

Regis University

ePublications at Regis University

Regis University Student Publications
(comprehensive collection)

Regis University Student Publications

Spring 2023

Why Bad Things Happen to Good People: Polytheism as a Response to Questions of Human Suffering

Mikaela L. Taylor
Regis University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/theses>



Part of the [Other Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Taylor, Mikaela L., "Why Bad Things Happen to Good People: Polytheism as a Response to Questions of Human Suffering" (2023). *Regis University Student Publications (comprehensive collection)*. 1067.
<https://epublications.regis.edu/theses/1067>

This Thesis - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Regis University Student Publications at ePublications at Regis University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Regis University Student Publications (comprehensive collection) by an authorized administrator of ePublications at Regis University. For more information, please contact epublications@regis.edu.

**WHY BAD THINGS HAPPEN TO GOOD PEOPLE:
POLYTHEISM AS A RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS OF HUMAN SUFFERING**

**A thesis submitted to Regis College
The Honors Program
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For Graduation with Honors**

**By
Mikaela Taylor**

April 2023

Approval Page
Thesis Written by
Mikaela Taylor

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "L. Thomas Vance", is written over a horizontal line. Below this line, a green scribble is also present.

Approved by

Thesis advisor

Thesis reader

Accepted by

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Amy L. Schreier", is written over a horizontal line.

Director, Regis College Honors Program

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	iv
Relationship with God.....	1
Why God Talk Matters.....	4
Where Life-Affirmation Falls Short.....	13
An All-or-Nothing Approach- Authoritative Monotheism.....	18
A Transactional Approach- The American Prosperity Gospel.....	25
Post-human View of Humanity- Universal Pre-Destination of Grace.....	30
An Alternative Perspective on Divinity.....	37
Conclusion.....	55
Bibliography.....	57

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank, first and foremost, my mother. Without her, none of my thesis would have been possible. Thank you for encouraging to write what I love and for all your guidance. Thank you to my wonderful advisor, Dr. Howe, for allowing me standing office hour appointments, your patience, and advice throughout this process and my three years at Regis. Thank you to Dr. Oliver for being my reader. Your encouragement was immensely helpful during the last push of the project. Thank you to Dr. Narcisi and Dr. Schreier for keeping me and all of the cohort on track to graduate. Thank you to my cohort for being supportive and welcoming in my transfer as one of your own. Thank you to my friends for sitting with me when I was working and letting me discuss my thoughts and frustrations. It has been a wonderful three years, and I feel so incredibly fortunate to get the opportunity to be part of such a magnificent institution.

Abstract

This thesis argues that there are some interpretations of Christian traditions which are not adequate in response to questions of human experience, particularly suffering, which results in a crisis of faith. Questions of purpose or greater meaning of suffering people face are often answered by their relationship to the divine. Through the process of critiquing the American Prosperity Gospel, Karl Barth's Universal Predestination of Grace, and biblical narratives, I argue that there are some authoritarian monotheistic conceptions of divinity which do not adequately respond to questions of human suffering. As a way of providing an imaginative approach to divinity, I then explore a polytheistic understanding of divinity based on the ancient Greek pantheon. Through the examination of myths, I offer that a polytheistic understanding of divinity might be helpful for people who find monotheistic divinity limiting to respond to questions of faith. I explore the possibility of a divinity which exemplifies human behavior and displays a range of human experiences. Recognizing that a divinity could be fallible also relieves the pressure of measuring up to heavenly standards which could be liberating for some people. This is an exploratory thesis which looks to question commonly held beliefs and push for adequate answers when some understandings of the oppressive, restricted monotheistic divinity does not allow for inclusive or creative answers to suffering.

Chapter 1. Relationship with God

This discussion began long ago for me. When I was in the sixth grade, I began my fascination with Greek Pantheism through the readings of Rick Riordan's work with Percy Jackson. This fascination continued throughout my high school times and into college where I continued to read works of Greek mythology, and in college I was able to take a class on Epic works. Throughout this time, I also spent many hours listening to Greek Mythology podcasts while training for Regis Cross Country. This fascination culminated for me upon my travel to Greece when I was able to walk in the footsteps of ancient Greek worshippers who followed this religion. What follows is a personal culmination of my time at Regis University in the religious studies department. Throughout this paper, I harnessed my curiosity about Greek mythology and the use of religion as a tool to determine the lens people use to understand the world in which they live.

It is a human inclination to make meaning out of life. We do not want to believe that we are living only by random chance. If humanity does not exist by random chance, then we must conclude that there is a greater purpose for our existence. This search for purpose is often thought to be conducted by the divine as evidenced by the rich faith traditions which seem to be present in nearly every culture. Humanity searches continuously for the divine which is thought to give human existence purpose. Over the course of time, the search for the divine resulted in the creation of traditions which were eventually replaced with other traditions as people worked to build empires and civilizations. Religions developed from ideas which people used to interpret their humanly experience in the world. Maurizio Bettini states about ancient religion, "There is no question, therefore, that religion in the ancient world was a legitimate cultural

product; moreover, it was a locus in which multiple cultural forms were interlaced.”¹ The religions sprang from the cultures in which they existed. The culture in which the religions emerged greatly influenced the resulting relationship with the divine. Religion is used to understand the human relation to the divine which also allows humans to understand their life experiences.

One of the most common human experiences, and most difficult to understand, is suffering. Each religion has a desire to interpret the meaning of suffering, and each faith tradition understands the purpose or reason differently. It is my belief that some of the explanations of the Christian tradition are not life-giving to the faithful and do not adequately respond to experiences of suffering. The most important factor in understanding a certain tradition’s understanding of suffering is understanding the relationship in that tradition between the human and the divine. Bettini uses this idea in his book, *In Praise of Polytheism*, to examine the relational characteristics of religion for the people it serves. He borrows the idea of “cash-value” from William James and describes the “cash-value” of religion as, “how the concept helped the individual to cope, and how it aided the individual in his or her actual, practical, and concrete experiences.”² While I want to be expressly careful of turning the relationship between the divine and humanity into a purely transactional experience, I do believe that both James and Bettini have a solid argument because they understand religion as serving a purpose for people in the practical world. This is what I hope to argue in the following pages. I have seen certain manifestations of tradition in which the relationship between divinity and humanity, in specific Christian contexts, is not helpful in a practical world. I have also examined the Greek

¹ Bettini, Maurizio. *In Praise of Polytheism*, (University of California Press, 2023), 1-3.

² Ibid, 8-9.

polytheistic understanding of divine relations with humanity and, while it is far from perfect, I believe that there is some merit to the way this ancient civilization thought about their relationship with the divine. Therefore, I will depict specific issues in the relationship between certain understandings of the Christian God and humanity which provide inadequate explanations to questions of suffering and offer a Greek polytheistic understanding of a divine-human relationship that could help provide comfort to people experiencing suffering or to people who are isolated by certain Christian traditions.

Chapter 2. Why God Talk Matters

The environment in which we exist influences the experience of our lives. Humans are influenced heavily by the culture in which they develop. At some point people make a conscious decision to believe in a faith tradition or not, but the tradition which they believe is heavily determined by their experiences in their life. Human experience does not exist in a vacuum which is short to say that the cultural linguistic environment a person experiences is influential to the relationship that person has with the divine. The way a person talks and thinks about the divine influences his or her relationship with the entity which ultimately shapes his or her experience in life. Religion is purposeful for the people who follow that tradition. Bettini describes religion as a useful cultural construct saying, “The fact that religion is a fully cultural construct is fairly evident: if it weren’t, its practices and organization would not have changed so radically from one era to another, from one continent to another, or from one nation to another.”³ Bettini makes the claim that religion serves a purpose for the culture in which it exists. Religion functions to explain meaning and provide consolation in times of suffering and desolation. Because religion is deeply important to people, it must be examined to make sure that it is serving people in the best way possible. Therefore, people must evaluate the effectiveness of their own religion as it functions to console in times of suffering and provide meaning for the unique experiences of human life.

The topic of suffering and the relationship with the divine is something which truly matters to everyone because the way a person thinks or does not think about the divine determines how he or she interacts with the world. No matter how you think of the divine or if

³ Ibid, 3.

you do not even think about the divine at all, suffering happens to you. Suffering appears different for each and every person, but nobody can go through their life without facing some form of immense struggle. For many people, their relationship with the divine allows them to cope with the world around them and the suffering they experience. The way that each person thinks about the divine is influential in the way that he or she experiences and copes with the suffering that he or she faces. Divinity influences the cultural experience people have which in turn defines the ability of people to endure and give purpose to their suffering. Experiences related to divinity determine the cultural lens from which people look out into the world around them and influences how they will interact with that world.

The search for the divine can be driven by a human desire to understand personal experience in life. As people go through life, their experience is influenced by some level of pain. People will feel pain throughout the course of their life, and I believe that pain can be a good thing because there are many practical uses. For example, a small child feels pain when he or she touches a hot stove and because of this pain, the child will be more careful around a hot stove. There is also an experience of psychological pain, for example, when a person experiences grief. There is a pain which stems from the loss of a loved one. The Oxford Dictionary defines suffering as, “physical or mental pain.”⁴ This is a definition which I think only reaches the surface of suffering. However, when I refer to suffering in my argument, I believe that it is not just mental or physical pain, but the experience of extreme mental or physical pain which causes people to question their purpose. Pain is part of the definition of suffering, but pain and suffering are different. Someone who has a sinus infection could be in

⁴“Suffering Noun- Definition, Pictures, Pronunciation and Usage Notes: Oxford Advanced American Dictionary at Oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com”

pain. However, a person who experiences the loss of a child experiences pain and also suffering. The difference is that suffering is pain elevated to an experience of an existential crisis.

One particularly horrible condition of suffering is suffering of the innocent. There are many people who bring about suffering on their own because of poor decisions and actions. This is not to take agency away from people who experience suffering due to their own actions. Their experience as a human is also valid, but people who bring about their own demise question their own choices rather than their relationship to the divine. When people suffer due to the consequences of their own actions, their relationship with the divine might be reexamined, but it is less likely to be a crisis of faith due to the fact that the relationship, which lead them to justify these actions, is flawed. Grief, terminal cancer, and extreme poverty coming from economic oppression are all examples of undeserved suffering. All of these circumstances bring pain to the people who endure them, but they are suffering because of the conditions of their life which they cannot control.

Suffering of the innocent is an evil. Humans exist in a world filled with many evils. I believe that many forms of evil lead to undeserved suffering which is the reason many people experience suffering through a crisis of faith. To believe in a divine being which is ultimately good and created the world, allows people to expect that the world in which they live is also good. However, this is not always the case because the world in which we live is flawed. Even though the world in which we live contains evil, this does not mean that humanity must despair. Mark Larrimore, a professor at Princeton University who studies the ethics of good and evil, presents a particularly hopeful tone in his book *The Problem of Evil*, "Rather than seeing the encounter with evils as the door between belief and unbelief, it is perhaps better to see it as one

of the main stimuli for religious change.”⁵ When people are confronted with evil, they do not have to decide whether or not to believe in the divinity because they understand the divine can adapt. Throughout this paper, I am not arguing for cessation of belief, but I am arguing that confrontation with evil, suffering, should cause a person to reexamine his or her relationship with the divine. A relationship with the divine should serve the person who believes by providing consolation and comfort. An adequate answer to questions of evil should address the relationship between the faithful and the divine in a way that helps the faithful find greater purpose for his or her suffering, to see a way out of the suffering, and validate his or her experience as human.

When a person experiences pain which transcends to the level of suffering, there is often a moment where a crisis of faith occurs in which a believer calls into question his or her relationship with the divine. This experience forces the believer to evaluate that relationship because he or she is living in a world which was created by the same divinity which could also cause him or her pain. If people believe that a divinity is ultimately in control over the direction of their lives, and by no fault of their own they find themselves in the path of suffering, it would be assumed that the divinity has put them down that path for a reason. In that moment, the believer must decide how that intense pain will shape his or her interaction with the world and the divine. If we can agree that each and every person suffers in his or her own way, then it is logical to conclude that at some point each person will search for a purpose for that extreme pain in his or her individual circumstance. Suffering is possible to endure when there is a purpose and a way out of the suffering. Giving suffering a purpose creates a situation where the person experiencing that suffering has a desire to move past that experience. Often, religion is used as a

⁵ Larrimore, Mark J. *The Problem of Evil: A Reader*, (Oxford; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001), XVIII

source from which to derive meaning of suffering or to hope for salvation from the experience of suffering.

Throughout this essay, I express that religion needs to be life-giving to those who are faithful. When a tradition is life-giving, it does not oppress people for acting in a way which is genuine to their experience. People can be who they are at their core without fear of retribution or damnation by their tradition. Life-giving traditions allow people to find meaning and purpose for their lives which liberates them from the suffering they experience. Bettini reaffirms that religion is practically useful because it helps people give purpose to their lives including the actions they take.⁶ However, traditions which demand a person to act in a way which is incongruent with their lived experience of sex, gender, or sexual orientation is not life-giving. If a faith tradition demands that people live under systems of oppression to maintain status quo or if a tradition calls people to live ingenuine lives to conform to an unrealistic ideal, this is not life-giving. One way that a tradition can be life-affirming is to be inclusive of all human experiences. For example, Christian traditions typically speak of God as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. However, roughly half of the people in Christian tradition are women. This is an experience to critique because only visualizing God as one particular way is limiting to the experience of many people within the tradition. A critical eye is important for the development of the tradition so that more people may feel welcomed and valued within that tradition.

Elizabeth Johnson, a feminist theologian, writes eloquently in “Critique of Speech About God” in her book *She Who Is*, about understanding the way the language we use to discuss God is deeply problematic for the way we also understand the Christian God. She begins by stating

⁶ Bettini, Maurizio. *In Praise of Polytheism*, 8-9.

that terms used to speak about God are particularly exclusive, literal, and patriarchal. Speaking about God as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit creates an understanding that God relates specifically to the male in a way that excludes females from identifying in the same way to God. The literal interpretation of speech about God is also problematic, specifically for females. The male interpretation of God creates an idealized world which sparks the idea that, “maleness is an essential character of divine being.”⁷ This directly interferes with the reality for roughly half of the human species. To assign God with only male characteristics is to not realize the full potential for divinity in female life. It could be argued that the divinity of God transcends all worldly understanding of sex and therefore gender. The speech about God cannot be taken literally, but in certain traditions of Christianity, speech of God severely limits female interaction in the Church. The final point of Johnson’s critique of speech about God is that the way which we speak about God creates and perpetuates the patriarchy. God is referred to in the Bible as the king of kings, and lord of lords. Both perpetuate the idea that God is a male ruling figure. Many times, the Christian God is displayed in art as the old, white bearded man, young, brown bearded man, or a dove. These depictions of the Christian God, which exist in a society that is separated based on gender and race, create a struggle for those who are not white or male to directly relate to the divine. It is not to say that people cannot relate to those who do not look like them, but it is much harder when people who are above you in social caste look like the God you worship. It leads to a complex interaction where God becomes removed from the class you find yourself in due to race or gender.

Therefore, the way that people speak about God influences the relationship they have with the divine. A healthy life-giving relationship with the divine is ideal. However, religion

⁷ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (Crossroad, 2002), Pg. 33.

can neither be proved nor disproved which means that God cannot be fully understood— further reinforcing the necessity to speak conscientiously about the divine due to its implications for the people who believe in it. To claim that one understands completely the divinity which is encompassed in God is to say that a person completely understands an unsolvable mystery. Karl Rahner, a Jesuit theologian, says, “the mystery [God] is eternal light and eternal peace.”⁸ This understanding is important for Rahner’s understanding of mystery, and it is useful when attempting to explain a relationship with God which cannot be either proven or disproven. Rahner’s claim of God as a mystery is vital to the understanding that assigning a specific gender or characteristics to God other than light, love, and peace, which are life-giving to every person, is problematic because there is no way that a person can know the truth. There would not be harm in attributing positive, peaceful characteristics to God because to say that the divine is merciful or loving has no negative implications for any particular group of people.

Beneficent talk of God does not promote exclusivity but rather relates to humanity in an equal way. However, to say that God is a male and to assign the divine male characteristics singles out a portion of people in a way that drastically affects the way they function in their religion. Elizabeth Johnson quotes Mary Daly when she said, “if God is male then male is God.”⁹ Therefore, the way that Christians speak about their God matters to the relationship that humans will have with the divine. In times of suffering this relationship is vitally important to the alleviation of suffering. Additionally, an understanding of a relationship with God is important to working toward justice which will alleviate the suffering people face. A God who is more personal and relatable is more consoling in a time of sincere pain and anguish. This

⁸ Rahner, Karl. *The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology*. 55-57.

⁹ Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 37.

personal and relatable God is not able to be concretely known by a person, which could be confusing because the extreme ambiguity might interfere with the understanding of that suffering.

Ambiguity of religion can be used to provide hope during times of suffering.¹⁰ The idea of ambiguity providing hope and also being consoling is confusing, but the idea of God is also paradoxical in this way; therefore, God is both frustratingly ambiguous to some and abstractly consoling to others. When the tradition claims to be absolute and definitive, this becomes problematic for the expectations of people within the tradition. If the faithful believe that they are all-knowing regarding God, the tradition can quickly become oppressive to people who exist on the margins of that tradition causing an experience of othering rather than inclusivity. However, a tradition which is too mystical and mysterious is also not helpful for the interpretation of life experience because it is too easily manipulated. I believe that a healthy middle ground where there are no specific characteristics assigned to God, but that it is clear that God wants what is best for the faithful is where the life-affirming tradition exists. Religion must exist for the benefit of humanity because it was created to explain and understand the evils in the world. Mark Larrimore says, “we expect the world to make sense in its own terms, and so it makes sense to us to judge God as the ‘sum of his acts’ in this world.”¹¹ Because humans desire to make sense of the world, we must also make sense of the evils which happen in the world and therefore, the relationship of the world to God. The divine-human relationship is impactful for understanding the world in which we live.

¹⁰ McKim, Robert. “On Religious Ambiguity.” *Religious Studies* 44, no. 4 (2008): 373–92, 1-3.

¹¹ Larrimore, Mark J. *The Problem of Evil*, XXVIII

There cannot be one understanding of the divine because human experience has a richness of plurality which mandates that the divine must also encompass that plurality in order to provide life-giving experiences for all of creation. This pluralism incorporates a multi-faceted understanding of divinity which is helpful for understanding lived experience. The mystery, described by Rahner, is important because this opens up the mind's ability to conceptualize more experiences of divinity, which is helpful in fostering a life-giving tradition, and can also be critiqued and evaluated in order to be a valuable tool for faithful people. The way people think about and talk about God matters for everyone including the privileged people of society and the widow, orphan, and poor. Elizabeth Johnson said, "Language of God as universal creator, lover, and savior of all... moves believers toward forgiveness, care, and openness to an inclusive community."¹² To conclude, the way that people talk and think about divinity matters because it can either bring forth life-giving faith and hope, or the divinity which people conceptualize can be exclusive, harsh, and unaccepting, therefore perpetuating the suffering which happens in human life.

¹² Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*, 36.

Chapter 3. Where Life-Affirmation Falls Short

The Christian tradition is one that has survived through 2000 years of controversy, questioning, and the evolution of new beliefs. What has emerged in 2023 is a fractured church. Much like a mirror which claims to reflect something of humanity, Christianity is a tradition which reveals to believers some form of divinity that is helpful for giving purpose to their existence on Earth. Each sect of the Christian religion claims to reveal something about the divine and makes a claim about the way humanity is supposed to interact in relation to that divinity. Much like the fractures of a mirror, each piece reveals a different view on this question. This is a confusing predicament because each thread of tradition claims to speak the truth about the gospel. Many times, in my life, I have heard that a certain line of thinking is “correct” or each different sect simply has differing opinions. Being “correct” regarding one’s faith is important because faith has existential consequences. I say this because religion serves to provide meaning to life which is existential by design. The faithful find purpose for their existence. Religion answers questions of the human soul which can neither be confirmed or denied. Robert McKim states in his essay on *Religious Ambiguity*, “Presumably, a religion that did not have this capacity to mesh without its followers, or failed to provide an interpretation of, and hence a way to cope with, those important events in the lives of its adherents...[the religion] would be discarded.”¹³ When the religion fails to comfort a believer and provide meaning for the human experience, that religion should be examined closely. I think this article is too strong in claiming it should be discarded, but I do believe that the religion should be evaluated. If we

¹³ McKim, Robert. “On Religious Ambiguity,” 3.

are to believe that the risk of faith is one which has existential consequences, then this is one question I would want to answer in a way that is inclusive and the most life-giving to humanity.

Recognizing that I fall outside the traditions which I am critiquing, my experience inside the tradition is limited. However, my main argument lies in the idea that people within the tradition should be the ones most harshly evaluating the practice. To present this argument, I use Johann Baptist Metz, a German theologian who was forced into service by the German army then captured in WWII and sent to prisoner of war camps in the United States. Metz is valuable in this discussion because he harshly critiques the experience of Christians while himself remaining Christian. Even after his crisis of faith, he returned to the tradition with a new interpretation of beliefs and a greater understanding of his relationship to his divinity. During his time in the war, he realized that people are forced to endure suffering which is out of their control. To claim that all suffering is purposeful or that there is something to be learned or gained through suffering is cruel because it reduces life experience to only suffering. Metz was very clearly in a position to critique the religion which he was using to interpret his experience in the world. I use this as an example to show that a religion is most helpful when it is questioned and critiqued because it either reaffirms faith or creates a new way of interpreting the tradition which can be more life-affirming in times of crisis and suffering. His essay discusses, “how one can speak of God at all in the face of the abysmal history of suffering in the world, in ‘His’ world.”¹⁴ The question for Metz was how to reimagine divinity in a way where the Christian God, who is all-loving, could exist in the same world as the atrocities in World War II.

¹⁴ Johann Baptist Metz and J. Matthew Ashley, *Suffering unto God*, n.d., pg. 612.

If God created the world to be the place it is, then it becomes difficult to understand the Holocaust and long history of suffering in the created world. For Metz the call to adequately respond to questions of suffering is, “if we do not forget that biblical Christian mysticism is not really a mysticism of closed eyes but rather a mysticism of open eyes that obligates us to a more acute perception of others’ suffering.”¹⁵ This call is not to forget those who have been lost but to lift up their spirits and experience so that Christians can work with more awareness of the suffering which others face. The call to help people who are experiencing suffering is important for the relationship that Christians are expected to have with God.

Metz explains his theological issues with the Christian tradition when he says, “the traditions of discourse about God that are available and familiar to us also know of attitudes that do not manage contingencies, do not accept life’s circumstances.”¹⁶ Here, Metz articulates a major issue with Christianity because the practice which has emerged from Christian tradition is one that does not work to be adaptive to accept the plurality of human experience. If the tradition does engage alternate experiences of humanity, the tradition is problematic because each person interacts with his or her world differently. When speaking about the tradition and the prophecy from which it emerges, Metz says, “It ensures a poverty of spirit; it conceives eschatology as a negative theology of creation.”¹⁷ Here Metz is arguing that the eschatological projection of suffering is contrary to the divine creation for life on Earth. When the definition of what it means to be human translates to only seeking the afterlife, the spirit of humanity is lost along with the ability to be present in everyday experience. When people are confined to a rigid definition of what it means to be human, that experience of humanity loses meaning. Therefore,

¹⁵ Ibid, 622.

¹⁶ Ibid, 613.

¹⁷ Ibid, 613.

the thought that death is a negative pattern of creation is detrimental to humanity because it is a universal human experience. The Christian tendency to respond to questions of suffering in an eschatological way is not life-affirming. While death is not the always happiest experience of being human, it will happen. Metz is calling people to live presently in their relationship with the divine and to work through critiques of that relationship because part of what it means to be human takes place in the Earthly life. Therefore, the way humans live their life while they are alive and the way they give purpose to their suffering is important. Focusing on a post-death life devalues the practical, earthly life of the faithful and creates the poverty of spirit of which Metz speaks.

The theology which comes from Rahner and ultimately Metz regarding the mysticism of thinking about God is vital to the realization that the relationship people have with God is important for their understanding of the suffering they face.¹⁸ To respond to the Holocaust, some Christians removed God from their religion because they did not want to believe in a God who would allow those atrocities to happen.¹⁹ However, Christian viewpoints would say, a godless religion lacks a luster which is capable of drawing humanity into the deep levels of faith promised by divine salvation. There is a necessary balance for what people expect from God and what people give in return for salvation. This balance must be examined and critiqued in order to ensure that the most life-affirming tradition is fostered. I firmly believe that every faith tradition which is life-giving must withstand heavy scrutinization from the followers of that tradition because it must withstand the crisis of faith which emerges in suffering. Metz recognizes that, “with God, however, risk and danger enter into, or return to, religion.”²⁰ Theology from

¹⁸ Rahner, Karl. *The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology*. 55-57.

¹⁹ Johann Baptist Metz and J. Matthew Ashley, *Suffering unto God*, n.d., 613.

²⁰ Ibid, 613.

Metz's vantage point requires more from the discourse of God. Metz ultimately offers a critique of the religion, within the tradition. For Metz, the critique was utilized to reaffirm his understanding of faith which might not be the case for each person who experiences a crisis. There is a vital need to be morally conscious of the way that Christians speak about God because it has distinct consequences for the way that faith and religion impact humanity in times of brutal, unwarranted suffering.

Chapter 4. An All-or-Nothing Approach- Authoritative Monotheism

Another critique of the monotheistic tradition comes from the formative narratives within the bible. One of the most consulted examples regarding human and divine interaction in biblical narratives comes from the Book of Job. The critique of this section comes from the issue that one interpretation of this section could lead to a form of monotheism which is authoritative rather than inclusive of human experience. The Book of Job is about a man who is righteous in every way. He has many blessings from God and is described as, “blameless and upright.”²¹ This book of the Bible gives authoritative Christian traditions insight for how to understand the suffering they face particularly because Job has much and God allows all his blessings to be taken. The main point of the story is to see how Job responds. This is particularly interesting because God gives Satan permission to cause suffering to Job even though Job is loved by God and has done nothing wrong. When Job has everything taken from him, he questions and cries out in anguish, then Job praises God. After much rebuking from his friends, Job is visited by God. God reminds Job that God is almighty and divinity should not be questioned. After God is done speaking, Job responds,

*“ ‘You said, ‘Listen now, and I will speak;
I will question you,
And you shall answer me.’
My ears had heard of you
But now my eyes have seen you.
Therefore I despise myself
And repent in dust and ashes. ’”²²*

²¹ Job, 1:1 NIV

²² Job, 42:4-6 NIV

Job felt as if he was not being heard but, God did hear him. God heard everything and yet he allowed the suffering to continue while Job wished for death, shouted in anger at God, and blamed himself for this suffering. At the end of it all, God answered Job and said that God was the ultimate creator and life-giver and that Job was ignorant and insolent in questioning God's desires. Job repented and then God blessed him even more than before Satan's experiment. The response to the suffering here is one I do not find life-giving. God allowed Satan to take everything from Job. Job suffered to great extents and could do nothing to alleviate his suffering. His friends sat and demanded that he must have done something wrong, but Job was righteous. The suffering was allowed and ultimately caused by God. One interpretation of this interaction could lead to an authoritative understanding of the monotheistic divinity. Job passed God's test of faith, but why did his faith need to be tested?

When we look at Job, we see that even a man deemed righteous by an authoritative monotheistic God is not above the suffering caused by his adversaries. Even in complete desolation, Job praises God. While the experience might be interpreted by Job to be life-affirming, I believe that the example of passively accepting the undeserved suffering is not life-affirming for all people who follow this narrative. Even though Job laments and questions God, the end result of the relationship is still a much more authoritarian relationship. When one human is caused suffering by another in a dependent relationship it is termed abuse. If this authoritarian interaction is the example for relationship with God in suffering, the relationship between God and Christians could be extremely toxic. Many authoritative Christians believe that the relationship between God and a Christian is what people should turn to when they face hard times, but the relationship demonstrated in Job is not life-giving.

Additionally, monotheistic traditions emerging from the Hebrew Bible perpetuate an idea of hostility toward people who are excluded and othered.²³ One example is a story in Genesis of Abraham and Sarah and the slave of Sarah, Hagar, who bore the first son of Abraham. Abraham had a son with Sarah's slave, but he wanted a son from his wife because in his covenant with God he was promised a child of his own flesh and blood.²⁴ Hagar's child with Abraham, Ishmael, was a legitimate heir to the estate of Abraham. However, he was despised by Sarah and Abraham because he was the son of a slave. God allowed this son, promised through the covenant to be a great man, to be tormented by the family. When Sarah finally became pregnant with Isaac, Abraham had what he thought to be a 'legitimate' heir. After Isaac was born, Hagar and Ishmael were not wanted. Abraham's house was a hostile environment and Hagar fled with Ishmael. When she finally reached a point where she had no food or water, God appeared and sent her back to the torment. God wanted Hagar to continue to serve the people who were making her and her son suffer. This example of returning to the torment can have ethical implications for the way monotheistic believers interact with their world. Regina Schwartz details in her book, *Curse of Cain*, that the monotheistic thinking which is developed in the Hebrew Bible specifically determines that, "Scarcity is encoded in the Bible as a principle of Oneness (one land, one people, one nation) and in monotheistic thinking (one Deity), it becomes a demand of exclusive allegiance that threatens with the violence of exclusion."²⁵ Schwartz claims that within the Hebrew Bible, there is a message of hostility and exclusion. Rather than being a welcoming and inclusive god, this is an illustration of othering. Instead of being a god of

²³ Schwartz, Regina M., *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 84-88.

²⁴ Gen, 15:4 NIV

²⁵ Schwartz, Regina M., *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*, XI.

liberation, the Christian God perpetuated the hostility which people encountered and continued their suffering.

The story of Hagar and Ishmael is one which starkly demonstrates the way Christian tradition others people who exist outside of the “ideal.” This violence in exclusion, which Schwartz discusses, is demonstrated in the story of Hagar. An Egyptian slave of Sarah; Hagar was an outsider in the land of Mesopotamia. She was brought to serve Sarah and Abraham out of her home country. In this time women, especially slaves, were seen as property. Even so, Hagar was the mother of the first male heir of Abraham. This child was set to inherit the property of his father; however, because he was the son of a foreign slave he was othered and turned away. This perpetuates the tradition within Christianity of the desire to conform to a specific set of ideals. This plays out in modern times through the expression of gender and sexuality specifically. People who are different from the Christian ideal in the way they express themselves are othered and turned away. The scarcity which is detailed in *Curse of Cain* is one which creates ethical implications for believers of this tradition. This is especially important to consider when we live in a world where scarcity of experience is far from the lived reality. Instead of providing a welcoming home in God, people who follow a line of absolute monotheism turn people away who experience the world differently. This is similar to the way that Hagar was turned away from her son’s rightful inheritance.

Another critique of this biblical narrative is that God told Hagar to return. This is not a liberative or life-affirming narrative. Since Hagar was a slave, she became a single mother, impregnated without her consent, who was forced by God to return to her place of torment. This does not affirm confidence in a Christian God that a person has the ability to exist outside of the tradition, especially if that person is female. This is not a life-giving narrative for people who

find themselves on the outer edge of tradition due to lived human experience. I realize that Ishmael would go on to be quite successful in his own right; however, the life of Hagar is one of desolation and despair. She has no ability to control her own life and like Job is an instrument of God's control. Just as Job was used by God to demonstrate a righteous man, Hagar was used by God to provide a son to Abraham, one who was turned away when the next best son came into his life.

The tradition of Christian authoritative monotheism operates under the assumption that there is one way to understand the divine. Something I heard in the Christian traditions of my upbringing is, "Jesus is the way, the truth, and the light." This is something I constantly questioned because I think that even at the young age of eleven, I realized that this could not be true. What about the people of other religions? I do not believe that simply because someone believes something different than another, they are damned. However, in a particular line of authoritative Christian thinking, this idea is prominent. There is a clear theology of exclusivity and universalism.

This idea of universalism can be interpreted two different ways, positively or negatively. To belong to a universal church of love is something which should be a reality of the Christian experience. The love of the neighbor which Jesus speaks of and the experience of living within the Kingdom of God is beautiful. It is core to my understanding of divinity because I believe we belong to a community of humans which allows for the plurality and richness of diversity. If a person believes that humans are created by divinity, there is divine light in each and every person. However, an oppressive view of universalism also exists when the experience of one person is deemed as less than another. Since there is a plethora of human experiences, there is a human tendency to value one person's experience higher than another. Oppressive universalism

exists when people understand 'universal' as there must be one way of experiencing the world rather than understanding 'universal' as a universal uniqueness of experience. This oppression places constraints on the richness of plurality in humanity.

This is one example of Christianity wanting to have a response to suffering which is all-encompassing. Oppressive universalism understands that there should be one answer to suffering because there is one universal human experience. I do not believe that an all-encompassing response to suffering can exist without minimalizing the personal aspect of humanity. Christianity wants to provide a response which will work for everyone. A deeper, more personal interaction with the divine might be beneficial to give greater purpose to human suffering and therefore affirm life for those who are othered by the oppressive universalist interpretation. Schwartz argues that this form of oppressive universalism emerges from a Biblical narrative tradition rooted in kinship. This tradition emerges from stories which are problematic because they exclude and other people who are different while also calling people to passively accept their fate from God.²⁶ This is not empowering or life-giving because the faithful are expected to respond to suffering and crises of faith in the same way, even when they fall outside of the tradition. This is contradictory to lived human experience because each and every person responds to hardship in his or her own unique way. Some oppressive, authoritative narratives in the Bible are not life-affirming for all people and are therefore inadequate in their response to human suffering.

As a universal experience of humanity, we all face some sort of suffering. There is no way to compare the levels of suffering that people face because, to some extent, each and every

²⁶ Schwartz, Regina M., *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*, 83-91.

human suffers differently. It is in the experience of emotional or physical pain which cannot be controlled, that people turn to God to find answers or comfort in their time of need. I think that this is the beauty of religion because it can be used to comfort and relieve the suffering which people face when they feel that all hope is lost. However, if the tradition offers an answer which is unhelpful for the sufferer, this can be detrimental to their faith and relationship with the divine. The way a tradition responds to questions of suffering has power. It is this relationship which can be problematic and qualitatively evaluated in order to determine an issue within the relationship between the tradition and the divine.

Chapter 5. A Transactional Approach- The American Prosperity Gospel

Kate Bowler, a scholar of the American Prosperity Gospel, talks about the particularly troublesome connection of the megachurches of the Prosperity Gospel and the relationship they have with health and wealth. The development of this line of American Protestantism and evangelical thinking is interestingly developed through the prosperous times of the United States. The Prosperity Gospel emerges from the development of wealth in the United States and interprets the ‘success’ proven through wealth and health as something which is divinely received. This divine intervention in the lives of ordinary people was commodified by preachers who began this tradition as a simple confession of Jesus and in the end, it was blown into bold commandment from preachers for God to participate in a relationship giving believers riches and good health. The tradition is rooted in the developmental idea that words are powerful, especially through the form of confession. The Great Confession was, “I believe in my heart Jesus Christ is the Son of God. I believe He was raised from the dead for my justification. I confess Him as my Lord and Savior. Jesus is my Lord. He is dominating my life. He is guiding me. He is leading me.”²⁷ American Prosperity Gospel preachers understand that by claiming this through confession, a believer could then make requests from God which should be granted for their “justification.” The preachers in this tradition emerged with catchphrases like, “the lack of money is the root of all evil.”²⁸ Sayings like this emerged to attract believers who were facing difficult times. The flashy attention that the preachers were gaining was useful in capturing believers.

²⁷ Bowler, Kate. *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013, 66.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 67.

The sale of divine grace turns the religious practice found in the American Prosperity Gospel to a commodification of religion. Money does not fix all of the world's problems and lack of wealth is not the root of all evil. The inflation of wealth and concern for money and power is a specifically potent kind of evil which is presented in the Prosperity gospel as a good. However, at its core the system of money and power is corruptive, especially when the commodity for purchase is God's love. The buying and selling of forgiveness create an economic system of exchange.²⁹ I fully recognize that money does make living life easier in some respects because it helps to fix problems, provide housing and sustenance, and provide enjoyment. However, I believe that there is an issue which emerged from the American Prosperity Gospel in saying that the creation of all that is good is money, which alleviates suffering. This thinking is problematic because money can disappear just as fast as it can come into a person's life, and it can also lead to a restructuring of priorities which is not helpful for human and divine relationships to flourish.

The Prosperity Gospel evolved to expect both health and wealth as divine gifts from God when people expressed their faith. There is an understanding in Prosperity thinking that believes if the faithful confess their wrongdoings, they can claim their divine rewards of faith. Preachers compelled congregants to confess then immediately profess a "faith seed" (money) which is expected to grow as long as the believers remain faithful to their new revelations. This monetary seed was planted in the church and then expected to grow and develop into wealth for the families in attendance. Once the congregants sowed their faith seed, the giving and receiving was conducted according to rigid rules set by the church.³⁰ This was important for the

²⁹ Ibid, 101-104.

³⁰ Ibid, 98-103.

continuance of the megachurches, which were costly. The preachers described this interaction as, “kingdom business.”³¹ However, while the faithful were pledging and hoping that they would receive divine wealth from God, the preachers were pocketing a significant portion to purchase fancy cars, nice clothes, and expand their spiritual empire through television and the sale of merchandise they created. The poverty people experienced was determined to be a sign of depravity of faith. Preachers in this line of theology said, “Poverty marked a spiritual shortage.”³² This presented the impoverished members of society as marked with not being enough and not placing enough faith in God. This interpretation of tradition is certainly not a life-giving understanding of poverty for the economically challenged people of society. This is discrimination of economic status because those who were not wealthy enough to afford the best of everything were viewed as less faithful by the church. The harsh retribution faced not only for being poor but on top of that being spiritually deprived, is certainly a form of suffering which stems from this entitled relationship with God.

The second expectation of the Prosperity Gospel is the expectation of health. It is understood from this tradition that, “a spiritually healthy mind provided the only true immunity. Sickness was a mental contagion and wrong thinkers spread their diseases.”³³ The thinking behind this was that in order to receive healing, congregants must believe that God would heal them. If they continue to be sick or contract an illness or disease in the first place, it was simply an act of wrongful thinking. Their faith was not strong enough to protect them. It was also practiced that you cannot ask God for the same thing twice if you believed you had already received it. People prayed for healing and they fully believed in the all-powerful healing of God

³¹ Ibid, 103.

³² Ibid, 95.

³³ Ibid, 145.

and that their faith would heal them. Then, they continued to be affected by the disease or sickness causing serious questions of faith which resulted in the muting of devout believers in this gospel.³⁴ To ask for healing twice would be to question God. This could be helpful in explaining acute illnesses such as the common cold from which most people would make a full recovery. When it comes to terminal illnesses which even the most faithful do not survive, a crisis of faith could occur. When the faithful developed terminal cancer, the church prayed for their healing. When they accepted the healing and demanded it from God, the cancer patient could not ask again. The terminal illness is not always stopped by God. The continuation of the disease, according to the Prosperity Gospel means that this person's faith was not strong enough for God.

A common response which emerges is that this is a test of faith. Bowler cites a woman who taught Sunday school from the confinement of her wheelchair and refers to this as her "Job moment."³⁵ In the Bible, Job is tested in a way that takes all he has even though he is a righteous man. The Prosperity gospel teaches that wrongful thinking as the cause of suffering is simply a test of faith. If a believer is faithful enough, he or she will be healed. To people who practice this Christian belief, the consequence for not passing the test of faith would be death. Believing that all suffering is a test from God and that as long as you pray hard enough and are faithful to God, then your suffering will be absolved, could decimate a person's faith when his or her suffering is not relieved through divine intervention. I can definitively say that this is a detrimental relationship between humanity and God because it creates a circumstantial environment. Only if a person is a devout follower can they receive the health and wealth which

³⁴ Ibid, 150-152.

³⁵ Ibid, 176.

is demanded by preachers of the American Prosperity Gospel. Followers are measured against a standard of belief which is not realistic because the results are only realized in this tradition if someone is healthy and wealthy. If a follower is economically troubled or contracts a disease, neither are necessarily the fault of God or the human; even so, they are viewed by the church as less desirable in God's eyes. To claim that the reason people suffer is that they are not asking God for the correct gifts or that they are not as faithful as the next churchgoer is not life-giving for the faithful who suffers. When all is well within the church, God is great. When hard times happen, the blame is placed on the congregants that they are not faithful enough or did not give enough to the church. This conditionality is not life-giving for people who experience suffering which is out of their control.

Chapter 6. Post-human View of Humanity- Universal Pre-Destination of Grace

Aside from certain absolute monotheistic biblical narratives and the American Prosperity Gospel there are additional Christian theological traditions that present issues with their relationship with the divine because their answers to questions of human suffering are not life-affirming. Karl Barth is a 20th century theologian who emerges from the reformed Calvinist tradition. One of the important beliefs in this tradition is that there is a universal pre-destination of grace for the faithful. At the first reading, this seems helpful and inclusive because it does not make God's love and salvation conditional, which is contradictory of the Prosperity Gospel. This seems to remove the idea that God picks and chooses. A believer does not have to pit themselves against divine measurements. The liberation is important because, as Barth says in his *Epistle to the Romans*, "Where the faithfulness of God encounters the fidelity of men, there is manifested His righteousness. There shall the righteous man live."³⁶ This should provide comfort for the faithful. It does not express that there is something which the congregant could do to earn, or lose, God's love and righteousness. A regular man can live in comfort within the faithfulness of God which is unconditional. Each and every person who believes in the Gospel is loved and has a place with God in salvation. I understand that this idea is comforting and would console someone in times of crisis. This appears life-giving in this aspect because no matter what, God's love is eternal.

Even as this thinking appears to be inclusive and life-giving, I struggle with another understanding of the implications with universal pre-destination of grace. The risk which is run within this line of thinking is expressed by Barth, "*We look for new heavens and a new earth*

³⁶ Barth, Karl. *The Epistle to the Romans*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1968), 12.

wherein dwelleth righteousness. And because we have been appointed to this awaiting, we perceive the faithfulness of God.”³⁷ What I believe to be not life-giving with this line of tradition is that this causes humanity to wait and seek a new heaven and divinity. The issue with this doctrine emerges because it is an issue which removes the need for giving a purpose to or seeing through the suffering.

Consequently, the suffering which is experienced on Earth is nonconsequential because when salvation is guaranteed to a believer, there is no reason to try to break out of the suffering people face. This is an eschatological projection of what it means to be human and is a reduction of the suffering people face because there is a belief that a new divine world will be reached at death. This thinking is not life-giving for people facing profound suffering in life. A universal pre-destination of grace is not helpful to think about questions of suffering because human experience is worthless when grace is the only explanation. Grace is helpful for consolation, but it is not helpful when thinking about a solution to alleviate the suffering or the experience of coping with the suffering people face. The pre-destination of grace makes the efforts of humanity futile. If it is guaranteed that each person will be divinely released from their suffering in the salvation with God, then the need to understand the suffering people face on earth is dispensable. This does not require people to create mutually beneficial relationships with others in humanity. It would not take long to see that this is problematic for the world. If people do not care when others fall on hard times and they are not called to love their neighbor and provide help and care for them in their time of need, it is not life-giving for all of the faithful.

³⁷ Ibid, 11.

Additionally, a critique of Barth's understanding of the relationship people have with a Christian god demonstrates the relationship to be impersonal in nature. Charles Waldrop, a theologian carefully examining Barth's work, writes, "Barth argues that God is not known directly but through creaturely forms which are not in themselves divine."³⁸ This article discusses theological arguments Barth makes. One of these arguments is that the way in which humanity encounters the Christian god is not directly through divine encounters themselves, but rather through "creaturely forms" which are from God, but not Godself. This could seem like an inconsequential bit of information, but as demonstrated through the examination of the American Prosperity Gospel, we can see where human interpretation can be lead astray. Therefore, the belief that humanity interacts with God indirectly through "creaturely forms" has implications for the personal relationship the believers have with their Christian divinity. It is demanding to assume that a divine being would take personal interest in each and every follower, but in times of undeserved suffering a divinity which takes a personal interest is more capable of comfort. Barth's argument of an indirect relationship with divinity has implications for the personable nature of interaction with a person's divinity.

Karl Barth's look on the world is ineffective to call Christians to give purpose to their existence. Barth explains this negativity towards life by stating, "in this world men find themselves to be imprisoned."³⁹ This is detrimental to most people who are attempting to give meaning to their existence because it begins the process of thought from a negative point of view. This thinking is enabling people who see others experiencing suffering to do nothing to help their neighbor cope or alleviate that suffering. It enables followers of this tradition to not

³⁸ Waldrop, Charles T. "Karl Barth's Concept of the Divinity of Jesus Christ." *The Harvard Theological Review* 74, no. 3 (1981): 241–63, 244.

³⁹ Barth, Karl. *The Epistle to the Romans*, 9.

search for a higher purpose but rather to accept their lot in life. However, a deeper experience in faith would lead those people to discover that there could be a purpose for their suffering and the life which they live on Earth. The Universal Pre-destination of Grace is a reductionist view of the experience of what it means to be human. Humans are called to have a life which interacts with the richness of the world around them.

However, there is a tension between the automatic salvation and the need for action and appreciation for the life we are given on Earth. Religion's purpose is to give meaning to the world in which humans live which necessitates that this world possesses some sort of meaning. Barth wants to make the claim that it does not have a meaning when he says that humans are imprisoned here. This eschatological projection is not helpful when deciphering a crisis of faith. When a believer comes to a crisis, he or she would certainly say that it does not matter because I am saved. This is not helpful to that person because the suffering they are enduring is not given greater purpose or alleviated. They could understand this suffering under the assumption that God wants them to suffer and eventually they will break free from this suffering in eternal life; however, until that point they just have to endure this meaningless existence. The rich meaning of what it means to live life in interaction with humanity is not there.

The incredible part of religion is that each tradition is shaped and influenced in relation to other traditions which fall differently among the belief spectrums and therefore call people to interact differently with each other. This experience of colliding traditions is important to the understanding of the cultural linguistic framework which is used to create religion and determine the way that a faithful person interacts with the world. These critiqued frameworks are extremely limited in the way that they think about God because the framework from which they emerged conceptualizes a narrow definition of an authoritative, monotheistic God.

I believe the traditions I called into question are problematic because they are limited in their understanding of human experience. Humans have a plurality of life experience as evidenced by the diversity of the human population and the idea that each and every human has a different experience of being human. This is important for each person's religion. As a human creation, religion functions to serve the faithful in their understanding of life.⁴⁰ Therefore, there is a need for religion to account for the richness and diversity of human experience. The meaning of human experience for many people is determined by their interaction with divinity and the purpose for the religion which they practice. This could even be argued for atheists because even though they are against the idea of divinity, the unbelief in a divine being influences their purpose and interaction with the world. I have demonstrated above how the Prosperity Gospel and Universal Pre-destination of Grace are inadequate in responding to questions of human experience, particularly human suffering. These inadequacies are proof that the way in which humans talk about their divinity directly influences their experience. Life-affirming traditions serve the people that follow the practice by helping them to have the most valuable experience in life, including the negative experiences of suffering. Talk about divinity matters because it determines how humans interpret and process their human experiences.

The above listed traditions are insufficient for providing adequate responses to human experience because they are limited in the way they think about the divine. The limitations placed on tradition and ultimately divinity is othering because the people who experience the religion and find an issue with the response to their unique experience cannot break past their crisis of faith. When faith is called into question and the constraints of the tradition are very limited, then the capacity for breaking past these issues within the tradition is also limited. This

⁴⁰ Bettini, Maurizio. *In Praise of Polytheism*, 8-9.

is ultimately detrimental to the faith. I recognize the tension between flexibility of tradition and fostering the flourishing of those who follow the tradition. However, in a world of plurality a tradition which is narrow-minded will not be helpful for answering questions responding to the diversity of human experience. These traditions which I have determined to be limited in their responses to human experience are both static and non-mysterious. They have a definitive understanding of divinity which limits their ability to be open-minded to the experiences of humanity.

Each of the above critiques of Christian monotheism provide an insight into the constraints of the tradition. No tradition should be exemplified which cannot stand up to difficult scrutiny such as that done by Metz. This is to say that all traditions should be subject to investigation and questioning; however, entire traditions should not be discarded unless they completely fail to serve the faithful individuals who follow the tradition. As demonstrated through the examination of the American Prosperity Gospel, Johan Baptist Metz, and Karl Barth, the Christian tradition can be interpreted in a way which has created the passive acceptance of suffering as divine will rather than free will and created an environment of hostility towards people who experience life differently from the Christian ideal. The way that the Prosperity Gospel and Karl Barth's Universal Pre-destination of Grace explains the relationship with divinity is static and non-mysterious. This is not life-giving because it limits the human experience to also be both static and non-mysterious, which is not the case. Each of these experiences of the Christian monotheistic tradition have qualities which make them non-life-giving because they do not account for the diversity of human experience. The richness of experience needs to be reflected in the divinity which humanity chooses to worship, and it is important to foster a welcomeness and inclusivity which accounts for the diversity in humanity.

Polytheism can offer a richness of example for the faithful which allows the people of that tradition to interpret the world around them in a life-affirming way. It fosters the flourishing of the faithful in a way which grants freedom to exist in a world of plurality and remain faithful to a particular tradition. Therefore, in the next section, I will attempt to offer an understanding of divinity which breaks the mold of monotheism.

Chapter 7. An Alternate Perspective on Divinity

As we have grown as a civilization and expanded our world, it is clear that no person experiences the world in the same way as another. To say that God expects all humans to worship in a similar way and behave according to a specific tradition limits the capacity of the human soul to experience the divine. If we understand that each person has a unique relationship with God, then we should also be able to understand that a person's understanding of God or visualization of how God appears to him or her is different for each individual. Therefore, it should not be difficult to understand that some people might best interpret divinity in a pantheon of the divine. If the divine is beyond our human limitations, a polytheistic visualization of the divine spread through a pantheon of gods could be helpful for people navigating different human experiences. The ability for people to associate or dissociate with a particular vision of the divinity is something which modern Christians do not have that could help provide consolation to a struggling believer.

Humans search for the divine in order to find something which will promote our own flourishing and to seek a greater purpose for our existence. I believe it is not about the rules and regulations surrounding what could make a person a good Christian, Jew, or Muslim, but rather the promotion of that uniquely created human being and his or her relationship with the world. That human's understanding of divinity will affect how that person thinks and feels about him or herself and the world. I do not find it helpful to believe there is a divinity which would want humanity to fail or suffer; therefore, if humans are finding suffering inflicted upon them through the institution of God or the church, then that understanding and relationship with that divinity should be questioned. If, after examination, the tradition is not found to be life-affirming, the relationship with that form of divinity should be altered. That which does not affirm humanity in

life is not divine. Encounters with divinity should reaffirm people in their flourishing and provide life-giving guidance for life especially in times of suffering. I propose that a polytheistic understanding of divinity might be helpful for someone to find his or her purpose of faith and help them navigate the experience of being human. It allows believers the ability to visualize a support system of Gods who would be helpful and relatable as figures of divinity to guide them through their life.

While many people see the Greek Pantheon as something mythical and ancient, I believe it has great value for those who believe in this form of divinity. Even though it is not something which is regularly practiced as a form of religion in modern times, the values and morals which are embedded in the tradition are still exhibited today. The mythology which is presented in popular culture is far from the stories of Ancient Greece because much of the pop culture is influenced by social and political commentary.⁴¹ Bettini even says in his book *In Praise of Polytheism*, “the movie industry has revived many ancient gods, hybridizing them with Marvel characters.”⁴² The iterations of ancient polytheism we currently have are skewed by the socio-political environment we have today. There are similarities to the experience in current culture, but the myths have blended together creating what is popularized. However, individual myths display a certain character trait which gives each of the gods in the pantheon their distinct personalities. Through the examination of myths, we can become familiar with the relationship Ancient Greeks had with their divine beings and also use that example to understand modern struggles. I will use sections from the Homeric Hymns and stories told about the gods’

⁴¹ Petrovic, I., & Petrovic, A. (2019). General. Greece & Rome, 66(2), 334-352. doi:10.1017/S0017383519000159, 335.

⁴² Bettini, Maurizio. *In Praise of Polytheism*, 5.

interactions with humans to demonstrate the possible relationship which could flourish in the relationship between a divinity and a human.

Some mythological characters are certainly more worthy of emulation than others, but this is what is life-giving for a pantheon of gods. The understanding of the Greek gods as fallible is beneficial because humanity is also fallible. Seeing gods as fallible shifts thinking from why suffering exists to how to effectively deal with the suffering when it happens. Rather than looking for the unanswerable why, people can make helpful changes which will help more than discovering a purpose for the suffering. This relieves a huge weight from humanity when we do not have to justify the existence of evil and suffering. Humanity is then liberated to give suffering their own purpose. Fallibility of the gods is important for helping to interpret the world in which we live. Since one of the functions of religion is to explain and interpret the world, and the world in which we live is flawed, it is rational that the god which created the world is also flawed. This rationality could help someone who experiences undeserved suffering because there is less emphasis on why the world is a certain way and more emphasis placed on how to cope with the real experiences of the practical world. Therefore, a pantheon of gods who have personalities and faults are much more realistic and effective for understanding and connecting to the human world. Additionally, fallible gods can serve as an example of a flawed being interacting with a flawed world. This is the best example for humans because humanity is inherently flawed. Therefore, a deity which interacts with the world in the same type of way that humanity would is beneficial as an example. The implications which are created by worship of a perfect god imply a human desire to also be perfect. This striving for perfection can be exhausting and unrealistic when the human can never measure up to the standards set by the divinity. This may be good to delineate the difference between gods and humans; however, a

divinity which is personal and relatable to human experience to serve as an example of how to interact with the world could be helpful for someone struggling to measure up to the standards of a perfect god.

A pantheon of gods which appear having many distinct personalities and forms can be comforting for people facing suffering. It seems silly to many people to worship Zeus again, and this is not what I am arguing for because it would not be practical to burn sacrifices to a god in a particular temple or perform a ritual for each of the gods to appease them. I am advocating for an interpretation of divinity which can help people to understand their relationship personally with the divine in the most helpful way for the individual. If people would use their imagination to experience divinity, the Greek pantheon could be used as a way to comprehend the diversity in human experience. Each of the Greek gods has his or her own personality and his or her own faults, like humanity. If it is understood that suffering is part of being human, then learning how to adapt to the faults in humanity which can cause suffering could help people begin to understand how to find ways to cope with human experience. The Christian tradition attempts to answer this question, but as I have argued, there are certainly faults to the answers Christianity provides.

The main Greek pantheon is made of twelve gods and goddesses, but in the stories there are many more influential beings which exemplify the richness of human experience. Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades are the three Olympian brothers with whom most people are familiar, ruling over the domains of the sky, sea, and underworld respectively. However, the earth (where people live) is under no absolute domain. Much like Christianity the people have free will and are under no direct rule by the Gods. Zeus is King of the Gods, but he is not omniscient or omnipotent. He is a fallible deity who can be, and often is, deceived— which is important

because there is no absolute authority. In many stories, Zeus has little impact on the events as they play out in humanity. Instead, the rest of the Gods are there to guide, help, and rule. In comparison with the Christian God, Zeus is not the ultimate being for which humanity is to strive because there are many other gods and goddesses who have worthy characteristics. I argue that a fallible deity is important for the understanding of an imperfect world. As much as we would like to one day make the world a perfect place, this task will never happen. If a divine being who is perfect created the world, we would expect nothing less than perfection. However, the world in which we live is not perfect nor are humans. The worship of an imperfect god is life-affirming because this relationship rejects the relationship which implies blind faith in a perfect god, especially when the divinely created world is not perfect. The implications of a perfect god set intense standards to which humans might never measure up, but if the gods, which humans worship, are fallible the immense pressure to be perfect dissolves. An imperfect god could be useful for someone who struggles with their own imperfections. A deeper connection of understanding could be formed when there is a shared experience of imperfection.

Just as humanity is not without fault, gods and goddesses in the Greek pantheon also have inherent faults which allow them to bond with humanity in a deeply personal and relatable way. Even so, in book 4 of the *Iliad*, Agamemnon tells his soldiers on the battlefield of Troy, “Argives, never yet, in any way, relax your fierce courage; for Zeus the father will be no abettor to those who deceive, and these men who have done harm contrary to their sacred oaths, surely, vultures will devour their tender flesh.”⁴³ Much like the Christian God, the correct sacrifice is

⁴³ Homer. *The Iliad*. Translated by Caroline Alexander. (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2015), Bk 4, lines 234-237.

demanding by Zeus but also the right action is what is preferred. According to the Achaeans, Zeus was punishing the Trojans because they acted incorrectly and took another Greek man's wife, Helen; however, the rest of the gods played an important part in orchestrating the events of the Trojan War. What is more important than correct worship is correct action. It matters more how a person interacts with their world than how they worship the deities.

Another god who was very influential in Greek culture was Apollo, and it was Apollo's duality in personality which connected him with the people of Greece. He was the god of truth, light, musicians, and healing. Edith Hamilton says in her book, *Mythology*, "Apollo at Delphi was a purely beneficent power, a direct link between gods and men, guiding men to know the divine will, showing them how to make peace with the gods; the purifier, too, able to cleanse even those stained with the blood of their kindred."⁴⁴ Apollo is a god who takes a personal interest in the people who worship him. He is a helper who speaks the truth and is a mostly beneficent god. However, much like the other divinities in the Greek pantheon, there were two sides to Apollo. In addition to his beautiful, helpful, and poetic side, Apollo is also often crude and primitive. An example of the god's prideful side is demonstrated in his tryst with Cassandra, a Trojan princess who promised herself to Apollo and then refused him. Apollo then gave Cassandra the gift of prophecy; however, her prophecies were always untrue to whomever listened.⁴⁵ The dualism of personality is exemplified by Gantz when he describes Apollo as, "always a healing god, for as one who sends plagues he is also the one who can halt them."⁴⁶ This dynamism of Apollo exemplifies the similarities of humanity because his son Asclepius was

⁴⁴ Hamilton Edith, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*, 27.

⁴⁵ Maurizio, Lisa. *Classical Mythology in Context*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 346.

⁴⁶ Gantz, Timothy. *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources*. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 96.

a healer who worked at the famous Epidaurus, a holistic healing center of the ancient world.⁴⁷

The struggle for Apollo, and much of humanity, is to fight against the faulty, crude side of one's personality. For Apollo, the faulty side of his personality was his pride which is demonstrated in the Hymn to Hermes when he is speaking about punishing Hermes for wrongdoings.⁴⁸ In the story, Apollo's pride got the best of him and he was bested by his brother. This is a relatable human tale. Apollo was a god who had humanistic experiences. He was on the side of Troy in the Trojan war which lost, he was bested by his little brother, and he even fell in love many times. The humanistic representation of experience is seen very clearly in the god Apollo.

Aside from his near-human experiences, it cannot be refuted that Apollo's influence on Ancient Greece is important for their relationship with divinity which is conducted through oracles. Maurizio interprets Apollo's influence as shown by Homer in the Iliad, "Homer conveys that Apollo's violence is tempered by his embodiment of the cultural arts.... Apollo also oversees the cultural accomplishments and practices of medicine and prophecy."⁴⁹ People of Ancient Greece sought religious guidance and answers to their questions, much like Christians of today. These religious questions were answered by an oracle. Oracles were yet another sign that these divine beings wanted a relationship with their followers. Each of these oracles were run by either a priest or priestess. The most famous of these oracles was Apollo's oracle at Delphi, run by female priestesses called Pythiai.⁵⁰ There are numerous accounts in myths of heroes and everyday people traveling to the oracle at Delphi. This oracle was especially famous because Apollo was the god of prophecy. I believe that this is important because depending on

⁴⁷ Ibid, 91.

⁴⁸ "Hymn 4 to Hermes Hugh G. Evelyn-White, Ed.," Hymn 4 to Hermes, To Hermes, accessed February 8, 2023, Ln 385-435.

⁴⁹ Maurizio, Lisa. *Classical Mythology in Context*, 144.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 346.

the god, the oracles could be run by men, women, or both. Unlike the Catholic tradition, which excludes women from being priests, the most influential oracle was run by women.⁵¹ Even though during ancient times women were seen as property, women in the Greek tradition were also trusted by Apollo to provide “Zeus’ counsel” to people at oracles throughout the ancient world.⁵² It seems to me that the actions people take in their lives is what make them sacred rather than their biological sex. This is a contrast to Christianity and an argument that makes a Greek Pantheon visualization of the divine more inclusive for a wider range of people.

Questions at the oracles centered around the everyday experiences of the Greeks. There were questions of love, war, and medicine. Depending on which god or goddesses’ oracle the traveler visited depended on what kind of question the traveler would ask. The priestess at Delphi would enter into a trance and answer questions in hallucination-filled riddles. It was also believed that she also would dream prophecies. The Greeks believed these prophecies and riddles to be words spoken directly by Apollo through the priestess. The prophecies were taken very seriously, but the priestesses and priests were interpreting the messages. While the oracle’s power of prophecy was infallible, the oracle could have fallen to the fallibility of the citizen.⁵³ The people who are to be the mediators between the divine and humanity have a significant responsibility as well as immense power. Even if the mediators want to do what is best for humanity and want to interpret the divine to the best of their ability, they are fallible as human beings. The fallibility of the human still requires the need for the divine, but the Greek experience would have continued the search for the truth encouraged by the gods rather than passively accepting the fate of the Christian god.

⁵¹ Hamilton Edith, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*, 26-27.

⁵² Maurizio, Lisa. *Classical Mythology in Context*, 345-46.

⁵³ Scott, Michael. “Delphic Oracle.” *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, July 30, 2015.

The oracles dealt with questions of human fate. To the Greeks, Fate was personified just as their gods were. Fate manifested in a form of three women, never apart, who knew the answers to all questions related to a person's future. Even though the Greeks were aware of the Fates spinning the thread, which was their life and destiny, the outlook of the Fates is one that differed. Aeneas, a Greek hero who fled Greece during the sack of Troy, was fated to be the founder of a great nation, Rome. His story was one of fated destiny; however, along the way, the Trojans were subject to many hardships caused by the gods who were fallible and often jealous. Divine interference for the Trojans certainly prolonged their eventual creation of Rome, but there was nothing any god or goddess could do to prevent Aeneas' destiny.⁵⁴ The Fates' elusive language created a sense of mystery because the fates would not explicitly tell a hero his destiny. This led to the philosophical investigation of life for which the Greek culture is known.

The religion of their time sparked an interest in the purpose for humanity and higher-level thinking. The way I have interpreted fate in Greek mythology is that the overall direction of a person's life is a mystery and relatively uncontrolled by the divine. Ancient Greeks felt consequence to their fate, but it was seen to be different from a divine plan because the fate was not set by the gods but rather set by the fates themselves. I believe that this distinction is important because it is not the divinity who is in control but rather the world itself manifested in the fates. There is a comfort in pre-destination, but also a recognition of free will and human dignity. Christian notions of the divine plan can create a culture of complacency and acceptance. If Greek people did not like how their life was going, they could be empowered by the gods to make changes and do something about the state of their life. Suffering, in Greek culture, could be seen as something which should be accepted and then people actively work to make their life

⁵⁴ Hamilton Edith, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*, 320-326.

better rather than stay down in that suffering and wait for salvation. This is an active culture which saw suffering as something to repent for, to show that they had learned, but also saw that there was a way out of the suffering they did not bring on themselves.

As I mentioned before, the earth was a free domain. This is mostly true; however, two gods interfere more directly with the experiences of humanity. These are the two gods of agriculture, Demeter and Dionysus. I compare Demeter and Dionysus because each of these gods reflect a deep understanding of humanity because each of them has suffered and chooses to live with humanity on the Earth. Both of these gods have had their own share of suffering, uncaused by them. Demeter has a tragic story. Her daughter, Persephone, given by Zeus to Hades to be his bride, was taken to the underworld without Demeter knowing. The goddess was distraught, but she found comfort appearing before four daughters of Keleos in the town of Eleusis.

The hospitality Demeter experienced from the family there made Demeter want to take care of the son Demophon whom she nursed with her divine milk and was in the process of making him immortal when the mother found her roasting him in the fire. Demeter revealed herself as a goddess and the family begged to be forgiven. It is out of this tradition that the Eleusian mysteries, a mysterious cult following Demeter, was created. The relevant parts of this story are in the interactions with the four daughters. When they found Demeter at the well, they were hospitable and said that they would check with their mother to see if she could stay in their father's house. The mother made the final decision regarding the hospitality rather than the father, signifying a strong female presence.⁵⁵ Eventually, the family of Keleos constructed the

⁵⁵ Homeric Hymn to Demeter. Translated by Gregory Nagy. Accessed January 5, 2023, Footnotes.

temple to Demeter near Eleusis. It is important to note that the polytheistic mystery cult rituals were especially inclusive. Maurizio explains that, “Any Greek-speaking person, -including women, men, and slaves- who was ritually pure (not committed murder) could participate in the Mysteries.”⁵⁶ The inclusivity of the rituals for all people who wanted to worship Demeter was life-giving, even when the societal structures of the ancient times were not. The divinities worked to bring life to all people who worshipped them, there was not a rejection of worship made by the goddess or a determination of who was worthy of divine light.

These Eleusinian mysteries were seen as a form of worship to the goddess Demeter who is the goddess of the harvest and controls the seasons. A strong signifier of the seasons was also the coming of the end of life. Demeter plays an important role in the rites of the afterlife. It was believed that those people who participated in the mystery cults would have a “better life after death and a certain intimacy with the god or goddess of the cult.”⁵⁷ The Hymn to Demeter describes the goddess in a passage which explains the greater purpose for the Rape of Persephone,

*“’Hades whose hair is dark, who rule over those who have died,
Zeus the Father has ordered that I from Erebus lead
Splendid Persephone out amongst the other gods,
So that her mother, on seeing her, might pull back from the wrath
And the dreadful rage that she nurtures against the immortal gods.
Of humans born on earth, concealing the seed in the soil,
And destroying immortals’ honors. She nurtures her dreadful wrath
And does not mix with the gods, but far away she sits*

⁵⁶ Maurizio, Lisa. *Classical Mythology in Context*, 159.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 396.

In her fragrant shrine and presides over rocky Eleusis town."⁵⁸

This section of the hymn is important in describing the relationship that Demeter had with the other gods. She was distant and took particular care of the people of the earth, especially those in agriculture which is shown by the line where Demeter nurtures people who conceal the seed in the soil. The power that she held for the Greeks, who were dependent on agriculture, was very influential to the everyday lives of Greek citizens. The tragic story of Demeter and Persephone ends with Persephone spending one third of her time in the underworld, a time Demeter mourns (winter), and two thirds above ground with her mother (spring and summer). This gives the Greeks the ancient, divine reason for the seasons they experience. A purpose is created for the practical experience of the world.

In the *Hymn to Demeter*, Kallidike says to Demeter, who is disguised as an old woman, "Old Mother, we humans endure the gifts [either good or bad] the gods give us, even when we are grieving over what has to be."⁵⁹ While I would argue that a sense of control in the faith traditions someone practices is important, it is also important to realize that not everything can be in our control. This shows that while the way people think about divinity is heavily individualized in a polytheistic understanding of divinity, there is still a certain aspect which is not under complete human control. The tension between control and chaos is important because there needs to be a balance of control for the divinity and the faithful person. The divinity needs some aspect of control because this provides a level of comfort for the believer. It is consoling to believe that experiences are not completely determined by oneself. However, the faithful people need some aspect of control over the divinity in which they believe because this is life-

⁵⁸ Hymn to Demeter, 345-356.

⁵⁹ Ibid, line 147.

affirming to each person's unique situation. I believe that just as it is shown in the *Hymn to Demeter*, an imagination of the polytheistic understanding of divinity can also be beneficial for people experiencing suffering out of their control.

Dionysus was the other important god of the Earth and he is comparable with Demeter because they both chose to live on Earth and to live in relationship with humans. He was the god of wine and the vine, two important parts of Greek life. Wine was a way for Greek people to touch and experience the divine. However, not all followers of Dionysus drank wine. The Greek people began to see Dionysus as the god who filled them with divine inspiration. For a culture which developed technology, art, and architecture far beyond its time, Dionysus became a vitally important god to the Greek society. It might seem that a worship of such a god would lead to a lustful, drunken party, but this was not the case for worshippers of Dionysus. The festival of Dionysus culminated in an experience of theater.⁶⁰ The theater of Dionysus was a magnificent theater created to honor the god in the most inspired way possible, through the production of a play.

Dionysus is also the god of suffering, or the suffering god. He plays an important role in the afterlife of the Greek culture. Dionysus is helpful for the human experience because he was the only mortal god. He was a god who lived and died just as humans do. Dionysus is brought back to life and resurrected as a divine being. This experience of death resonates with humans because even the gods have faced death.⁶¹ Dionysus was the personification of the grape vines; therefore, just as the vine dies each year and is pruned to be ready for new growth the next year, Dionysus died each winter. However, the death of a god also meant the resurrection each year

⁶⁰ Maurizio, Lisa. *Classical Mythology in Context*, 388-89.

⁶¹ Ibid, 387-89.

with the coming of spring and new growth. Hamilton says about Dionysus, “in his resurrection, he was the embodiment of life which is stronger than death.”⁶² Therefore, the Greek idea of death was comforted in the belief of Dionysus because they felt that the soul lived on forever. Even though the body of the person was dead, it was important for the Greeks to believe that their soul went to a happier comfortable place in the afterlife. According to Hamilton, Plutarch, after hearing of the death of his daughter wrote his wife, “We hold it firmly for an undoubted truth that our soul is incorruptible and immortal. We are to think (of the dead) that they pass into a better place and a happier condition.”⁶³ I believe it would be more comforting for people to believe that their loved ones have moved on to a better place and life for the soul continues after their earthly death. This is much like the Christian logic; however, it is important to note that, as Plutarch says, the soul is incorruptible and immortal. There are fewer requirements for the person’s soul to continue on to a better life.

Dionysus is also a god who helps to alleviate suffering and provide a way through suffering because he is a god who releases humans. I recognize that this release comes through the euphoric forms of wine and theatrical productions; however, the act of worship was seen as a way to cope with human suffering. This is especially important in an ancient culture when the life people lived was often harsh, controlled by natural phenomena and human conquest. Even so, Greek people lived rich, culture-filled lives through the worship of their divinities. Maurizio describes Dionysus, “he ‘releases’ people from their isolates existences and everyday lives as he leads them in groups to his ecstatic worship.”⁶⁴ This form of release in worship is important often for people who are suffering. It can be used as a form of coping with the environment

⁶² Hamilton Edith, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*, 74.

⁶³ Ibid, 75.

⁶⁴ Maurizio, Lisa. *Classical Mythology in Context*, 395.

around the sufferer. When met with a crisis of faith, a person who finds release in his or her worship is likely to find comfort and solace even in that time of suffering.

Demeter and Dionysus are two gods who interact more personally with the humans on Earth which also means that their interaction with the rest of the gods appears as though they are lesser. There are many power dynamics among the Greek pantheon, but much like the humans, the higher order gods of the pantheon dictate what happens in the less powerful gods' lives. Even so, it is necessary to understand that even though Demeter and Dionysus are less powerful in the traditional sense, they are incredibly important to the lives of Greek people. Their struggle of fate might make them even more important because they experience the same types of struggles that humans face as well. The power imbalance is like a system which humans live in where the lives of average people are dictated by those in society who are more powerful. In most societies, the powerful people are those who have more money or political sway than the average people. The rich and politically aligned make the decisions for the rest of society.

The gods of the Earth, Demeter and Dionysus, offer a glimpse into what the people who suffered in Ancient Greece were looking for, personal interaction with the divinity which they believed influenced their experience as humans. This personal interaction was directly shown by many gods who interacted with heroes, their children, and on the battlefield. The ability of Demeter and Dionysus to be relatable and struggle, just as humans, would have been of utmost importance to the quest for understanding how to alleviate the suffering Greek people faced. The personal nature of mythology could offer a more consoling answer to the questions humans have about suffering because it gives a hope that they are not forgotten or forsaken by a pantheon of gods but rather that the gods live among them and are impacted by suffering of their own.

In the Greek pantheon, there are gendered roles which the gods and goddesses take. This is understandable because Greek mythology emerged in a time where society was extremely gendered. Religions strongly reflect the culture from which it comes. This is a big reason why Christianity reflects some basic parts of Greek mythology. Christianity emerged when people were still worshipping Greek and Roman gods. Indeed, there are strong gender roles in Christianity- both religions emerged from a time when this was a common practice. However, I argue that there is a stronger sense of gender equality among the Greek pantheon. The Christian God is presented in mainline tradition as distinctly and only male. Jesus is a male personification of God which furthers the idea that the Christian God is male. To further this patriarchy, only men can be the interceding forces between God and His people in the Catholic church. For people who are not males, it seems difficult to be like God, Jesus, or be in any form that the divine would favor.

Conversely, Greek mythology was more inviting to the non-male half of society. While Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades manifest as male and all three have wives, the females in the Greek Pantheon are not to be mollified. These three brothers are the traditional power of the mythological world; however, the women of the pantheon are extremely powerful figures as well. Athena is the trusted daughter of Zeus who birthed her herself. She is the favorite child of Zeus and was honored with carrying the Aegis shield and occasionally Zeus' thunderbolt. Hera, the wife of Zeus, was a force to be reckoned with, and in many myths she was the manipulating force behind the scenes. If it wasn't for Hera, the Trojan War would not have occurred. The rage and vengeance which filled her is something which is realistic of people in all genders. In later stories, Aphrodite becomes a goddess who exerts her beauty in a malicious way above

men.⁶⁵ An example of this is in the *Hymn to Aphrodite*, when Anchises says, “Then, O lady who looks like the gods, I would willingly/ Once I have been in your bed, go down into the palace of Hades below.”⁶⁶ Aphrodite appeared to Anchises and tempted him, telling him she was a mortal woman, she drove him mad with passion, so much that he was willing to sacrifice his life for her love. The women of the Greek culture were not passive, directly conflicting with what is expected of women in many Christian traditions.

Another validating experience for the Greek pantheon was the understanding that sexuality is more fluid. Traditional Christianity has a definite structured view of the way that gender roles and sexuality are expressed.⁶⁷ Rather than condemning people who experience their gender and sexuality as different than the “traditional” understanding of Christian experience, Greek mythology celebrates and makes gods of beings who have a wide range of sexualities. There are many myths which present both Apollo and Poseidon as bisexual. Gantz details Apollo’s love affairs, many of which were with women; however, he states, “we cannot, however, close this catalogue of the god’s affairs without mentioning two young boys, Hykinthos and Kyparissos.”⁶⁸ The acceptance of these important, bisexual gods to the culture is liberating for those people who do not conform to the binary Christian understanding of gender and sexuality.

Another example from Greek myths is the three virgin goddesses, Hestia, Athena, and Artemis. This may seem like they should be praised for being virgins and women who are

⁶⁵ Hamilton Edith, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*, 30.

⁶⁶ Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite. Translated by Gregory Nagy. Accessed February 25, 2023, Lines 153-54.

⁶⁷ Hernandez, Elizabeth. “Denver Archdiocese’s Guidance to Catholic Schools: Don’t Enroll Transgender Students. Treat Gay Parents Differently.”

⁶⁸ Gantz, Timothy. *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources*, 94.

sexually active should be rebuked.⁶⁹ However, this is not the case. These three goddesses are praised for being virgins and choosing to buck the societal norm and gender roles of the times. Each of these women had the opportunity to conform to the societal roles they 'should' have played, but instead they refused to fall into the trap. I argue that these three goddesses are a symbol of power and inspiration for women who did not have the ability to control their lives. Therefore, the three virgin goddesses empower women in Greek society.

A final expression of women empowerment in Greek myth is the story of the Amazons. This is a band of women who depend on their strength and power to protect themselves and their society which is solely created for and by women. They were the original man-haters. The Amazons were powerful female warriors who saw men as only necessary for the birth of other females.⁷⁰ This is certainly not life-giving for men, but in a society that exists in patriarchy, it could be liberating for the women who are oppressed in situations that they cannot control. For a woman like Hagar, this might have been liberating for her to throw off her oppressors and live in a society that valued her worth as a woman rather than a slave and concubine.

⁶⁹ Maurizio, Lisa. *Classical Mythology in Context*, 337.

⁷⁰ Maurizio, Lisa. *Classical Mythology in Context*, 502.

Chapter 8. Conclusion

The authoritative monotheistic traditions I described each offer consolation in their attempts to interpret God and the relationship that humanity should have with the divine. In their own way, each tradition is beneficial for the followers; however, I hope that by pointing out how they respond to questions of suffering, it can be demonstrated that they are not immune to critique. In certain cases, they work against human flourishing by diminishing the experience of suffering or simply claiming that it does not matter. Health and wealth are both important aspects of the human experience and should be desired, but not at the expense of human dignity or intervention to increase the quality of life. There are certain understandings of relationships with the divine which can be problematic for the people who follow this belief. Even so, this does not mean that people should give up seeking the correct relationship or abandon their thinking which helps them to understand their experience as a human and their personal relationship with God.

The Greek religion is useful for people because it shows a relationship between humanity and the divine which helps the Greeks understand the reality in which they live. This is exemplified through the use of fallible gods, oracular questions which emerge through lived experience, and the reality of human suffering. The religion of ancient Greece responds to reality which is certainly life-affirming because it is not a prescriptive religion that requires blind faith in divinity, but instead, the Greek pantheon is one that reacts to the lived experience of those who worship it.

The relationship people have with their divinity should affirm the lived experiences of life for the followers. This relationship should withstand intense scrutiny, especially during a crisis of faith. With the assistance of a life-giving faith, people should be equipped with the tools which help them to navigate the suffering which occurs in their lives. The Greek pantheon is an

alternative way to see the divine which could be useful for some people because it serves as a relatable exemplification of divinity which does not place people on the margins but rather invites all to worship in a way that is individualistic while united in a distinct culture. This divinity might not be the solution for every person, but I believe that the deeper evaluation of faith leads to the deepening of that relationship which is life-giving. This search is what really matters for the development of people and the liberation of the individuals suffering. It is in the search for a life-affirming relationship with the divine that people can determine their interactions with the world and how we truly ought to live.

Bibliography

- Barth, Karl. *The Epistle to the Romans*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1968.
- Bettini, Maurizio. *In Praise of Polytheism*. University of California Press, 2023.
- Bowler, Kate. *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Gantz, Timothy. *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.
- Hamilton Edith, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1999.
- Hernandez, Elizabeth. "Denver Archdiocese's Guidance to Catholic Schools: Don't Enroll Transgender Students. Treat Gay Parents Differently." The Denver Post. The Denver Post, November 7, 2022. <https://www.denverpost.com/2022/11/07/denver-catholic-archdiocese-lgbtq-guidance-transgender-gay-students/>.
- Homer. *The Iliad*. Translated by Caroline Alexander. New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2015.
- Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*. Translated by Gregory Nagy. Accessed February 25, 2023. <https://www.uh.edu/~cldue/texts/aphrodite.html>.
- Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. Translated by Gregory Nagy. Accessed January 5, 2023. <https://uh.edu/~cldue/texts/demeter.html><https://uh.edu/~cldue/texts/demeter.html>.

“Hymn 4 to Hermes Hugh G. Evelyn-White, Ed.” Hymn 4 to Hermes, To Hermes. Accessed February 8, 2023.

<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0138%3AHymn%3D4>.

Johnson, Elizabeth A. *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. Crossroad, 2002.

Larrimore, Mark J. *The Problem of Evil: A Reader*. Oxford ; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001.

Maurizio, Lisa. *Classical Mythology in Context*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016.

McKim, Robert. “On Religious Ambiguity.” *Religious Studies* 44, no. 4 (2008): 373–92.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27749973>.

Metz, Johann Baptist, and J. Matthew Ashley. *Suffering unto God*, n.d.

Petrovic, I., & Petrovic, A. (2019). General. *Greece & Rome*, 66(2), 334-352.
doi:10.1017/S0017383519000159.

Rahner, Karl, *Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology*.

Schwartz, Regina M., *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Scott, Michael. “Delphic Oracle.” Oxford Classical Dictionary, July 30, 2015:

[https://oxfordre.com/classics/oso/viewentry/10.1093\\$002facrefore\\$002f9780199381135.0](https://oxfordre.com/classics/oso/viewentry/10.1093$002facrefore$002f9780199381135.0)

01.0001\$002facrefore-9780199381135-e-
2080;jsessionid=5DF948D6A19A8030D243A322784A4C88.

“Suffering Noun - Definition, Pictures, Pronunciation and Usage Notes: Oxford Advanced American Dictionary at Oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com.” suffering noun - Definition, pictures, pronunciation and usage notes | Oxford Advanced American Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com. Accessed February 7, 2023.
https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/suffering#:~:text=1%5Buncountable%5D%20physical%20or%20mental.has%20caused%20widespread%20human%20suffering.

Waldrop, Charles T. “Karl Barth’s Concept of the Divinity of Jesus Christ.” *The Harvard Theological Review* 74, no. 3 (1981): 241–63. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1509451>.