akin to heaven. While here I spoke as the Spirit taught me from Solomon's Songs. It was a happy meeting - refreshing to the thirsty soul - and we had a shout of the king in the camp. I shall never forget the kindness I received here from dear sister G.B. May the blessings of heaven be hers in this world and the world to come.[193]

For Lee, the blessings of heaven are not outside this realm but rather are present both in this world and the world to come. As James Cone writes, the Spirit in African-

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[190] Lee, "The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," 46.
[191] "Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," 97.
[192] Ibid., 26.
[193] Ibid., 32.

American religious tradition is "God's power to be with and for the people."[194] The Spirit can be understood as present from the beginning of creation while also coming from the future, to bring glimpses of another time, a renewed creation in the end of time. Lee's eschatological hope of the Spirit echoes James Cone's assessment of how spiritual life functions in the African American religious tradition. James Cone argues:

> The historical realization of the experience of salvation has always been an integral part of the black religious tradition. The idea that black religion was and is otherworldly and nothing more is simply not true….it is a spiritual vision of the reconstruction of a new humanity in which people are no longer defined by oppression, but by freedom.[195]

In other words, the vision and hope of a renewed humanity is not otherworldly but rather a redefinition of identity from an eschatological hope.

Lee's text is not only Wesleyan in its soteriology. She also understands her identity to be connected to the God that is the "unseen arm" that protects her from despair, to the Christological experiences of temptation, crucifixion and resurrection, to the Pentecostal Spirit. These movements correlate to Wesleyan soteriology, but they are also deeply connected to the history of salvation found in the Biblical narrative. Lee enters the Biblical narrative to re-write her identity in the face of discrimination. Lee's life framed in Biblical terms gives her life an authority, liberty, and community within the story of salvation history of God rather than the story of men.

Divinity Beyond Words

While she does defend her rationality, she also frequently relates to her audience the

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[194] James Cone, "Sanctification and Liberation in the Black Religious Tradition," in *Sanctification and Liberation : Liberation Theologies in the Light of the Wesleyan Tradition*, ed. Theodore Runyon, Council World Methodist, and Studies Oxford Institute on Methodist Theological (Nashville: Nashville : Abingdon, 1981), 178.
[195] Ibid., 189.

inexpressible dimensions of divine encounter. Such an encounter, for Lee, ultimately is indescribable and ecstatic. It is beyond words.

Lee notes the ways that the effects of sanctification are beyond words. She describes how she rushed back into a house from a yard, and is filled with joy is beyond words. Lee writes,

> as it were a new rush of the same ecstacy (*sic*) came upon me, and caused me to feel as if I were in an ocean of light and bliss…During this, I stood perfectly still, the tears rolling in a flood from my eyes. So great was the joy, that it is past description. There is no language that can describe it, except that which was heard by St Paul, when he was caught up to third heaven, and heard words which it was not lawful to utter.[196]

Living in the indescribable experience of divinity, Lee understands that divine life is beyond all words.

As she understands her tongue is at "liberty" in the ecstatic moment of the homiletic moment, the ecstatic offering of God's power flows through her, and she does not record the words of her sermons. As Peterson writes, "she steadfastly refused to record her sermons in writing. Willing on every occasion to quote the biblical text from which she preached and to describe the effect of her preaching on her congregation, she remained reluctant to represent either the form or the substance of her sermons to a reading public."[197] This reluctance to present the words of the sermon relate to the insistence of the unspoken apophatic moment of being in communion and at liberty in the Spirit. These are moments in which the divine speaks but cannot be revealed. It is a power that is in

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[196] Lee, "The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," 34.

[197] Peterson, *Doers of the Word : African-American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830-1880)*, 80.

excess of words.

New Space, New Community

In light of her experience of God, Lee's understanding of the margin also shifts. The margin is a place that holds divine power, not just a space of despair or temptation. The space of the margin symbolized as the yard, in Lee's text, is a sacred place that sits outside the ordinary human household. She is struck by God's holiness in a place that is not part of the human ordinary life. Earlier, "the yard of the house" at "evening's dusk" had been where she felt tempted to hang herself. Now, Satan sits on the edge of the encounter. The yard and the evening are marginal space and time, when her soul is vulnerable to the temptations of Satan but also the ecstatic bliss of a divine encounter.

Understanding the divine as present in the margin opens up a variety of figures in Lee's text who are also participating in divine power and are otherwise socially and ecclesially marginalized. There are "others" who are otherwise unnamed or unnoticed are, in her text, the holy and beloved. A variety of anonymous persons, who mark this divine power in the margins, line Lee's text.

There are many unofficial teachers in her text. Her earliest instruction comes from a head cook who tells her about the "rules of the Methodist society."[198] This anonymous head cook leads her to the hearing of the Rev. Richard Allen, eventual bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. She is also instructed and "learned much" in order to "comprehend the spiritual meaning of the text" through her accompaniment with an

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[198] Lee, "The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee, a Coloured Lady, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," 28.

African-American physician who was also a member of the Methodist society.[199] The head cook is not named nor is the physician. These “anonymous” persons are endowed with the work of instruction. This is a radical critique to those who want to restrict the authority granted to those who can teach and preach the Gospel. It seems that knowledge of God and the ability to instruct persons about God comes through many avenues regardless of the church’s own institutional claims for authority.

There are also many, many anonymous women preachers. Lee's text repeatedly "buzzes" with anonymous women like "sister G.B"[200] There are other "messengers of God" who she mentions: one "female preacher" in Baltimore who Lee asked to take "into the pulpit” and "spoke much in the spirit of God."[201] Another woman - no name given - confesses to Lee her own sadness over feeling called to preach and yet feared the church government and her husband disapproved.[202] She also recalls travelling for two or three weeks with a "sister preacher" who remains unnamed. Anonymity and speaking the truth of God are not at odds in Lee's narrative, but rather can even be seen as being deeply connected in the work of glorifying God. The power of reclaiming anonymity as unconnected to divinity gives those lives that are also covered under human obscurity a new kind of dignity.

The location of freedom is not located in the realm of the social norms, but rather in the participation in the divine realm. There are the invisible and unnamed “messengers” who speak to her in her dreams. The invisible men in white robes who speak to her and

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[199] Ibid., 32.
[200] "Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," 32.
[201] Ibid., 61.
[202] Ibid., 56.

reassure her that she is called to preach, the angels that witness to her sanctification, and those in her dreams who reassure her. Lee encounters angels when she is feeling alone and uncertain. When she and her husband move to Snow Hill from Philadelphia, she despairs over the lack of "communion and fellowship" that she had felt in Philadelphia. In the face of doubt and despair, she has a dream in which another "man of a grave and dignified countenance, dressed entirely in white, as it were in a robe" comes to her in the dream reassuring her that her husband Joseph Lee must tend to these "sheep." She wakes "convinced of her error" and does not worry. These anonymous spiritual presences function as messengers of God of whom she listens and takes instructions. She describes, for example, going to Port Elizabeth preaching to large congregations in a church there. The liberty and the activity of the people caused her "breast to swell with pure Serephic (*sic*) joy."[203] Lee is transformed into one like the seraphs - a joy that is not human but a joy of the angels. The liberty of preaching brings her community beyond that of human beings. The margin holds those who are not known, but are nonetheless participating in that generous and overflowing realm of the divine.

Rhetorical Subversion

Just as Lee experiences herself in the Biblical narrative that exceeds discriminatory practices of her day, Lee's text reflects and responds to this excessive power of God in the form of her text. Her text is not only a spiritual autobiography but also pushes the boundaries of genre by combining the autobiography with the travelogue, particularly in her second edition. This longer edition offers far more detailed descriptions of the places and people Lee encountered. Every travel entry typically begins with a phrase like,

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[203] Ibid., 62.

“From this place I next went…“ or “In November I journeyed for…” or “I was invited to…and was called upon by a brother to speak.” After specifying the town name, the weather, the nature of the invitation for her preaching and type of venue of her preaching, she names the Biblical passage she preached on, and then ends with an assessment of her own experience as well as an account of the “effectiveness” of her preaching, usually by recounting how many people were converted that day.

Rhetorically, through the travelogue form, Lee’s writing pushes on the itinerant dimension of her life and refuses to let the itinerant dimension make her any "less" of a preacher. Instead, it re-enforces - excessively - her own sense of being a preacher. The effect of the travelogue is impressive in that it reads rhetorically as a further challenge to one's sense of any "original" version of preacher as anything beyond her own narrative identity as preacher. The travelogue portion is strangely not bound to one particular event of conversion, but moves into an excessive listing of places, people, and Biblical references. Denied recognition by the larger ecclesial structure, she becomes the preacher ad absurdum in her text. The constant imitation of the male preacher coupled with the tireless repetition in her writing gives the text a sense of excess - excessive litanies of place and text. (Enough already!, the “dear reader” might desire to say. Is it any coincidence that most scholars refer to the shorter more contained text of 1836 rather than the longer, unwieldy 1849 version?) It’s as if the repetition, on the one hand, wants to “prove” that Lee is a preacher. On the other hand, this repetition causes one to be flooded with her as preacher, that then those who are supposed to be the “original” or “model” preacher - the (black) male leader - starts to seem a bit of a copy of her. Are they a parochial imitation of her omnipresent speech across multiple states and even countries or

is she imitating them? Like the Spirit in constant movement bringing life from death, movement from stagnation, Lee brings new life to the category of preacher, taking it on, and redeeming it. In living in the excessive power of the Spirit, she re-vivifies the category of preacher.

Lee's text is not only a validation of her authority as preacher it is also a liturgical text itself. Her last public voice - her written one - speaks with a hymnal refrain just as its author herself argues for her own liturgical place. In the ninety pages of this second edition, she references some sort of hymn no less than thirty two times. Literarily this repeated use of hymns as a moment of interruption or pause between the chronological observance echoes a liturgical role to the text. The hymns of singing and praise reflecting on the soul's temptations and subsequent trust in God, the work of Jesus' forgiveness and salvation, the beauty and power of God and the fleeting nature of the mortal life form a consistent refrain in her text. The use of hymns is particularly poignant given her paucity of prayers in the text or her own record of what she actually said in her preaching.[204] Lee lines her text with verse not only in times of benediction or closing of a chapter but also more consistently throughout the text.

Lee's measured text tries to live between a public disclosure of social and political

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[204] Certainly, others besides Lee incorporate hymnic refrains in their own writings. Maria Stewart as well as Julia A.J. Foote use verse as a way of ending a particular chapter or scene in their text. Stewart's text, however, includes more than a travelogue of activity. She includes written prayers, addresses that she conducted, as well as hymns. The hymns primarily appear at the closing of a chapter. Sue Houchins notes that Stewart's text is more a "collection of homiletic meditations and prayers" than a chronological autobiography, written to move readers toward their own personal sense of conversion. Sue E. Houchins, "Introduction," ibid. Julia A.J. Foote utilizes verse more sparsely in her text. In the case of Stewart, the devotional dimension of her writing is much more pronounced than in Lee's.

circumstances of her time, and expressing another alternative way of living with a disposition of praise and reception to the divine. Lee's life is a border logic, an eschatological hope. Her temporality was interspersed with a holy vision of divine participation that is in excess of what institutional discrimination presented to her. Living in this divine vision allowed Lee to persist in living a life that exceeded the social and political confines given to her.

Conclusion

Divine power, for Lee, flows in many places and in ways that exceeds the social expectations and normative practices of the Church and society. It comes through the Biblical narrative, in the apophatic moment of divine encounter, and in the anonymous companion who one cannot see but is also living in the inexpressible communion with the divine. Lee's life in God finds power in the "leading edge" or margin of the institution, pushing the powers of the institution to heed where the Spirit may be moving. The Spirit is the power of God that breathes life from the beginning of creation and brings hope from the future. It exceeds the limits of present day and offers an imaginative space of hope; Jarena Lee was pushed to the edges of the church and society due to discriminatory practices. She found that she was not alone there, however. Rather, the Spirit was moving.

The Life of Macrina:
The Excessive Nature of the Holy

> *Slowly, I am learning to live not in disappointment, but, rather, gratefully at the margins.*[205]

Unlike both Séraphine Louis and Jarena Lee, the fourth century ascetic Macrina did not write her life or produce an artistic work to study and observe. The record of Macrina comes through her brother's writing *The Life of Macrina* and *The Soul and the Resurrection*. The narrative portion, *The Life of Macrina*, centers on her life after she has passed away while *The Soul and the Resurrection* is more of a dialogue. As I am interested in the narrative figuring of the margin, I will be focusing primarily on *The Life of Macrina* assuming the other text is less of an entry point into the notion of the marginal figure. [206] I argue that Macrina's life narrated by Gregory shows how divine power lives in the brilliance of a marginal and Christian holy life free from institutional conflict.

The powerful ascetic Macrina pursued a holy life on the borders or edges of imperial and ecclesial power in the mountainous Roman province of Cappadocia. At the young age of twelve, Macrina claimed for herself the title of widow after her fiancé died before they were wed. She refused other suitors, and remained a "virgin-widow." After her

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[205] Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 29.

[206] Text quotations based on the translation of Gregory, *The Life of Saint Macrina*. Other translations include of Nyssa Saint ca ca Gregory, *Ascetical Works.*, trans. Virginia Woods Callahan (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1967). Also see *Vie De Sainte Macrine / Grgoire De Nysse. Introd., Texte Critique, Traduction Notes Et Index Par Pierre Maraval*, ed. Pierre Maraval (Paris: Paris : Editions du Cerf, 1971).

father died, Macrina convinced her mother Emmelia with her brother Peter to move from their more urban location in Neocaesarea to their family estate of Annesi in Pontus. With Macrina at the helm, the three dedicated their lives to living more fully in an equal relationship with others, renouncing personal wealth, and offering healing and welcome to others. Macrina spends her life reading Scripture, praying the Psalms, performing miracles, performing manual work including the lowly work of bread making, and sitting at a common table with former slaves.[207] Later, after a great famine, more women and men joined the community beyond the immediate household. During one of the region's great famines, their brother Peter in the community finds a way to feed all those gathered in the remote country (*eschatia*) in which they lived.[208] The margin can be a place that others are attracted to for its saving and holy work. In this case of the margin, so many people flocked to find food that this remote region of the world became like a city.

In contrast to Macrina, Cappadocian church father Gregory of Nyssa's public life, as both an appointed bishop and then exiled official of the church, centered on major theological Trinitarian debates and ecclesiological law. In the midst of this embroiled political and public center that defines much of Gregory's Christian life, Gregory writes a long meditation on his sister Macrina's life and death.

Gregory's impetus for writing the story, he says, is a conversation he had with a friend. Gregory was travelling towards Jerusalem seeking the "signs of the Lord's

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[207] While not legally recognized as freed slaves, those in the community who are formally designated as such are relieved of their role as slaves to Macrina's family through the simple invitation to dine with them.

[208] Jean Daniélou, "La Notion De Confins (Methorios) Chez Grégoire De Nysse," *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 49(1961).

residence in the flesh" when he came upon his friend Olympius in Antioch.[209] The two talked about this "honoured (*sic*) person" Macrina. Olympius put him to the task of remembering her. His task was to ensure that Macrina was not forgotten:

> you thought that a life of this quality should not be forgotten for the future and that she who had raised herself through philosophy to the highest limit of human virtue…should not pass along this way veiled and in silence.[210]

While Gregory "obeyed" Olympius and "told her story," he admits that he could not offer her life in a "simple, unaffected narrative."[211] While perhaps Macrina is not forgotten in this text, Gregory's text does not simply record the details of his sister's life; rather, it performs something about the holy life, inviting the reader to participate in the textual experience of encountering the silent and unspeakable dimensions of the holy. Gregory emphasizes the mysterious and unknown aspects of Macrina that are part and parcel of her holiness.

However, his reflections are also inflected with his own historical position as a central figure in the late fourth century church. Certainly, a tension persists throughout the text in that much of the analysis of the text centers on how Gregory constructs and performs Macrina's life in his writing of her. This chapter foregrounds Gregory's theological life as much as it speaks to Macrina. I contend however that the rhetorical foregrounding of Gregory's thought speaks to the way that Macrina remains hidden and set apart in her holiness. This may leave the reader wanting more, desiring to draw closer to Macrina. Yet, it also respects the ways in which Macrina's holiness cannot be duplicated via transcription, but rather invites one to seek after the divine in its mysterious and

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[209] Gregory, *The Life of Saint Macrina*, 21.
[210] Ibid.
[211] Ibid.

apophatic dimensions in one's own life. The disadvantage to such an approach is the way the reader remains at a perpetual distance from Macrina, risking a perception of a woman on a pedestal set apart and fetishized. But, Gregory is careful to note the ways in which this exceptional woman was also quite ordinary in her practices in the community. She was both set apart and intimately connected to those around her. He admires her display of holiness in her marginal place.

The tension between the margin and the center is not lost on Gregory; he recognizes the ways in which the center is also a valuable space. In fact, he couches his own position of fame in contrast to his sister's anonymity. In the text, Gregory recalls complaining to his sister about his "personal troubles" with the emperor Valens. She responds to him about the gift of being known even through the medium of public disputes. She sees his fame as being greater than their fathers; this excess of fame is a blessing: "'But you,' she said, 'are known in the cities, the townships and the provinces. Churches send you forth and call upon you as ally and reformer, and you do not see the grace in this?"[212] Of course, the irony is that just earlier in the text, Gregory praises his sister and her community for their life of ascetic withdrawal from worldly fame and possessions. Comparing their life to the life of angels, he says, "Self-control was their pleasure, not to be known was their fame, their wealth was in possessing nothing…their only care was for divine realities."[213] Macrina praises Gregory's fame as part of God's grace and Gregory praises a life that is hidden and yet drawing persons to her.

I read Gregory's project as deeply elegaic even melancholic for the passing of his

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[212] Ibid., 39.
[213] Ibid., 30.

sister. Certainly part of this tone is born out of the grief of his sister, but it is also a text that reminds the church that is currently embroiled in conflict that there is another way of living in the Christian life. Gregory's reflections on her sister seek to remind the church that its canons and politics are not the whole picture of the Christian life. Her life offered a piece of divinity in spite of and outside of the centralizing debates and councils in which he was involved. This text illuminates how the margin is not always a place that persons are pushed to, but rather might be a desirable place to live in the ecclesia.[214] While limited in one's ability to influence political lines of the church, the ascetic life can cultivate a deep and powerful connection to the divine in a gathering of believers.

Gregory of Nyssa perpetually reflects upon the holy life of his elder sister Macrina and yet is also wondering at the ways that a life is hidden in God. In the text, Gregory draws on the image of light/dark, hidden/secret and death/life, to express a hidden sacredness that lives in the saintly life exemplified in Macrina. In this ecclesial margin, Macrina cultivates the presence of Christ. This Christic power is made evident for Gregory most starkly at Macrina's deathbed.

Macrina's Marginality

Macrina certainly held social power in her ability to even lead the Annesi community. Women of a higher economic status and rank did have some authoritative power as influential laity. Macrina and her mother come from a distinguished family with the resources to leave the city and move to their country estate.

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[214] In this instance, I use the term ecclesia to suggest that the Church is not necessarily co-terminus with the ecclesia or "gathering." The ecclesia is simply a gathering or assembly, in this case of Christians while the Church includes the official canons, doctrines, and organizational structure of the church. One may not be tied to the church but may be part of the ecclesia.

However, Macrina's gender limited her leadership in the church. The church by the fourth century is marked by an increasing desire to regulate and standardize the church body. With the Empire's support of the Church, ecclesial councils and canons began to work to redefine the roles and work of the church, including those for women.[215] Certainly, competing traditions continued to thrive and have power in the empire, even as Christianity was given protection from persecution.[216] Nevertheless, the church's increasing enforcement and definition of catholicity dramatically limited the fluidity and multiplicity found in churches across Egypt, Syria, and modern day Turkey. With increasing unity and alliance with the empire, the Church's own theological discussion

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[215] One nuance must be included here, however. While the major shift in the church during this time was its transition from persecuted, martyred religion to official religion of the Roman Empire, this in no way entailed the persecution or end of other religious sects, polytheism, and even indifference toward religion. As historian Jehu Hanciles writes,

> the changed fortunes of the church under Constantine's rule made it desirable, even necessary, for all Romans ("Roman citizens," that is) to become Christian. But that left massive hordes of people unconverted or indifferent. Not only were there non-Christians among high ranking officials in Constantine's own government, but polytheism, which some argue Constantine never officially renounced, also continued to flourish in the empire during his reign and long afterwards. While Constantine succeeded in uniting the empire - no mean political feat - his efforts at creating what Eusebius termed 'one catholic church' were far less successful.

While the empire unified (and then later fell apart by the end of the fourth century, Hanciles wants to argue that Christianity never found its clear unity. "Bitter divisions and competing understandings of the ecclesia...troubled catholicity" (86). In other words, while the church itself changed in the face of being made an official religion, it by no means became, as Hanciles argues, the great monolithic tradition as it did in the Middle Ages among Germanic nations. Jehu Hanciles, *Beyond Christendom: Globalization, African Migration, and the Transformation of the West* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2008), 86.

[216] See the controversies associated with Athanasius and Arius around the Nicene Creed. For a concise and insightful analysis, see Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away: A Theology of Incarnation*, 15-35.

became more closely related to the political inclinations of the emperor at the time.

By the fourth century, the ministerial roles of women were already dramatically reduced in comparison to previous eras. Some historians have articulated that there were women who were priests as well as bishops in the second and third centuries.[217] But with the consolidation of the church under Constantine, the church became more concerned with catholicity over multiplicity. As such, the liturgical roles of women began to be slowly reduced both in number and in power. At the beginning of the fourth century, the offices of virgin, widow and deaconess were all well-known and revered positions for women. By this point, however, all three were directly subordinate to the roles of bishop, presbyter and male deacons. They lacked sacramental power in baptism, consecrating the elements for eucharistic celebration, and preaching. By the end of the fourth century, however, the office of widow began to be collapsed into the role of deaconess. By the sixth century, the role of the virgin in the liturgical life of the church would begin to be replaced by the role of choir boys.[218]

Virgins embodied virtues of modesty, faithfulness, and purity in such a way as to bring about salvific powers to their communities. They were not ordained roles, but definitely designated a certain expectation for their role in the church and the household.

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[217] For further discussion on this topic, see Karen Jo Torjesen, *When Women Were Priests: Women's Leadership in the Early Church and the Scandal of Their Subordination in the Rise of Christianity*, 1st HarperCollins paperback edition. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995).

[218] See Beverly Mayne Kienzle and Pamela J. Walker, *Women Preachers and Prophets through Two Millennia of Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). In the chapter "The Early Christian *Orans*: An Artistic Representation of Women's Liturgical Prayer and Prophecy," by Karen Jo Torjesen, she writes, "beginning in the fourth century, ecclesiastical regulations attempted to silence the voices of women doing liturgical singing, and by the end of the sixth century the chorus of virgins was replaced by the boys' choir" (53).

Typically, these women came from established families, and they were expected to live primarily with their birth family in the house. This term "virgin" was not simply a designation of sexual practice, but an expected role or "orientation" to the world. For many of the Fathers, virgins were considered, as historian Gillian Cloke contends, "the first rank of heaven, the vanguard of the church, the earthly counterpart of the Angels for whom there is no giving in marriage."[219] This sacrifice of abandoning human sexual practice is a sign of the virgins' commitment for a more superior and higher practice of virtue and worship. The office was not "ordained" (*cheirotonein*) but rather designated by the individual in consultation with her family. The designation of the office of virgin, with the exception of Gregory's own discussion of virginity in his treatise, was typically during the fourth century understood to be a designation for women.

With the cosmic designation of the virgin being "wedded" to Christ in a pure and chaste way, the orientation of her life entailed higher eternal stakes, according to this logic. To betray Christ would result in damnation for the virgin. In being closer to the life of the angels, the consequences of "falling" would be more like that of the fallen angel than the fallen human being. Thus, "temptations" were guarded against through seclusion inside the family home, away from married women who may speak of married life, eunuchs, and the general population.

This virginal state was not just beneficial for the particular young woman. She also benefited her family. Virgins' piety could spill over into the holiness of her whole family, and the church. In exchange for giving up the genealogical "line" of the family, the hope

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[219] Gillian Cloke, *This Female Man of God : Women and Spiritual Power in the Patristic Age, 350-450* (London ; New York: London ; New York : Routledge, 1995), 58.

is that the virgin would bring about greater blessing upon the family through her sanctity and abstaining from the sexual practices, devoting her life solely to the prayer and contemplation of God.

At times, the power of the virgin, including Demetrias and Macrina, were able to build communities and churches on their estates. Liturgically the role of the virgins was primarily in their role as singers. Virgins were typically part of the choir, singing the psalms, and invoking an angelic praise in the service. Beyond this, their sanctity was primarily born through their practice of abstinence, seclusion, and prayer.

Given her role as "virgin," unlike her brothers, Macrina was rather limited in how much she could shape the church writ large. "Macrina may have been recognized as a great teacher and leader, but her teaching and leadership were exercised only within her own household community, while her brothers Gregory and Basil had both become public figures with power to shape official church doctrine and to construct the rule that would govern the burgeoning monastic communities."[220] Macrina's leadership is privatized and limited to her immediate community while her brothers live in the public eye as bishops and council leaders. Gregory's own experience in the church reflects this political upheaval. From 374-377 AD, Gregory endured exile at the order of the new emperor Valens. Gregory's episcopal election was questioned, and he was accused of

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[220] Kendra Hotz, "Speaking Funk: Womanist Insights into the Lives of Syncletica and Macrina," in *Women, Writing, Theology Transforming a Tradition of Exclusion*, ed. Wendy Farley and Emily A. Holmes (Waco, Tex.: Waco, Tex. : Baylor University Press, 2011), 89.

"squandering funds."[221] These accusations gave Valens grounds to exile him, but politically he was condemned largely for his Nicene leanings, an unpopular theological position at the time. Eventually, he was restored to his position and attended a number of Councils and eventually led the Council of Constantinople in the early 380's. Not coincidentally, this demand for him to attend and eventually lead this Council over the conflict of "jurisdiction" in the church occurs just after he has visited Annesi and witnessed the death of his older sister Macrina. Emperor Theodosius convened one hundred and fifty clergy for the Council of Constantinople in an effort to re-establish the pro-Nicene position. The first four canons that come out of this particular council's letter to the emperor Theodosius this council outlined explicit disciplinary boundaries around orthodox thought and ecclesial protocols for leadership. Semi-Arians, Eunomians, Sabellianians, Photinians, and Apollinarians are all "anathemized" in the first canon. The second canon moves from the boundaries of orthodoxy to the boundaries of episcopal power: "The bishops are not to go beyond their dioceses to churches lying outside of their bounds, nor bring confusion on the churches."[222] The third canon declares the centrality of Constantinople for the church. The adjudication of the physical earthly church drew both theological and political lines around the order of the church. As Hotz helpfully writes, "Gregory's very ability to become embroiled in public and political controversy, and to be exiled for his courageous stance against the emperor, pointed to Macrina's own

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[221] of Nyssa Saint ca ca Gregory, *From Glory to Glory : Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings / Selected and with an Introd. By Jean Danilou ; Translated and Edited by Herbert Musurillo*, ed. Jean Danielou and Herbert Musurillo (New York: New York : Scribner, 1961), 4.

[222] Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church.: Second Series* (New York: The Christian literature company, 1890).

confinement to the relatively private realm of the family estate."[223] In contrast to her brother, Macrina's own life remained private and limited to her country estate.

Compounding Macrina's marginalization was her own movement from an urban sphere of Neocaesarea to Annesi. Geographically, she was on the edge between wilderness and city. She leaves the urban life in order to gain greater authority and leadership in the countryside. But this relative marginality only highlights the larger issues of her own limited ability to effect church polity in the wider public sphere primarily due to her gender.

But Macrina and her community's cultivation of hospitality, prayer life, and simple lifestyle "exceed" expectations and boundaries of the church. The form of the text performs the way that Macrina's life itself exceeded the boundaries and expectations of a woman in an aristocratic life. Starting with the prologue, Gregory admits that his writing exceeds the limits of the letter. Gregory says from the beginning that he intends to write this text in the form of a letter, but that his writing does not fully conform to this format. The first opening lines of the text read:

> The work appears from the general form of the heading to be a letter, but it exceeds the limits of a letter and stretches into a lengthy narrative. My excuse, however, is that the subject you ordered me to write is too big to be treated within the proper bounds of a letter.[224]

The term "lengthy narrative" in the Greek can be read as a play on words with

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[223] Hotz, "Speaking Funk: Womanist Insights into the Lives of Syncletica and Macrina," 89.

[224] Gregory, *The Life of Saint Macrina*, 21.

Macrina's name.[225] As a "Macrina speech," the text performs something about its subject. The text "exceeds" the form of a letter in order to perform the excessive life of Macrina that went "beyond the bounds" of its form. By renouncing her wealth and dedicating her life to an ascetic community of prayer and worship, Macrina cultivated an expression of life that exceeded the expectations of a woman born from a wealthy family.

A Missive or a "Macrina-Speech"

The tension between remembering a life that is so holy and yet portraying the mystery of the holy begins at the start of the text. The form, structure, and style of the text reflect Gregory's desire to communicate the mysterious and holy nature of Macrina's life for the edification of the reader. Gregory does not recount Macrina's words, even though he admits that he listened to Macrina speak about her life. He recalls that as she was dying she "took up the story of the events of her life from infancy and retold them all in order as in an historical narrative."[226] This indicates that, if Gregory had wanted to, he could have dutifully typed up what his sister said in the order that she had told it.

To tell her story in such a fashion would defeat the purpose of the text to teach about what Derek Kreuger calls "the holy essence" of Macrina's life: "Like a monument placed at the saint's tomb marking a point of access to the saint's power, hagiography sought to

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[225] Derek Krueger suggests that the relationship between Gregory's authorship and Macrina speaking relates to Gregory's attempt to render the text a 'Makrina-speech." Gregory wants to invoke Macrina's presence through the mixture of speech and writing. The word for "lengthy narrative" in Greek *makregoria*, Krueger calls a "pun" on Macrina's name. By its etymology and usage, a makregoria is always oral, a long-winded speech. So, here Gregory is writing an oral speech. Through this work of imaging Macrina's speech, Kreuger argues, Gregory is invoking Macrina's presence in her absence. See Derek Krueger, "Writing and the Liturgy of Memory in Gregory of Nyssa's Life of Macrina," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8, no. 4 (2000): 493.

[226] Gregory, *The Life of Saint Macrina*, 37.

make present in narrative a holy essence that might otherwise be irretrievably absent."[227] In other words, the text is meant to be a transmission of the power of the saint, something that can be transferred through the writing, while the material body and daily life of Macrina is lost to history. Gregory transmits meaning-making of Macrina's life, but not the daily details. Gregory's text is meant to be pedagogical for the reader, rather than merely descriptive of Macrina's life. The text is edifying to the reader on the level of that which can be transmitted, the inspiration for holiness.

While Macrina does not directly speak to the reader in the text, the text acts upon the reader as a participatory experience of reading a life that "exceeds" an ordinary life. Gregory's text is a hagiography: "In presenting saints as models for emulation, hagiographers employed narrative to articulate Christian ideals and might even use hagiography as a tool to cultivate virtue in themselves, to develop humility and obedience."[228] Nyssa maintains certain hagiographic conventions including the relatively small role of the father, the stress on a pious widowed mother, Macrina's physical beauty, her ability to perform miracles, and her attention to celibacy.[229]

In addition to its hagiographic structure, the story is also highly stylized with its mythological, Platonic, and Biblical allusions. Various scholars have argued that Macrina

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[227] Krueger, "Writing and the Liturgy of Memory in Gregory of Nyssa's Life of Macrina," 484.

[228] Ibid.

[229] Joan M. Petersen, *Handmaids of the Lord: Contemporary Descriptions of Feminine Asceticism in the First Six Christian Centuries* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, Inc., 1996).Interestingly, Petersen insists that one can "look beyond" the conventions of writing about a saint's life, to find the "portrait of a real person," (46). Surely, Petersen assumes a) a portrait of a holy person is not the same as the portrait of a real person and b) one's task in reading is to get behind the text to locate a historical figure. I will diverge from Petersen's assessment in this regard.

is portrayed as a priestly figure, a character with both Odyssean and Penelopean dimensions, a mystic, and a Socratic teacher to her Platonic student (Nyssa).[230] Nyssa describes her with a variety of terms including a "manly woman," a philosopher of virtue, a second Thekla, father, mother, and nurse.[231] Despite Nyssa's explicit claim to write a "simple, unaffected narrative" of his sister, the text is thick with symbolic, figurative allusions.[232] The text's allusionary character transmits or communicates the idea of holiness in the character of Macrina while also holding Macrina's particular bodily life shrouded in mystery.

Holiness Beyond Words

The hagiographic structure also teaches a further "veiling" in the text. When Macrina does speak in the text, she addresses God, quotes Scripture, or instructs Gregory. Macrina's first words in the text, for example, are a prayer to God giving thanks for Gregory's visit. She greets Gregory and stretching out her hand "to God" she says, "Even this favour (*sic*) you have fulfilled for me, my God, and you have not deprived me of my heart's desire in that you have inspired your servant to visit your handmaiden."[233] Macrina cannot be directly known in some sort of discursive exchange, but rather, Gregory expresses the ways in which holiness embodied in his sister remains veiled and in silence even while he speaks about it.

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[230] Catharine P. Roth, "Platonic and Pauline Elements in the Ascent of the Soul in Gregory of Nyssa's Dialogue on the Soul and the Resurrection," *Vigiliae Christianae* 46(1992); Georgia Frank, "Macrina's Scar: Homeric Allusion and Heroic Identity in Gregory of Nyssa's Life of Macrina," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8, no. 4 (2000).

[231] Gregory, *The Life of Saint Macrina*, 31.

[232] Ibid., 21.

[233] Ibid., 35.

This refusal to give us a transcription of her life reflects Gregory's perspective on Macrina and her community. For him, its holiness cannot be fully expressed in speech. Reflecting on life in her community, Gregory writes, "And such was the order of their life, such was the high level of philosophy and the holy conduct of their living by day and by night that it exceeds the power of words to describe it."[234] When trying to transmit the essence of holiness, part of holiness is a quality that must be marked as beyond words. Teaching others about holiness, for Gregory, means that one must speak about its unspeakability.

Enclosure

The other dimension of holiness is the way it is not only wrapped in silence, but also wrapped in a kind of darkness. The language of the dark is an important dimension of the apophatic tradition.[235] St. Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, Marguerite Porete and Gregory of Nyssa all understand contemplation of God to be contingent upon entering a non-discursive mode of knowing. Further back/behind these prominent theologians lies Moses' own encounter with the Unnameable Name. As Keller writes "denizens of the luminous dark resist both dominance and its language."[236] Spoken positively, then, Keller advocates for the negative move in theology as a corrective of any sense of linguistic dominance. Apophaticism and the dark are synonymous in that negation is equivalent to

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[234] Ibid., 29.

[235] Certainly, the language of the dark applied to persons has been used in Christian theological and philosophical thought to reinforce and legitimate white supremacy and racism. The dark has had the connotation of something dangerous, deprived, and even evil. Such language has been used to denigrate individuals in order to dehumanize and further alienate them from access to the central structures of institutional power.[235] Such language is abhorrent and should never be reinforced or accepted.

[236] Keller, *Face of the Deep : A Theology of Becoming* 204.

being drawn ever deeper upward and inward towards the "brilliant dark" of God. This darkness serves as a corrective to any sense that language bears a hold on God.

This form of holiness is symbolized in the imagery of Macrina's relationship with her mother. The mother and daughter were so inseparable it is as if Macrina were still living in the womb of her mother, hidden in the dark recesses of her mother's body. Gregory says that Emmelia often said to her daughter Macrina that "she had been pregnant with the rest of her children for the prescribed term, but as for Macrina she bore her always and everywhere, embracing her, as it were, in her womb." The two were intertwined in a very intimate way. In many ways, Macrina served as a holy relic for the cultivation of Christ in her mother. Her mother perpetually embraced her, kept her in her own self, and thus cultivated holiness within her.

Macrina's holiness then was not an individual journey, but one deeply intertwined with her family and community. Holiness, for Gregory, involves community, as holiness in its nature communicates through the transmission of its power to others. While Macrina was recognized as holy, the nature of holiness is not contained within a body, but transmits to those around them. It is also needs to be cultivated under the protection of others.

Just as Macrina's cultivation of divinity grows in the intimate life with her mother, Macrina's death is embedded in the seclusion of a holy dark space. When Gregory goes to visit his sister, he finds Macrina lying down in a "holy place." She is deeply ill and heading towards her death. Gregory sees her suffering and yet maintains that this room is a "holy place." The use of imagery that emphasize her life and death both residing in secret, dark spaces like the womb and the dark room of a house, Gregory suggests that

her holiness is cultivated in both her life and her suffering and death. Her divine illumination to others comes through her being carefully enclosed and shrouded in a dark womb or in the darkness of death.

Divine power when cultivated fully can be so powerful that it can blind others if they seek to look upon it directly. Therefore, the seclusion and veiling of Macrina is critical to her ability to share such power with others. Gregory shares this insight about his sister by recounting his dream. Gregory has a dream on the way to see his sister on her deathbed. In the dream, he recalls "I seemed to be holding in my hands the relics of martyrs, and there came from them a bright gleam of light, as from a flawless mirror which had been placed face to the sun, so that my eyes were blinded by the brilliance of the gleam."[237] A relic reflects God like a flawless mirror reflects the light of the sun. One actually cannot see the face of the mirror because the power of the light being reflected. Gregory's dream happens three times; he reports that he was "not able to interpret clearly the dreams' hidden meaning."[238] It was only after having conversation with Macrina on her deathbed that he realizes its meaning as a message about his sister's life. Gregory remarks:

> what I had seen seemed to unveil the hidden meaning of the vision in my dream. What I had seen before me was truly the remains of a holy martyr, one who had been dead to sin, but illumined by the indwelling grace of the Holy Spirit.[239]

The wisdom of Christ in this learned teacher flows out of her so easily that it is like light gleaming effortlessly off of a mirror or water flowing freely downhill. Her speech and teachings on her deathbed were so clear and easy that it was "like water...borne from

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[237] Gregory, *The Life of Saint Macrina,* 33-34.
[238] Ibid., 34.
[239] Ibid., 36-37.

some fountain-head without anything to get in its way."[240] At the point of death, Gregory sees a clear-eyed saint. The brilliance of divine power is blinding in that it is so bright.

While divine power is present in life and death, divine power persists beyond death. Later, upon seeing his sister's body covered first in a robe and then her mother's dark cloak, he remarks that her beauty persisted in death: "She shone even in the dark mantle; God's power, I think, added even such grace to her body that, exactly as in the vision I had while dreaming, rays of light seemed to shine out from her beauty."[241] Like the rays of light gleaming from the relics of the martyrs like a flawless mirror, Macrina's beauty shone through. In the evening, when she died, the women cry out: "With you even the night was illumined like day for us by your pure life. But now even the day will be changed to utter darkness."[242] Gregory himself remarks that he was in some sort of "abyss" of grief. Her beauty is covered over by the mantle of darkness, death, and grief. Yet, the power of God shines through. The power or effect of her life shines through the dark shroud. Divine power in its fullness can be blinding to the one who encounters it, even in reflection. Macrina's mind and body were so full of divine power, that others found her power to be beyond comprehension. Her life lived at the margins in community cultivated this deep divine power.

When two opposites coincide, life and death, glory and decay, light and dark, there is a margin created between these two qualities. It is in this margin that God meets us, and pours out divine love. Such meeting is, as Von Balthasar writes, "the window through

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[240] Ibid., 36.
[241] Ibid., 44.
[242] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 152.

which the flood tide of divine life penetrates into the creature."[243] Gregory espouses the power of the dark to reveal the power of God in a life. She is a lamp for others, but one cannot see her as to look upon the lamp is to blind one's eyes.

Macrina and Christ

The key to Macrina's ability to manifest such divine power is, according to Gregory, through a secret and hidden practice of devotion to Christ. The true disciple of Christ follows Christ in secret, and therefore the true disciple remains in the margins, only retrospectively coming into full view. Divine power is available to human beings through Christ. For Gregory, Macrina is one of those bright lights that pulses with divine light; she is mysteriously chosen before birth to come and light the way for others.

Gregory suggests that Macrina's whole life was in imitation of Christ, including her birth, life, and death. Macrina's imitation of the life of Christ begins before she is born. Like the story of Mary learning from the angel Gabriel about the unique life she bears, Macrina's mother Emmelia receives a divine message about her daughter's divine role. Emmelia gains a premonition about her daughter when she falls asleep while giving birth to her. In a dream, the child in her womb was now in her arms and "someone in suprahuman majesty of form and shape appeared to address the little child by the name of Thekla."[244] The name Thekla refers to the apocryphal account of a legendary virgin who was a disciple and follower of St. Paul. Paul entrusted his ministry to her. This

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[243] Gregory, *The Life of Saint Macrina*, 48-49.

[244] Ibid., 22.See the apocryphal work *Acts of Paul and Thekla.* For a critical reading of the Thekla tradition and its influence in Gregory's work on Macrina, see Patricia Wilson-Kastner, "Macrina: Virgin and Teacher," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* (Spring 1979).

identification with Thekla reveals a divine lineage to Macrina's life. Emmelia's dream functions as a foreshadowing of Macrina's role as a second Thekla, or a virgin disciple who continues to pass along the ministry of Paul and therefore of Christ to her community. The truth of Macrina's future path is revealed in her mother's dream. Under the veil of sleep, Macrina's mother learns about her daughter's divine connection to the previous Thekla just as Mary learned of Jesus from the angel Gabriel.

As much as her birth story is reminiscent of the Annunciation, similarly her death parallels the death of Christ. Macrina's deathbed is cruciform. She is lying on a plank covered with sack-cloth. Another plank supports her neck. One board supported her body and another lay perpendicular to it, like the shape of a cross. As she is dying, Macrina weaves psalmic references also referenced by Christ in his suffering, crucifixion, and death.

It is only in death that Macrina's full love of God is made manifest for Gregory. The pursuit of her true "bridegroom" is made manifest in the way she was "with God in prayer" and no longer present with her ailing body, family, and friends surrounding her bed. Macrina's final long speech is a tapestry of biblical phrases strung together from a variety of Biblical sources. It is a prayer directed to God,[245] recalling both salvation history of the world along with her own personal life.[246] The first half of Macrina's prayer remembers creation, redemption from sin, and a path to the resurrection[247] through

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[245] For a detailed reference point for the biblical citations in this particular passage, see Corrigan's notes in *The Life of Saint Macrina*. Biblical references in the narrative assumes The LXX.

[246] Krueger, "Writing and the Liturgy of Memory in Gregory of Nyssa's Life of Macrina," 508.

[247] Ibid., 509.

Christ's own death and resurrection.

The second half of her prayer focuses on her own life. She remembers the beginning of her life in her mother's womb to her death. In the second half of Macrina's deathbed speech, she says, "You who have cut through the flame/ of the fiery sword and brought to paradise/ the man who was crucified with you, who entreated your pity,/ remember me also in your kingdom,/ for I have nailed my flesh out of reverence for you/"[248] Referencing Luke 23 and Galations 2:19, Macrina's deathbed scene shows that she identifies with the man who is crucified beside Jesus. The sinner who turns to Jesus on the cross and says, "Jesus, remember me in your kingdom." She lays at the point of death in a symbolic act of crucifixion as a way of dying with Christ, and to therefore be raised in Christ to paradise.

It is only in death that Macrina's full love of God is made manifest for Gregory. The pursuit of her true "bridegroom" is made manifest in the way she was "with God in prayer" and no longer present with her ailing body, family, and friends surrounding her bed. As Gregory recalls:

> she seemed to me to be making manifest to those then present that pure, divine love of the unseen bridegroom, which she had nourished secretly in the most intimate depths of her soul, and she seemed to transmit the desire which was in her heart to rush to the one she longed for…For it was really towards her beloved that she ran.[249]

Instead of being a moment of complete loss or end to Macrina's life, the death of her human life becomes an opportunity to manifest true love for God. Macrina ends her prayer and makes the sign of the cross, then closes her eyes, and dies.

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[248] Gregory, *The Life of Saint Macrina*, 42.
[249] Ibid., 40.

After her death, Macrina's body continues to bear signs of the cross. Gregory discovers a deep wound – emblematic of Christ's wounds - on Macrina's body. When he asks about it, one of the ascetics named Lampadion reports that Macrina had a growing tumour on her skin. According to Lampadion, Macrina poured her tears and mud over the growth, and then, instructed by Macrina, Emmelia made the sign of the cross over it. The tumour disappeared and the scar emerged as a sign of "God's visitation." This scar remained hidden from others until death.[250]

When preparing her body for burial, they removed a necklace that held two items –an iron cross and a ring with a cross engraved on its seal and a hollow stone inside. Lampadion then explains to Gregory, "in it is hidden a fragment of the wood of life; and so the seal with its own engraving reveals from above what is hidden below."[251] Once again, the image of the cross and ring uncovers a hidden dimension of Macrina's life. Just as she was secretly cultivating a life of Christ in her heart, she held both the cross and her ring close to her heart all her life. The ring might be symbolic of her marriage to Christ, a sign of her commitment to her true bridegroom. The ring also is rich with symbolism. While the cross appears engraved externally, as Lampadion says, the truth of the cross is found inside the ring, at the hollow stone where the wood of life lives.

Let me unpack this image for a moment. The "wood of life," according to a note by the translator Kevin Corrigan, is a reference to both Genesis 3:24 and Revelation 2:7. The "wood of life" is understood as the tree of paradise, which is protected, as Macrina says, "by the fiery sword." Through the victory of Christ over death at the cross, humanity can

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[250] For more on the significance of this scar, see Frank, "Macrina's Scar: Homeric Allusion and Heroic Identity in Gregory of Nyssa's Life of Macrina."
[251] Gregory, *The Life of Saint Macrina*, 47.

eat from such a tree in paradise. The hollow stone represents the tomb out of which Christ came, thus freeing humanity from the grips of death. Macrina's life lived through both a participation in the life "at the cross." She gave up her power and wealth. She lived in community with others, worshipping and praising God. Through her dedication to the Christian life, Macrina lived near the cross, dying without ecclesial or worldly power. Through her ascetic practice and union with Christ, she wedded herself to cultivating divine power in her, with her inner eye on paradise. According to Gregory's interpretation, Macrina cultivated a love of Christ that was hidden deep within. Her dedication to Christ allowed divine power to be manifest and poured out on others through her life.

The Indirect Miracle of Life

According to Gregory, the effects of such a life lived in imitation of Christ is only retrospectively realized but will be made known. After burying Macrina, Gregory recalls a story about his sister from a military commander (*hegemon*) about Macrina's healing of his daughter's eye through prayer and hospitality. It's a miracle story consistent with Gregory's work of demonstrating Macrina's saintliness. The story, however, is most significant in what it seems to tell about what miracles look like. Unlike a direct vision or telling of the moment when the healing occurs, the reader doesn't "see" what Macrina did to heal the soldier's baby daughter. Nor did Gregory.

According to Gregory's account, Macrina invited the family to enjoy some supper in the male and female quarters respectively. She promised that she had a way to heal their baby daughter from the blindness in her eye. They agreed to join the community in fellowship, and proceeded to have a lovely time before they left. When the commander

(*hegemon*) and his wife re-united after spending time in separate quarters, they began to tell one another about their evening feast. With joy in their souls, they forgot that the original reason they supped with the Annesi community was to heal their daughter. The mother began to rush back to the community to ask for the special medicine to heal her daughter when the nurse holding the baby stopped her and explained the child was healed. They looked down and found the daughter had clear sight. While entering the community seeking one physical remedy, they ended up living into a larger story of joy and hospitality at table. Paradoxically, the marginal location of Macrina's community draws humanity together at a central feast table.

The consequence of living with the illuminating wisdom of God enclosed in secret is that the effects of such a hidden marginal life are not directly seen or witnessed. The cause of the healing event remained a mystery for those effected. How was the girl healed? When was she healed? The answers are not revealed. This story greatly impacted Gregory in part because he recognized the influence she had on others, including those as powerful as military commanders. For Gregory, the mysterious nature of Macrina's holiness is something to be honored not explained.

The secrecy of divine healing by Macrina marks the marginal nature of witnessing to divine power. The margin is a place that cultivates divine power, but the nature of the margin coupled with the nature of divine power suggests that, in Gregory's reading of Macrina's life, such divine power remains manifest only in an indirect or retrospective fashion.

Still on the Margin…

This text is an education in the mystery of the holy and the way it forever beckons the

human towards it, while also perpetually eluding direct speech. If there are such saintly lives in the margins, they live in a precarious place. The holy can light the way for others near them, but one cannot look directly at the light out of fear of being blinded by it. Such is the paradox of the holy, for Gregory.

Gregory of Nyssa lived between two worlds: a political institution fraught with conflict and his sister's community of love. In this narrative, he brings forth images of light shining through a dark cloak, a ring with the wood of life buried in its center, a bride eagerly anticipating meeting her bridegroom. Like Mary Magdalene encountering the risen on Easter morning, Gregory does not fully comprehend what he witnesses to, but he knows that it is holy.

The margin is an ideal place for the fullness of divine power to live because it is a place where one cannot directly gaze. Gregory articulates that in the midst of imperial rule and bureaucratic argumentation in the church, the nature of divine power is not fully captured. Rather it is found in the life of those who pray ceaselessly, heal the sick, and welcome the stranger.

In the midst of making legal decisions in councils, Gregory writes this text about Macrina as a way of praising the holy ones in the ecclesial margins, the parts of the church that creatively and powerfully negotiate the social and ecclesial boundaries of the church in order to bring about a transcendent and more bountiful expression of healing love.

At the beginning of the text, Gregory had remarked that he was on his way to Jerusalem to "see the signs of the Lord's flesh." Gregory does not have to go to Jerusalem to find signs of the Lord. Rather, the power of God is manifest precisely at the

deathbed of a beloved ascetic. Paradoxically, the margin's hiddenness allows divine power to more brilliantly shine through. Macrina reveals the radiance of the divine light that one cannot bear to look upon. Macrina in her Christic power at the limit of worldly, institutional power draws people to the overflowing power of her healing acts of love and communion.

The Power of God Exceeds:
A Marginal Hope

Those on the margins are difficult to hear or recognize. Their stories possess gaps and fissures. Their lives can appear as aberrations, annoyances, and anomalies. They occlude clear epistemological access.

These lives in the margin are like the cipher in a pipe organ – an annoying sound coming from the gap between the open valve and the pipe metal unintended by the order of the church. In this metaphor, divinity is a power that at times blows through the gap or fissure created by the opening between the valve and the metal pipe.

Unlike the relative uniformity of the shape and nature of organ pipes, however, marginalized lives are legion and diverse. Persons arrive on the margins under a variety of conditions. This is part of the nature of the margin in itself. The edges of social order are dispersed and varied, with people who are neither all alike nor hold to the same expression and practices in their life. The record of the margin has varied as much as the lives on the margins ranging from art to autobiography mixed with travelogue to parable and remembrance.

Amidst the variety, persistent sounds come through these fissures and gaps in the lives of the margins leaving a divine trace. Their records sing with the overflowing and radical nature of divine power in the margins.

In the case of Séraphine, while marginalized by her eccentric, fragmented mind, art and madness intermingle. Beauty and creativity inspire Séraphine; her work expresses a holy witness to the divine through the act of painting and interpreting her vision of creation. This inspiration was not ultimately redemptive in the sense that it restored her or

prevented her from living with an unstable mind. As Séraphine's story expresses, divine power courses through madness. If our sense of ourselves is fragmented, distorted, and we live on the edges of our own mind, divine power does not fade, but continues as creative expression. This implies that divine power exceeds the power of reason.

For Jarena Lee, marginalization occurs in the form of racial and gendered discrimination. Rejected by the church for certain marks of identity, divine power appears in the world of the biblical text in which Lee finds a new identity that is not subject to the racialized one. By reading her life in the biblical narrative, Lee persists in writing and living her life in the margins. She finds community, liberty, and life in the margins. Divine power operates in real existential darkness and sense of abandonment. Yet it also overthrows the terrors of despair through living in it.

As a powerful leader and teacher, Macrina's presence on the margins symbolizes those who exceed the power of the institution to contain their brilliance in the divine life. Gregory understands the divine power to be one that is indirectly known, carefully veiled through symbol and remembrance, and through the veiled crumbling body of a dead relic. We are only able to see dimly in this life what is more fully revealed in glory.

For much of humanity the anxiety of living in the mortal world brings about great terror and despair. The mortality and corruptibility of our lives can feel like a great weight upon us. A theological reading of Genesis 3 suggests that taking the story of Genesis symbolically, having eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, we know the wages of sin and death, but we also know good and evil. To recognize the forces of evil and the forces of good in the world are vital for our survival. Yet the law of order and moral good are not, for the Christian tradition, the end of the story. The

principle of life is one that exceeds the moral order.

The theological difference between life and moral knowledge emerges at the mythological beginning in Genesis. As the story goes, in the paradisiacal garden of Eden, there were two trees, one of the knowledge of good and evil and the other of life. This other tree, as one might recall, stands in the center of that mythological beginning from which humanity lived: "And out of the ground God Yahweh caused to grow various trees that were a delight to the eye and good for eating, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of knowledge of good and bad" (Gen. 3:22). Faced with the knowledge of good and evil, God becomes concerned fearing that humanity would become "like us" (i.e. like God) if humanity also ate from the tree of life.

Rather than risk the chance that humanity might eat from the tree of life, God sets cherubim with a fiery sword before it. In post-edenic life, the tree of life does not disappear from view, but becomes the tree found in dreams and visions. John dreams of "a river of the water of life flows" beside the tree of life, "whose leaves are for the healing of the nations" (Rev. 22:1-2). The tree of life becomes, for the mortal human being, the promise of a life of peace and healing.

While there are various interpretations of this tree, I propose that it reflects a key insight about the relationship between human knowing of good and evil and the prospect of life. Simultaneous knowledge of good and evil coupled with immortality would be a torturous existence reaping unrelenting suffering upon the human being. The created human being would suffer under the knowledge of good and evil while tormented forever in immortality. Facing the logic of checks and balances, of what is good and what is evil and never being able to live beyond that logic would be too much for the human life.

There had to be another way in which humanity might enjoy and even *love* life beyond the pattern of retribution upon which the logic of good and evil resides.

The divine power lives beyond the logic of what is reasoned to be good and evil in Christ. This pattern of excess is beyond the limit of what is reasonable.

Those on the margins of the church are not those who determine institutional norms but are the ones subject to them. Those who live on the margins of the ecclesial institution are subject to the moral order of the day without much redress. Séraphine could not live within the moral order of Senlis. She was becoming undone by her fragmented mind. Jarena Lee was subject to the discipline of the church that did not know anything about women as ordained ministers. And Macrina lived in the moral order in which women could not sit in the center of ecclesial life as authorities of the church.

For them, the promise of divine excess is a hopeful word. Séraphine paints the Tree of Life, a vision of a natural world that shimmers and gleams with a power she sees in her mind's eye. She paints – excessively and furiously – without reason. She paints a vision of an alternative world, in which she might live. In the case of Jarena Lee, her biblical reading of her life incorporates a story that is larger than the limits of her chronological life but looks toward the eschatological reality. She preaches on Revelation including Rev. 22:1 in which John dreams: "Then he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal, coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb." Lee is perpetually preaching and living in the vision of something more than what society offered. She sees how the Spirit of God "pours down" and allows for dreams and visions to emerge. "The prayers of God's people helped me, and the power of God, like the dew of heaven, was let down

upon us."[252] She recalls the cosmic battle against the evils of slavery. As she writes,

> In 1831, a young man who professed to be righteous, says he saw in the sky men, marching like armies, whether it was with the naked eye, or a Vision by the eye of Faith, I cannot tell. But the wickedness of the people certainly calls for the lowering Judgements (*sic*) of God to be let loose upon the Nation and Slavery, that wretched system that eminated (*sic*) from the bottomless pit, is one of the greatest curses to any Nation.[253]

For her, ultimate reality is near and radically immediate as well as determinate beyond the current social relations. There are larger forces acting, penetrating, and revealing a larger glory of God. For Jarena Lee, caught in the evils of slavery, the Christian story offers her a way to live beyond the limits of discrimination. She rewrites herself into the Christian story beyond that which defined her place in church and society.

Both with the "wood of life" embedded in an iron ring hanging on a chain tied around her neck, and her body participating in the form of the cross at death, Macrina's life and death express a theological hope of the eternal life.[254] As J. Warren Smith writes, Gregory "identifies aspects of Eden that God will restore in the resurrection – the tree of life, the original grace of the image and dignity of rule."[255] Through Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, Christ takes up the corruptible and death dealing human life, and takes death into God's life. Through such an act, the human being's image of God recalled in the story of Paradise is restored and magnified in the glory of the life to come. Remembering the writing in 1 Cor. 15:42, the resurrected body "reproduces its state in

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[252] Ibid., 40.
[253] Lee, "Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel," 63.
[254] Gregory, *The Life of Saint Macrina*, 47.
[255] J. Warren Smith, "The Body of Paradise and the Body of the Resurrection: Gender and the Angelic Life in Gregory of Nyssas De Hominis Opificio," *H. Theolo. Review* 99, no. 2 (2006): 220.

Eden, but changed into something more magnificent."[256] As the *Life of Macrina* suggests, mortal corruptibility whether found in the present life or death are no longer barriers to the life in God. The resurrected body can be embodied in the present through the ascetical practice of Christological life.

Macrina exemplifies how the God-human relationship reflects the mode in which God and human beings reach for one another across death. In Gregory's larger theological corpus, Gregory argues that the infinity of God and the desire of human beings for the divine is a relationship that exceeds the bounds of mortality and corruption. The human being stretches forth in desire for God; both in the reaching out of God toward humanity in Christ and the human being's desire for God, the human being undergoes *epektasis* or "perpetual spiritual progress" toward the infinite God[257] in the human being's relationship with God. *Epektasis* refers to how the human being is perpetually "stretching forth" towards the "infinity of God."[258] Macrina shines through the veil of death and decay with the power of God as she participates in an ever-deepening knowledge and wisdom of God. No longer bound to the logic of retribution, or the logic of equivalence, Macrina binds her life to the divine power that exceeds death, decay, and corruptibility even while she faces the degenerating state.

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[256] Ibid.

[257] Ibid., 221. For more on the larger Cappadocian discussion of the telos of the human being, see Paul Marion Blowers, "Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of 'Perpetual Progress'," *Vigiliae Christianae* (1992): 151.

[258] Enrico Peroli, "Gregory of Nyssa and the Neoplatonic Doctrine of the Soul," ibid.51, no. 2 (1997); John F. Callahan, "Greek Philosophy and the Cappadocian Cosmology," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 12(1958).There are multiple debates about whether the discussion of epektasis in Gregory's work comes from the development of Gregory's model of the mystical union with God, a philosophical development on the nature of divine infinity, or a criticism of Origenism.

As Paul M. Blowers writes:

> Established in the higher mode of change, human beings enter a process of constant recreation through virtue, and, paradoxically, find their true ontological and eschatological stability through eternal moral change for the better and ascent toward the immutable God.[259]

Faced with the accusation that this movement suggests an instability in the soul, Gregory maintained an "absolute and infinite paradox. The eternal movement *is* the stasis."[260] This paradox of eternal movement and stasis is reflected in Macrina's death bed scene. Just as she lays still, she continues to move ever more deeply into participation in the participation of the divine. Macrina is both unmovable and yet shining with the wisdom and love of God.

Ecclesial Implications

If indeed, the logic of God is the logic of excess and not equivalence, then what might this mean for the order of the Church. Divine power exceeds the logic of the institutional power. What difference does such an insight mean for the church's institutional life? The ecclesial institution regulates the roles and responsibilities related to the sacred symbols, narratives, and history of the Christian tradition; it arranges persons according to their role in the institution. Some play central roles as priests, elders, bishops, and lay leaders.

In this current age, the ecclesial logic of mainline Protestant denominations has been based on a liberal theology of inclusion; as Mary McClintock Fulkerson writes about the logic of inclusion in the following terms,

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[259] Blowers, "Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of 'Perpetual Progress'," 154.
[260] Ibid., 156.

> On the liberal view the features of gender, race, sex, and class are special interests of sorts, that need to be included in a social order that previously left them out. To address that, one includes representative outsiders whose freedoms were not previously protected and negotiates successful accommodation of manageable differences. Then one celebrates this as diversity. Basic to this story is the essential sameness of all persons and the possibility of easy accommodation of the various (superficial) differences, since the social order is left intact.[261]

Fulkerson critiques what she calls the "liberal politics as a solution to difference." She argues that the difficulty of a liberal politics is that the "terms of redress" for oppression is to keep the social order intact and to simply include persons with certain identities into the fabric of a set social order. The inclusionary logic of liberalism assumes its opposite of exclusion. This implies that the center of an institution is somehow *more than* the margin. The additive impulse of liberal politics assumes that to be added into the social order implies more access to knowledge, power and freedom. This assumption is absolutely true on the level of the social order, and I have certainly benefited from such a view.

Given this representative, liberal view, the U.S. Protestant church is currently wringing its hands over both the question of representation and inclusion alongside the contemporary decline of its membership in the U.S. What I want to suggest is to consider how the logic of excess might shift the church's institutional posture at the center. Theologically, if the church recognizes that its institutional power, its logic of good and evil, right and wrong is not the final word, then this does not mean it necessarily must operate only with a logic of inclusion, but also a logic of excess.

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[261] Mary McClintock Fulkerson, *Changing the Subject : Women's Discourses and Feminist Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 5.

If divine power exceeds and overflows institutional life, then central ecclesial disposition and practice might reflect this. The ecclesial center might live and even celebrate its limits in light of the radical, excessive nature of divine power. The center might delight in the ways that divine power overflows and exceeds even its perceptions and reasoning. Rather, than only projecting an air of inclusion/exclusion, one might celebrate in a posture of hope for the excess of divine power that flows. The center cannot only replicate, import, or include those persons on the margin in order to understand or access the particular relationship to the divine that the margin offers. Mourning the violence and injustice that permeates all levels of social life, and the vulnerability of many left on the margins, the church might nonetheless respect the margins for its reminder of that which lies beyond its perception, and proclaim the love of God that exceeds even its knowledge.

It is a simple proposition that I began with in the introduction – divine power is not identical to institutional power. Part of the fundamental structure of divine power is how it exceeds any particular social order. The social order of human community does not have the last word on the nature of divine power. The radical nature of divine life permeates all of creation, extending the vision of divine life beyond the edges of the present situation.

As the ecclesial margins will continue to persist, different lives and different narratives will continue to pour into the margin, as predictably as the waves rising and crashing on the surface of the tehomic, watery depths of the seas. They will continue to find divine power in divine weakness; they will continue to be drawn towards the immediate and generous beauty of creation alive with divine power; they will continue to

live with the logic of divine excess.

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