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## Christ on the Postmodern Stage: Debunking Christian Metanarrative Through Contemporary Passion Plays

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CHRIST ON THE POSTMODERN STAGE:  
DEBUNKING CHRISTIAN METANARRATIVE  
THROUGH CONTEMPORARY PASSION PLAYS

by

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B.A. Messiah College, 2014

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Theatre  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
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Major Professor: Julia Listengarten

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## ABSTRACT

As a Christian theatre artist with a conservative upbringing, I continually seek to discover the role of postmodernism in faith and how this intersection correlates with theatre in a postmodern society. In a profession that constantly challenges the status quo of Christian living, and a faith that frowns upon most “secular” behavior, I find myself in a position of questioning the connection between these two components of my life. Furthermore, I am troubled by the exclusive nature of the evangelical Christian community for people who do not meet its expectations of absolute truth—namely, the treatment of the LGBTQ+ community and the judgment of others. After reading several contemporary plays with religious narratives, it is safe to say that there *is* a correlation between Christian faith and the postmodern stage and this connection can be used to debunk these accepted truths in Christian thought. In this thesis, I explore three plays by mainstream American playwrights—Terrence McNally’s *Corpus Christi*, Stephen Adly Guirgis’ *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, and Sarah Ruhl’s *Passion Play: A Cycle*—to disrupt the metanarrative dogma that evangelical Christianity continues to force upon its “believers.” These topics include the traditional evangelical treatment of homosexuality, the judgment of others, and the exclusivity of the gospel message. Using postmodern theory and the New Testament Gospels as a lens, this thesis expands the universal messages of the Gospels and makes them inviting and applicable to all people despite varying cultures, lifestyles, or worldviews.

To all who feel isolated, judged, or lost in the  
journey navigating faith and self, this project is for you.

Matthew 24:3

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Throughout my thesis journey, there were several people who challenged and nurtured me in ways that caused me to grow as a theatre scholar, artist, and teacher. First of all, thank you to my best friend and confidant, Timothy Sensenig, for your unending support and encouragement, for editing every chapter, and for forcing me to take care of myself during the writing process. To my family, thank you for your unwavering love and support during my time at UCF. To my friends Kody Grasset and Kate Busselle, thank you for your influence and assistance during the planning stages of this project. To my committee members and colleagues, Vandy Wood and Earl Weaver, thank you for your wisdom during this process and for stretching me as an artist throughout my graduate experience. To Dr. Aaron Thomas, I am deeply thankful for your time, honesty, and invaluable guidance during each revision of every chapter. Last, but certainly not least, I extend my deepest and most heartfelt gratitude to my advisor, chair, and friend, Dr. Julia Listengarten. Julia, thank you for the countless hours of mentorship and for helping me find my academic voice. Most importantly, thank you for forcing me to “show my teeth” a little bit more. I am so grateful.

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## INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I explore three plays by mainstream American playwrights—Terrence McNally’s *Corpus Christi*, Stephen Adly Guirgis’ *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, and Sarah Ruhl’s *Passion Play: A Cycle*—in order to disrupt the metanarrative dogma that evangelical Christianity continues to force upon its believers. Using postmodern theory and the New Testament Gospels as a lens applied to these “Gospel rewrites,” this thesis expands the universal messages of the Gospels and makes them inviting and applicable to all people despite varying cultures, lifestyles, or worldviews. Throughout this thesis, I explore possible responses to the following questions: what are the ways in which modernized Passion Plays change the message of the Gospels to apply to all people?; how do modern retellings of the Christian Bible resonate with both traditional evangelical audiences and postmodernist audiences?; and how can these plays be used to bridge the gap between these two audiences?

In the 1970 rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, the traits and actions of the bible-based characters such as Judas Iscariot and Mary Magdalene often contradict what is accepted of their biblical counterparts within evangelical theology.<sup>1</sup> Some traditional Christians may go so far as to call these characters—or at least the show’s creators—blasphemous. For example, the character Judas is portrayed in a positive, sympathetic light when the familiar dialogue of the church regarding this matter supports the notion of the traitor’s everlasting suffering in Hell. Furthermore, in the power ballad, “I Don’t Know How to Love Him,” Mary Magdalene sings about her possible romantic love for Jesus Christ and what it would be like to act upon those feelings. She sings:

I don't know how to love him.

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<sup>1</sup> *Jesus Christ Superstar* was written by Andrew Lloyd Webber with lyrics by Tim Rice.

What to do, how to move him.  
I've been changed, yes really changed.  
In these past few days, when I've seen myself,  
I seem like someone else.  
I don't know how to take this.  
I don't see why he moves me.  
He's a man. He's just a man.  
And I've had so many men before. (*Jesus Christ Superstar*)

Musical theatre scholar Vagelis Siropoulos argues in his essay “Andrew Lloyd Webber and the Culture of Narcissism” that with his racy lyrics, “Rice, quite wittingly and shockingly (not to say blasphemously), blurs sexual and religious ecstasy, divine adoration and erotic infatuation” (277). However, despite these perhaps taboo creative liberties, the creators of *Jesus Christ Superstar* demonstrate the value of artistic interpretation of biblical narrative and how this interpretation leads to understanding differences in worldviews and multiple ideas of truth.

This relationship between secular ideals and traditional Christian morals through the weaving together of diverse ideologies—as demonstrated through *Jesus Christ Superstar*—is an example of postmodernism applied to evangelical Christian theology through art.<sup>2</sup> Many traditional evangelical Christians fall into the camp of modernism, as they believe in the Bible as the infallible word of God and the narrative of Jesus Christ as the root of faith and salvation. These are grand theories adopted as absolute truth. Thus, the idea of moving into a postmodern mindset, one that would ultimately dismiss the bible as infallible, is often opposed by evangelicals. In the book *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views*, theology and philosophy scholar Myron B. Penner writes:

Generally we have two polar opposite positions emerging in the Christian intellectual community in response to the postmodern turn—those who are *for* the postmodern turn and see its value in articulating the gospel (these constitute, somewhat ironically, a minority among their peers); and those who are *against* the postmodern turn and view it

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<sup>2</sup> In this thesis, postmodernism can be described as the departure from the “grand theories” that modernists use to attempt to justify all knowledge and reason.

as a clear and present danger to the integrity of the faith and Christian community (and these make up a much larger group). (14)

This dichotomy in Christian theology divides evangelical believers into multiple camps separating the church's communal atmosphere into polarized schools of thought. In one camp, Christians favor postmodern ideas of moving from absolute truths to smaller, local narratives (explained below) and on the other, Christians favor the traditionalism that makes up the theological framework of American evangelicalism.

In his 1979 book, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard defines postmodernism as the “incredulity toward metanarratives” or the distrust of the modernist idea of universal truth and the dismissal of the value of diversity in human existence (xxiv). Thus postmodernism begins to remove any sense of metanarrative in its search for truth about the world. In her book *How Postmodernism Serves (My) Faith: Questioning Truth in Language, Philosophy and Art*, English and film studies scholar and Christian postmodernist Crystal L. Downing defines metanarrative as “an overarching explanation for reality that ground its truth in universal reason” (75). She goes on to say that Lyotard and fellow postmodernists’ distrust of a “grand narrative” or “grand theory” is a “reaction against the arrogant confidence of modernists who, thinking they have a special handle on truth, disdain narratives based on faith” (75). In other words, modernists are content with believing in so-called universal truths that provide an over-arching explanation for the existence of humanity and its role in the world. I argue that Christianity’s use of biblical narratives that explain an overarching worldview for the existence of the universe—such as the Creation account in Genesis—is metanarrative.

In his essay “A Little Story about Metanarratives,” philosophy and postmodern scholar James K.A. Smith writes, “For Lyotard, metanarratives are a distinctly modern phenomenon: they are stories which not only tell a grand story (since even pre-modern and tribal stories do

this), but also claim to be able to *legitimate* the story and its claims *by an appeal to universal Reason*” (125). Thus, to challenge the modern metanarrative, Lyotard suggests a series of smaller narratives, or stories, influenced by local knowledge, cultural influence, and the human experience. As theologian Kevin J. Vanhoozer explains in his essay, “Pilgrim’s Digress: Christian Thinking on and About the Post/Modern Way,” Postmodernism is “the condition of being so exposed to plurality and otherness that one becomes conscious of the contingency of one’s own language, culture, and way of life” (77). Therefore, in a world of metanarratives and universal truths, postmodernists explore alternate methods of obtaining *personal*, not institutional, truth.

In regard to the postmodern lens applied in this thesis, I have differentiated and delineated between the terms postmodernism and postmodernity. The latter refers to the time in which people are postmodern in their thinking. Postmodernism, then, is the lens which people apply to their thinking in the pursuit for multiple truths and ideas about the world and beyond as opposed to the time in which one may be postmodern. In her book *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* Judith Butler speaks to this idea of time. She writes, “That there is no one time, that the question of what time this is, already divides us, has to do with which histories have turned out to be formative, how they intersect—or fail to intersect—with other histories, and so with a question of how temporality is organized along special lines” (101). Assigning a particular state of mind to a timeframe—in this case, postmodernism within postmodernity—assumes the temporal nature of the state of mind. While periods of time, as Butler argues, have their moments of influence within the history of the world, time continues to move forward and therefore, the state of mind within that timeframe moves, as well. By applying a postmodern lens separate from

so-called postmodernity, one may be postmodern outside of an allotted time and, therefore, continually shape his or her thinking outside of the confines of time.

Christianity is slowly changing its views on the relationship with twenty-first-century politics, social issues, and morals; it is moving from a modernist aesthetic of ultimate truth defined by a series of grand narratives and heading toward understanding Christ from new perspectives influenced by stories of human experience and culture. I argue that despite the many objections and challenges, Christianity is slowly moving toward accepting a postmodern perspective. Theologian and postmodernist David F. Wells writes in his book *Above All Earthly Pow'rs* that “Modernity itself is in deep crisis and the postmodern ethos which is sweeping over it is bringing not only some relief to evangelical faith which had been abandoned on the margins by modernity, but also a whole new set of challenges” (11). These challenges include, but are not limited to, a millennial generation willing to revisit centuries of religious belief, reinterpret biblical scripture, rediscover historiographical and cultural significance within the text, and examine Christianity’s connection to political, social, and moral correctness in the twenty-first century. Throughout these challenges and changes, however, the essence of the Christian message remains alive and well. Wells goes on to say:

And yet, the history of the church shows that in every generation there are cultural challenges, in some places hostility against religion, overt persecution, difficulties of every kind, and yet generation after generation the church has joyfully proclaimed the greatness of Christ and his humility in assuming our flesh, taking upon our sin as if it were his own, and in conquering that sin also conquering both its consequence of death and the devil. (11)

Thus, despite the challenges that biblical clarification may bring, the shift toward a postmodern mindset in evangelical Christianity would not only savor the Christian message, but it would make it applicable in a new age and for a new generation.

It is important to note that while the spectrum of Christianity consists of many different sects, traditions, and beliefs, I base my arguments on the general theology of contemporary evangelicalism in the United States. Derived from the Greek word, *evangelion*, which means “message of salvation through the atoning sacrifice of Christ,” at the heart of evangelicalism is the responsibility of Christians to share, or witness, the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Bloesch 7). A traditional evangelical understands the Bible to be divinely inspired and the “final authority in matters of faith and practice,” accepts that salvation is the result of Christ’s sacrifice on Earth, and “stresses the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of an individual to bring about conversion and an ongoing life of fellowship with God and service to God and others, including the duty of all believers to participate in the task of proclaiming the gospel to all people” (Larson and Treier 1). An umbrella term for many religions including Lutheranism, Presbyterianism, and Pentecostalism (among others), evangelical Protestants make up nearly 26% of Christians in the United States according to a 2015 religious landscape study (pewforum.org). It is also important to note that due to the sheer size of evangelicalism, some of the theology I include may cause a contradictory dialogue for other believers within this Christian movement. This is a testament to the thousands of interpretations and beliefs held by American Christians.

As a guide throughout this process, I use selected works and teachings of three major twentieth-century theologians in each chapter to discover contemporary ideas within evangelical theology. I also explore their relationship to postmodern adaptations of Bible narratives in theatre practice, specifically the three Gospel rewrites I analyze in this thesis. These theologians are C.S. Lewis (1898-1963), Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), and Francis Schaeffer (1912-1984).

C.S. Lewis, while famous for his fictional body of literary work such as *The Chronicles of Narnia*, is a well-known Christian apologist and theologian who wrote books, essays, and

sermons about his reasoning for the existence of Christianity and the lifestyle of a righteous Christian. After growing up in a religious household, Lewis saw religion as a chore and turned to atheism at a young age. He returned to Christianity after he was convinced by the arguments of fellow inkling and apologist J.R.R. Tolkien of the existence of God in 1931. Lewis' work contains a balance of secular ideas and evangelical Christian wisdom.

In Dietrich Bonhoeffer's thirty-nine years of life, he obtained several graduate degrees in theology from German universities. As both a German and a Christian during World War II, Bonhoeffer was vocally opposed to the Nazi regime and dedicated a portion of his life toward its destruction. In 1943, he was arrested by the Gestapo for the suspected involvement in a plan to kill Adolf Hitler and bring down the Nazi party. After two years of imprisonment, he was tried and killed at a Nazi concentration camp in 1945. Through his work as an educator, Lutheran pastor, and martyr, Bonhoeffer left behind a theological legacy surrounding a Christ-centric, non-metaphysical God in a "religionless" Christianity, or the abandonment of manmade theology and misinterpreted dogma and a return to Christ's teachings. Bonhoeffer's martyrdom and fierce abandonment of his own wellbeing makes him a suitable theologian for this thesis, which may otherwise lose the support of Christian modernists.

Francis Schaeffer is an American-born theologian and thinker from Pennsylvania. His theology is the essence of an ironically modernist ideal of fundamentalism, or the direct, literal interpretation of scripture. His theological legacy consists of the move away from secular humanism, or "the assumption that humans will continue to evolve as long as they educate themselves in the truth of science and the enlightenment of art," and back to reliance on God and his Word (Downing 70). Schaeffer was the founder of the 1955 Swiss organization, L'Abri,

which served as a Presbyterian seminary and community in Europe and eventually in North America.

In his book *The God Who is There*, Schaeffer writes, “The problem which confronts us as we approach modern man today is *not* how we are to change Christian teaching in order to make it more palatable, for to do that would mean throwing away any chance of giving the real answer to man in despair; rather, it is the problem of how to communicate the gospel so that it is understood” (133). But can adaptations of original biblical narrative be communicated properly, as Schaeffer suggests? If so, how can an interpretation different from the traditional narrative express the core messages of the Bible and of Christianity? For many Christians, the Word of God is the blueprint for which Christians mediate their lives and “Scripture is central, not just as the Text that mediates our understanding of the world but also as the Story that narrates our role in it” (Smith 76). And yet as one begins to understand the multiple variations of religious belief associated under evangelicalism, one recognizes the multitude of interpretations of scripture that has dictated Christian belief since the beginning of its practice.

Plurality in Christian belief, or the ability to recognize that there may be other interpretations of truth in Christian theology is beneficial to understanding the true meaning of the Bible, the role of God, and our role as Christians. Vanhoozer argues that postmodernism applied to Christianity demonstrates that “we need *many* human interpretations to hear the *one* Word of God. The Word-ministering Spirit has not been given to one person, denomination, or interpretative tradition, but to the whole church. ... Plurality need not be the enemy of meaning and truth, but their enabling condition” (94). Scriptural discrepancies that stem from scribal errors, translation mistakes, and a misunderstanding of the culture at the time the text was written support a “pluralistic situatedness of interpretation” (Downing 221). This multicultural canon of

religious belief supports the postmodern notion of smaller, local narratives and “if anything, Christians should be advocates of ‘multiculturalism,’ wanting to understand how and why people of other cultures think and act the way they do” (Downing 108). With a postmodern lens applied to Biblical narratives and to the theatrical adaptations analyzed in this thesis, one can see how the message of the Gospels applies to all people, from all cultures, and from all walks of life through mainstream American plays.

Postmodernists argue that the postmodern Christian remains open in his or her religious worldviews and strives to understand *why* many different opinions of theological dogma exist. In the evangelical tradition, no matter which particular religion, Christians worship the same God. However, in *How Postmodern Serves (My) Faith*, Downing argues:

When someone assumes that absolute truth can be reached through the objectivity of reason, and then discovers that many smart people disagree about the truth, that person can easily become skeptical about the possibility of our ever attaining authentic knowledge. This often happens to Christians who have never been challenged to grapple with what they believe and why others believe differently. As soon as they leave a protective environment where everyone around them assumes Christian truth is self evident, they become skeptical not only about Christianity but about all religious conviction. (188)

The way to combat this discouragement of conviction is to recognize immediately the lack of absolute truth as a result of historiographical errors throughout the last two centuries, and understand that evangelical beliefs may vary from others. With Lyotard’s opposition of metanarratives at the forefront, one can work toward the reconciliation of Christian ideals and secular pluralism. As Smith explains:

Lyotard’s critique... demonstrates that no philosophy—indeed, no knowledge—is untainted by prejudice or faith commitments. In this way the playing field is leveled, and new opportunities to voice a Christian philosophy are created. Thus Lyotard’s postmodern critique of metanarratives, rather than being a formidable foe of Christian faith and thought, can in fact be enlisted as an ally in the construction of a Christian philosophy. (73)

This idea of new opportunities for the direction of Christian philosophy is similar to Downing's suggestion that evangelicals' foundation of theology be placed on "rollers of faith," a system that "can move as we employ reason to assess empirical data in the light of biblical teaching and traditional dogma" (119). Downing goes on to say that the only way to do this is to "assess our understanding of the Bible and church tradition by reasoned assessment of science and culture: to keep our foundation intact by allowing it to move" (119). This notion of "rollers of faith" combined with the ideas of smaller local narratives and multicultural reinterpretations of biblical stories supports postmodern biblical narratives adapted for the contemporary.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Christian faith has been presented throughout every artistic mode within popular media. From the cinema to the Broadway stage, the stories of the Christian Bible have been reinterpreted and adapted time and time again with many different lenses from progressive to fundamentalist backgrounds. But what is it about these stories that draw audiences? In her book *Sensational Devotion*, Jill Stevenson writes, "Christians employ popular media not simply to reflect or communicate theology but, more important, to increase religious accessibility in ways that give lay believers agency over their faith" (6). In order to make the Christian message readily available to Christian, or non-Christian, believers, one may use arts such as theatre, film, and literature because of their accessibility in popular media. When Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* premiered in theatres in 2004, thousands of youth groups, church ministries, and evangelical Christians across the country purchased blocks of tickets to see it. Jesus Christ became an overnight celebrity again. The film's graphic nature, vivid imagery, and demonic undertones emphasize the suffering that Christ endured to guarantee salvation for his followers. But what are the benefits of a film that simply portrays the ailments of Christ but does not connect to its audience on a personal level? Religion and film scholar

Margaret M. Miles attests to the negative energy within Gibson's film in her essay, "The Passion for Social Justice and *The Passion of the Christ*":

In a cultural context in which American society is slipping dramatically from levels of support achieved more than thirty years ago, becoming meaner and meaner, often in the name of Christian values, *The Passion* implies that contemplation of the sufferings of Christ is the sole duty of a (still dominantly) Christian society. When Christians' attention is exclusively on Jesus's suffering and death, they are not likely to understand their religious duty to be the alleviation of the present suffering. (126)

I argue that this idea of a separation between the meaning behind the biblical Passion of Christ and the audience, present here in the spectacle of Gibson's film, is also present in much of the art made by evangelical Christians. In this thesis, I analyze three plays that redefine the narrative of the New Testament in the lives of twenty-first-century thinkers, particularly for people who are excluded from evangelical circles. Furthermore, I argue that these particular plays rewrite the Gospel in a way that directly connects all people to the Christian message.

*Corpus Christi* (1997), *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* (2005), and *Passion Play* (2004) are postmodern, mainstream plays written by American playwrights within the last two decades. Although loose adaptations of biblical narratives, these pieces are *not* historical fiction as they do not take place at the time of Jesus's ministry. On the contrary, I classify these plays as Gospel rewrites, or as literary theorist Ziva Ben-Porat describes, "a retelling of a known story in such a way that the resulting text, the rewrite, is simultaneously an original composition and a recognizable rendition, involving a rereading of the source" (93). Gospel rewrites feature Jesus Christ as a central character and use the biblical narrative as inspiration for the storyline of the action. In addition, other ideas and events are added into the play's content; these actions may not have any relation to biblical narrative and may or may not uphold the Gospel's message. As Margaret E. Ramey states in her book, *The Quest for the Fictional Jesus*, "Like everything else imported into the fictional world of a Jesus novel, the Gospel material itself is not safe from

being transformed” (8). It is difficult not to change historical fact when writing about a fictional world. The consumer serves as the decider when interpreting this information. This often leads to postmodern reinterpretations as a result of local narratives and cultural identifiers that may sway the meaning of the text to twenty-first-century relevancy.

Throughout this thesis, I aim to understand if and how the message of the Christian Gospels changes when the narrative is amended with contemporary themes and ideas in mind, how these stories resonate with both evangelical and postmodern audiences, and how one can bridge the gap between the two. In chapter one, I explore McNally’s *Corpus Christi* to analyze the ever-relevant social issue surrounding the relationship between homosexuality and the Christian church through the playwright’s reimagining of the life, ministry, and passion of Christ in twentieth century Corpus Christi, Texas. McNally’s Christ-like figure—called Joshua in the play—and his disciples are homosexual men. Heavily focusing on the playwrights idea of divinity and applying the theology of C.S. Lewis, I use *Corpus Christi* to explore the effect that the gospel has on contemporary social issues and how the Christian narrative can be adapted to include ostracized minorities whose lifestyles have been deemed unacceptable and sinful by the modern evangelical right. Ultimately, I argue that *Corpus Christi* suggests that all people are equal in terms of humanness and deserve to be treated as such despite differences in cultural and religious ideologies.

In chapter two, I analyze Guirgis’s *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, a play that reimagines the fate of the biblical Judas Iscariot, the alleged traitor who sealed the fate of Jesus Christ. Modern evangelical dogma assumes that Judas’s fate consists of an eternity in Hell due to his traitorous deed and the suicide that followed. Throughout the play, Guirgis critiques the modern American judiciary system and shares the testimonies of prominent biblical figures to

(re)determine the fate of Judas Iscariot. With a postmodern sensibility applied to this contemporary retelling based on the biblical narrative of Judas Iscariot and a look at Crystal Downing's idea of Christian relativism, I argue that Guirgis's play and his interpretation of Judas provide an updated way of looking at the actions and fate of the biblical Judas and ultimately, each other.

Finally in chapter three, I examine the political implications and their relation to faith through Ruhl's *Passion Play*. In this three-act piece, Ruhl accounts three different time periods and the attempts to produce the traditional Passion play during varying political climates. Throughout this chapter, I discover how politics often sway evangelical tradition and how this affects the biblical message of the Passion play. This final chapter demonstrates how art with biblical narratives as the source of its plot can be personally applicable to non-Christian viewers. By applying postmodern ideas such as Margaret Ramey's concept of the Jesus Novel and the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Ruhl's *Passion Play*, I argue that sacred performance can be more accessible and welcoming to non-Christian audience members. By the end of this thesis, I ponder ways to apply postmodern thought in Christianity through the use of biblical retellings on the contemporary stage to make the essential Gospel message applicable to all people despite differences in culture, sexuality, and worldviews.

# MCNALLY'S *CORPUS CHRISTI*: RECOVERING THE GOSPEL FOR ALL PEOPLE

## Introduction

In this first chapter, I use Terrence McNally's groundbreaking play *Corpus Christi* to examine how contemporary biblical adaptations introduce postmodern ways of thinking to disrupt the traditional evangelical understanding of homosexuality. In addition, I critically analyze how *Corpus Christi* is a Gospel retelling that reintroduces the biblical narrative's message to gay people and beyond. This chapter uses the evangelical theology of C.S. Lewis to support my argument that McNally's *Corpus Christi* suggests all people are equal and deserve to be treated as such despite differences in cultural and religious ideologies.

On June 26th, 2015, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled state-issued bans on same-sex marriages unconstitutional, legalizing the right for gay men and women to marry whomever they choose in every state. The decision of *Obergefell v. Hodges* deemed the fundamental right of marital union extends to all couples. Justice Anthony M. Kennedy wrote for the majority decision that "No union is more profound than marriage, for it embodies the highest ideals of love, fidelity, devotion, sacrifice, and family. In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than they once were" (28). In the United States of America, marriage is a human right available to all people despite their sexuality, and it is illegal to deny a person this right. Yet there remains a negative stigma on homosexuality from institutions such as the American Evangelical Church that work to withhold and withdraw these human rights in the name of its interpretation of evangelical dogma.

Three months following *Obergefell v. Hodges*, on September 3rd, 2015, Kim Davis, a county clerk in Kentucky was jailed after refusing to issue a marriage license to a same-sex couple. She claimed that, "To issue a marriage license which conflicts with God's definition of a marriage, with my name affixed to the certificate, would violate my conscience. It is not a light

issue for me. It is a Heaven or Hell decision” (qtd. Blinder and Faussett A15). Less than three months since the Supreme Court Decision, the United States once again found itself polarized, one side defending its religious freedoms and the other supporting Constitutional law. Even in the political sphere, openly Christian public officials worked to roll back the progress on Constitutional rights that exist thus far. The Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) interviewed 2016 Republican presidential hopeful Marco Rubio on his opinions of recent LGBTQ developments in the nation. He tells CBN’s David Brody:

I think one of the biggest things the next President is going to do is appoint justices to the Supreme Court—justices who understand that the Constitution is a living and breathing document. It is a document of limitation and it’s supposed to be interpreted and applied based on its original intent. And there is no way that you can read that Constitution and deduce from it that there is constitutional right to an abortion, or a constitutional right to marry someone of the same sex. And what you have is a Supreme Court that wanted to reach a certain policy outcome and so creatively manipulated the Constitution to discover a right that for over two centuries, some of the most brilliant minds and legal history didn’t find.

Rubio went on to say that the next president has the responsibility to roll back some of these equal rights initiatives. This ongoing morality war isolates gay people from the evangelical interpretation of God as many churches deem gay lifestyles “sinful.” Additionally, many Christian people are convinced that the continued acceptance of “secular” lifestyles in the twenty-first century is slowly destroying the foundation of Christian doctrine.

The negative stigma of homosexuality ingrained in Christian theology is created by several freestanding bible verses in the Old and New Testaments that briefly mention homosexual behavior. With little regard for the cultural or political background of the scribal year, many Christians take these verses at face value. For instance, Leviticus 20:13 considers homosexual behavior an abominable deed while 1 Corinthians 1:27 calls it a “shameful” act.

Ironically, none of these verses correlate with the teachings of Jesus Christ, unlike the

issue of divorce which Christ specifically calls an act of adultery.<sup>3</sup> Because the Bible is not an infallible text but one that needs constant reinterpretation, polarized schools of thought exist in determining the role of homosexual behavior within the Christian community. While more progressive Christians welcome gay people into their congregations as members and leaders, some traditional evangelical believers deny them membership in the church. Brian Houston, senior pastor of Hillsong Church, recently announced his ministry's affirmation of gay members within his church: "You are welcome to attend, worship with us, and participate as a congregation member with the assurance that you are personally included and accepted within our community" (*Hillsong*). However, Houston received critiques for this open acceptance of gay members within his congregation. In an article for the *Christian Post* entitled, "Hillsong Church Should Deny Membership to Unrepentant Gays," evangelical pastor and author Shane Idleman writes, "In my opinion, a statement more in line with God's heart would be: All are welcome, but those who continue in unrepentant sin via a lifestyle that opposes God's will cannot participate in leadership or become members." This ongoing polarization causes the gay v. Christian debate to separate evangelical Christians from one another and from the world more than any other dispute in contemporary Christianity.

In the twenty-first century, mainstream American society is quickly progressing toward the acceptance of all members of the LGBTQ community. Gay culture is incorporated into popular media on platforms such as television, film, music, and theatre. However, this development in American society was not always the case. In the 1950s at the height of the McCarthy era, homosexuals were considered a risk to national security. Anti-Communist radicals believed gay people could be swayed to betray the American Government. In his essay

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<sup>3</sup> See Matthew 19:9.

“The Truth That Must Be Told: Gay Subjectivity, Homophobia, and Social History in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*,” Dean Shackelford writes, “Being homosexual was associated with subversive, un-American behavior, as it has been during World War II” (102). Eventually, this negative stigma that compared homosexuals to Communists convinced many people in American culture that homosexuals should be persecuted.

Furthermore, until 1971, homosexuality was considered a mental illness by the American Psychological Association (APA), which deemed homosexuality a “serious personality disorder.” As Shackelford writes, gays and lesbians were considered “abnormal” or “maladjusted” (104). Therefore, a person with homosexual feelings was medically treated, often against his or her will. American theatrical legends such as playwright Tennessee Williams and experimental director Robert Wilson were among those forced into treatment for their homosexuality. Wilson was hospitalized in a psychiatric facility after attempting suicide. His conservative upbringing in Waco, Texas, and especially the reaction of his father, left him in a hopeless place in terms of his sexuality. Because of these pioneers in the arts who were willing to showcase their homosexuality in their body of work, American culture is beginning to adopt a positive perspective on gay issues.

Until homosexuality was no longer considered a medical issue in 1971, Christianity was unified with American society’s view of same-sex behavior. Now it seems that the Christian faith is one of the only organized groups openly against accepting homosexuality as a viable lifestyle. Therefore, traditional Christian ideology is left behind in the discourse surrounding it. Similar to the gay people that they shun from Christian communities, Christians are removed from a constantly progressing American society. While the APA no longer classifies

homosexuality a mental disorder, traditional Christianity considers it a “sinful” way of life and, therefore, a human quality that can be healed.<sup>4</sup>

John Fletcher speaks to this idea of sexual transformation and so-called “healing” in his book, *Preaching to Convert: Evangelical Outreach and Performance Activism in a Secular Age*. He argues that since same-sex attraction is no longer considered a medical deficiency or an issue of mental health or sickness as it once was in American society by the APA, “the idea that such identities indicate sickness and need changing, repairing, or curing seems at best ignorant and at worst homophobic” (263). If homosexual attraction is a biological result within the very genetic makeup of human existence and since evangelical Christians believe that humanity is modeled after a perfect God, then people do not have to deny these sexual desires and strive to suppress homosexual attractions. According to Fletcher, the twenty-first-century thinker revisits and perhaps reinterprets the grand narratives of scripture determined while ignoring the cultural and societal nuances that inspired the text. In other words, traditional Christian metanarrative and accepted truths are flawed. To combat these inconsistencies, I argue that scripture is fluid and has multiple possibilities of interpretation as opposed to a fixed structure by which Christians lead their lives. This reinterpretation is made with an understanding of the cultural politics and ideologies that shape the trajectory of the biblical narrative. Playwright Terrence McNally’s groundbreaking piece *Corpus Christi* is an example of this use of reevaluated interpretation as it disrupts traditional Christian thought and reinvents the Gospel narrative for a specific audience.

McNally is one of the most influential twentieth-century American playwrights for his countless contributions to the gay and theatre communities. A gay man raised in Corpus Christi, Texas, McNally was influenced by the conservative and religious undertones of his

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<sup>4</sup> See John Fletcher’s *Preaching to Convert*, pp. 262-302.

predominantly Catholic hometown. Many of the works in his artistic canon contain autobiographical information covering experiences similar to his own and/or surround a gay issue in twentieth-century America, such as his 1991 AIDS-centric piece, *Lips Together, Teeth Apart*. While often negatively plagued by his strict, faith-based upbringing in Texas, McNally incorporated many lessons from his youth in his plays including *Corpus Christi*, a contemporized Passion play set in his hometown. Raymond-Jean Frontain writes in his book *Reclaiming the Sacred: the Bible in Gay and Lesbian Culture* that the playwright wrote the play “to enhance his audience’s recognition of gay men as human beings who, like themselves, are simultaneously ordinary and divine” in a community that traditionally deems homosexuality a “sinful” lifestyle (251). The play suggests that the message of the Christian Gospel is inclusive to all people.

#### About the Play: *Corpus Christi*

Set in modern day Texas, McNally’s *Corpus Christi* “draws upon the biblical narrative of Jesus’ nativity, ministry, and passion to tell the story of a gay teenager’s coming out and subsequent death in a bigoted town...” (Frontain, “McNally” 21). McNally explores the life and times of Jesus Christ—reinvented as Joshua—from his birth to his crucifixion. The opening of the play is a ritual. John the Baptist baptizes each of the actors who thereby play the disciples in the play. As he does this, he recites over each of them, “I bless you, (full name of the actor playing ANDREW). I baptize you and recognize your divinity as a human being. I adore you, (full name of the actor playing ANDREW). I christen you Andrew” (2). Each of the disciples declares his profession to the audience and a brief account of how he met Joshua.

In addition to their “christened” disciple, the actors play multiple roles throughout the performance. For example, the actors who play Peter and Philip transform into Mary and Joseph respectively when Joshua is born in a crowded motel. The parents are visited by three “wise

men” that bring forth gifts of room service, Cuban cigars, and a Flexible Flyer sled, as opposed to the biblical gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Instances such as these transport the audience into a twentieth-century sensibility. The play continuously transitions into scenes depicting Joshua’s relationship with his teachers and clergy, his relationship with classmates at a school dance, and the beginning of his relationship with Judas. The trajectory of the play shifts when the voice of God calls Joshua to leave Corpus Christi and begin his ministry: “Joshua, the time has come to leave Corpus Christi and begin your life as the son of man” (40). Thus begins the passion narrative loosely mirroring the New Testament Gospels.

Throughout the play, Joshua heals the leprosy and blindness of a truck driver and is tempted to commit suicide by a Satan-like character called Jimmy. The play recounts the miracle of the loaves and fishes where Joshua multiplies food to feed the hungry. In a scene that highlights Jesus’s forgiveness of Mary Magdalene, Joshua forgives Philip, an HIV+ prostitute who attempts to sleep with him, and then invites him to join his disciples. In perhaps McNally’s boldest creative liberty in the play, Joshua orchestrates the same-sex marriage of two of his disciples, James and Bartholomew. This act causes the High Priest to begin the accusation process that ultimately leads to Joshua’s death. The High Priest convinces Judas to betray Joshua and after the “last supper,” Joshua is arrested, tried, and crucified.

The play combines both non-biblical and biblical themes. According to Frontain, it “juxtaposes the transformative power of a religion that is charitable, all-embracing, and respectful of difference with the destructive power of religionists who divide the world into the ‘godly’ and the ‘sinful’ and reserve for themselves the authority to define and persecute the latter in the name of righteousness” (“McNally” 21). This divide was evident during the original off-Broadway opening of the production. *Corpus Christi* opened at the Manhattan Theatre Club in

New York in October of 1998. Outside the theatre, thousands of angry members of various religious organizations and radical groups picketed to protest the run of the show claiming, “It’s ridiculous to claim that Jesus Christ was a homosexual. There’s absolutely no respect involved” (McNulty 65). The Roman Catholic Church, represented by the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights (CLRCR) and its president, William Donohue, was especially vocal, taking McNally’s work as a personal attack against Catholicism and stating that “The animus against Roman Catholicism is so pervasive that it warrants immediate attention” (Fish 29). However, the negative response to McNally’s play was based strictly off of speculation; most of those picketing *Corpus Christi* did not actually attend a performance. Nevertheless, the idea of homosexuality in association with the life of Christ led to the assumption that McNally’s play is a blasphemous demonstration that spits in the face of Christianity.

When Lynne Meadow, artistic director of the Manhattan Theatre Club received a threatening anonymous phone call where the caller vowed, “to exterminate the author, the staff and our audiences, and burn the building to the ground,” the decision was made to postpone the run of the production (McNulty 65). However, after local authorities insured the safety of patrons, staff, and the actors, *Corpus Christi* opened. In his piece “Demanding The Divine: Terrence McNally’s Gay Passion Play Corpus Christi,” Thomas Fish describes how those coming to see the show were plagued with a feeling of potential danger as they walked through metal detectors at the entrance to the theatre, passed dogs trained to detect the presence of bombs and explosives, and noticed armed guards stationed throughout the lobby (29). Religious protestors raised their voices shouting, “shame, shame, shame” as patrons scanned their tickets to enter the theatre (McNulty 64). Even today, *Corpus Christi* remains a controversial play to produce in schools and theatres around the country.

Although dramatically differentiated from the New Testament narrative, *Corpus Christi* maintains the essence of the Christian message in a postmodern society. I will analyze this idea throughout this chapter in three parts: using the play to recover the universal message of the Bible by retelling the Gospel narrative, examining McNally's idea that all men are divine and thereby equal, and discussing the "Golden Rule" and its role in humanizing others despite different ideas of truth.

### Recovering Truth Through Gospel Retellings

*Corpus Christi* is a retelling of the New Testament Gospels; the play loosely recounts the birth, ministry, and Passion of Jesus Christ, contemporized for a new era and a new purpose. As I argue throughout this chapter, while the biblical narrative of Christ contains a universal message of love, acceptance, and salvation for all, the current religious climate surrounding the issue of homosexuality causes gay Christians to feel ostracized from evangelical circles and disconnected from the church. The story of Christ seems suitable only for those who are not gay and/or do not live a homosexual lifestyle. McNally uses *Corpus Christi* to include gay people in accepting the universal message of the original narrative the Bible offers today in a way that openly incorporates homosexual themes and characters in the story. On this point, Frontain writes in *Reclaiming the Sacred*, "Rather than claiming that McNally is offering a new or alternative gospel, perhaps it is more accurate to say that he is recovering the Gospels for gays who feel dispossessed by institutionalized Christianity when in reality the Bible has a great deal to teach them" (238). In addition, I argue that this play is an attempt to deconstruct the mainstream understanding of the Bible, pushing the boundaries of what it means to be Christian. Perhaps more importantly, McNally fosters new thinking in the evangelical community about what it means to serve an inclusive, loving God despite differences in ideology.

Central to the message of the play is a revisiting of Christ's teachings and the ability to use the Gospel's message in present day society as an illustration of the shift towards postmodern thought in Christianity. As the play begins and the cast emerges in street clothes, one of the actors steps out to welcome the audience to the presentation:

We are going to tell you an old and familiar story. One you've all heard over and over, again and again. One you believe or one you don't. There's no suspense and fewer surprises. You all know how it turns out. But it's a story that bears repeating. Some say it can't be told enough. The playwright asks your indulgence, as do we, the actors. There are no tricks up our sleeves. No malice in our hearts. We're glad you're here. (1)

In this address, the actors recognize that the performance may offend some audience members who have a traditional understanding of the biblical account of Christ. However, he reminds the audience that while the playwright and the actors understand this concern, they will share their story truthfully, hoping the audience connects a unique meaning to the play, applying it to their own lives in the process. Furthermore, McNally and the actors want to begin a dialogue about the inclusion of homosexuality in the Christian sphere.

McNally intentionally uses parody and satirical techniques throughout the play that occasionally poke fun at Christians. This exposes the hypocrisy of the church so it may recognize the error of its ways in the treatment of gays and exercise acceptance despite ideological differences. Near the beginning of the play while the disciples are setting up for the performance that is about to unfold, Judas says to the audience, "People can't stand the truth. They want their Joshua, seen through their eyes, told through their lies. Truth is brutal. It scalds, it stings" (9).

McNally is keenly aware that the predicament regarding the exclusionary motives toward homosexuals from the Christian community is a result of traditional scriptural (mis)interpretation and a lack of an understanding of Christ's teachings. McNally speaks to this awareness through Judas's line written above: ultimately, people only see what they want to see. This move toward

using an adaptation of the story to extend the message is a postmodern point of view. McNally uses the play's narrative as a search for truth. While some traditionalists may accuse McNally of blaspheming Christ and the Bible, *Corpus Christi* includes once-marginalized members of the Christian community by disrupting the evangelical status quo and generating an accepting view of homosexuality as a result.

To use the play's narrative as a search for multiple truths, McNally loosely uses scripture as a source. He mirrors vignettes from the Gospels and inserts them into his unique retelling. For example, in the exchange below, Joshua hitches a ride from a truck driver at the start of his ministry. To avoid talking with the truck driver any further, Joshua turns on the radio only to hear the voice of God play over the speakers:

GOD'S VOICE: This is My son in Whom I am well pleased.

TRUCK DRIVER #3: What did I tell You? Sounds like He's trying to tell You something.

*JOSHUA turns off the radio.*

That ain't gonna make His voice go away.

JOSHUA: All my life I've heard it. I don't know what it means.

TRUCK DRIVER #3: He's saying He's well pleased with You.

JOSHUA: How can He be pleased with Me when I am so displeased with Myself?

TRUCK DRIVER #3: He has given You the gift of healing. Touch me.

JOSHUA: I don't want to touch you.

TRUCK DRIVER #3: Touch me!

*TRUCK DRIVER #3 takes JOSHUA's hands and puts them on his eyes.*

Thank you, Lord! I can see. My skin is smooth. The air is sweet. I am healed of all affliction. He has given You the greatest gift of all, son of God.

JOSHUA: Don't call Me that. I'm not worthy.

TRUCK DRIVER #3: Then become worthy. Now get out. The world is waiting for You. Get out, I said. (42)

In the Bible, God refers to Jesus as "His Son with whom He is well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). For a Christian who believes he or she is created in the image and likeness of God, this is the culmination of the desire of those who want to be like Christ: Christian believers want the acceptance of God (this idea will be further explored in the next section using the theology of

C.S. Lewis). Even outside of religious discourse, non-Christians want to be accepted. However, Joshua's response to the compliment is a feeling of unworthiness. McNally reimagines biblical narrative, such as Christ healing the leper, and uses it to demonstrate the unworthiness that homosexuals often feel as a result of traditional evangelical beliefs against their lifestyle. Furthermore, this technique serves as a cautionary piece to warn Christians what it is like to be ostracized from society.

C.S. Lewis, a Christian apologist and famed author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, sees the Bible as a vehicle that carries God's truth but its readers look to Christ to find the truth within the message; in other words, truth does not come through the words in the Bible, but through the revelation of Christ's life demonstrated through the words. Lewis writes, "It is Christ Himself, not the Bible, who is the true word of God. The Bible, read in the right spirit and with the guidance of Good teachers, will bring us to Him" (*Letters of C.S. Lewis* 247). Therefore, pushing his ideas further, Lewis behooves Christians to look to the revelation of God and the wisdom and discernment of His people to understand the meaning behind the text and the ways to live a Christian lifestyle using cultural multiplicity and the acknowledgement of all ideas and worldviews. In his essay, "Christian Discipleship in a Postmodern World," David F. Wells reminds his readers:

Christianity...has passed from one people group to another, from one continent to another, from one age to another. It belongs to no single language, group, culture, or time but it is within the whole Church, spread across time and rooted in multiple people-groups, that the whole wisdom of God is reflected. (32)

While narratives that remain supreme exist within the Bible—principles like the Golden Rule, for instance—there are also other aspects that are relative to the particular time period in which

they emerge. Rules dictating beard length, head coverings, and tattoos are among them.<sup>5</sup> Lewis's and Wells' arguments propose that it is up to the determination of the reader to discern the narratives regarding homosexual behavior as either relative or absolute principles in the twenty-first century.

### Divinity/Humanity

McNally expresses one of the most prominent themes in *Corpus Christi* when Joshua declares to his followers, "We're each special. We're each ordinary. We're each divine" (50). The playwright uses the exclusivity of divinity to represent the humanity of all people, and specifically in *Corpus Christi*, homosexuals. He writes in his preface, "If a divinity does not belong to all people, if He is not created in our image as much as we are created in His, then He is less a true divinity for all men to believe in than He is a particular religion's secular definition of what a divinity should be for the needs of its followers" (v). Therefore, McNally uses his characters to exemplify this sense of divinity, or oneness with God, and connection to others. If humanity is created in the image and likeness of God according to evangelical theology, then why should homosexual men and women feel ostracized from society and especially from Christians? Using McNally's idea of divinity, I argue that *Corpus Christi* suggests that all people, indeed, are equal.

McNally attempts to justify his intention for writing his controversial, but entirely unique retelling of Christ's universal story in an interview with *The New York Times* saying, "I was trying to invite gay men and women back to the table of spirituality. We've been made to feel we are sinners and that we have no business in the story" (Qtd. in Blankenship AR8). This accepted

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<sup>5</sup> See Matthew 7:12.

truth in evangelical doctrine that deems homosexual practice a “sinful” act, whether meant intentionally or unintentionally, rejects an entire community of people. Fish writes:

This new subject poses an inherent threat to the stability of biblical master narratives for conservative Christians who do not believe that homosexuality is an innate, ‘true’ identity. The play claims a fixed identity for the Jesus-like character and his apostles; homosexuality is not presented as a phase, but as something inherent, static, and even something natural. (34)

McNally uses this idea that all people are divine to reinterpret the traditional narrative of the Gospels. He reintroduces a Christ-like figure that unapologetically accepts everyone who loves Him and emphasizes that despite differences, humanity is all the same.

This idea is mirrored in C.S. Lewis’s 1942 sermon, “The Weight of Glory.” He argues that the ultimate desire of all Christians is the direct connection and acceptance of God and the fulfillment of eternal salvation in Heaven. As stated in the previous section, Christians long for those scriptural words, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant” (Lewis 5). In the sermon, Lewis declares:

Those who have attained everlasting life in the vision of God doubtless know very well consummation of their earthly discipleship; but we who have not yet attained it cannot know this in the same way, and cannot even begin to know it at all except by continuing to obey and finding the first reward of our obedience in our increasing power to desire the ultimate reward. (2)

Similar to a Christian longing for communion with God, gay Christians desire the acceptance of the Christian community and continuously work toward this endeavor. Using Lewis’s theology in and out of religious discourse, all of humanity is the same in its desire for acceptance. As Lewis says in “The Weight of Glory”, “There are no *ordinary* people. You have never talked to a mere mortal” (9). Just like McNally, Lewis mirrors this idea that as followers of Christ, everyone is divine.

To emphasize this divinity, McNally equalizes the Christ-like Joshua with his disciples by putting them on Joshua's level. This is beautifully portrayed in a scene where the disciples kiss each other's feet to display a sense of reverence and oneness with each other. This particular moment mirrors the biblical narrative when Christ washes the disciples' feet in the New Testament representing His humility and willingness to serve others.<sup>6</sup> In this scene, however, Matthew refuses to kiss Joshua's feet:

MATTHEW: I'm sorry, gentlemen, but I have a lot of trouble kissing someone's feet.

JAMES THE LESS: Joshua isn't someone.

MATTHEW: I think it's degrading. It reeks of servitude. It's the language of slaves.

JAMES THE LESS: That's not what it's saying.

*JOSHUA has come to where MATTHEW is standing.*

JOSHUA: I love you, Matthew.

MATTHEW: You're not better than me, Joshua. I can't accept that.

JOSHUA: I am less than you.

*JOSHUA prostrates Himself and kisses MATTHEW's feet. MATTHEW puts his face in his hands and weeps. (57)*

In this exchange, Joshua demonstrates humility, connects with his followers on a personal level, and teaches them that they are all divine. Joshua combats the claim that kissing someone's feet "reeks of servitude" by essentially becoming Matthew's servant. Therefore, if Joshua is less than Matthew in ranking, as Joshua demonstrates, the hierarchy of divinity is compromised and they are all equal in that moment. When Matthew realizes the message of this simple act of humanity, he is moved to tears.

In the New Testament Gospels, Jesus is arrested and crucified on the accusation of calling Himself the King of the Jews and the Son of God. According to the high priests who accuse him of these crimes, Christ's actions demonstrate an act of treason against Caesar and blasphemy against God:

Then the high priest said to him, "I put you under oath before the living God, tell us if

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<sup>6</sup> See John 13:1-17.

you are the Messiah, the Son of God.” Jesus said to him, You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy. (Matthew 26:63-65)<sup>7</sup>

However, McNally reverses this accusation in *Corpus Christi*. When Judas sells Joshua to the High Priest, he asks why the latter is interested in the destruction of Joshua:

HIGH PRIEST: Thirty pieces of silver. You boys make it very easy for us.

JUDAS: Thank you, father, we try.

HIGH PRIEST: But this one, He’s a dangerous man.

JUDAS: What is His crime?

HIGH PRIEST: Blasphemy.

JUDAS: Because He says He’s the son of God?

HIGH PRIEST: No, because He says you’re the son of God as well.

JUDAS: We’re all the son of God. (65)

The idea of the Son of God calling mere mortals “god-like” or equal to God causes the High Priest to reject Joshua’s message and brand him a blasphemer. To the High Priest, men, especially gay men, are not divine and do not deserve to have a close relationship with God. This is a commentary on the evangelical trend of refusing to accept gay people into the Christian community. However, through this idea of divinity, McNally argues that all people are equal despite what is considered “sinful” by people on Earth and therefore no one can be rejected based on their misdoings. As C.S. Lewis notes in “The Weight of Glory,” when this “glory” or the acceptance of God in salvation is finally achieved, all sense of inferiority is lost and people can move to a place worthy of a connection with God (6). Similarly in *Corpus Christi*, McNally suggests that not only does his Jesus-figure accept gay people, but he died for their salvation despite the rejection of Christians who claim to follow Christ and His teachings. Furthermore, the play suggests that God accepts all of His creation and invites Christians to mimic this

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<sup>7</sup> All scriptures in this thesis will reference the *New Revised Standard Version*.

acceptance for all people, including homosexuals. McNally offers an option that says all of humanity is divine.

### The Golden Rule

In this section, I argue that McNally's *Corpus Christi* offers ways to separate oneself from the dogma of organized evangelicalism and encourages Christians to love one another as Jesus instructed in the New Testament. To do this, I explore the ideology of the Golden Rule, or in traditional Christianity's case, Jesus's command to love one another as one's self as written in the book of Matthew. Furthermore, I highlight specific moments where Guirgis's reinvention of Christ, Joshua, demonstrates this fundamental principle throughout the play.

Although McNally makes the case for the divinity of humanity and the equality of all people, traditional Christian theology does not accept homosexuality as a righteous lifestyle. Instead, many Christians adopt a "love the sinner, hate the sin" mentality, automatically branding the person a sinner and ostracizing him or her from the church, religious communities, and from evangelicalism's interpretation of God.<sup>8</sup> While homosexuals may consider themselves Christians and have a deep relationship with God and can justify their so-called sinful lifestyle, many evangelical traditionalists cannot progress to a place of acceptance and support for gay men and women in their religious circles. As a result, many fundamentalist Christians claim that one cannot be gay and Christian simultaneously. Biologically, while someone may be able to refrain from acting upon sexual urges, a person's sexual desires do not diminish. As sociology scholar S.J. Creek writes in her article "Not Getting Any Because of Jesus?: The Centrality of Desire Management to the Identity Work of Gay, Celibate Christians," for those gay Christians who decide to live a single, celibate lifestyle, "ex-gay attempts to change desires are futile. What

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<sup>8</sup> This idea stems from the teachings St. Augustine. Refer to *Letters 211-2710*, pp. 19-28.

matters is that one does not act upon such desires” (126). Therefore, since traditional theology does not accept a homosexual lifestyle, practicing gay Christians are forced to choose between acceptance from the church and their sexual attractions. As sociology scholar Andrew K. T. Yip writes in his piece, “Attacking the Attacker: Gay Christians Talk Back”:

In their relationships with the Church, gay Christians are subjected to the Church’s vocabulary of motives that label their lifestyle as unacceptable. In response, gay Christians have to develop an alternative vocabulary of moral motives that label their sexuality and lifestyle as compatible with Christianity. Needless to say, the Church’s official stance on homosexuality generates a stigmatizing climate under which gay Christians must learn to survive. (116)

Yip explains the heartbreaking truth that homosexuals are forced to conform to a heterosexual lifestyle to feel welcome in the Christian community. Yip explains that many gay people are forced to practice a sense of *individualized spirituality*, which “emphasizes a personal faith that is broadly and nominally predicated on Christianity, instead of seeking affirmation from the Church” (122). Thus, Yip argues that spirituality becomes a personal experience, a relationship with the self and with God, and without the ability to celebrate faith with other Christian believers.

However, according to gay Christian activist and author Justin Lee, “Jesus wasn’t known for his *disdain* of people; he was known for his unconditional love for everyone, especially outcasts and sinners. . . . We’ve been shown so much grace from God that we must be gracious to others” (3-4). With this in mind, Lee argues that twenty-first-century thinkers should not have to conform to evangelical expectations of Christian lifestyles to feel accepted by the church. In fact, Jesus’s ultimate message is explained in Matthew 7:12 when He says, “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law. . . .” According to Jesus, the contents of this verse—known today as the Golden Rule—apply to all people in need, even one’s enemies, or in

this case, those whose lifestyles contradict or even challenge traditional belief systems.

Christians are to treat gay people the same way they would want to be treated.

*Corpus Christi* emphasizes this message. In McNally's preface to the play he writes, "The purpose of this play is that we begin again the familiar dialogue with ourselves: Do I love my neighbor? Am I contributing good to the society in which I operate or nil? Do I, in fact, matter?" (vi-vii). Therefore, *Corpus Christi* is not only a rebuttal of Christian dogma regarding the role of homosexuality in evangelicalism, but also a commentary on how people ought to be treated by other people. Christ speaks about love in John 15:9-12 saying:

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

McNally recovers the ultimate meaning behind the Gospels through *Corpus Christi*. He argues that in this postmodern age, the Christ-like person loves one another as Jesus commanded in the Gospels, despite differences in accepted opinions regarding homosexuality and Christianity.

Near the beginning of the play, Mary and Joseph, played by two of the actors on stage, leave the infant Joshua alone in a motel room to celebrate Christmas with a few "tequila sunrises" and "a little junkin'" and Joshua is left crying by himself (17). Meanwhile, in the room next door, the audience hears the sound of a man violently beating and screaming at his wife and Joshua begins to cry. God then addresses Joshua and begins His mission on Earth:

Joshua. Joshua. Joshua. This is the Lord God, Your Father. Stop crying and be a man. Much has been given to You because much is expected of You. Men are cruel. They are not happy. They sicken and die and turn away from love. I want You to show them there is another way. The way of love and generosity and self-peace. You will comfort a woman who lies battered in a motel room next to Yours. You will forgive the man who left her there. (19)

Throughout this interaction, God defines the purpose of Joshua's existence within the world of the play: He is to love all men equally, show comfort to those who need it, and save them from eternal damnation. Furthermore, McNally suggests that people turn from God's love and are selective with whom they love, a commentary on the treatment of gay people by the church. God calls Joshua to show people who turn from love that they are not doing God's work; those who mistreat homosexuals are not showing God's love. Furthermore, in the Gospel of Mark 11:25, Jesus says to His disciples, "Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses." According to evangelical dogma, to gain eternal salvation, one does not hold bitterness in his or her heart. McNally uses a contemporary issue of domestic abuse in Corpus Christi, Texas to teach this lesson of forgiveness in a postmodern age, more specifically suggesting that gay people forgive Christian people for the isolation that they have caused between the two groups.

McNally portrays Christ's unconditional love for others in an exchange between Joshua and Judas later in the play by suggesting Joshua's sexual attraction toward others. While using the restroom at a school dance during Joshua's high school years, a gang of teenage boys accuses Joshua of looking at one boy's penis. The gang attempts to dunk Joshua's head in the urinal as punishment. Judas comes into the bathroom, sees what is happening, and saves Joshua. After a bit of small talk, Joshua asks Judas:

JOSHUA: Who'd you come with?

JUDAS: No one.

JOSHUA: How come?

JUDAS: I don't like girls. What about You?

JOSHUA: What do you mean, what about Me?

JUDAS: You like girls?

JOSHUA: Yes, I like girls.

JUDAS: Just asking, Joshua.

JOSHUA: I like boys, too. I like people. (34)

While some may accuse McNally of celebrating a bisexual, or perhaps homosexual agenda, this exchange goes deeper, reimagining the love of Christ for all despite varying cultural ideologies and religious belief systems.<sup>9</sup> Allowing Joshua to experience a semblance of sexual attraction contradicts what many Christians believe about Christ's perfection, namely that Christ did not experience sexual desire.<sup>10</sup> However, McNally equalizes Joshua by allowing him to experience sexual attraction. As a result, this technique disrupts the mainstream value of Christianity that often isolates anyone whose worldview or opinion differs from traditional evangelical doctrine. Furthermore, allowing Joshua to experience a bisexual attraction, and later in the play a homosexual attraction, is a critique on the homophobia projected by evangelical Christianity. If this Christ-like figure can love all people despite their sexualities, then so can Christ's followers—contemporary Christians in the twenty-first century.

This idea of adopting a twenty-first-century sensibility, or lack thereof, is prevalent in the response of the High Priest to the marriage of Bartholomew and James, a ceremony that Joshua blesses. After asking the local churches to bless their marriage, the two men are denied the right to marry and their love is deemed unacceptable in the eyes of God. Joshua responds in a way that contradicts the Christian interpretation of Jesus:

JAMES: Bartholomew and I had wanted our union blessed for a long time—some acknowledgment of what we were to each other.

BARTHOLOMEW: We asked, Josh. They said it was against the law and the priests said it was forbidden by Scripture.

JAMES: "If a man lies with a man as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them."

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<sup>9</sup> In his essay, "Demanding the Divine, Terrence McNally's Gay Passion Play *Corpus Christi*," Thomas Fish explores the negative response to McNally's sexual active Jesus-figure. He writes, "The 'heat' of the controversy stemmed from the illusions to a sexual relationship between Jesus and his apostles" (32).

<sup>10</sup> According to John E. McKinley's essay "Jesus Christ's Temptation," "We can affirm that Jesus was only susceptible to legitimate or innocent desires of fallen humanity (i.e., he was not fallen or sinful, so he did not possess *lust*)" (62).

JOSHUA: Why would you memorize such a terrible passage? “And God saw everything that He had made, and behold it was very good.” I can quote Scripture as well as the next man. God loves us most when we love each other. We accept you and bless you. Who’s got a ring? (61)

Many Christians denounce the sanctity of gay marriage. Even today, some church leaders refuse to perform same-sex marriages claiming that marriage is a sacred bond between one man and one woman and therefore gay marriage is not recognized or blessed by God. However, when James recites Leviticus calling homosexuals an “abomination,” Joshua is stunned that there is a lack of love and acceptance from the clergy in the treatment of gay people. Instead of understanding and recognizing their love as a legitimate bond, the High Priest comes from a place of disapproval, mimicking the modern church’s response to gay marriage. So when Joshua not only agrees to marry the two men but does so “in broad daylight under the canopy of Heaven in the eyes of God and for all men to see,” Bartholomew is shocked (61). Joshua recognizes the existence of laws against homosexual practice, and perhaps may not even be able to justify it. This also mirrors the contemporary struggle for gay men and women who want their marriage supported by the church but are unable to defend themselves from traditional Christian dogma regarding a homosexual lifestyle. However, Joshua understands that love between two people is a reflection of God’s love for His people and therefore, it is not evil or sacrilegious. McNally’s narrative is also an attempt to justify gay marriage and to mock modern Christianity for its denial of loving committed unions between two people.

However, when the High Priest witnesses Joshua presiding over the same-sex wedding ceremony, he condemns Joshua, Bartholomew, and James as abominable sinners who are not doing the work of the Lord:

HIGH PRIEST: It is one thing to preach perversions to ignorant and sentimental people such as yourselves, but such travesties of God’s natural order will never be blessed in the House of the Lord by one of His ordained priests.

JOSHUA: This is the House of the Lord. I ordain Myself.

HIGH PRIEST: You have broken every commandment.

JOSHUA: You are hypocrites. You are liars. You have perverted My father's words to make them serve your ends. I despise you.

*JOSHUA sends the HIGH PRIEST flying with a single blow.*

THOMAS: Joshua, You struck a priest.

JOSHUA: And I'll do it again. All who do not love all men are against Me! (62-63)

To Joshua, the High Priest is not a man of God as he is motivated by religious politics instead of from genuine love for others. Similar to McNally's characters, many traditional evangelical Christians are motivated by their own opinions and therefore, they denounce homosexual practice. The High Priest, filled with hatred and acceptance, *is* modern Christianity.

Ironically, Christian society and evangelical dogma dictate that people must treat others the way they would want to be treated. To complete this task effectively, one may look to Christ's example of how He treated all people in the Bible. Through *Corpus Christi* McNally suggests how people ought to be treated through the example of his Christ-like character, Joshua. Professor of English Martha Greene Eads writes in her essay "Conversion Tactics in Terrence McNally's and Paul Rudnick's Gay Gospels" that "McNally's play teaches that the disciples' allegiance to Joshua and modern-day playgoers' allegiance to Jesus should be sufficient to inspire kind and loving behavior" (170). Christians are responsible for the application of Christian principles as stated in the bible and as demonstrated by Jesus's ministry. Only loving God is not enough; His creation is a reflection of Himself and therefore, people must love others to love God fully. Joshua demonstrates this principle by healing Philip, an HIV+ prostitute who attempts to seduce Joshua. Joshua sees through his disease and loves him anyway, wanting to heal him and allow him to join His disciples:

JOSHUA: I love you, Philip.

PHILIP: I love You, too, Charlie. I hope you have rubbers. I'm positive.

JOSHUA: I said I love you.

PHILIP: Hey! Don't fuck with me. You love the idea of telling someone like me You love them. It makes You feel good. Love this.

JOSHUA: I think I can heal you. I think I can make you well.

PHILIP: I think You can suck my dick now, faggot.

*JOSHUA goes to PHILIP and takes him by both arms and looks directly into his eyes.*

JOSHUA: Father, heal this man.

PHILIP: Fuck you.

JOSHUA: Let these hands make him well. Give him back his life.

PHILIP: Fuck you, I said.

JOSHUA: You are healed, Philip.

PHILIP: I wish I could believe that.

JOSHUA: Then do. As you believe, so shall you be. You are healed, I say.

*PHILIP kneels before JOSHUA. His head is bowed. (55)*

With his ability to heal Philip's disease and invite him to join his followers, Joshua demonstrates that everyone is in need and worthy of God's grace. This includes homosexuals who are constantly bullied by conservative evangelical theology. This account exposes the hypocrisy of the modern church. Since homosexuals are God's people despite their "sinful" nature, the unequal mistreatment of gay people as a result of a negative response to their lifestyle is a direct example of not loving others the way God loves us. More importantly, it is the epitome of *not loving God*.<sup>11</sup>

McNally's *Corpus Christi* illuminates both sides of the gay v. Christian debate. The playwright romanticizes those oppressed by contemporary evangelicalism. As Frontain writes:

In a maneuver that is typical of parodic satire but, significantly, that carries no satiric force in *Corpus Christi*, McNally reverses the traditional poles of expectation, showing the self-righteous people who are quick to judge others to be the real blasphemers against religion and life, and the marginalized and seemingly unorthodox to be the genuinely blessed. (232)

Ironically, McNally retells the Gospel narrative of the Passion of Christ to suggest that those who deny people the right to Christianity based on a difference of beliefs are killing Christianity. He uses a mixture of parody and satire, almost mocking the traditional view of scripture and

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<sup>11</sup> See 1 John 4:20-21.

retelling it in a way that uses homosexuals as the main biblical protagonists. In the Bible, Jesus declares that people must treat others the way they want to be treated and to love one another as Christ loves us. McNally emphasizes this important commandment through his Christ-like figure, Joshua, mocking modern Christianity in the process and demonstrating that contemporary adaptations of Passion plays emphasize the message of the Christian Bible.

### Conclusion

In his groundbreaking sermon, “The Weight of Glory,” C.S. Lewis writes, “If our religion is something objective, then we must never avert our eyes from those elements in it which seem puzzling or repellent; for it will be precisely the puzzling or the repellent which conceals what we do not yet know and need to know” (4). There are many aspects of “secular” life in which Christians discern whether or not to partake. But what happens when religious discourse clashes with someone’s lifestyle? McNally’s *Corpus Christi* suggests answers to this question. The playwright takes the biblical narrative of the Passion play and retells it with modern themes. In *The Theatre of Terrence McNally: A Critical Study*, Peter Wolfe writes:

From the very start, McNally began rewriting the rulebook. The Gospels are daring, subtle, profound, and psychologically gripping. Tormented expletives and all, *Corpus Christi* doesn’t compete with them. Instead, it marks the rare artistic occasion when a mind of extraordinary power takes a text, tosses aside or re-imagines all its conventions, and raises it to a new plane of sophistication and universality. (142)

McNally inverts the holiness of Christ to represent underrepresented minorities within the Christian faith when he allows the sinner, the homosexual, to take the place of Christ. As Frontain writes in *Reclaiming the Sacred*, McNally’s play represents a theatre that “practices rather than preaches acceptance,” some could argue the very antithesis of the modern Christian church; “The only sin in McNally’s world...is to refuse to listen” (238, 240). According to this account, the play offers ways to reevaluate how Christians treat those whom they outcast.

But why should either side of the gay v. Christian debate feel excluded from God's word? Postmodern thought invoked through Christian theology challenges Christians to consider other ways of thinking, other views, and other cultural stigmas. McNally combats this idea through *Corpus Christi*. With his use of ritual and the ability to modernize a classic text to be relevant to a group of people who it once ostracized, to messages such as the Golden Rule and equality through divinity, McNally explores the cultural politics and progressive ideologies to provide a piece of theatre that invokes postmodern ways of thinking and a new opportunity to revisit the sacred text with open arms.

## **GUIRGIS'S *THE LAST DAYS OF JUDAS ISCARIOT*: REDEFINING THE JUDGMENT OF "SINFULNESS"**

### Introduction

In chapter one, I applied a postmodern lens, the theology of evangelical Christianity, and the teachings of Christian apologist C.S. Lewis to Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi* to retell and recover the biblical narrative for all people including minority groups marginalized by the Evangelical Christian Church. In this chapter, I argue that Stephen Adly Guirgis's play *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* combats the use of religious adopted truths regarding suicide and the fate of Judas Iscariot. With a postmodern sensibility applied to this contemporary retelling based on the biblical narrative of Judas Iscariot, I argue that Guirgis's play and his interpretation of Judas provide an updated way of looking at the actions and fate of the biblical Judas.

The story of Judas Iscariot is one commonly associated with betrayal within and outside of religious discourse. In Dante's *Inferno*, the first part of his epic poem the *Divine Comedy*, Judas is sentenced to the lowest level of Hell for his betrayal of Christ.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the *Cambridge English Dictionary* defines a "Judas" as "a person who is not loyal to a friend and helps the friend's enemies" and Christians and non-Christians alike regularly use the term to describe a traitor. In the New Testament Gospels, Judas was a dedicated follower of Jesus Christ and one of His twelve disciples; he was also the man responsible for betraying Christ and beginning the narrative known as the Passion.<sup>13</sup> As a result of his guilt, Judas hanged himself from an olive tree.<sup>14</sup> While the narrative surrounding Judas's actions is briefly recorded in the Bible, in the twenty-first century, both Christians and non-Christians continue to argue the

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<sup>12</sup> See Canto 34 of Dante's *Inferno*.

<sup>13</sup> Or the time at the end of Christ's life as noted in the New Testament Gospels from His entrance into Jerusalem during Passover to His Salvation.

<sup>14</sup> See Matthew 27:1-5.

intentions behind his betrayal as well as his eternal fate. Debates such as these have entered popular media discourse: in a CNN.com post entitled “Is Judas in Hell?” Craig Gross highlights some of these arguments for and against the forgiveness of Judas. While some Christians believe in the eternal damnation of the biblical traitor, Gross argues, “We all fall short and deserve death, but because of what Jesus did on the cross 2,000 years ago, we are able to have life. And I believe that where you end up, God only knows.” In popular culture, influential mainstream artists continue to add to this ongoing Judas discourse by portraying their own versions of Judas in modern media.

English novelist, playwright, and Christian essayist Dorothy Sayers portrays Judas as a villain in her radio cycle-drama *The Man Born to be King*, which explores the story of Christ from birth to post-resurrection. In a character description within the cycle, she writes, “At the core of Judas are the devil’s own sins of pride and unbelief, and beneath all his idealism is a rooted egotism” (200). Throughout Sayers’ interpretation of the Passion, Judas has a concrete view of his representation of God. When he begins to follow Christ, he agrees with His ministry in accordance with that view. However, Judas realizes that his interpretation of God no longer connects with Jesus’s teachings; he is married to his own idea of truth. English, film, and postmodern scholar Crystal Downing discusses Sayers’ Judas character in her essay

“Theopoetics: Si(g)ns of Copulation,” stating:

Grasping the significance of Jesus better than any other disciple, Judas’s strength, however, becomes his greatest weakness: his passionate commitment to Christ turns into certitude about his ability to understand the word of God. He becomes so committed to *his own interpretation* of sacred truth that he accuses Jesus of treason when the latter acts differently than Judas anticipated. (51)

In the eighth play of Sayers’ play cycle entitled *Royal Progress*, Judas states to the High Priest, “I believed in his pretensions. I supported his claim. Despite all appearances, and against my

better judgment, I stifled my growing suspicions. I sincerely thought he had sufficient character to resist temptation. I suppose I was a fool to trust him” (221). According to Sayers and Downing, Judas’s worldview is skewed, and he acts with his intellect as opposed to his heart. As a result, his personal pride does not allow him to believe in any version of truth other than his own. In *The Man Born to be King*, this is the catalyst that causes Judas to doubt Christ’s teachings and the inspiration for Sayers’ representation of Judas.

Similar to Sayers’ reinterpretation of Judas, in his 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ*, actor and producer Mel Gibson suggests that Judas was possessed or haunted by demon-like spirits that ultimately caused him to commit suicide after his betrayal. As theatre and film scholar Mark Pizzato describes in his essay “A Post-9/11 Passion Play,” Judas is “chased by demonic children and then finds himself alone with the decaying corpse of a donkey, its teeth smiling grotesquely as Judas ties a rope to a tree branch and hangs himself, tormented to death by his role in God’s plan” (251). In this interpretation, Judas is provoked to his malicious actions and ultimately forced to kill himself by the spirits that haunt him. Gibson’s narrative strips from any sense of redemption as the devils suck this hope from Judas.

While there are many opinions regarding Judas’s reasoning for betraying Jesus, his intentions can never be proven due to a lack of factual evidence. Furthermore, as humans bound to the knowledge of this world and not a spiritual realm, no one is able to discern Judas’s eternal fate and yet, this does not sway people away from assuming his fate. Stephen Adly Guirgis manifests this idea through *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*. Guirgis tells *The Telegraph* about his experience with the biblical Judas narrative from his days in Catholic school as a young child saying, “It threw me a big jolt. I was little but I remember thinking, well, if I can forgive someone, why can’t God, who was supposed to be all loving” (qtd. Rees). Guirgis is a member

and former co-artistic director of the LAByrrinth Theater Company in New York City, an ensemble based company “founded in 1992 by a small group of actors who wanted to push their artistic limits and tell new, more inclusive stories that expanded the boundaries of mainstream theater” (labtheater.org). *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* was originally written, workshopped, and produced through LAByrrinth. It opened off-Broadway in 2005 at the Public Theatre in New York.

Guirgis grew up in a traditional Catholic family and based *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* around the religious dogma and accepted beliefs surrounding Judas Iscariot by the Catholic Church and from his Catholic school. In the introduction to the play, he writes:

When I was a kid, the story of Judas troubled me a lot. It didn't make sense to me, it frightened me, and it seemed to fly in the face of the notion of the all-loving and all-merciful God that the very good and loving nuns at the Corpus Christi School on 121<sup>st</sup> street were teaching me about. (vii)

This widely accepted fate for Judas by Catholics and evangelical Christians alike led Guirgis to question the validity of the church's description of God's omnipotence, humility, and justice; he felt the absence of redemption toward Judas for which God is evidently known according to evangelical—or in this case, Catholic—doctrine. *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* is an example of Guirgis pondering his own perspectives on Christianity and biblical narratives through his work, moving away from accepted norms within Christian beliefs and toward an accepting, forgiving relationship with God on a personal level. *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* humanizes the once-villainous antagonist and gives him a new role in biblical history.

Throughout this chapter, I analyze the different camps of Christianity that discern Judas's fate using Downing's ideas of faith-based relativism and argue that a twenty-first-century postmodernist remains open to multiple interpretations of truth. I also explore the effects of Guirgis's use of “inculturation” in this particular story of Judas to emphasize the universality and

relevancy of the Judas narrative in a twenty-first-century world.<sup>15</sup> Finally, I analyze Judas's tragic flaws throughout the play using a postmodern lens and an updated look at the theology of twenty-first-century apologist and fundamentalist Francis Schaeffer. Throughout, I argue that *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* is a reworking of the biblical narrative of Judas that allows the audience to reevaluate its expectations of "sinfulness" and eternal judgment, specifically of Judas Iscariot, and to recognize the universality of humanness within the Judas narrative in contemporary society.

About the Play: *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*

In *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, the audience is transported into a purgatorial atmosphere called "Hope," a place where souls from various generations, from the American Civil War to the present, earnestly await the trial of their eternal judgment. Attorney Fabiana Aziza Cunningham calls for the trial of Judas Iscariot with a writ signed by God Himself. Begrudgingly, Judge Littlefield presides over the case. The play consists of trial scenes portraying the testimonies of biblical and contemporary figures including Satan, Pontius Pilate, and Mother Teresa, among others. The play also shifts to portray Judas's actions leading up to and during his betrayal, as well as sporadic monologues from disciples such as Peter and Thomas speaking to their associations with Judas and describing their own roles in the ministry of Christ.

In his review for *The New York Times*, Ben Brantley writes, "To present Cunningham's case, Mr. Guirgis sets up his own cosmic judicial system, suitable for a contemporary purgatory where, as one character notes, contemplation has been replaced by litigation" (E4). Guirgis reinvents the biblical idea of judgment day by placing it into the confines of a quasi-United

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<sup>15</sup> Not to be confused with "enculturation," inculturation is a term coined by the Catholic tradition, most often associated with the Jesuits, and can be defined as retelling the biblical narrative in a specific way to connect to a non-Christian audience.

States judiciary system. This mechanism not only creates a relevant connection to biblical judgment for a contemporary audience but is also a commentary on the injustice of the American justice system. Guirgis exposes the inconsistencies of justice for the characters, shows the obscene wait times and poor treatment of those awaiting their trials, and instills a sympathy for the prisoners within the audience. In his essay “Parables for His People: Legal and Religious Authority in the Plays of Stephen Adly Guirgis,” David Pellegrini further argues that Guirgis questions the morality of the justice system by exposing how authority figures are “not always motivated by the desire to uphold justice” but instead allow their personal biases and priorities to sway their opinions (112). Clearly authority figures such as Judge Littlefield do not want justice for the souls of others when their own souls remain in limbo, as well. The audience quickly finds out that Judge Littlefield was a Confederate general in the Civil War and hanged himself when the confederates surrendered. Using traditional Christian dogma as a lens, this character’s actions on Earth would justify an eternity in Hell due to the act of suicide. Ironically, Judas is associated with this same outcome. Therefore, personal biases specifically cloud his case in the play.

While Guirgis’s play is a commentary on his own view on the narrative of Judas, it is even more so the beginnings of a dialog on the interworking of Christianity regarding the way Christians judge other people. Connecting an example of this ongoing conversation to Guirgis’s play, Pellegrini writes:

When Henrietta Iscariot, whose maternal love transcends “all measure and understanding,” testifies that “If my son is in hell, then there is no heaven—because if my son sits in hell, *there is no God*,” it is clear that both earthly and religious justice are on trial. (113)

According to Henrietta Iscariot’s philosophy, if people are so quick to judge the misdoings of others in the name of God, and if these acts are thereby punished, then a so-called just, loving God cannot exist. This is a postmodern view at heart: I argue that Guirgis uses the play to

suggest ways that twenty-first-century thinkers may embrace to move away from the views of organized religion that do not consider the possibility of alternate truths regarding the treatment and judgment of “sinfulness,” and that they may move toward a personal connection with Christian faith and with each other.

### The Relativism of Christianity

In his 1979 book, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard defines postmodernism as the “incredulity toward metanarratives” or the distrust of the modernist idea of universal truth and the dismissal of the value of diversity in human existence (xxiv). In other words, Lyotard argues that absolute worldviews do not and cannot exist but rather smaller, localized pieces of information are relative to an individual. This idea of relativism relates directly to the universal truths adopted by the Evangelical Christian Church. It is important to clarify that due to the inconsistencies from subjects such as scribal errors when transferring and translating the Bible over time, the lack of information or biases in biblical narratives, and cultural and historiographical discrepancies, humanity *cannot* determine absolute truth within the spectrum of Christianity. However, as a testament to the multiple religious sects and ideologies that live under the umbrella of evangelicalism, there are many interpretations of adopted truths that compete with one another, creating a broad spectrum of polar religious “camps”: on the one side, some Christians favor postmodern ideas of moving from absolute truths to smaller, local narratives as Lyotard suggests. On the other, Christians favor the traditionalism that makes up the theological framework of American evangelicalism.

Applying postmodern theory to these ideas, I argue that Lyotard would encourage people to move away from the camp that adopts an absolute truth that cannot be changed. Downing

writes in her book *How Postmodernism Serves (My) Faith: Questioning Truth in Language, Philosophy and Art*:

For Lyotard, then, when modernists impose their versions of truth on others, their behavior becomes “terroristic”—a term that has special resonance for Americans after the destruction of New York’s World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Those Twin Towers were destroyed by people who thought their own tower, or construction, of truth was pure; their terrorism was motivated by an assumption that everyone plays be a problematic “language game” except themselves. (170)

Downing uses this 9/11 image to emphasize the point that she and Lyotard attempt to make: the terrorist attack occurred because of one group’s inability to accept the existence of any other truths but its own. With this particular analogy connected to Christianity, the dismissal of others’ versions of truth is detrimental to smaller, local, or even individualized ideas in Christian faith and even more so, to a personal relationship with God and a connection to the world.

In her book, Downing invents six terms that classify the various schools of thought in Christian belief: bird relativism, brain relativism, bouncing relativism, boundary relativism, bombardment relativism, and building relativism. In order to gain an understanding of Downing’s suggestions for adopting a postmodern sensibility, it is necessary to describe each of these versions of relativism. Those in the camp of *bird relativism* believe that all religions are the same as they all lead to God. This particular view is a pluralistic approach to religious thought and the bird relativist “often feels contempt for someone who believes his religion is the one and only tower reaching into the mind of God” (190).<sup>16</sup> *Brain relativism* “asserts that people in radically different cultures use their brains (by which I mean their *minds*) differently. Something logically true in one tower might be false in another” (191). *Bouncing relativism* consists of

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<sup>16</sup> By tower, Downing refers to the psychological locations that often define what people reflect as absolute, universal truth. She says that the tower, or the narrative people find themselves in, is often influenced by the ideological foundations of youth and that “the construction of discourse that surrounds you defines the good, the true and the ugly” (155).

members who rarely go into their own camp of religious thought but instead pick up various ideas from multiple camps (192). In *boundary relativism*, although one understands that multiple versions of truth exist, one “can only understand a tower of thought only if you live inside it” (193). In the fifth camp called *bombardment relativism*, all ideas of Christian faith that contradict the adopted truth should be regarded as false (196). Downing’s analysis on the above schools of relativism is a commentary on how *not* to approach Christianity. More importantly, it is a statement on how to live according to one’s own interpretation of truth while keeping an open mind and a respect for the validity of truth from differing Christian, or non-Christian groups.

Instead of the above five camps of relativism, Downing argues that in the twenty-first century, postmodern Christians ought to adopt what she calls *building relativism*, or a camp that “believes that facts indeed exist apart from discourse, but because facts are viewed differently from within different language-covered tower walls, those facts differ from tower to tower” (198). Connecting this camp to evangelical Christianity, postmodernists recognize the validity of their own tower of belief, and yet remain open to the potential truths of others. They adopt a pluralistic mindset and a teachable sensibility to acknowledge that because of biblical inconsistencies, they have the opportunity to build continuously their camps with cultural and local ideologies to discover multiple interpretations of truth. In addition, postmodern thinkers acknowledge that truth is relational and “is perceived through the beliefs, values and practices of the community—the human relations—within which a human is positioned” (206). In other words, truth may have multiple connotations depending on the culture that it supports.

This idea of a relational nature is evident in *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* when defense attorney Fabiana Cunningham refers to Hegelian philosophy in order to connect two possibly clashing characteristics of God:

I cite Hegel: Within every idea—*thesis*—is contained its contradiction—*antithesis*—and out of that struggle is created—*synthesis*. Synthesis, Your Honor! The Union of Opposites—their interdependence and their inevitable clash producing what’s next—what must be revealed: God’s perfect Love versus God’s Rightful Justice equals what? Your Honor?...The synthesis of Love and Justice can produce only Mercy and Forgiveness...If a just God sits in Heaven, it can fall no other way! (16)

In this instance, Cunningham uses this Hegelian discussion to argue that love and justice, two characteristics of the traditional understanding of God, are relational but may also be considered conditional. According to Cunningham, the love of God is the Hegelian thesis while the Justice of God is its antithesis. The two characteristics contradict one another according to human understanding; if a person loves someone, he or she cannot send that person to jail or in this case, Hell. However, Cunningham argues that the love and justice of God can be synthesized since the common Christian understanding of God is that He radiates love for His people and is also fair in judgment. He is just *because* He loves us. This is Cunningham’s reasoning when fighting for Judas Iscariot’s case for his eternal fate. Furthermore, I argue that Guirgis’s play is a commentary on adopting a postmodern sensibility to explore the relational nature of truth.

I contend that Guirgis’s *Last Days of Judas Iscariot* is an example of Downing’s idea of *building relativism* in action as it provides alternate methods of looking at someone’s so-called sinful actions before judging his or her eternal fate. If contemporary Christians remain open to the multiple possibilities that led Judas to pursue such a “wicked” path, they may recognize that first of all, no human has the authority to decide Judas’s fate, and their traditional ideals regarding “sinfulness” and suicide may be skewed. For example, from a Catholic perspective, Guirgis’s theological advisor James Martin writes in his book *A Jesuit Off-Broadway*, “While the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that some ‘grave psychological disturbances’ can diminish the responsibility of the person who commits suicide, it is nevertheless an act that, for several reasons, is ‘contrary to love for the living God’” (43). Even though the Catholic Church

may pardon suicide as a sin for those who are mentally ill and choose suicide as an escape from their skewed reality, in the Christian faith, suicide is traditionally considered a sinful act that leads to eternity in Hell. Guirgis's play debates this belief when Sigmund Freud testifies during Judas's trial:

CUNNINGHAM: In your expert opinion, Doctor Freud, was Judas Iscariot a psychotic?

SIGMUND FREUD: Without question.

CUNNINGHAM: And are psychotics responsible for their actions?

SIGMUND FREUD: No, they are not. For example, say I have a bad bout of influenza. As a result of my bad influenza, I sneeze rudely, but involuntarily, in your face. The next day, you wake up with the same flu. Did I cause your flu? No. My flu caused your flu. I only sneezed because I was sick.

CUNNINGHAM: In your opinion, Doctor Freud, does Judas Iscariot belong in Hell?

SIGMUND FREUD: No, he does not.

CUNNINGHAM: Explain.

SIGMUND FREUD: Suicide is a direct sign of mental illness.

CUNNINGHAM: But did he become mentally ill *after* allegedly betraying Jesus of Nazareth, or was he mentally ill to begin with?

SIGMUND FREUD: Preprogrammed, yes. You must understand: Normal people do not kill themselves—even under extreme duress. (62).

In this exchange, Guirgis uses his Catholic upbringing and understanding of the punishment of suicide as a lens, but also makes it clear that he does not believe people who commit suicide should be responsible for their actions as they are not well when they make the decision to do so. If this is the case, anyone who commits suicide must be pardoned. Guirgis combines the understanding of absolute truth of one group—The Catholic Church—with a scientific sensibility to show that suicide cannot be a punishable act. This demonstrates more of an accepting and forgiving sensibility to those who commit suicide.

In *How Postmodernism Serves (My) Faith*, Downing expresses an open-minded sensibility of multiple interpretations of truth and the constantly adapting relativism of Christianity. She explains how someone may cement his or her view of truth, supporting this truth with both reason and faith. However, when he or she presents this truth to other “smart

people” who then disagree about that truth, those people “easily become[s] skeptical about the possibility of ever attaining authentic knowledge (188). However, Downing suggests that this discourse can be avoided if contemporary thinkers use *building relativism* as a guide in the search for truth. By locking in an absolute truth, or metanarrative, Christians limit themselves from varying views of truth that could expand multiple worldviews and ideals:

Believing, in all humility, that we have been forgiven, Christians are called to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. This includes attempting to understand how and why people in other towers relate to the truth differently from the way we do. Remembering that Jesus provided light for the blind in radically different ways, we need to be open to what many Christians would call ‘the impossible’: the idea that people who do not see Jesus eventually come to the light because of Jesus, the Truth who can relate to us whether we see him as Truth or not. Absolute Love, after all, loves absolutely—despite our building relativism. (207-208)

According to Downing, when someone recognizes that absolute truth is unattainable, he or she will be able to connect with others, forming the unified, loving, and accepting community that Christians are called to create. I argue that Guirgis’s play falls under the umbrella of building relativism as it suggests ways to reevaluate absolute truths and to recognize that one interpretation of truth may be different than another.

### Inculturation

Stephen Adly Guirgis is known for his urban characters and high-stakes plot developments surrounding issues of drug use, jail time, and complicated personal relationships in plays such as *Jesus Hopped the ‘A’ Train*, *The Motherfucker with the Hat*, and *Our Lady of 121<sup>st</sup> Street*. Because of this highly specific style of writing, Guirgis uses the many dialects and accents of underrepresented minorities as language and plot devices in his plays, emphasizing the use of cultural diversity and local ideas that postmodernism emphasizes. While *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* does not take place in an urban atmosphere or an impoverished location, the characters who inhabit the purgatorial “Hope” come from many different generations,

backgrounds, and ethnicities. As such, Guirgis adopts stylized urban language for most of the characters, including saints, disciples, and historical figures in and out of the Christian faith. In the play, Saint Monica, the mother of Saint Augustine attempts to speak with Judas, and when he ignores her, she patronizes him mocking his infamous actions:

Yo, Judas, you got change for thirty pieces of silver, mothahfuckuh?!...Yo, Judas, how much you pay for that haircut?—thirty pieces of silver?! Yo Judas, why you so “hung” up? C’mon, let’s “hang” out. C’mon, bitch, go out on a “limb”! You want a “olive”? C’mon muthahfuckah, have a “olive.” Wanna go to the “Olive Garden” restaurant? Day got good “Olive Oil” there...Ah-aight, fine, come on, Judas, whaddya say you an’ me go down to the bar and—betray some muthahfuckas! (18)

This passage not only demonstrates the unique, stylized language choices of Guirgis’s characters, but also shows the anachronistic trends that he uses to create a relevant connection between a centuries-old narrative and a twenty-first-century audience. This use of modernized language as a way of sharing a bible narrative is a device that Christian theologians, particularly Catholics, call “inculturation” or “a translation of the Gospel texts not simply into a different language but for a specific culture” (Martin xvi). By re-introducing the biblical narrative using a twenty-first-century lens, Guirgis helps audience members synthesize the content using a contemporary mindset, allowing them to revisit the judgment of Judas in a postmodern society. It also uses language to suggest that absolute truth does not exist, but smaller, local notions of truth can be determined and defined differently depending on the culture that is creating and receiving the information.

Guirgis utilizes several devices of inculturation in *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, among them a mirrored version of the United States Judicial System, a merging of characters from multiple time periods, backgrounds, and cultures, and characters whose stories and legacies remain relevant throughout the ages. An example of this last point can be seen in the character of

Satan who is called to testify in Judas's trial. When he begins his questioning, the prosecutor, Yusef El-Fayoumy compliments Satan on his choice of clothing:

EL-FAYOUMY: You.....I must say, Claimer of the Damned, your candor is quite refreshing.

SATAN: As is yours.

EL-FAYOUMY: Oh...Thank you...Yes...Oh! Your jacket, Satan, really, it is smart.

SATAN: You like it?

EL-FAYOUMY: Beautiful, really. Armani?

SATAN: Gucci.

EL-FAYOUMY: "Gucci." Yes. Elegant. Very. Yes...So...(And your trousers, they are Gucci, too?)

SATAN: Yeah. (49)

This demonstration of relevance is a testament to how Satan remains an important figure in the Christian tradition. The concept of sin from biblical times is as prevalent today as it was then, but the ways people commit these acts have adapted throughout the times. Therefore, Satan, clad in material garb, also adapts with the times. Guirgis's Satan glamorizes sin with his Gucci clothes, emphasizing how in and out of religious discourse, material goods often distract a person from seeing the greater good. Guirgis seems to support this traditional narrative by making Satan hyper-relevant to a twenty-first-century audience. Additionally, this is another commentary on the American justice system. Why would one choose Satan—the embodiment of evil in all of historical and contemporary Christianity—as a viable source for testimony in the case of Judas Iscariot? Guirgis further demonstrates the appeal of so-called sinfulness in a flashback during Satan's testimony. After a seemingly cordial conversation between the two characters in a bar, Judas opens up to Satan about his actions:

JUDAS: Hey, man, if I told you something corny, would you think that I was, like, a dick?

SATAN: Not at all.

JUDAS: Okay...I'm kinda mildly afraid of going to Hell.

SATAN: Why?

JUDAS: Minor incident last night—a miscalculation on my part—nothing serious.

SATAN: Well, one thing I can tell you about Hell: As an eternal destination, it's apparently vastly underrated.

JUDAS: Yeah?

SATAN: And "Hell" is nothing more than the Absence of God, which, if you're looking for a good time, is not at all a bad thing. You wanna play the lute, sing Mary Chapin Carpenter—that's what Heaven's for. You wanna rock? Apparently, Hell's the venue.

JUDAS: Are there, like, girls down there?

SATAN: Not many, but I hear they import them from developing nations on weekends...But hey, I wouldn't worry about going to Hell.

JUDAS: Even if I did something, perhaps, a little controversial?

SATAN: God understands. (53-54)

This exchange shows the power and manipulation of language, which is arguably the most important device of inculturation that Guirgis uses in *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*. Satan is able to make Hell seem appealing and God unjust. He is able to take Judas's regret and turn it into an opportunity to accept his eternal fate in Hell instead of recanting his actions, repenting of his deeds, and saving his soul.

Throughout the play, Guirgis utilizes the stories and testimonies of several saints and church leaders such as Mother Theresa, Mary Magdalene, and Saint Monica. This device reminds audience members, especially those who associate Judas's fate with Hell, that all of these religious figures are also human, perhaps blinded by bias, and not perfect by any means. David Pellegrini affirms this notion in his piece, "Parables for His People," writing, "Inculturation is not only a major source of humor in *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, it is also a means by which Guirgis can more effectively challenge the authority of religious figures, often caricatured by idiosyncrasies that compromise notions about their saintliness" (116). An example can be seen when Mother Teresa is questioned during the Judas Iscariot case:

CUNNINGHAM: Mother Teresa, upon receiving your Nobel Prize, did you say to the world, quote, "The biggest obstacle to Global Peace in the world today is abortion"?

MOTHER TERESA: Jess. I said dat.

CUNNINGHAM: Do you actually believe that?

MOTHER TERESA: Jess, I do.

CUNNINGHAM: You accepted large cash donation from the Duvalier family in Haiti, correct?

MOTHER TERESA: Jess.

CUNNINGHAM: Duvalier being a dictator who murdered and stole from his people?

MOTHER TERESA: He gave. I took.

CUNNINGHAM: Blood money?

MOTHER TERESA: No. Cashier's check.

CUNNINGHAM: You also took money from Charles Keating, the savings-and-loan scam artist who robbed American citizens of billions of dollars?

MOTHER TERESA: For the poor, I took it. You got five dollars? I take from you, too.

CUNNINGHAM: You opposed Vatican II reforms, which among other things, called for a long-overdue official condemnation of anti-Semitism as it relates to the death of Christ. Did you oppose Vatican II, Mother Teresa?

MOTHER TERESA: Jess.

CUNNINGHAM: You blamed the wars of the world on abortion, took blood money from murderers and thieves, and opposed taking a stand against anti-Semitism. I'm having trouble understanding why we're supposed to consider you an expert on anything having to do with the spirit. (39-40)

In this exchange, Guirgis uses the multiple accounts of Mother Teresa's seemingly hypocritical actions during her ministry. While her actions seem noble on the surface, they come at the expense of stealing from other people. Cunningham uses this information to counter Mother Teresa's negative opinions about Judas; why should she have a right to judge the eternal fate of another person if she herself has made unethical decisions? Therefore, Guirgis uses inculturation not only to question the validity of saintliness, but also to strengthen the Judas Iscariot case through language. Using Guirgis's idea, one can see that even though human nature has the tendency to jump to conclusions about the judgment of people's actions, it does not have the right to do so, for all of humanity is comprised of imperfect people. Therefore, the audience is given the opportunity to create its own informed decisions about Judas's eternal fate.

### Judas as a Tragic Hero

While the phrase "be in the world and not of it" is an accepted norm in evangelical Christianity, postmodern playwrights have offered new ways of re-evaluating what it means to be "of the world" using a twentieth-century sensibility and a postmodern lens in order to

reinterpret the story of the Gospels. If contemporary thinkers allow the opportunity for a greater truth—or series of truths—using the cultural ideologies and progressive minds of this generation, perhaps the Christian narratives can become more accessible—more applicable—to those who they once ostracized. This progression in thought can be seen in Guirgis’s *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*. In this section I explore Judas’s place in the world and argue that both Guirgis’s and the biblical Judas are tragic heroes.

Many fundamentalist and traditionalist Christians resist a progression in thought regarding the way the Bible is interpreted. As a Christian apologetic, theologian Francis Schaeffer spent his life and career fighting against the modernization of religious ideals and supporting the authenticity of the unadulterated Christian bible. In his book *The God Who is There*, Schaeffer blames a lack of fundamentalist teaching on the progressive mindset of contemporary generations saying, “In our modern forms of specialized education there is a tendency to lose the world in the parts, and in this sense we can say that our generation produces few truly educated men” (19). He argues that while Christians live in the world, they should not conform to the progressive mindsets and postmodern interpretations of scripture:

The Christian is to resist the spirit of the world. But when we say this we must understand that the world-spirit does not always take the same form. So the Christian must resist the spirit of the world *in the form it takes in his own generation*. If he does not do this he is not resisting the spirit of the world at all. (18)

According to this account, any insinuation of applying cultural or local narratives as a means of discovering truth is a betrayal of the infallible Christian Bible. Schaeffer argues that a reinterpretation of scripture and the ability to rethink and re-universalize the Christian meaning is a means of conforming to this so-called world-spirit.

However, literal interpretations of the Bible may vary depending on the background of their readers. If this is the case, fundamentalist theology is flawed in that multiple literal

interpretations may clash. Instead, in *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism*, James K.A. Smith suggests ways to interpret scripture with a postmodern sensibility:

First, if one of the crucial insights to postmodernism is that everyone comes to his or her experience of the world with a set of ultimate presuppositions, then Christians should not be afraid to lay their specifically Christian presuppositions on the table and allow their account to be tested in the marketplace of ideas. (55)

According to Smith, since a Christian's accepted ideas of faith also inform the way he or she sees the world, perhaps the ideas presented by others in the world can be used to focus on a clearer version of truth. If truth is actually truth, it will prevail, even if it is challenged. Smith continues:

Secondly, and more constructively, this should push us to ask ourselves whether the biblical text is what truly governs our seeing of the world. If all the world is a text to be interpreted, then for the church the narrative of the Scriptures is what should govern our very perception of the world. We should see the world through the Word. (55)

If one deeply heeds the meaning of the text, still recognizing the authority of the Bible as Schaeffer suggests, one can see the accepting nature of the Word, allowing him or her to rethink the treatment of others whose opinions, faiths, and beliefs differ from his or her own. This mindset provides a melting pot of Christian apologetics and updated ideas of biblical authority. The world could indeed be seen through the Word, allowing the Word of God to include everyone instead of ostracizing those with whom it traditionally disagrees.

With this particular view of Christian scripture as a lens applied to *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, it is important to remember that the biblical Judas was a mortal man; he was not divine. Furthermore, Christ Himself described his actions before they even occurred.<sup>17</sup> While Judas Iscariot is considered a traitor even outside of traditional religious discourse, I argue that the biblical Judas's humanness affected his decision-making abilities in the moment of his betrayal and immediately following. While Judas's actions should not be excused, Judas does not

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<sup>17</sup> See John 13:18-30.

deserve to be branded immediately a monster, but a human being who succumbed to his flaws and acted upon them. As B. Uraguchi writes in *The Psychology of Judas Iscariot*:

Thus we find from a study of Judas no sinner above all others, but a very human character, tempted as we all are at the point of his greatest strength, and falling as any man may fall who trusts to his own instincts rather than to the spiritual guidance of the superman revealed in the life of Jesus Christ. (360)

As Uraguchi suggests, Judas's flaws—namely despair, pride, and guilt—worked together to destroy his morals and common sense, which led to his suicide. In his piece "From Villain to Tragic Figure: The Characterization of Judas in Matthew," Richard P. Carlson argues that the biblical Judas's flaws classify him as a tragic hero, not a villain: "Judas sincerely acknowledges both his own guilt and Jesus' innocence as he returns his ill-gotten gains. Yet this is tragic irony because he has failed to perceive that Jesus' innocent blood is also the blood of the covenant poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (477). Carlson's account does not attempt to justify the reasoning behind the biblical Judas's betrayal, but he argues why twenty-first-century thinkers should be less quick to judge his eternal fate. If one considers Judas a tragic hero, one can connect with him on a deeper, human level.

According to Carlson, these tragic flaws are the catalysts that fuel the trajectory of Judas's actions in the Bible narrative. I argue that Carlson's description of the tragic hero also dictates the trajectory of Guirgis's interpretation of Judas in *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*. Ultimately, after his actions in both narratives, Judas's despair leads to his attempted repentance, his resulting suicide, and his catatonic state in purgatory, the latter an embellishment unique to Guirgis. In Guirgis's narrative, Judas is not involved in his trial. Defense attorney Fabiana Cunningham argues that despite his absence, Judas is still in need of forgiveness:

JUDGE LITTLEFIELD: If he's catatonic, then how do you know he even wants an appeal in the first place?

CUNNINGHAM: Who couldn't want to appeal "eternal damnation"?

JUDGE LITTLEFIELD: Someone who was aware of his own self-inflicted erosion of the capacity to be filled by Grace...Someone too prideful to ask for forgiveness even in the face of the fiery furnace. Or maybe, he don't bother askin', 'cuz he knows he don't deserve it!

CUNNINGHAM: Your Honor, the only person who *needs* forgiveness is the one who doesn't deserve it. (23)

Guirgis taps into his version of Judas's human sensibilities by creating him unable to escape the guilt of his actions to be present in court. His pride keeps him from being seen by those who judge him. As a commentary on pride in the play, Mother Teresa shares a personal account during her testimony when she doubts the existence of God and her dedication to ministry. She explains this to a friend, Sister Glenna, who recites a quote from the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton:

Despair...is the ultimate development of a pride so great and so stiff-necked that it selects the absolute misery of damnation rather than accept happiness from the hands of God and thereby acknowledge that He is above us and that we are not capable of fulfilling our destiny by ourselves. (38)

James Martin explains in his book *A Jesuit Off-Broadway* that this quote demonstrates how “the person in despair (though he or she may not feel the capacity for pride) denies that anything can change: “Things are hopeless. I am convinced—more accurately, I *know*—that things will not and cannot ever change. In other words, I know better than God” (45). Any instance of the biblical Judas's pride at work is demonstrated in Matthew 27:3-4, when Judas recognizes the error of his ways and attempts to recant his actions and return the money to the High Priests:

When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the High priests with the hope that they would pardon him. He said, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.” But they said, “What is that to us? See to it yourself.”

While he hopes to be forgiven, Judas's repentance goes to the wrong place; in the biblical account, instead of asking Christ for forgiveness, he turns to the very men who manipulated him. In Guirgis's interpretation, Caiaphas the High Priest testifies in Judas's case. When Cunningham

questions Caiaphas about Judas's attempt for forgiveness, he admits that he had no intentions of giving it to him:

CUNNINGHAM: How about in terms of follow-through: Judas recanted and tried to return the silver, did he not?

CAIAPHAS THE ELDER: He did.

CUNNINGHAM: And did you, Caiaphas, do anything at all to try to prevent Jesus's death?

CAIAPHAS THE ELDER: No.

CUNNINGHAM: And therein lies the real difference between you and Judas Iscariot, does it not? And yet you sit here and say how Judas "crossed the line" and that he "disgusted" you! And if that's true, Caiaphas, then I wonder, how you must've felt about yourself. (76)

In this account from the play, and mirroring the biblical narrative, Judas's actions fall upon deaf ears; while Christ could have forgiven him immediately, Judas was engulfed by his pride and could not admit his guilt to the one he betrayed. This combination of guilt and the recognition of his dismissal from being a member of Jesus's people inspires Guirgis to highlight that to be redeemed from despair, one must first overcome his or her pride. Judas cannot do this. Therefore in both narratives, Judas kills himself, and in the play, this tragic flaw lives with Judas through his time in purgatory and even after his moment of judgment.

To combat humanity's tragic flaws, Guirgis beautifully articulates the love of Christ toward Judas, mirroring His love for all of His people despite their flaws, backgrounds, or lifestyles. This is evident at the end of the play when Jesus attempts to ask Judas for forgiveness and furthermore, when he asks to fix their relationship:

JUDAS: You got a lot of fuckin' nerve—

JESUS: —and you've got no nerve at all! Where's your *heart* in all this, Judas? You think you were with me for any other reason than that?! It was your heart, Judas. You were *all heart*. You were my heart! Don't you know that?!

JUDAS: I'll tell you what I know: I watched you trip over your own dusty feet to heal the sick, the blind, the lame, the unclean—*any two-bit stranger stubbed their fuckin' toe!* When some lowly distant relative—too cheap to buy enough wine for his own fuckin' wedding—suddenly runs out of booze—no problem, you just "presto change-o"—*and it*

*was fuckin' Miller time in ol' Canaan again, wasn't it bro?! But when I fuckin' needed you—where the fuck were you, huh?!*

JESUS: Judas—

JUDAS: You forgave Peter and bullshit Thomas—you knocked Paul of Tarsus off a horse—you raised Lazarus from the *fuckin' dead*—but me? Me? Your “heart”? ... *What about me???! What about me, Jesus?! Huh?! You just, you just—I made a mistake! And if that was wrong, then you should have told me! And if a broken heart wasn't sufficient reason to hang, THEN YOU SHOULD HAVE TOLD ME THAT, TOO!* (104)

In the play, despite Jesus's attempts to forgive Judas and deliver him from the despair that plagues him, Judas cannot see the possibility of reconciliation with Christ. According to Guirgis's Judas, Jesus abandoned him; he believes that Christ never loved him. This despair ultimately poisons his view of the world and of love, blinding him to the possibility of being forgiven. However, in and out of religious discourse, the possibility of redemption from despair is possible if one overcomes the pride that ensnares him or her. The two characters continue:

JESUS: I'm right here.

JUDAS: I would have never believed that you could have left me.

JESUS: I never left you.

JUDAS: That you didn't love me.

JESUS: I do love you.

JUDAS: Why...didn't you make me good enough...so that you could've loved me?

JESUS: ...Please take my hands, Judas. Please.

JUDAS: Where are they?

JESUS: Right here.

JUDAS: I can't see them.

JESUS: They're right here.

JUDAS: *Where are you going?!*

JESUS: I'm right here.

JUDAS: *Don't leave me.*

JESUS: I'm here.

JUDAS: I can't hurt...

JESUS: I love you, Judas.

JUDAS: I can't...

JESUS: Please stay.

JUDAS: I can't hurt...

JESUS: Please love me, Judas.

JUDAS: I can't. (106-107)

Guirgis's Judas is so distracted from the pain of his isolation from Christ to recognize that he is given the opportunity for redemption. He cannot accept Christ's love because he feels he is not worthy of it. The feeling of unworthiness, one that plagues many people today, is the reason behind Guirgis's Judas and I argue that this version of Judas asks us to see the biblical Judas in a new way. Despite the way Judas reacts in the play, this attention from Christ not only humanizes Judas and frees him from the adopted characterization of villain in the New Testament, it is also a testimony to the forgiveness and love of Christ toward all people.

### Conclusion

According to traditional Christian thought the commonly accepted actions of Judas Iscariot is deemed a punishable act that deserves an eternity in Hell. However, in within the lens of postmodernism, this particular matter is up for debate: are Judas's actions punishable if his actions were necessary to further the narrative of Jesus? If he was truly blinded by despair and unable to receive forgiveness from Christ as a result of his guilt and ultimately took his own life, should he be punished? Or is there leeway for forgiveness and redemption from God and subsequently, from Christians? Guirgis's *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* suggests how the commonly accepted fate of Judas could be reevaluated using a twenty-first century mindset, despite his accepted role as a traitor.

This mindset is mirrored by the love that Jesus has for His people in the New Testament and in Guirgis's play. At the end of the play, Jesus addresses the audience and says:

And what I want you to *know* is that the efficacy of divine love is practiced consciously. And what I need you to *believe* is that if you hate who I love, you do not know me at all. And make no mistake, "Who I Love" is every last one. I *am* every last one. People ask of me: Where are you? Where are you?... Verily I ask of you to ask yourself: Where are *you*? Where are *you*? (101)

In this passage, Guirgis encapsulates the love of Christ—and outside of religious discourse, the possibility of redemption—for everyone, despite differing opinions in religion, politics, and worldviews. He sees past the flaws of His people and offers the chance for redemption. This is the love that Christians are called to share with others or as 1 John 4:7 declares, “Let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God”; this is the message of *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*. Guirgis presents this message with a postmodern lens offering new ways to think about the narrative of Judas, and ultimately, new ways to treat each other.

# **RUHL'S *PASSION PLAY*: CELEBRATING THE SACRED THROUGH THE SECULAR**

## Introduction

In the first two chapters of this thesis, I focused on the ideological shifts in theological dogma that can occur using the Gospel retellings of mainstream American playwrights. In this chapter, I switch gears and focus on the inclusion of non-Christian audiences attending shows with biblical narrative as inspiration for the text. Using Sarah Ruhl's *Passion Play* as a contemporary lens, this final chapter demonstrates how biblical narrative in art can be personally applicable to non-Christian viewers. I argue that spectators, both Christian and non-Christian, can connect to and reimagine the sacred aspects of the performance—namely the message of Christ and the community that Bible plays create—through the secular components of the production. Furthermore, the audience can interpret the narrative presented in their own unique, localized ways.

In the United States during the nineteenth century, theatrical performances of any kind were segregated from and banned by those within the Protestant religion. According to Charles Musser's essay, "Passions and the Passion Play: Theatre, Film and Religion in America, 1880-1900," these evangelical groups "directed most of their opposition and energy against the vibrant commercial popular culture that seemingly threatened the orderly, austere values and lifestyles of their congregations, communities, and the nation" (421). Until the early 1900s, two groups of Protestant preachers banned the depiction of Christ and His ministry on the stage.<sup>18</sup> For example, in 1880, playwright Salmi Morse offered his version of the Passion play, entitled *The Passion*, to New York City where "he tried unsuccessfully for three years to secure a production" (Bial 1). Mirroring the 1998 protests of McNally's *Corpus Christi* by the Roman Catholic Church, many

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<sup>18</sup> Refer to Charles Musser's "Passions and the Passion Play," pgs. 420-421 for more information on these two Protestant groups.

protestant officials openly opposed the production and demanded it be denied a license to perform in New York City. While the reviews for Morse's *The Passion* were favorable in regard to its artistry and spectacle, Musser details some of the many Protestant arguments against *The Passion*. Among these complaints include the commercialization of Christianity's most famous story, the concern of religious hatred against other faith groups such as Jews, and that "The very act of attempting to reenact or depict Christ and his suffering is sacrilegious" (426). After years of trying to open his show in New York, Morse eventually gave up, ending his attempts to move to Broadway in 1883.

Musser notes that American religious and cultural groups loosely compared Morse's *The Passion* to the famous Oberammergau Passion play in Bavaria, Germany, a ritual playing since the mid-seventeenth century (425). Unlike its German counterpart, *The Passion* was accused of not celebrating the biblical narrative that it portrays. Protestant officials argued that the Oberammergau performance did not capitalize on its commercial appeal, unlike *The Passion*, and was a time when the community came together to celebrate the story of Christ. Ironically as James Shapiro explains in his book *Oberammergau*, the Oberammergau Passion play was praised by Hitler and was famous for its anti-Semitism (ix). During the 1934 season of the Passion play in Bavaria, the production was updated to include nationalistic themes, instituting Nazi ideals within the performances. The village's tourist office advertised, "This 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration is symbolically related to the momentous year of the awakening of the German spirit, this year, which for Germany has brought liberation from Bolshevism, which was destroying all Christian culture" (Shapiro 157). Several scenes within the play were updated slightly with anti-Semitic themes, portraying the Jews as the villains within the biblical narrative and, ultimately, as those who killed Christ. Therefore, I argue that every theatrical production,

and the Passion play in particular, has the potential to ultimately destroy the play's mission to create a different kind of community, as demonstrated in the example above, and relive the story of Christ as a result of political and religious agendas. With this historical information at the forefront, this chapter attempts to answer the following question: how can people produce Passion plays to celebrate the religious messages by all audiences refraining from the nationalistic and religious propaganda that plague them?

This idea inspired Sarah Ruhl to begin writing her inventive play cycle *Passion Play*. During her undergraduate education at Brown University, Ruhl was a student of poetry. However, when she took a playwriting class with American Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paula Vogel, who agreed to serve as her thesis advisor if she wrote a play, Ruhl launched her career in the theatre (Wren 31). Her thesis project was the beginning of the decade-long writing process of *Passion Play*. The playwright's inspiration for the work came from reading a book on the Oberammergau Passion play in the twentieth century. She recounts in the preface to the play:

In this old fashioned narrative, the man who played Christ was actually so holy as to have become a living embodiment. The woman who played Mary was, in real life, just as pure as the Virgin. I started thinking, how would it shape or misshape a life to play a biblical role year after year? How are we scripted? Where is the line between authentic identity and performance? And is there, in fact, such a line? (7)

Ruhl began to search for the answers to these questions in her three-part play cycle. Through the play, she explores the effect that playing a biblical role has on an actor's psyche. Furthermore, she applies a specific political climate to each of the three acts—the first act takes place in Queen Elizabeth's England, the second in Hitler's Germany, and the third in Reagan's United States of America. By applying these lenses, Ruhl explores how theatre and religion can be used to manipulate viewers for support of a particular political or religious agenda: "I found myself fascinated by how leaders use, misuse and legislate religion for their own political aims, and how

leaders turn themselves into theatrical icons” (Ruhl 8). Ruhl tells Celia Wren of *American Theatre Magazine* that “More and more, religion is such a divisive topic—and yet it’s shaping politics so intensely. We’re in a weird moment where we’re not supposed to talk about it with each other, and yet we’re supposed to act on it” (31). *Passion Play’s* readers and viewers are introduced to a series of vignettes where Christianity lives at the forefront of the characters’ worlds but where politics and personal agendas manipulate faith.

Although Ruhl’s play is a commercially successful production that transcends the boundaries of audience reception, many mainstream artists argue which media with religious narratives constitutes as art, if any. Specifically in the twenty-first-century United States, Christian art is rarely studied as part of the American artistic canon. Jill Stevenson speaks to this separation of art, specifically theatre, and Christian religion in the introduction to her book

*Sensational Devotion: Evangelical Performance in Twenty-First-Century America:*

In most cases, Christian performances staged by and for believers have also been excluded from more general studies of twentieth- and twenty-first-century popular theater and performance, an omission that not only obscures the important role that theatricality continues to play within U.S. Christianity, but one that also excises significant examples of religious performance from histories of popular American theater, thereby perpetuating the conventional narrative of Protestantism’s inherent antitheatricality. (8)

One conclusion drawn from this separation between art forms is that Passion plays and religious spectacles such as mega-churches, TV evangelists, etc. support a religious agenda or are politically or financially motivated. For example, Pastor John MacArthur speaks to the fraudulent tendencies and big-business atmospheres of large ministries around the United States in a blog post entitled “A Colossal Fraud” saying:

The faith healers and health-and-wealth preachers who dominate religious television are shameless frauds. Their message is not the true gospel of Jesus Christ. There is nothing spiritual or miraculous about their on-stage chicanery. It is all a devious ruse designed to take advantage of desperate people. They are not godly ministers but greedy impostors who corrupt the Word of God for money's sake.

As a result of this cautionary sensibility that some people, both Christians and non-Christians, have for profit-receiving Christian organizations and ministries, there is a disconnect between the genuine intentions for the piece of art being presented and the suspicion of commercialism from evangelical art in the mainstream. Is it motivated by financial profit or out of Christian charity and a faith-based message?

In addition to this suspicion of religious propaganda or personal agendas within evangelical art, there is an intellectual divide within mainstream art culture and evangelical artistry regarding quality. In regard to evangelical film, critics argue that the majority of mainstream Christian cinema produced recently has been of poor quality both in artistic merit and storyline. Movies such as the 2011 film *Courageous* and the 2014 film *God Is Not Dead* were ultimately rejected by non-Christian audiences for their bad quality and unrealistic, preachy storylines, despite the attempt to make them more appealing for a wider audience. Therefore, contributing to the discussion on the divide between mainstream and evangelical art, is a lack of artistic quality a cause for this separation between the mainstream and evangelical art circles?

Jill Stevenson argues that this disconnect from non-Christian believers—be it from personal agendas or the quality of art—stems from the necessity for Christians to appeal to fellow Christian believers. She writes, “What ultimately makes these genres valuable to believers is their unique ability to clarify, secure, and reinforce faith” (21). Even though, according to scripture, the ultimate mission of the Christian is to “witness,” or share the Gospel with non-believers, evangelical arts through popular media such as film, television, and the theatre mainly appeal to those who believe in the same messages as those who create the art.<sup>19</sup> Stevenson argues

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<sup>19</sup> Refer to Matthew 5:16.

that these particular art forms and genres fall under a specific dramaturgy that she calls *evangelical dramaturgy*:

Like all dramaturgical systems, evangelical dramaturgy assumes certain interpretations of representation, realism, enactment, spectatorship, and presence, in order to achieve particular aesthetic, ideological, and experiential effects. Moreover, I contend that evangelical genres that utilize this dramaturgy do not merely represent theological concepts and depict biblical stories; rather, they confront users with vivid, sensual, and rhythmic experiences designed to foster embodied beliefs that respond to specific devotional needs and priorities (4).

Stevenson writes that “Evangelical Christians employ popular media not simply to reflect or communicate theology but, more important, to increase accessibility in ways that give lay believers agency over their faith (6). In other words, she suggests that beliefs and practices from one particular group may inform another; in this case, non-evangelical audience members receive the evangelical message. However, since this particular dramaturgy only appeals to a Christian audience, I offer the suggestion to expand Stevenson’s argument so that non-Christian art can fall under evangelical dramaturgy with the goal of allowing a larger audience—both Christian and non-Christian—to interpret the biblical narrative on an individualized basis. By applying Stevenson’s framework of evangelical dramaturgy to a play written by a non-Christian playwright whose plays appeal to a mainstream audience and whose work uses biblical narrative within the plot, both Christian and non-Christian audiences can look at the performance in a new, non-exclusive way.

Throughout this chapter, I apply Stevenson’s idea of evangelical dramaturgy to Sarah Ruhl’s *Passion Play* by further classifying *Passion Play* as a ritualistic performance that falls under my own evangelical dramaturgical neologism, the “neo-ritual,” or a ritualistic performance that meshes secular themes within the religious contexts of the ritual to invite non-Christians to take part in its redemptive message. Furthermore, I use Ruhl’s *Passion Play* as inspiration to

argue that if twenty-first-century Christians and Christian artists apply Dietrich Bonhoeffer's idea of a "religionless" Christianity to the theatrical biblical narratives, this may separate any personal, political, or religious agendas from the Passion play and introduce the theatre as a sacred space where the biblical narrative is not hindered by outside religious forces. These theories and ideas make sacred performances more accessible and welcoming to non-Christian audience members.

#### About the Play: *Passion Play*

Sarah Ruhl's *Passion Play* is a metatheatrical play cycle in three acts. Although the play was created to run in succession, Ruhl wrote each act so they can also stand alone. Each act surrounds a town preparing for its production of the Passion play with insight into the rehearsals in the respective time periods, scenes from the performance, as well as the personal struggles of each of the actors. In every act, the characters reprise their roles but in different forms and with varied storylines. As Charles Isherwood describes in his *New York Times* review "The Intersection of Fantasy and Faith," "All three sections are, fundamentally, backstage soap operas accented with comedy and a little bit of mysticism, as biblical imagery bleeds from the stage into life and vice versa" (C5). Furthermore, each act contains an air of the political atmosphere that ultimately controls the way the play is run, a critique on the use of politics in sacred drama, and a demonstration for the need of religionless Christianity within Christian performance.

The first act takes place in England in 1575 during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. At this time Elizabeth—who was excommunicated from the Church—was about to "shut down the Passion Plays in order to control religious representation" (Ruhl 7). The historical Elizabeth believed that she was the ultimate source of authority and "The queen expected to enjoy absolute authority, licensing and advancing those clerics whom she approved, censoring and imprisoning

those who displeased her” (Christian 561). At the end of the first act of Ruhl’s play, the queen visits this Northern English town and cancels the production.

During the first act, John the fisherman plays the role of Christ and is envied by his cousin, Pontius the fish-gutter, who plays the roles of Pilate and Satan in the town’s play. Pontius also desires Mary 1 (who plays the roles of the Virgin Mary and Eve). He impregnates her and she tries to pass off her pregnancy as the second Immaculate Conception to keep her role in the both the town’s Passion play and her reputation in society. Mary 2 is in love with Mary 1 and suggests they run away together to raise her child. After the queen bans the production, Mary 1 drowns herself. As a result of his grief, Pontius says:

There is nothing left for me, Mary, but to find you. I will swim to you, arms outstretched.  
So that no man in the world may  
Give me a cruel death;  
My own heart  
With my knife I will pierce –

Oh, alas, and welaway – (56)

He stabs himself with a knife while his cousin fishes on the other side of the stage.

Act two takes place in Oberammergau, Bavaria in 1934 during the reign of Adolf Hitler. At this time in history, many actors and the director of the Passion play were already members of the Nazi party. Ruhl uses this information within her play. According to the play’s introduction, Hitler saw the village’s Passion play several times and publically admired it (Ruhl 7). During Hitler’s reign, the play’s script was updated to include anti-Semitic themes. In his book *Oberammergau*, James Shapiro writes “In the official guide to the Passion play of 1934, Oberammergau’s village pastor, Franz Xavier Bogenrieder, praised the fusion of religious and nationalist impulses in the new production, and hailed it as an improvement upon the past” (158). When Hitler visits a production of the Passion play at Oberammergau in Ruhl’s play, the

playwright uses his actual words to express his love for the production and its mission: “to remain forever watchful in the knowledge of the menace of the Jews” (Ruhl 92).

In the second act, similar themes occur among the actors. This time, Eric who plays Jesus in the Oberammergau Passion play has an ongoing homosexual relationship with the Footsoldier who portrays Pilate. The two are spotted embracing by a German Officer who seduces Elsa, cast as the Virgin Mary. Mary 2, Eric’s sister and the actress who plays the role of Mary Magdalene, cares for her dying father who was until this point the man who played Christ. Against Eric’s will, he takes his father’s place. During a rehearsal, a young Jewish orphan named Violet helps Eric remember his lines during “The Last Supper” speech. As he repeats what she says, she amends the lines with her own version saying:

And finally, I want everyone  
at this table,  
eating my blood and my body,  
to remember that  
I am a Jew. (82)

At the end of the play, both the Footsoldier and Eric become German soldiers in the Nazi regime. Eric arrests Violet as the sound of a train blows in the background.

In the final act, the audience is transported to Spearfish, South Dakota from 1969 to the present (the act takes place over several years). The Passion play in the third act is based off the actual Spearfish Passion play. In the 1940s, an older actor from the Oberammergau Passion play brought the play to South Dakota where “the American performers question the blatant bigotry, and the Anti-Defamation League has enforced some changes” (Frank 501). Ruhl notes some of these changes through her characters in act three:

YOUNG DIRECTOR. Look, we’ve had the Anti-Defamation League here, haven’t we?  
CARPENTER 2. (*to the Young Director*) Oh, yeah they came, about six years ago, and gave us some feed-back. Used to be we had horns on the costumes of the high priests but

we took them off a long time ago – um – six years ago. So the Anti-Defamation League – now they really – um – like our play. (132)

The play begins during the draft for the Vietnam War in the United States. J plays the role of Jesus; he is a college philosophy student. His brother P plays the role of Pontius Pilate and Satan. Before he goes to war he marries Mary 1 who, similar to the earlier acts, plays the roles of the Virgin Mary and Eve. While P is serving in the war, J and Mary 1 have an affair. When P returns, he suffers from the trauma of his service and the personal complications of his home life. During the last act, Ruhl switches the symbolic roles of J and P, making P the tragic figure throughout the play. As Glenda Frank describes in her performance review for *Theatre Journal*, “He is a hero for our time, the sacrificed (drafted) son and killer for the state” (501). His existential state of mind caused by posttraumatic stress disorder explores the role of American citizens in civilian life, in war, and within spirituality.

Ruhl uses this style of metatheatricality or a play-within-a-play to disrupt the sacredness of the Passion play and to demonstrate the real lives and struggles of those involved with the ritualistic production, ultimately using biblical narrative to connect with non-Christian audience members. This technique extends Stevenson’s idea of evangelical dramaturgy as it appeals to both Christian and non-Christian audiences. Ruhl also strays from the typical trends of realism that mainstream audiences expect from twenty-first-century theatre by including various nonrealistic symbols and metaphors—such as a parade of human-sized fish—that weave the three acts together. The play does not follow a typical unity of time or action but instead continuously moves from one fractured scene to the next. This series of techniques distances as well as historicizes each Passion play performance throughout the ages through the actors who are embodying the characters from different periods. Ruhl leaves the reader and audience member asking, how do the political and social constraints of a particular time period affect a

person involved with a sacred production at that time? Furthermore, Ruhl's poetic quality in her writing weaves the lives of each of her characters from every act through a series of dreamlike imagery, similar situations, and symbols arguing that all of humanity is interconnected through our desire for self-fulfillment and acceptance.

### Jesus Novels, Gospel Rewrites, and the "Neo-Ritual"

In *The Quest for the Fictional Jesus: Gospel Rewrites, Gospel (Re)Interpretation, and Christological Portraits within Jesus Novels*, Ramey explores the theological strategies and agendas of a literary phenomenon known as the Jesus novel, or books that have been written about the life and actions of Jesus Christ. Often times, these novels or novellas follow a similar structure to the biblical account of Christ but take artistic liberties in their content. Nevertheless, Ramey clarifies the classification of this plot device saying, "To qualify as a Jesus novel, the novel's fictional Jesus must be externally referential in some way to its real-world counterpart, Jesus of Nazareth" (4). In other words, the Jesus-figure should follow the familiar narrative of Christ's life as written in the Bible with similar aspects that include time period or name. As long as these devices are followed, creative liberties may be taken within the story. I argue that this idea is a postmodern classification of contemporary work surrounding the narrative of Christ as it allows both the author and the readers the ability to interpret the biblical narrative as they wish as opposed to framing the interpretation using the existing adopted truths of organized religion.

An example of Ramey's taxonomy can be seen in Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi* (explored in depth in chapter one of this thesis). McNally received major criticism for his extensive liberties taken with the play's Christ-like figure, Joshua. Although the plotline strays considerably from the original biblical narrative and Joshua from his real-world counterpart, McNally used the original narrative as a source for his plot and took creative liberties to recover

the Gospel meaning in a postmodern society. Therefore, I propose that *Corpus Christi* fits under the umbrella of Ramey's Jesus novel and that her ideas do not simply apply to literature, but to all art that follows the confines of historical fiction.

In addition to historical fiction, Ramey also classifies Jesus novels as Gospel rewrites, another demonstration of postmodernism at work. In her essay "Saramago's *Gospel* and the Poetics of Prototypical Rewriting," literary theorist Ziva Ben-Porat classifies a Gospel rewrite as "a retelling of a known story in such a way that the resulting text, the rewrite, is simultaneously an original composition and a recognizable rendition, involving a rereading of the source" (93). Because writers use the original text as the "major building blocks" as Ramey describes, the reader, or in the case of this thesis, the audience member is able to interpret the connection between both the original and the new work, a postmodern approach to interpreting biblical narrative. The plays discussed in this thesis, classified as Gospel rewrites, reshape Christian narrative with a postmodern lens. Furthermore, as Ramey contends, the Gospel rewrite and Jesus novel "not only affects interpretation of the rewrite but also alters the reader's relationship to and understanding of the original text itself," allowing to reader or spectator to see multiple interpretations of Jesus (7).<sup>20</sup> Therefore, through dramatic narratives, adaptations of the Passion play such as Ruhl's *Passion Play* propose postmodern Christian ideas and invite connections with non-Christians who can now interpret, reimagine, and draw parallels from the biblical narrative for themselves, itself a hallmark of postmodern Christianity.

Furthermore, I argue that these Gospel rewrites and Jesus novels fall under Stevenson's model of evangelical dramaturgy and also combine a non-religious worldview with the message

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<sup>20</sup> For more of an evaluation of these Jesus "types" often seen in Gospel rewrites, see pages 9-15 in Ramey's *The Quest for the Fictional Jesus*.

of the traditional Passion plays. Applying Stevenson's classification to Ruhl's *Passion Play*, I propose that the play falls under a genre within this evangelical dramaturgy that I call the neo-ritual, or the fusion of non-religious themes within a sacredness of a ritual performance. This frame allows a different kind of approach for non-religious audiences to connect to the religious message using a nontraditional structure so that they can interpret the religious narratives for themselves. Ruhl occasionally meshes the two worldviews—religious and non-religious—together, showing how audience members may connect to the sacred characters through the non-sacred counterparts and thus inviting non-Christians to take part in the ritual. This idea suggests a postmodern theatricality that blurs lines between Christian and non-Christian audiences with the goal of continuously reinterpreting and reimagining biblical narrative.

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, Ruhl recalls an old-fashioned narrative from a book on the Oberammergau Passion play in the early 1900s. She writes how the man playing the Christ in the performance “was actually so bold as to have become a living embodiment. The woman who played Mary was, in real life, just as pure as the Virgin” (7). Since the ritualistic tendencies of the Passion plays were to have actors able and willing to live their lives embodying their sacred counterparts, there is a barrier that exists between the players and the non-Christian audience. Ruhl even portrays her characters having this very conversation, arguing about the line between the sacred narrative that the Passion play uses as the script, and the non-religious art form used to share the story:

YOUNG DIRECTOR. I think we need to get away from talking about the play as a real historical document and get back to the play as a *play*. It is our task as actors to –  
MARY 2. It's not just a play! It's the word of God!  
DIRECTOR. Yes, of course. Can we move on now? (132-133)

Using Ruhl's ideas as a lens, I argue this idea of sacred performance and holy lifestyles presented to non-Christian believers separate them from the religious narrative on stage.

However, Ruhl's *Passion Play* as a neo-ritual within evangelical dramaturgy combats this idea. By making her Passion play actors people with whom the audience can connect, Ruhl removes this association of holiness from the Passion actors and connects them directly to the audience. This is a technique that Stevenson calls "blending." She writes, "when watching a play, spectators make sense of what they see by blending the living actors with their characters' identities" (114). For example, in the first act of *Passion Play* during the sixteenth century Passion play presentation in a small village in England, Mary 1, the actress playing the Virgin Mary desires John, the actor playing Jesus. In a scene entitled "Mary and Mary," Mary 1 and Mary 2 speak to one another:

MARY 1. Oh! Oh! His loincloth is slipping!

MARY 2. It's sinful to covet your own son, Mary. It's a sin, a sin against God.

MARY 1. I didn't ask to play his mother.

MARY 2. I'm sure it's not right, Mary. Perhaps we should switch roles. I think my part has more scenes with John the Fisherman.

MARY 1. Oh!

MARY 2. Run find the director and ask! Go on! (24)

In this exchange, Ruhl highlights the actresses' humanness, ultimately tainting Mary 1 the "sexual purity" that the actress playing the Virgin Mary is expected to possess. Ruhl makes the characters blatantly sexual beings that openly talk about their desires. Since they are "real" people who encounter sexual desires, the audience can connect to the play on a personal level and receive the positive effects of the biblical narrative like the actors do when performing plays with religious narratives.

In addition to making her characters sexual beings that talk about their desires, Ruhl also explores the negative religious traditions that work as disciplinary forces against all people. As a result, non-Christian audience members witness common contemporary issues and themes within the sacred performance. An example lies in act one of *Passion Play* in the storyline of Mary 2.

The actress experiences sexual feelings toward women and confesses her desires to a visiting friar who is in hiding from the Queen's men:

MARY 2. Forgive me Father, for I have sinned. I have dreams of women embracing me and kissing me full on the lips.

VISITING FRIAR: That is indeed a sin. I want you to say twenty Hail Marys, thirty-two Our Fathers, and hang a crucifix above your bed.

MARY 2. But there is a crucifix above my bed, Father. And I find that I rather enjoy the dreams, though I try not to have them.

VISITING FRIAR. Now you mustn't enjoy such dreams, Mary. It addles a young girl's brain to play the role of a whore from a young age. (26)

The Visiting Friar associates Mary 2's role as Mary Magdalene in the Passion play with her homosexual attractions. Because she is playing the role of a once-promiscuous person, he believes that she is more susceptible to fall victim to a "sinful" sexual lifestyle than others. This mirrors many of the arguments against homosexuality that evangelical church leaders and family members use to persuade gay people away from sexual behavior in the twenty-first century. Therefore, by inviting audience members to take part of the neo-ritual, or the juxtaposition and the meshing of secular themes with religious themes, the audience member is willing to connect to the performance on a personal level, witnessing that those involved in the production are indeed human with similar struggles and triumphs to their own.

Retelling and reinterpreting the Gospel allows its message to extend to both Christian and non-Christian viewers and allows them to continuously reimagine biblical narrative. By applying postmodern theories and ideas such as Ben-Porat's classification of the Gospel rewrites to theatrical productions such as the Passion play and specifically Ruhl's *Passion Play*, the narrative of Christ becomes malleable for a twenty-first-century audience. Additionally, by applying Stevenson's idea of evangelical dramaturgy to *Passion Play* and classifying the play as a neo-ritual as a method of retelling the Gospel, non-religious ideas merge with religious ritualistic aspects of theatrical performances and other artistic mediums.

## Cheap Grace in Sacred Performance

Throughout *Passion Play*, Ruhl illuminates the tension between politics and religion within sacred performance in the twenty-first century by highlighting similar issues in history. This section analyzes the playwright's spotlight on these tensions and uses Dietrich Bonhoeffer's ideas of cheap grace and a religionless Christianity to support the notion of removing political and religious agendas from these rituals of sacred theatre such as the Passion play and in commercial theatre productions such as *Passion Play*. Furthermore, I argue that Ruhl's play mirrors Bonhoeffer's idea of religionless Christianity by interweaving secular characters with their sacred counterparts in this metatheatrical production.

Until the day he died, Bonhoeffer dedicated his work and teaching to explore Christianity's role in the secular world, namely the Church's role in society and the notion of Government as a divinely inspired institution. In his book *Ethics*, an accumulation of many of his works and essays, Bonhoeffer writes:

Government is divinely ordained authority to exercise worldly dominion by divine right. Government is deputyship for God on earth. It can be understood only from above. Government does not proceed from society, but it orders society from above. (297)

Political theorist René de Visme Williamson expands on Bonhoeffer's ideas in his book *Politics and Protestant Theology: An Interpretation of Tillich, Barth, Bonhoeffer, and Brunner* explaining that while the government does not have to confess Christ, "It is the duty of the government to maintain conditions under which the Christian faith can flourish or, at least, not be unduly handicapped" (81). Therefore, if government is a divinely inspired institution, Bonhoeffer argues it must be upheld as such and not taken advantage of or abused. In *Passion Play*, Ruhl examines the correlation between the ritual of the Passion play and the involvement and abuse of national politics within the sacred theatrical production. In act one, Queen Elizabeth

cancels the play as acknowledgement of Catholicism hinders her complete reign over religion in England. She speaks in a way that would perhaps support the Catholic's reasoning for cancelling the town's production of the ritual:

I do not want the gravediggers to scrape white paint off the dead faces of my subjects. I want my subjects to remain clean. Clean and honest and loyal to the crown. I do not want my subjects to impersonate the holy figure of Christ. Did Christ paint his face? No! Such things are unholy. If any man or woman in England is seen with a painted face, assuming the person of a holy figure on a stage, I will have them beheaded. Immediately. (53)

Both Ruhl's Elizabeth and the historical Elizabeth have intentions that are predominantly based on selfishness. If both of these figures' subjects give their attention to the Catholic tradition, then they are not the only sources of power. Furthermore, the Church of England is not the only religious authority in the country. Therefore, in the play, Elizabeth had to cancel the play to limit the loyalty to Catholicism and insure her power. The opposite reaction occurs in act two when Hitler comes to witness the Oberammergau Passion play. Before the performance begins, Hitler addresses the audience, expressing his support for the show:

One of our most important tasks will be to save future generations and to remain forever watchful in the knowledge of the menace of the Jews. For this reason alone it is vital that the Passion Play be continued at Oberammergau; for never has the menace of the Jews been so convincingly portrayed as in this presentation of what happened in the times of the Romans. There one sees in Pontius Pilate a Roman racially and intellectually superior, there he stands out like a firm, clean rock in the middle of the whole muck and mire of the Jews. Now, continue with your holy play. How I *love* the theater. (92)

As stated earlier, in 1934 the Oberammergau Passion play was updated with anti-Semitic themes. Both Ruhl's Hitler and the historical leader of the Nazi Party supported the play for this very reason and to re-appropriate the ritual for political purposes. According to James Shapiro, Hitler's support for the play "could be seen as a shrewd political move on Hitler's part to secure greater support among Catholic voters in Bavaria" (166). Ultimately, the Führer's support or

dismissal of the Passion play is a political move that mirrors debates regarding religion and politics in the twenty-first century.

Similar to political agendas used by national leaders regarding the Passion play, many modern religious institutions maintain agendas to coerce people to follow their particular beliefs. The inspiration behind these agendas ranges anywhere from monetary gains to increasing the number of followers it possesses. These churches, many of which serve under the umbrella of evangelical Christianity, abandon the message and purpose of the church while inventing new methods to fulfill its agenda. Reflecting on the ideas of Bonhoeffer regarding this idea of a religious agenda, Williamson writes:

By allowing itself to become an institution the Church became like all institutions: self-centered and defensive. It sought to acquire new privileges and to make old ones more secure. Its defensiveness took the form of apologetics—*i.e.*, arguments designed to convert unbelievers and to defend Christianity against attacks from within and from without—and condemned the world for refusing to accept its claim. (90)

Bonhoeffer writes that the modern church exercises what he calls cheap grace, or “the grace which amounts to the justification of sin without the justification of the repentant sinner who departs from sin and from whom sin departs. Cheap grace is not the kind of forgiveness of sin that frees us from the toils of sin. Cheap grace is the grace we bestow upon ourselves” (*Testament* 308). In other words, people who preach a particular message but do not live what they preach exercise cheap grace. Bonhoeffer argues that this type of hypocrisy is common in modern Christianity.

Bonhoeffer’s idea of cheap grace is prevalent in the private lives of some of the characters in *Passion Play*. For example, in the second act, the German Officer catches Eric and the German Soldier, who are involved in a secret relationship, in an embrace. He later confronts the Footsoldier and makes him place his hand on Elsa’s backside. He says to the Foot Soldier:

GERMAN OFFICER. I want you to remember. Repeat after me. This is a woman's flesh.  
FOOT SOLDIER. This is a woman's flesh.  
GERMAN OFFICER. It feels something like a melon, or a ripe squash.  
FOOT SOLDIER. It feels something like a melon, or a ripe squash.  
GERMAN OFFICER. How I love womanly flesh.  
FOOT SOLDIER. How I love womanly flesh.  
GERMAN OFFICER. Soldier, do you know what happens to men in the German army who do not appreciate women the way a man should?  
FOOT SOLDIER. I don't know what you mean, sir.  
GERMAN OFFICER. Oh, I think you do. (88-89)

The German Officer combats the crime of homosexual behavior between males as stated in paragraph 175 of the *German Criminal Code* by forcing the Foot Soldier to exercise a sexual attraction for "woman's flesh." Meanwhile, earlier in the play, the German Soldier and Elsa begin a sexual relationship. The German Soldier advances:

GERMAN OFFICER. I am a blunt man, Elsa. Will you ever marry?  
ELSA. Is that a proposal, sir?  
GERMAN OFFICER: Is that a yes?  
ELSA. I wish to play Mary one last time. And after –  
GERMAN OFFICER: After?  
ELSA. Perhaps –  
GERMAN OFFICER. A man cannot live on perhaps.  
ELSA. But there are many kinds of perhaps – perhaps you *can* live on perhaps –  
GERMAN OFFICER. Perhaps like this?  
*He slides his hand up her dress.*  
ELSA. Perhaps –  
*He slides his hand further.*  
*She smiles.*  
ELSA. But no one must know –  
GERMAN OFFICER. Oh, Elsa. (76)

As stated earlier in this chapter, while involved in a Passion play ritual such as the 1934 Oberammergau production, the actress playing the Virgin Mary is expected to remain sexually "pure" to better connect with her sacred character. However, Elsa gives in to the advances of the German Soldier and allows him to sleep with her. Furthermore, it is clear that the unmarried sexual relationship between the German Soldier and Elsa is not technically socially correct, but homosexual relationships are not politically accepted and therefore, it is a greater offense to be

punished. The German officer sees no problem with sexual “sin” but does not condone homosexual behavior. This is an example of what Bonhoeffer would describe as cheap grace, or the hypocrisy of people.

To contest the hypocrisy of cheap grace and the religiosity of the church and of organized religion, Bonhoeffer suggests a religionless Christianity, or a return back to Christian principles without the cheap grace that plagues Christianity, an idea Sarah Ruhl mirrors in *Passion Play* to clarify the biblical message despite the separation of Christians and non-Christians. Bonhoeffer introduced this idea of religionless Christianity in an exchange of letters with his friend and former student Eberhard Bethge in 1944. He wrote to Bethge:

What is bothering me incessantly is the question what Christianity really is, or indeed who Christ really is, for us today. The time when people could be told everything by means of words, whether theological or pious, is over, and so is the time of inwardness and conscience—and that means the time of religion in general. We are moving towards a completely religionless time; people as they are now simply cannot be religious any more. Even those who honestly describe themselves as ‘religious’ do not in the least act up to it, and so they presumably mean something quite different by ‘religious’ (*Testament* 501).

The Christian religion as it is known today is a manmade invention inspired by the Bible. Over the centuries, however, its existence was modified over time through historical and social occurrences. As time progressed, the institution of Christianity has branched into thousands of different offshoots and sects, each with unique doctrine and dogma that ultimately mediates how one is to live one’s life. Therefore, the sacredness of Christianity and of biblical narrative is disrupted. Bonhoeffer suggests that Christians recognize this separation from the biblical message and return back to an unadulterated Christian lifestyle. In her book *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre*, Erika Fischer-Lichte explores the relationship between the audience and the performers, recognizing the sacred bond between them. She writes:

The performance is taking place *between* actors and spectators; it is brought forth by both parties. Thus, the performance is not to be regarded as a representation or expression of something which already exists elsewhere—like the text of a play—but as something which is brought forth by the actors, perceptions, responses of both actors and spectators alike. The performance calls for a social community since it is rooted in one, and, on the other hand, since in its course it brings forth a social community that unites actors and spectators (23).

Fischer-Lichte's connection between spectator and performer represents a ritualistic bond in a sacred atmosphere: the theatre. Outside forces such as political or religious influences do not deter this relationship and the spectators leave with a sense of understanding the actor's unadulterated message. Fischer-Lichte's idea mirrors Bonhoeffer's proposal of religionless Christianity as the latter suggests a separation from outside religious forces and a direct connection with the sacred text.

Ruhl's *Passion Play* echoes both this religionless Christianity and the sacredness of theatre in that she hopes to interweave the different layers of her characters within her metatheatrical production; she ultimately combines the roles of the secular characters with their respective sacred characters, demonstrating the accessibility of the sacred components of the Passion play for all people instead of a specifically Christian audience. She dismisses the Christian "norms" and connects the biblical narrative with the struggles and worldviews of her characters. For example, in act three of the play when P returns from the war with major depression and the inability to acclimate back into civilian society, his relationship with Christianity and, more specifically, with God is compromised. He no longer feels the existence of God and therefore, does not feel he has a right to participate in the Passion play where people "should believe in God":

P. And I would think of old Pilate, lying there in the dark. How Pilate has good intentions – he *had* to kill someone innocent, it was all part of the big plan. He saved us all, didn't he, by being willing to be bad. But – a little girl's brains – there's no plan for that.  
MARY 1. You're a good man.

P. Yeah, right. I don't want to be in the play anymore.

MARY 1. What? Why not?

P. I don't believe in God anymore.

MARY 1. It's okay – a lot of people don't believe in God these days –

P. No – it's not okay! In this town – people *should* believe in God – or else they're fucking hypocrites! You believe in God, don't you Mary –

MARY 1. Yes, I believe in God – (137)

P, who plays Pilate in the Passion play attempts to justify the New Testament villain's actions by saying if he did not send Christ to be crucified, the Passion narrative would be disrupted. Since he does not feel the redemption for Pilate, or at least any recognition of his role in the Passion narrative, he no longer feels the validity for the existence of God. Furthermore, he notes that people in Spearfish, South Dakota should live out their roles to the best of their ability, mimicking the sacred expectations of the Passion play actors. Since he does not believe in God any longer, Judas separates himself from the religion. Mary 1 admits that many people involved in the production do not believe in God any longer, suggesting the hypocrisy of those involved with the sacred performance.

Ruhl's critique of American politics and of war in the play is similar to Bonhoeffer's critique of the modern Christian religion. In a scene in the second part of act three, P drunkenly stumbles into Mary 1's home years after their divorce and rambles about the role of the American President in relation to war:

P. I killed people – for that man – and no one wants to give me a fucking bar of soap!

MARY 1. What man?

P. The President, who else.

MARY 1. There's another President in the White House now, honey.

P. Take your pick! A likeable man becomes a tyrant just like any other man. In a democracy – likeability is tantamount to tyranny.

MARY 1. Tantamount?

P. Tantamount.

MARY 1. You're drunk.

P. No – I'm not drunk! In a democracy, it is a *likeable* man who gets elected. It is a *likeable* man who sends you to your death. What's the difference?

MARY 1. There's a difference between a – a – likeable man and an evil man.

P. I can tell you, you don't *feel* the difference, when everyone gets zipped up in a body bag, and no one says anything about it, they just say "ZIP!" Because when there are guts where skin should be – and skin, where guts should be – there's no difference between a nice guy and an evil guy who sent you out to kill. One of them is *photogenic* – the other one isn't – they both take you and they go ZIP. (144)

To P, it does not matter if the leader seems to be a respected person or a nice individual. Anyone who sends another person to war to kill and be killed is an evil person. Similarly, from Bonhoeffer's point of view, the Christian who is consumed with religious ideals does not take responsible action for the world or treat all people with the redemption that is expected of Christians according to the Bible. Christian religion, which mediates what people see and how people should live through dogma, often excludes non-Christian audiences from popular media. Ruhl clarifies the biblical message through a specific means of dramaturgy and reestablishes the role that Christianity and biblical narrative can play in the lives of non-Christian viewers. This is an example of religionless Christianity; the exclusivity of religion is removed and a reconnection with Christian ideals is established. Theatre becomes a sacred space where the unadulterated biblical message can be shared. Religionless Christianity insures both a personal connection with non-religious audience members and the further teaching of Christian believers.

### Conclusion

The Passion play in both contemporary performance and throughout history exists to celebrate biblical narrative as a community of performers and spectators. However, as the Passion play progressed throughout the centuries, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a disconnect between the sacred and secular aspects of performance caused a separation between non-religious and Christian audience members. In Nazi Germany, the Oberammergau Passion play was updated to include themes of anti-Semitism. In the United States, Passion plays and religious performances and art such as film attract only specific, mostly

Christian audiences. This latter issue is large in part due to a miscommunication in the separation of church and state. Sarah Ruhl speaks to this separation (or lack thereof) in the introduction to

*Passion Play*. She writes:

More and more, it seems to me that the separation between church and state is coming into question in our country. We are a divided nation. And the more divided we are, the less we talk about what divides us. The left is perceived of as anti-religious ideological secularists; the right as religious zealots. But whatever happened to the founding fathers' rationale for separating church and state? More devotion was possible, and more kinds of devotion would be possible, the less the state controlled religious rhetoric. More devotion, and more conversation about devotion, would be possible with that freedom. (Ruhl 8)

I argue that Ruhl's *Passion Play* is an evangelical dramaturgical form of retelling the Gospel through the neo-ritual, or a term I invented to describe a ritual that implements non-religious themes within the sacred art form. Furthermore, the play suggests a return to the Christian cores and a separation from contemporary religion as I connect the play to the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Ruhl's play demonstrates that if the Passion play is presented in a way to connect personally to non-Christian audience members in addition to Christians, it has the ability to share the message of its narrative to nonbelievers. This not only separates political and religious agendas from the art with biblical narratives, but also extends the attraction of these productions to non-Christian audience members. As Ruhl writes through her Character P in act three, "I don't know if this country needs more religion or less of it. Seems to me everyone needs a good night's sleep" (153). Ultimately, I argue that religion is unnecessary to share the message of the Bible and the core of Christianity. Instead, allowing the theatre to become a sacred space, the audience and the performers can build a connection that ensures a unique interpretation of and a deep connection with biblical narrative.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I analyzed three contemporary, mainstream plays that provide an updated look at the New Testament Passion narrative. These plays that I classify as Gospel retellings reevaluate and reintroduce the biblical message to all people with varying spiritual beliefs despite differences in sexual, cultural, or political ideologies. Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi* completely reimagines the narrative of Christ by telling the story of a Christ-like figure named Joshua. By relocating the Passion to modern Corpus Christi, Texas and by layering prominent themes of homosexuality in the plot and characters of his play, McNally suggests that while some Christians may not agree with homosexual behavior as an acceptable option for Christian living, the narrative of the New Testament applies to all people including gay men and women. In *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, Stephen Adly Guirgis presents a retelling of the narrative of Judas Iscariot and provides an alternative way of looking at the actions and fate of the biblical Judas through his theatrical counterpart. Furthermore, Guirgis presents this message with a postmodern sensibility offering new ways to think about the judgment of Judas and of each other. Finally, Sarah Ruhl explores three different time periods, political climates, and religious atmospheres through her three-act play cycle *Passion Play* and in the process creates a sacred space within the theatre that allows her audiences to generate a unique interpretation of and a deeper connection with biblical narrative.

I suggest that a theoretical lens of postmodernism applied to modern evangelical Christianity allows Christians to look at and redefine scriptural interpretation and application of outdated and exclusive religious dogma. As a result of these theatrical analyses, I propose that applying a postmodern sensibility in a twenty-first-century world and by retelling and redefining the New Testament Gospels through contemporary Passion plays, all people are welcome to

receive the Gospel message. While evangelical Christians may oppose some of the radical changes within these retellings—the incarnation of a homosexual Christ-like figure, for example—at the core of these playwrights’ works lies a fundamental expectation to love one another despite differences in lifestyles or ideologies. Furthermore, these plays are a call to bridge the gap between the traditional and—I argue—outdated Evangelical Christian Church and a postmodern generation that works to understand multiple layers of truth.

As this project comes to a close, I reflect upon the questions that I asked at the beginning of this study: what are the ways in which modernized Passion Plays change the message of the Gospels to apply to all people?; how do modern retellings of the Christian Bible resonate with both traditional evangelical audiences and postmodernist audiences?; and how can these plays be used to bridge the gap between these two audiences? The contents of these chapters analyze three contemporary Passion plays to understand how biblical scripture may be reimagined and reinterpreted with a personal, localized lens and furthermore suggests how biblical narrative may be redefined to apply to all people. However, additional research can be conducted on how theatre can be used to challenge continually the religious status quo that often rejects the progressive thinking that connects Christian and “secular” worldviews. How can these particular plays be presented to an evangelical Christian audience without the immediate rejection to their radical natures? This study might challenge people to think about the core of evangelical Christianity and perhaps offer suggestions of what it looks like to interpret scripture on a personal level as opposed to a member of a man-made religious agenda.

This series of new questions and potential research endeavors along with a reflection upon the work done in this thesis also brings up the question of how to destroy the dichotomy of audiences—Christian audiences and non-Christian audiences—that I have adopted throughout

this thesis. While I recognize that all people have different views on particular ideas within politics, spirituality, human rights, and other social commentaries, I also ask myself, does separating these audiences into multiple camps help to bring people closer to the message of the Gospels? Furthermore, while I recognize the major difference between the opinions of my conservative evangelical family and friends and my liberal colleagues, does it help or hinder those who are not Christian to be reminded that they live outside of this religious circle? And on the other hand, does it help or hinder these so-called Christian audiences to remind them that they are excluding a “non-Christian” audience? Now that the framework of this thesis has been laid, how can I amend the language used within to notate that all art, despite its purpose or mission, can be applicable to all people as opposed to a particular audience? Consequentially, deconstructing this dichotomy will also allow me to stray from assuming how an audience thinks or feels based on my own understanding of their worldviews or beliefs. Is this not the prescriptive voice that this project hopes to debunk?

Throughout this project, I look at three instances of how the Christian opposes the non-Christian’s way of life and how artists can use so-called Christian themes and narratives to appeal to a “non-Christian” audience. In future studies, I wonder what the effect of studying art that covers these themes from the Christian’s point of view would do in the reconciliation between people who are Christian and people who are not. For example, in Ted Schwartz piece “Listening for Grace,” a production out of Ted and Company TheatreWorks, “Schwartz plays the role of a father rooted in an evangelical upbringing, and he is forced to cope with the news that his son is gay. Throughout the play, the consults with friends and family, confronting the dilemma of choosing between his God or his son” (Yoder). Chris Yoder, who plays the role of

the gay son reflects upon his experience of speaking with audience members after the show. He writes:

Without fail, the viewers assume my sexual orientation based on the role I play in the show. I have had people ask me to gay bars after shows. I have had people refuse to shake my hand. I have had people express undue sympathy – sympathy I feel that I do not deserve. But in experiencing these responses, my perception as a straight man is now complemented by the experience of living with the label of “homosexual.” I will tell you, above every other problem that the church currently faces, the labeling of those who identify as homosexual is stifling. It suppresses the individual. (Yoder)

As a result of playing this role and after receiving various responses from audience members, Yoder, a heterosexual Christian man, can empathize, connect, and reevaluate his own treatment of gay men and woman from both a spiritual and human point of view. In future research, I would be interested in studying the “other” in this dichotomy, using theatre to discover the ways that postmodernism can be used within the four walls of the church. Perhaps change can occur from the inside out as opposed to the outside in as I suggest in this thesis.

Overall, the dialogue about the exclusive nature of evangelical Christianity, especially from people whose ideologies disagree from the traditional evangelical Christian, is underway in our postmodern society. From this thesis it is clear that there is a connection between twenty-first-century Christianity and theatre arts, and that the latter can be used to begin these conversations. The contemporary mainstream playwrights’ works analyzed in this study suggest that by retelling these Gospel stories whether slightly or radically, the outdated interpretation of biblical narrative can once again be presented to all people despite differences in culture, race, sexuality, or ideology.

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