Eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil: Exorcisms of Scripture and the Bible as Evil Text

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Building upon Paul Tillich's analysis of demonic politico-theological structures and Marilyn McCord Adams' treatment of "horrendous evils," this article explores the Bible's capacity to effect existential ruin when incorporated within theological systems that demand fanatical obedience from adherents. By investing the Bible with absolute authority as the holy Word of God, the ecclesial elites whose theological discourse both defines the nature of biblical authority and demarcates the boundaries of acceptable scriptural interpretation are able to arrogate divine authority to themselves and their favoured construction of orthodoxy; the result is a demonic elevation of these elites to positions of unlimited – and unquestionable – power *vis-à-vis* dissenters. The official doctrine of the Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada, considered in light of the denomination's systematic expulsion of homosexuals and other so-called "heretics," provides an extended illustration of one such system in which the Bible is instantiated as evil text, which may be resisted through the cultivation of an apophatic hermeneutic of resistance.

Keywords: Paul Tillich; Marilyn McCord Adams; demonic; fanatic; Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada

Introduction

Cove Community Church held its first Sunday services in February 2003 at Seycove Community School, North Vancouver, Canada, its praxis shaped by its vision of being "[a]n Authentic [*sic*] community where everyone belongs, revealing hope in Jesus Christ, [and,] courageously, becoming better neighbours."[1] A Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada (CMAC) plant out of North Shore Alliance Church, weekend attendance reached 170 within the congregation's first year, with that figure increasing

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[1] Ed Hird. "Welcoming the Newest Kid on the Deep Cove Block." *Deep Cove Crier*, January 2004. http://www3.telus.net/st_simons/cr0401.html.

to approximately 200 attendees by 2007.[2] On Sunday, 20 November 2012, while Cove was meeting at Mount Seymour United Church, founding pastor Sean Graham welcomed Stacey Chomiak and her wife Tammy as official members, thereby violating denominational policy, which neither recognizes homosexual marriages nor grants memberships to those who "engage in, *or endorse*, homosexual conduct and/or relationships."[3] The response was swift from the Canadian Pacific District, which has responsibility for overseeing CMAC congregations in British Columbia and the Yukon, placing Cove's affiliation with its parent denomination under review in February 2013; Graham sought the support of Mount Seymour United in the event that Cove lost denominational backing, a request that was declined in May of that year.[4] At the end of April, the District notified Cove's leadership that the church's relationship with the CMAC would be terminated in May and its charitable status forfeited. The congregation gathered for its final Sunday service on 26 May 2013; unable to meet its financial obligations, Cove was forced to disband, donating "kitchen equipment and a sound

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[2] North Shore Alliance Church. "Our History." North Shore Alliance Church. Accessed March 7, 2017, http://www.nsac.bc.ca/about/our-history; Peter Biggs. "The Church on the North Shore." *BC Christian News*, June 2007. https://canadianchristianity.com/bc/bccn/0607/18north.html#articletop.

[3] See the CMAC's "Policy on the Relationship of Official Workers and Churches of The Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada to Those Engaged in Homosexual Conduct," which was approved at the denomination's General Assembly in 2004 (*C&MA Manual (2016)*, 72–73 [emphasis added]).

[4] Mt. Seymour United Church Council, *Minutes (February 20, 2013)*, 1; Mt. Seymour United Church Council, *Minutes (May 8, 2013)*, 2.

system" to cover outstanding rental debts.[5] Four days prior, the Pacific District held its District Conference and Annual General Meeting in Langley, BC, adopting a report from CMAC President David Hearn "with gratitude for all God is doing through the C&MA in Canada family of churches."[6] Jesus was being crucified on Vancouver's North Shore; just to the south, Pilate and Herod affirmed their friendship.

The policy that informed the CMAC's decision to expel Cove is prefaced with a quotation of Article (4) of the denomination's Statement of Faith: "The Old and New Testaments, inerrant as originally given, were verbally inspired by God and are a complete revelation of his [*sic*] will for the salvation of people. They constitute the divine and only rule of Christian faith and practice."[7] This conception of Scripture, and the power dynamics associated therewith, provides the point of departure for the present article, which investigates the manner in which the attempt to inscribe the Bible with absolute divine authority in official CMAC doctrine contributes to the construction of a particular and exclusionary version of Christian "orthodoxy" that legitimates the demonic power claims of the denomination's political elites at the expense of dissenting parties such as the aforementioned members of Cove. Methodologically, my analysis takes its cue from Derridean deconstructions and the postliberal approach to doctrine outlined by George Lindbeck, these providing the basis from which I examine the

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[5] For a first-hand account of the events described here, see Chomiak, "Church That Loved." The church's rental obligations were partially satisfied by an anonymous donation from a member of Mount Seymour United (Mt. Seymour United Church Council, *Minutes [June 12, 2013]*, 2).

[6] See the minutes of the 2013 meeting recorded in the Canadian Pacific District, *Report to 2015 District Conference*, 14. On 10 March 2017, the Pacific District declined a request by the author for access to the Report to 2013 District Conference and other materials related to the history of Cove (personal correspondence).

[7] CMAC, *C&MA Manual (2016),* 5, 72.

capacity of Scripture *qua* language to promote both the transformation and destruction of finite human existence. Interfacing Paul's Tillich's descriptions of finitude, fanaticism, and the demonic with Marilyn McCord Adams' treatment of "horrendous evils," I contend that the Bible is instantiated as evil text when incorporated within a regulative system that impels its use for existentially ruinous ends; the article of faith just cited exemplifies such a system, the appropriate response to which is a hermeneutic of resistance that not only rejects evil incarnations of the Christian Scriptures but constructively reconstitutes them *apropos* a dialogical apprehension of the divine character as one defined by love.

Prolegomenon: Finitude and Its Discontents

The present study of evil, and of texts' potential to participate therein, is an investigation of the tragedy of finitude. Towards this end, Paul Tillich's attention to the deictic function of infinity is helpful as an initial point of departure: For Tillich, being is finite inasmuch as it is delimited by the nothingness of nonbeing, with cognizance of this finitude subjecting the individual to the ubiquitous anxiety that "belongs to existence itself."[8] As an ego-self, a person is able to structure her environment through the manipulation of linguistically conditioned forms, in particular those of time and space; in this way she is able, through acts of the imagination, to transcend finitude by conceiving of both an endless multiplicity of possible finite realities as well as the abstract possibility of infinitude. Rather than instantiating the individual as infinite, however, this transcendence impresses upon the ego-self an awareness of her own limitation insofar as "the mind itself remains bound to the finitude of its individual

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[8] Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 39. Anxiety in Tillich's thought should not be equated with fear; the latter has a definable object while the object of the former "is the negation of every object" (ibid., 36).

bearer."[9] It is in transgressing the boundaries of her existence through this imaginative enterprise that the individual is able to contemplate the nothingness of nonbeing, thereby gaining an apprehension of the contours of her own finite self.[10]

Tillich delineates a threefold taxonomy of the anxieties that arise from consciousness of nonbeing's threat to being, distinguishing between the anxieties of death and fate, meaninglessness and emptiness, and, finally, condemnation and guilt.[11] The first of these denotes the absolute threat to ontic self-affirmation posed by death, which Tillich associates with the condition of estrangement wherein people find themselves separated from the eternal;[12] in relation to death, fate describes the contingency of human existence that produces anxiety inasmuch as apprehension thereof entails an understanding that one's existence lacks "ultimate necessity."[13] Meaninglessness is likewise an absolute threat in its challenge to spiritual self-expression, generating the anxiety that doubt will efface the ultimate meaning of existence; emptiness is a relative threat to being that undermines the capacity for discrete elements of the spiritual life to maintain their content as objects of devotion.[14] Finally, condemnation is the product of a person's inability to actualize her destiny

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[9] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:191. Similarly, consult Paul Ricoeur's discussion of finitude in relation to bodily mediation and the necessity of transgressing the boundaries of finitude in *Fallible Man*, 19–25.

[10] Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 32–39; Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:168–171, 186–192.

[11] Note that, for Tillich, "[t]he fear of death determines the element of anxiety in every fear. Anxiety, if not modified by the fear of an object, anxiety in its nakedness, is always the anxiety of ultimate nonbeing" (*Courage to Be*, 38; see also Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:197).

[12] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 2:66–67.

[13] Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 42–45; note also Farley, *Good and Evil*, 124.

[14] Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 46–49; Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 2:72–73.

because of the ambiguous interface of being and nonbeing inherent to estranged existence, however that destiny is characterized in the theological or ethical discourse to which she subscribes;[15] guilt is the subjective consciousness of this ambiguity.[16]

The import of the preceding account of anxiety and finitude for my proposed analysis of the Bible as evil text is suggested by Tillich's symbols of the fanatic and the demonic, especially as these two labels relate to the question of meaning(lessness) alluded to here. As a response to doubt, fanaticism arises when an individual sacrifices her freedom to inquire after meaning in order to identify with a "transindividual" entity that dictates in absolutist terms the legitimate responses to any potential queries or uncertainties.[17] Although participation in this authoritarian corporate structure enables

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[15] Tillich's comments in this respect are particularly germane for the present analysis: "however the norm is formulated man has the power of acting against it, of contradicting his essential being, of losing his destiny. And under the conditions of man's estrangement from himself this is an actuality. Even in what he considers his best deed nonbeing is present and prevents it from being perfect. *A profound ambiguity between good and evil permeates everything he does, because it permeates his personal being as such.* Nonbeing is mixed with being in his moral self-affirmation as it is in his spiritual and ontic self-affirmation" (*Courage to Be*, 52 [emphasis added]).

[16] Ibid., 51–53. Paul Ricoeur proposes a similar understanding of guilt as "the *subjective* moment in fault as sin is its *ontological* moment. Sin designates the real situation of man before God, whatever consciousness he may have of it…. Guilt is the awareness of this real situation" (*Symbolism of Evil*, 101 [emphasis in original]).

[17] Tillich observes that fundamentalism, "in its biblicistic-evangelical form," characteristically leads to fanaticism amongst its adherents "because it speaks from a situation of the past. It elevates something finite and transitory to infinite and eternal validity. *In this respect fundamentalism has demonic traits.* It destroys the humble honesty of the search for truth, it splits the conscience of its thoughtful adherents, *and it makes them fanatical because they are forced to*

the individual to meaningfully retain elements of the spiritual life insofar as such self-sacrifice superficially averts the threat of *systematic* doubt, the result is "fanatical self-assertiveness," a need to violently oppose "those who disagree and who demonstrate by their disagreement elements in the spiritual life which he must suppress in himself."[18] The image of the demonic comports with this symbolic matrix of fanaticism, describing the elevation of a finite element, such as a particular local permutation of the body catholic, to infinitude through the predication of unambiguous or divine attributes to the finite entity itself. Since this aggrandizement is instantiated by means of an appeal to the holy, the demonic always maintains an ambiguous, and for Tillich ultimately distorted, relationship with divinity; asserting of itself not merely a witness to holiness but holiness itself, the demonic crushes criticism and suppresses creative innovation inasmuch as it pronounces judgment in the name of God against any who reject its own self-conception.[19] To the degree that demonic entities eliminate potential dissent, they thus nurture fanaticism amongst their members as the appropriate outlook in the face of ultimate meaninglessness.

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suppress elements of truth of which they are dimly aware" (*Systematic Theology*, 1:3 [emphasis added]).

[18] Tillich, *Courage to Be*, 49–50. Compare the similar comments of Edward Farley, who notes that ecclesial structures of authority employ violence to preserve themselves against attempts to undermine their claim to divine status (*Ecclesial Reflection*, 168).

[19] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:102–106, 244–245. Citing Tillich, Wendy Farley makes a similar argument with respect to the church's frequent attempts to arrogate an authority that lacks corruption and ambiguity, this providing a justification for the persecution of dissenters (*Gathering Those Driven Away*, 17–18).

Marilyn McCord Adams' treatment of "horrendous evils" provides the bridge between Tillich's study of finitude and my own reflections on the Bible as evil text, horrors being understood

> as "evils the participation in (the doing or suffering of) which constitutes *prima facie* reason to doubt whether the participant's life could (given their inclusion in it) have positive meaning for him/her on the whole." Paradigm horrors include the rape of a woman and axing off of her arms [e.g., Judg 19:22-30; Ezek 16:35-43], psychophysical torture whose ultimate goal is the disintegration of personality, schizophrenia, or severe clinical depression, cannibalizing one's own offspring [e.g., Deut 28:47-57; Lam 2:19-22].… Participation in horrors furnishes *reason* to doubt whether the participant's life can be worth living, because it engulfs the positive value of his/her life and penetrates into his/her meaning-making structures seemingly to defeat and degrade his/her value as a person.[20]

Among the distinguishing qualities of these evils is their tendency to exceed the imaginative capacities of their perpetrators and victims, the former being unable to anticipate the extent of the suffering caused by their actions because of a lack of prior experience thereof.[21] While this ignorance does not relieve human actors of their culpability, it is indicative for Adams that horrific situations generate a surplus of evil, a conclusion that intimates God's own complicity in the occurrence of horrendous evils because it was God who created an environment in which the finitude of human embodiment entails radical vulnerability to trauma.[22] That God's effectuation of material creation was an act of love and that God, through the incarnation, elected to participate with humanity in this radical vulnerability are explanatory rather than

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[20] Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, 32–33 (emphasis in original).

[21] See Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, 36.

[22] Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, 32–41; cf. Ricoeur, *Symbolism of Evil*, 31–32. See also Wendy Farley's discussion of the tragic structure of suffering and finitude (*Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion*, 30–34).

justificatory claims; for Adams, the metaphysical gulf between humanity and the Divine is sufficient to preclude the former from accounting for the activities and intentions of the latter *in toto*.[23]

Adams' attention to the existentially ruinous effects of horrors accords with Tillich's understanding of "structures of evil" as "structures of self-destruction," which "are based on the structures of finitude; but they add the destructive elements and transform them, as guilt transforms the anxiety of death."[24] Texts are uniquely susceptible to participate in this destructive transformation because of their capacity to organize the narrative identities of communities and therefore the perceptions of reality adopted by the constituents thereof;[25] neither neutral nor benign, texts are constitutive of a corporate body's self-definition, serving the ideological interests of those in positions

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[23] Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, 53–55, 94; Adams, *Christ and Horrors*, 42–44. Note at this juncture Simone Weil's comment that it is by reflecting upon one's own "wretchedness" that God's otherness becomes apparent ("Attention and Will," 216). See also Paul Ricoeur's critiques of Leibniz's *Theodicy* in *Evil*, 51.

[24] Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 2:68.

[25] See the discussion of dominant narratives and counterstories in Nelson, "Resistance and Insubordination," 23–40; and, similarly, Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, xii–xiii. Compare Nelson's analysis with the "ontological Whorfianism" described by Reines and Prinz, "Reviving Whorf," 1029; and also Lindbeck's treatment of religions as cultural-linguistic idioms in *Nature of Doctrine*, 47–48. In the present article, my reference to "text" is inspired by the treatment thereof in Halliday and Hasan, *Cohesion in English*. Peter Williams rightly acknowledges that the denotation of "text" is not limited to written documents; nevertheless, his proposed explication of the term to support a view of scriptural inerrancy amounts to little more than an attempt to reinscribe the composer of a text with interpretive primacy, an argument that, in its assumption of a single author-god, overlooks the composite formation of works like the Pentateuch for which a number of figures were responsible ("Inerrancy of the Original Text," 396–400).

of power by constructing the subjectivity of their hearers/readers.[26] Within communal contexts, a dominant discourse invites members of the social body to locate themselves within its narrative.[27] In order to preserve this dominance, however, the polysemous range of denotations that necessarily obtains in the text *qua* language must be restricted by a privileged strand of interpretation sympathetic to the agendas of the power-elites, conformity to which determines whether a particular reading is compossible with membership in the community;[28] the removal of this constraint would undermine the ability of the powerful to appropriate the discourse as a means of preserving and codifying their own authority, opening narrative spaces within which affiliation with the corporate body could be defined independently of the elites themselves in variegated and diffuse rather than essentialist-absolutist terms.

The erasure of difference that monosemy promotes finds an especially sinister manifestation when the text and its dominant interpretation are demonically equated with the holy, this being a distortion of these finite elements' relationship with divinity such that dissent from either is marked as opposition to God:[29] The demonic interface of text and hermeneutic demands that those desiring to both remain within the bounds of the discursive community and persist in faithfulness to the Divine abrogate their own pursuit of meaning and acquiesce to the dominant narrative *tout court*. On this account, evil texts, biblical or otherwise, are those that are existentially destructive insofar as

[26] Newsom, "Discourse of Patriarchal Wisdom," 155; Shields, "Circumcision of the Prostitute," 62–63; consult further Mandolfo, *Daughter Zion Talks Back to the Prophets*, 12–19.

[27] In a more positive vein, see Lindbeck's comments regarding the Bible and "intratextuality" (*Nature of Doctrine*, 113–124).

[28] For a useful discussion of polysemy as a textual phenomenon, see Ricoeur, "Problem of Double Meaning," 62–78.

[29] See Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away*, 28–31.

they encourage a fanatical self-sacrifice that dispossesses free agents of their courage to face the threat of meaninglessness;[30] while the Bible's instantiation as such is not the inevitable result of its composition,[31] I will argue that the conditions for this evil manifestation are located within the demonic qualities of the statements of faith noted above.

Meditations in the Garden: The Evangelical Captivity of the Word and the Bible as Evil Text

Applying the foregoing framework to an analysis of the evangelical tradition under discussion in the present article, the notion of *Scripture* accepted in official CMAC doctrine,[32] insofar as it denotes the composite entity that emerges from the dialogical interface between the biblical canon *qua* Christian vocabulary and the doctrinal statements of ecclesial entities *qua* regulative grammar,[33] deconstructs in the tension created by the violent privileging of the former over the latter.[34] The CMAC's attempt to simultaneously assert and efface its own authority over the Bible both impels this text's instantiation as evil and indicates the means by which that evil may be resisted.

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[30] Ironically, Alliance theologian A. W. Tozer uses much the same language, including a reference to satanic influences, when criticizing Protestants for being "yes-men and yes-women" with regard to their acceptance of modernity (*The Bible*, 4–5).

[31] But, cf. Terry Eagleton's treatment of ideology as the production of a text in *Criticism and Ideology*, 68ff.

[32] Though the CMAC does not actually use the language of "Scripture" in Article (4) of its Statement of Faith, the term does appear in articles (2) and (8).

[33] Cf. Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*; Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*.

[34] Recall that deconstructions are neither methods nor procedures but, rather, events (Derrida, "Some Statements and Truisms," 85; Royle, "What Is Deconstruction?" 10–11).

On the Domestication of Holy Writ

In its own right, the statement of faith cited earlier represents a framing device that

governs the CMAC's delimitation, interpretation, and application of the biblical texts

for intrasystematic consistency;[35] in this regard, it principally advances second-order

rather than first-order (i.e. ontological) truth claims.[36] Although in official parlance the

CMAC formally recognizes the Bible as the "divine and only rule of Christian faith and

practice,"[37] the denomination's requirement that individual members subscribe to, and

partnered post-secondary institutions "[p]romote the teachings of,"[38] the Statement of

Faith gives preliminary support to an alternative analysis of Alliance doctrine using

loosely cultural-linguistic categories.[39] These stipulations allude to the Statement's

internally regulative functions in both homogenizing the education of officially licensed

workers as well as demarcating the range of beliefs that one might legitimately hold

whilst maintaining communion with the church;[40] as I argue here, this regulation

extends to the Bible itself.

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[35] The relation between the frame and deconstructions is discussed in Smith, "Deconstruction and Film," 123–125.

[36] For the distinction as applied to doctrine, see Lindbeck, *Nature of Doctrine*, 80 and *passim*.

[37] See, e.g., CMAC, *Alliance in Canada Today*, 29.

[38] The two institutions in Canada to which this presently applies are Ambrose University in Calgary, AB and École de Théologie Évangélique du Québec in Montreal, QC (CMAC, *C&MA Manual (2016)*, 33).

[39] Ibid., 33, 57. Note in this regard that although the Alliance did not adopt a formal statement of faith until 1965, as early as 1928 an official denominational doctrinal statement governed Alliance Bible Schools. See Draper, "Doctrinal Statement of 1928," 223.

[40] Borderud, "Creeds and the Statement of Faith," 221. Note Alliance President Nathan Bailey's complaint at General Council 1960, when the Canadian Alliance was still a constituent of its parent American denomination, that there was then a "lack of clarity in doctrinal teaching and experience;"

Germane to my proposed characterization is the formal description of exegetical procedure submitted by Franklin Pyles et al. to the CMAC's Board of Directors in 1987 at the behest of the denomination's 1984 General Assembly,[41] the authors of that document, which was appended to a larger study of the legitimacy of female eldership in the local church, noting at the outset that an affirmation of the Bible as sole theological authority has content only to the extent that the biblical canon is itself "interpreted as carefully and correctly as possible."[42] Pyles et al. commend the "grammatico-historical" method as the modality of biblical criticism most frequently and consistently employed by the Holy Spirit to explicate the Old and New Testaments, provided, however, that the conclusions derived therewith cohere with "basic biblical doctrine;" conveniently, the details of this nebulous requirement are left undefined.[43] While not explicitly recognized by Pyles et al., that their argument lends itself to the

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Borderud identifies this concern as a driving impetus for the subsequent formulation of the initial Statement of Faith (p. 217). Observe more recently the stipulation in the CMAC's licensing policy, which is binding on all paid CMAC staff involved in local church ministry or international missions, that "[o]nly a person…who is in *full agreement with the doctrines and teachings of The Christian and Missionary Alliance in Canada*, may be approved by the C&MA for licensing" (CMAC, *C&MA Manual (2016),* 43 [emphasis added]).

[41] Franklin Pyles would be elected President of the CMAC in 2000.

[42] Although the authors do not specifically cite the CMAC Statement of Faith, their prefatory comment that "[w]e confess the sole authority of the Holy Scriptures" is reminiscent of the assertion in both Article (1) of the 1928 Doctrinal Statement and Article (4) of the 1965 Statement of Faith that the biblical canon serve as "the divine and only rule of Christian faith and practice" (C&MA, *C&MA Manual (1966)*, 97; Draper, "Doctrinal Statement of 1928").

[43] Pyles, Runge, and Dahms, "Supporting Document," 5–8. In discerning the content of this "basic" doctrine, the authors evasively defer to the guidance of individuals "gifted" in the interpretation of "holy oracles" (p. 6).

conclusion that the CMAC Statement of Faith is fundamentally, if often covertly, regulative of the identification and interpretation of this so-called "basic" doctrine is confirmed by the denomination's more recent delineation of its "Core Values;" included in this later document is a description of biblical authority that recognizes both the CMAC articles of faith as a "summary of key truths from the Bible" as well as the necessity of "teaching in order to understand, obey, and apply the Bible to our faith and practice."[44] Implicit clarification of the latter summons is provided in the 2016 policy on "The Roles of Men and Women in Ministry," which enjoins submission for those in the CMAC such that their instruction of others directly comports with the canon of the Statement of Faith; compare this adjuration with the similar sentiments evinced in the document "Marriage – Divorce – Remarriage," which is construed as a set of "guidelines *from which* can be drawn scriptural applications to varying situations."[45]

Rather than following from the Bible *tout court*, the foregoing suggests instead that it is the denomination's Statement of Faith that prescribes the manner in which both the biblical text and its readers are sanctioned to participate in Alliance discourse. Informed by this reading, it remains to explicate the mimetic quality of the Alliance's assertion of absolute biblical authority, which mirrors even as it tries to obscure the CMAC's own arrogation of divine power; as I shall demonstrate presently, the regulative function of Alliance doctrine identified here demonically blurs the boundary between ecclesial power and that of Godself, thereby suppressing potential dissent and introducing the conditions wherein the biblical canon is instantiated as evil text.

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[44] CMAC, *C&MA Manual (2016)*, 4.

[45] Ibid., 92 (emphasis added).

God and Humanity – Enslaved!

Orthodoxies conjure heresies. Without the latter, the former lack not merely content but,

in the economy of discursive subjugation delineated earlier, potency; before an endless

horizon of interpretive potential,[46] they are bereft of any claim to monosemously

represent Godself and a monolithic tradition against the enemies of divine truth, to

licitly centre theological discourse and shape it according to their own image.[47] Thus, if

the CMAC Statement of Faith meaningfully represents "the orthodox interpretation of

Scripture,"[48] then any actions or beliefs in contradiction thereof are appropriately

identified as heretical, irrespective of whether those actions or beliefs are licensed by an

available denotation of the biblical text *vis-à-vis* its history of interpretation.[49] The

deviant individual is in this respect defiant not only of a particular denomination but, in

the absolute sense evoked by the aforementioned assertion of the Bible's divine

ontology, of the deity knowledge of whom is mediated through these religious bodies.[50]

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[46] On this, note the notion of deferral enshrined in Jacques Derrida's neologism *différance* ("Différance," 1–27). A horizon, for Derrida, "is both the opening and the limit that defines an infinite progress or a period of waiting" ("Force of Law," 26).

[47] This point is made strongly by Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away*, chap. 1. In the sense suggested above, orthodoxy easily slips into idolatry, on which point consult Johnson, *She Who Is*, 39–40.

[48] As declared explicitly for the former in CMAC, *C&MA Manual (2016)*, 72.

[49] The diversity of readings evoked by the Song of Songs is particularly apposite in this respect. For an attempt to simultaneously account for the cohesion and polysemy of this text, see Dalwood, "Dialoguing Polysemy."

[50] Note here the discussion of Irenaeus in Pagels, *Beyond Belief*, 154–157. Here, Paul Ricoeur's comments on defilement are germane. In discussing the murderer, Ricoeur remarks: "the maleficent power of which the murderer is the bearer is not a taint that exists absolutely without reference to a field of human presence, to words that express the defilement. A man is defiled who is

Grounded as it is in this rhetoric of conflict, the marginalization and attempted

expulsion of homosexuals from membership in the church catholic, to cite but one

example, gains legitimacy insofar as it may be construed not as a finite corporate body's

attempt to silence disagreeing interlocutors but, more sinisterly, as performative of

divine judgment.[51]

The construction of an absolutist orthodoxy is facilitated by the CMAC's

appropriation of 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20-21 to substantiate the thesis of Article (4) of its

Statement of Faith, the affirmation of biblical supremacy in this article functioning

reflexively to inscribe official denominational discourse with divine primacy. Since no

such citations of the biblical literature are present in the original 1965 doctrinal

document, despite an attempt to insert them at that year's General Council as a means of

investing the articles of faith with "unquestionable authority and clarity,"[52] their

inclusion in the Statement's most recent manifestation is of especial interpretive

interest, revealing the demonic impulse in Alliance thought.

For these passages to predicate of the Bible the ontological quality of being the

exclusive and divine rule for Christian faith and praxis, they must be interpreted

towards this end within the theological grammar of the Statement itself;[53] however,

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regarded as defiled; a law is required to say it; the interdict is itself a defining utterance" (*Symbolism of Evil*, 36).

[51] Thus, "Homosexual conduct is incompatible with the orthodox interpretation of Scripture as set forth in the Statement of Faith of The Christian and Missionary Alliance and cannot be condoned" (CMAC, *C&MA Manual (2016)*, 72). Once again, note that this policy goes on to anathematize those who even endorse homosexual conduct.

[52] C&MA, *Annual Report (1964)*, 208.

[53] As Luke Timothy Johnson notes, to read 2 Tim 3:16 as an ontological rather than functional statement reflects a crassly "anachronistic literalism" *First and Second Timothy*, 420, 423–

Alliance doctrine endeavors to obfuscate its own regulative role inasmuch as it simultaneously defers ultimate *de jure* authority to the Bible whilst retaining for itself a privileged position in the elucidation of the Bible's contents.[54] In addition to the evidence given above, on this latter point note the argument given at the CMAC's 2000 General Assembly in the preface to the proposed revisions of the Statement of Faith that the articles therein represent both "the orthodox foundation of the Christian faith" and the "classic creeds of the early church" over against the threat of "an increasingly pluralistic postmodern society…[that] has rejected institutions, authority, and tradition."[55] In spite of the confidence with which it is presented, this reconstruction of the Alliance's relationship to historic Christian thought is remarkably inventive; nevertheless, in light of my earlier comments on the distortive potential of orthodoxy the latter clause has particular import inasmuch as it may be understood as enabling those responsible for the creation of the CMAC's Statement of Faith to appropriate for

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424). For 2 Pet 1:20-21, note Jerome Neyrey's argument that these verses, which focus on the interpretation of prophecy rather than its origin, are principally concerned with the need for interpreters to act "as agents of the revealer;" that is, they do not necessarily denote that prophecy is itself divine (*2 Peter, Jude*, 182). These observations do not immediately disqualify the CMAC's use of these passages, although they do further call into question the degree to which the Bible functions in Alliance discourse as a source of authority independent from the Statement of Faith itself.

[54] The absolute, independent authority the CMAC ascribes to the Bible is thus an impossibility. On this, see Derrida's comment that "[e]ach time I say 'deconstruction and X (whatever the concept or the theme)', it is the prelude to a very singular division which makes of this X, or rather makes appear in this X, an impossibility which becomes its own sole possibility, so that between the X as possible and the 'same' X as impossible, there is no longer anything but a relation of homonymy for which we have to account" ("Et Cetera," 299–300).

[55] CMAC, *Biennial Report for 1998-1999*, 96.

themselves the politically advantageous position of speaking on behalf of an

apostolically inaugurated community of which their opponents are not constituents.[56]

From beneath the slim façade of submission cultivated by this deferral,

acquiescence to the CMAC Statement of Faith emerges as at once prerequisite to and

isomorphic with a comprehension of the divine will, such apprehension constituted as

genuine only to the extent that it comports with the claims advanced in the articles of

faith themselves.[57] The denomination's allusion to 2 Pet 1:20-21 is in this respect

germane, these verses portraying the faithful interpretation of prophecy as contingent,

first, on membership in the orthodox community with which the text is sympathetic and,

second, on whether the interpreter discharges her role not merely as a human agent but

as an agent of God. The selection of this passage subtly aligns the CMAC's claim to

bear a uniquely authoritative understanding of the biblical literature with the position

adopted in these Petrine verses, surreptitiously presenting the denomination as a body of

interpreters who engage the biblical text as God's own representatives.[58] Within the

dynamic interface between the biblical text and Alliance doctrine instantiated by the

CMAC Statement of Faith, criticism of one thus translates into an assault upon the

other; the divinely ordained appropriation of the Bible to support the articles of Alliance

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[56] Indeed, the paragraph from which the above quotations were taken is entitled "Standing Firm."

[57] See my discussion of the regulative functions of Alliance doctrine *vis-à-vis* the delineation of "biblical doctrine" in the preceding subsection.

[58] See, similarly, Wendy Farley's comment on church-sanctioned violence in the Patristic period: "This violence is never actually done by the church or the clergy themselves: through the sleight of hand that makes human agents stand in for divine ones, it is always God who acted" (*Gathering Those Driven Away*, 31).

faith centralizes theological discourse and, by extension, access to God within the confines of the denomination itself.

    The demonic character of CMAC thought is evidenced as a favoured construction of orthodoxy is invoked to domesticate the Bible such that its essential polysemy is reduced to a univocality that aligns with the interests of official Alliance discourse; dissenters therefrom are necessarily marginalized as opponents of the holy will of God,[59] and if need be condemned to eternal conscious torment.[60] Reduced to little more than a bludgeon with which to force capitulation to the absolute truth captured in CMAC doctrine, the biblical text is rendered evil insofar as it is appropriated within the Alliance's demonic political structures such that readings thereof that do not accord with those codified in the denominational Statement of Faith are *ipso facto* classified as unorthodox and, consequently, as both illegitimate

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[59] Once again, the inclusion of Article (4) of the CMAC Statement of Faith in the policy on "Homosexual Conduct" is relevant; note this policy's appeal to the importance of adhering to the divine will as attested in the Bible, which precedes the subsequent affirmation of the orthodoxy of Alliance hermeneutics (CMAC, *C&MA Manual (2016)*, 72). Compare the Alliance's construction of orthodoxy with Tillich's comment that "Self-affirmed greatness in the realm of the holy is demonic. This is true of the claim of a church to represent in its structure the Spiritual Community unambiguously" (*Systematic Theology*, 3:244).

[60] Though not necessarily representative of official denominational thinking, see Alliance Pastor Steve Gascon's comments in his introductory article on the CMAC Statement of Faith: "Doctrine is important because it tells us who God is. Knowing our doctrine allows us to separate truth from falsehood. *False doctrine leads to a different Gospel, and a different Gospel doesn't save* (Galatians 1:6-9)" ("This We Believe: Introduction"); the reference to "eternal conscious torment" as the destiny of nonbelievers comes from Article (5) of the CMAC Statement of Faith (CMAC, *C&MA Manual (2016)*, 5).

conceptions of God and existentially vacuous permutations of Christian living.[61] The Bible and Alliance doctrine are in this way capable of effecting existential ruin: Since, with the complicity of an absolutist biblical text, CMAC doctrine *qua* orthodoxy purports to capture a holy spiritual centre immune from the threat of doubt, any attempt by the individual to personally face the anxiety of meaninglessness encounters the demand that she fanatically submit herself to the dictates of Alliance thinking lest, in deviating therefrom, she lose communion with God. As Tillich observes, in such situations "[m]eaning is saved, but the self is sacrificed."[62]

Concluding Reflections on the Exorcism of Evil Texts: Towards a Hermeneutic of Resistance

Revolt rather than submission is the appropriate response to the evil Bible and demonic structures identified in the foregoing arguments, a reassertion of the ego-self's power to build meaning despite the ever-present threat of total doubt that attaches to her finitude. This revolt manifests itself not as a rejection of the Bible *tout court* but instead as a hermeneutic of resistance informed by the supremacy of divine love. The biblical canon continues to have import for Christian living, but the interpretation thereof is self-consciously apophatic: Readers approach demonically distorted appropriations of this text as models of the destructive threat posed by finite elements such as the Bible when incorporated into theological/political discourse, recognizing such appropriations as exempla of what Christian interpretation is *not*; they interrogate existentially ruinous readings, especially those arising from within a rhetoric of domination, insofar as these

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[61] "The danger of the pronouncement of verity without adaptation…is a demonic absolutism which throws the truth like stones at the heads of people, not caring whether they can accept it or not" (Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3:186).

[62] *Courage to Be*, 49.

interpretations are *prima facie* inconsistent with the erotic intimacy the Divine Eros shares with creation.[63]

Instead of merely reconstituting the monosemy decried above within the locus of the individual, however, the dialogical quality of the hermeneutical practice proposed here promotes a return to a polysemous Scripture. Interpreters are empowered to engage both the Bible and its historic reading communities as equal partners, drawing insights where constructive and challenging denotations therein where necessary.[64] Meaning thus becomes an ever-expanding horizon towards which the individual is always striving but at which she will never arrive; nevertheless, in reaching forward she touches the very face of God.

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[63] A beautiful conception of this intimacy in light of the *via negativa* is given in Farley, *Gathering Those Driven Away*, chap. 3.

[64] On dialogical interaction within the Bible as a model for lament, see Brueggemann, "Costly Loss of Lament," 98–111. See also the helpful theological reflections on the portrait of God in Lamentations offered by O'Connor, *Lamentations*, 121–122.

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