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Imago Dei to Ciphers of Transcendence: Narrative Theology of the Integrity of Life

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ABSTRACT

Religious communities around the world face challenges of inclusion. Often the question is asked regarding who does and does not belong within a particular religious or political community. The two ideas of religion and politics can also intermix in a way that creates further challenges. If theology provides a framework for religious communities, it must remain flexible in order to accommodate the continually changing environment of those communities. Viewed through narrative construction, theology, and in the case of this essay specifically Christian theology, is fluid because the narratives of the communities arise out of the ever changing contexts of those communities. The goal of this essay is to use the theological work of Wendy Farley, David Klemm, and William Schweiker among others to show how Christian theology can build communities of inclusion and integrity of life. The imago dei of traditional Christian theology transforms into a potentially trans-contextual narrative of human beings (and perhaps non-human as well) as ciphers of transcendence through a narrative approach to these thinkers and the implications of their work for promoting the integrity of life.

Keywords: *Constructive theology, trans-contextual narrative, integrity of life, cipher of transcendence*

INTRODUCTION

Religious communities around the world face challenges of inclusion. Often the question is asked regarding who does and does not belong within a particular religious or political community. The two ideas of religion and politics can also intermix in a way that creates further challenges. If theology provides a framework for religious communities, it must remain flexible in order to accommodate the continually changing environment of those communities. Viewed through narrative construction, theology, and in the case of this essay specifically Christian theology, is fluid because the narratives of the communities arise out of the ever changing contexts of those communities. The goal of this essay is to use the theological work of Wendy Farley, David Klemm, and William Schweiker among others to show how Christian theology can build communities of inclusion and integrity of life.

The *imago* dei of traditional Christian theology transforms into a potentially trans-contextual narrative of human beings (and perhaps non-human as well) as ciphers of transcendence through a narrative approach to these thinkers and the implications of their work.

Theology can be seen as a reflection on narrative. It is a deeply human enterprise arising out of the multitude of narratives constructed by human context and knowing. But how does one move from a single stream theology of dominion or exclusion to an inclusive theology that embraces the multiplicity of human voices and experiences? Is it possible to do so within the Christian tradition without being cast aside as a troublesome anomaly or heretic?

Furthermore, is it possible to make this move such that those inclined to drive you away are given eyes to see that multiplicity by valuing the perspective of others? This drive to multiplicity in unity motivates progressive Christian theology to make a space within communities where everyone is welcome.

This essay proposes the idea of a trans-contextual narrative as a way to create communities of difference in unity. Differentiating between types of narratives that are operative within Christianity and clarifying the function of narrative in forming individual and communal identity is the beginning of this endeavor. Using Wendy Farley's *Gathering Those Driven Away: An Erotic Theology of Incartnation* as a starting point, I propose a reflexive theology that constructs a trans-

contextual narrative within the framework of theological humanism (Klemm and Schweiker). Farley's project can be identified as one form of narrative— for our purposes, a Christian sacred history. She develops a narrative that seeks to open people's hearts and minds to love of the other and to see the beloved in the other through the redemptive work of Divine Eros and the incarnation. Thus in order to open churches (and, for that matter, other religious communities) to multiplicity a vocabulary of narrative, and understanding of the power of narrative is necessary.

In my evaluation, bridges can be built between seemingly competing voices by understanding how the stories are told and how they shape the self and the lives of communities. Christian sacred history can be read as the unity of identity (belonging) and difference (individuality). As Farley notes, Christianity gathers in all humanity through two central ideas: incarnation and *imago dei*.[1] These ideas are in constant relation to each other: a self, relating itself to itself, in Kierkegaard's famous language.[2] Farley addresses both of these ideas, with her emphasis on the paradox of incarnation as "the Divine Emptiness from which flows all that is, the Infinite Eros whose fecundity is manifest in creation and whose mercy is manifest in healing." [3] I add to Farley's project of "gathering in" a reframing of *imago dei* as cipher of transcendence understood through the hermeneutical lens of theological humanism. In bringing together Farley's discussion of incarnation and my discussion of *imago dei* it becomes possible to build what I call a trans-contextual narrative of the integrity of life: we understand ourselves and our place in the world by the way we tell our story, both as individuals and as members of a group. There are many narratives of Christianity, many ways of telling the story or sacred history of Christianity. Farley helpfully provides one such narrative that challenges an entrenched narrative of exclusion. In building a trans-contextual narrative, I develop a bridge that allows multiple narratives to co-exist based upon the narrative begun by Farley in her discussion of the incarnation.

Divine Eros, Wisdom, and Incarnation

In *Gathering Those Driven Away: An Erotic Theology of Incarnation*, Farley continues a project begun in her earliest work, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy*.[4] In that first book she describes herself as engaged in a hermeneutic of resistance, doing a phenomenology of compassion that responds to a profound oversight in traditional theodicy: radical suffering. In her current work she continues this hermeneutic of resistance by expanding Christian sacred history in order to resist dominating and exclusionary restraints on how Christian sacred history is told. This exclusionary form of sacred history can be described as disunity in the quest for unity. A theology of dominion – theology that supports authority, power, and "single-stream" ideology – enforces unity by silencing diversity. Exclusion of diversity drives people away from the Church, and purposefully so in an "if you are not with us you are against us" ideology. However, as Farley points out, this exclusionary, dominion theology is not the first or final word on Christianity. A multitude of voices tell the story of what it is to be Christian, but among these voices are many that see their own voice as the sole narrative of Christianity.

In attempting to create a unified picture of the whole body of Christ through the beliefs of the faithful, the variety of interpretations of what it is to be Christian has continually increased. All of the councils and their creeds, definitions, and overall theological positions did not eliminate dissenting voices, they simply marginalized them. As Christian communities continue to divide in the contemporary world, one finds there are more flavors of Christianity today than flavors of Ben and Jerry's ice cream. However, a narrative that cannot see the unity within that diversity, that cannot see that who we are (our identity) is united in relationship to the beloved, poses a problem. Indeed, diversity that has developed not because people embrace the variety but because people reject each other's perspectives as wrong, even dangerous, causes communities to splinter. This is the troubling disunity that arises in the quest for unity when individual identities claim to speak for the whole of Christianity above all others. In a narrative of Christianity that seeks dominion over all, the multiplicity that is always present lacks a sense of belonging. In the process of creating a narrative of dominion, many are simply driven out of the Christian community altogether.

It is this disunity that is the primary concern for Farley. The trend in the development of Christian sacred history has been to silence dissenting voices and alternative ways of expressing the divine-human relationship.[5] But

as can be seen in Farley's unfolding of the multiplicity of voices throughout Christian history, this exclusionary and dominating approach to sacred history does damage to the sacred history itself. It ignores the human experience of multiplicity as well as the limitations of human knowing. Knowledge of God, as Tillich has explained, is not like scientific knowing an object in relation to a subjet.[6] To limit the understanding, experience, and reflection of the divine to a particular set of beliefs is to impose the duality of human thinking onto the depth and abyss of the divine reality. As Farley reads it, the traditional narrative of the incarnation grounded in a doctrine of original sin has under-written the logic of domination in the construction of the Christian narrative.[7] But a resisting narrative, one embracing the voices of women and other marginalized groups, is also in the tradition if one looks for it. To use a single understanding of the divine to exclude some people by not considering them bearers of the divine image is to reject the broad sacred history of Christianity.[8]

The alternative Farley puts forth is a way of understanding the divine-human relationship as a relationship of love that embraces multiplicity. She uses the language of non-dual Divine Eros precisely because of its ability to break down barriers to thinking the unity of multiplicity in the Christian narrative. Non-dual Divine Eros unites where other images of God are used to divide, separating humanity from God, and separating people between those loved by God and those who are not. While, as Tillich described it,[9] all language for God is symbolic and therefore unable to express the full reality of God, love does not necessitate such dualistic thinking. Love unites within difference that which is existentially estranged.[10] This alternative offers a narrative that is transformative through contemplative practice. Contemplation of Divine Eros allows one to see multiplicity within unity in the divine, the very function of the incarnation. Thus, contemplation of the incarnation as a part of this narrative counteracts the claims of "single-stream" theology. God understood in light of incarnation is the unity of identity and difference.

Farley uncovers a fruitful narrative of Christianity through the incarnation. In her telling of Christian sacred history, the non-dual reality of the divine, in a sense a negative theology, is simultaneously engaged in the dualities of human thinking and being through the incarnation of Wisdom. Kenosis and theosis are at the heart of the Christian story. But what does Farley mean by non-dual Divine Eros? Eros is chosen because of the nature of erotic love to be a desiring rather than dominating or owning love. Plato, in his *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*, gives (in the voice of Socrates) a reflection on Eros as Divine Madness.[11] Eros is longing, desire for ultimate reality. While ultimate reality may be a limit point for human thinking, one that can only be addressed negatively or symbolically, this wholly other quality is in relation to immanence. That is, to the reflection of ultimate reality in all of reality, to the presence of the divine in the human through the soul. Eros is love that is desire rather than ownership.[12] Wisdom is found, for Plato and Farley, in this Divine Eros.[13] The Christian narrative of incarnation as described by Farley makes this Eros relational – the kenotic Divine Eros is the Wisdom of God bridging non-dual abyss and embodied life, building a connection between them.[14] Wisdom allows human being to be a mirror of divinity, to reflect it, according to Farley.[15] Incarnation is, therefore, also the otic, raising humanity to God by creating participation in the Divine life, not theoretically, but in the lived experience of community and contemplative practice, of being gathered in by the Wisdom that makes Jesus the Christ.[16] Incarnation is both kenosis and theosis, allowing humanity to both reflect divinity and participate in it.[17] Farley explains at the heart of her text that the primary symbol of this mystery and abyss, reflecting participation in rather than simply estrangement from wholly otherness, is love, Divine Eros. She says, "When we fall in love with the incarnation, we do so because we yearn for the unbegotten Good and we see this unnamable Abyss refracted in Christ."[18] The incarnation story is told through both love and Wisdom

Based on a broad understanding of both scripture and tradition, Farley unfolds a narrative of the incarnation where Wisdom is the movement of pure divinity into action so that something other than non-dual infinity might take shape. It is that by which divinity creates. As the mediation between non-duality and concrete existence it is also that by which divinity can be said to become incarnate in a human being.[19] Wisdom mediates between awareness of the divine and concrete action, between non-duality and its manifestation "in the form of duality and plurality."[20] In other words, Wisdom is itself the unity of identity and

difference in the divine that will be reflected in the human. Eros, Farley says, "for the world is manifest in the twinned movements toward difference and union. Love generates difference and plurality in an *act of self-othering*. At the same time, Eros surges toward union with the beloved."[21] If incarnation reveals to us the potential of our humanity, *imago dei* reveals to us divinity within us, theosis. "When we see with the divine eyes within us, we see that everyone is Christ."[22]

The question becomes, then, how is it possible to reach out to contemporary churches and promote the gathering in that Farley has so eloquently described? There are multiple types of narrative at work within any religious tradition. They may all wave the same banner, but they do not all tell the story of the community in the exact same way. How the story is told influences both the individual's understanding of herself and her understanding of her place in the larger community. Religious narratives, because they arise out of the human desire to understand the relationship to the divine as an individual and a member of a community, can vary widely based on human experience.

But the issue of religious narrative is not simply that the Christian narrative can be told in different ways. The risk of any narrative, even one seeking engagement with multiple voices, is that it can become exclusive if it cannot recognize the value of differing narratives. There is not simply one type of narrative. There are many types, and recognizing the types of narratives can aid in the building of Christian sacred history that can be properly reflexive, continually challenging itself and engaging multiple voices while at the same time creating a sense of belonging for all of these voices. Answering the questions raised by Farley's work requires a clearer understanding of these types of narrative and their interaction.

Narrative, Sacred History and Theological Humanism

Building off the groundwork provided by Farley, one can apply her narrative of the incarnation to contemporary religious communities through the creation of a trans-contextual narrative of the integrity of life. This integrity of life requires seeing human beings as a cipher of transcendence. Farley's notion of the integration of life and the well-being of the whole body of Christ can be expanded by the idea that human being as cipher of transcendence becomes a way to describe *imago dei*. Cipher of transcendence as described in the work of Jaspers[23] opens up traditional theology in order to make passages for communion.

The idea of a trans-contextual narrative of the integrity of life arises out of the theoretical blending of narrative, sacred history, and the hermeneutical enterprise within theology. Paul Ricoeur argues that it is through narrative that we understand ourselves as beings in relation to a larger world. In *Figuring the Sacred*, Ricoeur describes narrative as having four traits:

- "the art of employment," the activity of creating a narrative by ordering events,
- "the epistemological status of the intelligibility created by employment,"
- "the role of tradition or the recognition of and engagement with one's context," and
- "the meaning of narrative."[24]

In other words, we know ourselves and even become ourselves through how we tell our own story, both as an individual and as a part of a collective. We make sense of the world by creating a plot, ordering events and ideas into a continuous story. Through that story, we give order to the world and the world can make sense to us. These stories do not arise *ex nihilo*. Each person and generation builds on the stories of the past. The narratives that shape our lives are living narratives, always changing. They are not static, no matter how much we might think we want them to be. Finally, these narratives mean something to someone. They put us in touch with the depth of ourselves and our society. But what is important to remember is that we build these stories out of our context, and the stories are dynamic because our context is dynamic.

There are different narrative forms we use to organize our lives, individually and communally. Identifying these forms allows us to see where single stream, hegemonic narratives arise. It also enables us to recognize how the dynamic nature of narratives allows us to hear the varied individual narratives to our benefit rather than fearing them. We lose multiplicity only by diminishing the meaningfulness of our own narratives, limiting their ability to speak to the world and even to speak their own truths. These types of narratives are ways of engaging the world. There are three types of narratives that give meaning and understanding for life in community: contextual

(or little), meta-, and trans-contextual.[1] Within this framework, religious narrative as sacred history can fall into any of these three categories. How one tells the sacred history of a community will place it in a category. Where it fits in the categories identifies how it functions in and for the world and the people who live by it. Understanding how sacred histories function develops a hermeneutic from which we can create change not only in the sacred histories themselves, but also in how they shape the self through their epistemological and meaning giving capacities.

First, contextual narratives are communal narratives of identity that are context dependent. While there may be variation from person to person, these narratives locate an individual within the community, creating either a sense of belonging or rejection. They express the identity and shape the engagement of individuals and communities in specific times and places. They do not speak *for* the world, but rather *to* the world as the tool for an individual or community to make sense of the world. Contextual narratives can be an opportunity for growth as a member of an integrated world, *if* one recognizes these narratives as contextual and is not threatened by that status.

Second, meta-narrative is the term that has been given to contextual narratives that purport to bring the whole of reality and history itself into clear focus, incorporating some and rejecting other narratives. Such narratives are exclusivistic, and these are what Farley identifies as "theologies of dominion." Meta-narratives are constructed to be liberated from context because they are understood as addressing the whole world, whether or not the world recognizes the authority of these narratives. Ultimately meta-narratives are still contextual, but they are contextual narratives that do not recognize themselves as such.

Finally, the third type is a trans-contextual narrative, in that it is not limited to a particular context but rather becomes a mediating narrative between contextual narratives. It is not meta-narrative because it recognizes at its core that all narratives are fluid, affected by context even when transcending particular context, because narrative is an interpretation of life itself. Trans-contextual narratives will be successful as mediating narratives if they recognize the mystery of life, its uncertainty, and therefore remain fluid in that uncertainty rather than becoming rigid and speaking for a single point of view.

Each of these different narrative types can be observed in religious communities, Christian and non-Christian alike, as the form through which sacred history is conveyed. Sacred history has four components: 1) imagination, 2) interpretation, 3) context, and 4) application. In other words, the unfolding of sacred history is read through an image of the whole and understands that history itself is meaningful in that it gives value and purpose to life. Religious narratives of historical communities present the sacred history of the community, how they understand themselves as a community at once in relation to the divine and within a specific context. Unlike factual history, sacred history reads factual history through the lens of a community in relationship to God.[25] It is not a simple recounting of the past, but rather the ongoing self-understanding of a community projected into the future. In this image of the world one creatively interprets the events of history and applies them to one's present and future. But this creative activity raises an important point: the process of interpretation is heavily dependent on one's context. What one brings to the story affects one's interpretation and therefore the story's unfolding. Point of view can never be eliminated.

In religious narratives, point of view brings out one of the most significant differences between trans-contextual and contextual narratives: contextual narratives often have cognitive dissonance. For example, claiming human beings are created in the image of God and then developing a narrative of incarnation that in many ways excludes people - women, homosexuals, those who are of different nationalities or race - from full communion in the body of Christ is cognitive dissonance. Activities by Christians that dehumanize others through hate-speech, exclusion from communities, and promoting laws that say "You are not welcome here" while at the same time believing in human reflection of and participation in the divine is cognitive dissonance.

It is this cognitive dissonance that creates space for the trans-contextual narrative in contextual narratives of exclusion. Because, even though these contextual narratives reflect distinct points of view, they reflect distinctly human points of

[1]With gratitude for the assistance of Dr. Robert von Thaden Jr. who developed the terminology.

view and ways of understanding ourselves as human beings in the world. While the origin points and trajectories may be different, they are still asking the question of how to live a good human life. On the other hand, the trans-contextual narrative, if it is to be successful, must speak to the heart of these contextual narratives, to their expression of what gives meaning, value and integrity to life itself. In this way, trans-contextual narratives challenge the cognitive dissonance inherent in contextual narratives, exemplified in the places where claims they make compete with each other.

Ciphers of Transcendence and the Integrity of Life

Theological humanism, with its emphasis on the integrity of life, can provide a framework or space to see these blends in contextual narratives and construct a trans-contextual narrative of the integrity of life through reframing *imago dei* as cipher of transcendence. In this discussion of *imago dei*, the claim has been made throughout Christian sacred histories that human beings are created in the image of God. Humanity reflects the divine, and through the incarnation participates in the divine. The reflection of God is uncovered through the incarnation, transforming people's hearts and minds in order to allow us to fully realize our human potential as *imago dei*. Christian narratives embrace *imago dei* as a central claim, but when they exclude people from belonging in the community, or worse deny their full humanity, they create cognitive dissonance. How one incorporates *imago dei* into Christian sacred history simultaneously affects one's self understanding and one's relationship to others. *Imago dei* does not require differences to be eliminated.

Rather, as can be seen through an understanding of *imago dei* as cipher of transcendence, reflecting the divine means reflecting multiplicity and difference within the context of unity and belonging. It then becomes possible to build a trans-contextual narrative of the integrity of life, the unity of identity (belonging) and difference (individuality) that recognizes the value of distinct contextual narratives while bridging them through a constantly reflexive theology of the mystery of the divine. This move in Christian sacred history is accomplished through the application of theological humanism.

I am indebted for my discussion of theological humanism and the integrity of life to David E. Klemm and William Schweiker and their book *Religion and the Human Future: An Essay on Theological Humanism*. The "integrity of life" as a standard of evaluation used by Klemm and Schweiker has three important components based upon Todorov's, *Imperfect Garden: The Legacy of Humanism*. The integrity of life affirms 1) the autonomy of the "I," 2) the finality of the "you," and 3) the universality of the "they."[26] To affirm the "integrity of life" carries an obligation for care and concern in all these areas. Within theological humanism, life is evaluated in terms of a set of inter-connected and over-lapping goods. First, basic goods preserve life itself. Second, social goods build life in community, and third, reflective goods provide the tools for making judgments about life. Together, the protection of these goods in a series of "oughts" or obligations is achieved through the "integrity of life." The integrity of life, then, means, "the integration of distinct levels of goods into some livable form, always threatened and always vulnerable, but without which personal or social life is impossible."[27] Second, integrity of life means, "a life dedicated to respecting and enhancing the proper integration of those goods and thereby a commitment to the well-being of other forms of life."[28]

Reflective goods are found in the questions we ask about our own lives, what gives them meaning, where we find truth and goodness, etc.[29] It is within reflective goods that our own lives are measured. Reflective goods express the courage to be as oneself, to step back from one's context in order to evaluate and understand it in light of broader horizons of understanding. Farley's narrative of incarnation that reflects non-dual Divine Eros and the incarnation of Wisdom is an expression of reflective goods. While Farley remains focused on the context of speaking to and for those driven away from the churches because of gender or sexuality, her goals parallel those of a trans-contextual narrative of the integrity of life.

At the heart of her discussion of incarnation is the reflection of the image of God. It is through the reshaping of Christian narrative to speak to the full human experience that the reflective good transforms the self. In transforming the self the individual's mind and heart are opened to promote basic and social good. The transformation of the narrative can be moved in that direction through a more detailed discussion of *imago dei*. It is now to this reflection of the

divine that the discussion turns in order to more fully develop this trans-contextual narrative.

Implicit in the work of Farley is the idea that theology is reflexive thinking, thinking about our own thinking about our being, which allows us to see the human being as a cipher of transcendence. We have eternal desire because in our very humanity we are part of the eternal, the "not this" of ultimate reality. We embody it and are estranged from it at the same time, and thus, as Plato expressed so beautifully in the *Phaedrus*, we seek it. A cipher of transcendence has to do with reflection, concealing and revealing the divine, encoding and decoding it in our embodied existence. Mystery is both exposed and deepened in human existence. To recognize this cipher quality in every human life is to encounter the sacred, where every human life is a hierophany. This understanding of *imago dei* as cipher of transcendence provides a perspective of inherent dignity and interconnectedness. The expression of the cipher is the integrity of life.

The first aspect of person as cipher of transcendence is characterized by uncertainty. Using Fichte's structure of the self as a model, the self can be expressed as a relationship of subject self and object self through the statement, "I am this one here."[30] The subject self is contact with universality, upon which I reflect and yet which constantly escapes my reflection. As I reflect on the "I" that thinks, the reflecting "I" recedes in reflection as the subject mirroring the ultimate subject, God. At the same time, I have history and context as "this-one-here." I both am and am not "this-one-here." I am an object to myself that I can study, reflect, upon, and for which I can imagine possibilities. But I am an identity in difference. I transcend my object self by projecting possibilities to be. The subject "I" cannot be dissolved into "this-one-here." Likewise, "this-one-here" exists in a particular context in the world and therefore cannot be robbed of its particularity.[31] "*I* think about who I am." In the thinking, I am subject. The "I" that thinks cannot become an object of my thinking because I am always engaged in thinking. The subject "I" is active, in motion, and cannot be pinned down. At the same time, "I think *about* who I am." I can reflect upon myself, become an object to myself, stopped in a moment in time. The "I" that thinks and the "I" about which I think are in constant relation to each other in the activity of thinking, yet, irreducible to each other as subject "I" and object "I."

Given this structure of the "I" as a unity of identity and difference, the very structure of human being is the relationship of transcendence and immanence, universal and particular. The subject "I" is the universal, transcending every moment of my particular existence in the world because it is from the subject "I" that I project possibilities to be. At the same time, I am a particular existence in the world, imminent in it at every moment. The object "I" informs and makes present in the world the whole of the "I" while at the same time I continue to project possibilities for each future moment. Thus, "I am this one here," is an expression of the "I" as a relationship of transcendence and immanence, and a unity of identity and difference. It is the human condition to be this relationship, which presents us with our own mystery. Drawing on Klemm's use of the Heisenberg uncertainty principle[2] in his analysis of the play, *Copenhagen*, it is impossible for the "I" to fully know itself. It is a unity of identity and difference in its singularity and plurality. It is a revealing of the self and concealing in the very act of self-reflection. The uncertainty principle in physics claims it is impossible to measure both position and velocity of a quantum particle at the same time because the act of measuring affects that which is measured, the self as relationship between the "I" of velocity and "this-one-here" of place is an uncertainty.[32] I both do and do not know myself. I chose the word cipher because of its dual meaning of decoding and encoding. Revealed in incarnation as Farley describes it, in *imago dei* the divine is both the encoding in the human and decoding by the person of the divine. But if the self is a mystery, never fully known to me, how much more is the divine? What is revealed in the self as cipher of transcendence is

[2]The basic uncertainty principle in physics states that either a quantum particle is measured as velocity or it is measured in place, either movement and power or position and particularity. The particle *in motion* can never be fully grasped by the particle at a particular place in time. The measurement of either will always be affected by the influence of the one who measures. This uncertainty principle can be applied as an analogy for the uncertainty of the self and the uncertainty of God. In that uncertainty, the self mirrors and participates in divine transcendence. At the same time, that uncertainty is also the "darkness of the soul," the capacity to work against its own vitality by misconstruing its good, and in the process the self puts its own nature as cipher of transcendence into shadow by failing to see the standard it reflects.

the mystery of the divine and the presence of the divine. One both reflects and participates in the divine through the very nature of being oneself. Uncertainty is key to the self as a cipher of transcendence.

The self as "I" both transcends and is the play of differences while at the same time being shaped by them in "this-one-here." The self becomes a crossing of universal and particular. In the process of self-manifestation self is emptied into the world while at the same time remaining "I." Self embodies this crossing, both decoding and encoding the divine as infinite in the finite. Divine is decoded by being made available to the world in contact with self as cipher and encoded in the reflection of the divine, the relational activity that is divine Eros. The divine is made available in the face of every person and hidden in the uncertainty, the inability to pin down self or divine to a single identity. The presentation of incarnation as Wisdom's act of incarnating Divine Eros and of *imago dei* as cipher of transcendence speaks within Christian sacred history to the heart of Christian claims in a trans-contextual narrative. The cognitive dissonance of meta-narratives of dominion are brought into conversation with narratives of multiplicity in such a way that a unity is between difference (individuality) and identity (belonging).

Synthesis and Conclusion

The narrative Farley develops of Divine Eros and the incarnation is not, in my estimation, a discussion of the nature of God. Rather, it is a narrative of relationality. The narrative is located in the context of the Christian idea of incarnation. The context of her narrative is not only the larger tradition of Christian sacred history but also the active exclusion of people from the story, from participation in incarnation and *imago dei*. In that sense, then, Farley's narrative is still a contextual narrative, though a contextual narrative that is reaching out for open discussion of the narrative, to allow it to be a dynamic and living narrative. In the scheme of narratives developed earlier, Farley's narrative stands alongside the dominating and exclusionary narratives as another contextual narrative. But the concern being expressed by Farley and myself is precisely with how Christianity tells its sacred history, with a single voice or the broad inclusion of the many. Narrative gives belonging in a community. It requires the language as symbols of the community in order to both express and live a life of ultimate concern. We are, in Ricoeur's language, emplotted. We shape our self-understanding and our world through our narratives. But narratives are, in a sense, always contextual. So the challenge facing us is whether we eliminate narratives we don't like, simply accept that they will not change, or find a way to work with them. Can a bridge be made that allows those who exclude to recognize the arbitrariness of the exclusion while at the same time not becoming the excluded? Belonging must be retained, and this is accomplished by building a narrative that is trans-contextual, existing in both domains by finding common ground.

The trans-contextual narrative cannot, then, be built on superficial similarities, but must be built on commonalities that lie at the heart of the contextual narratives. Religion is a deeply human enterprise, and thus the divine-human relationship lies at the heart of the concerns of those included and excluded by the way Christian sacred history has been told. The trans-contextual narrative of incarnation and *imago dei* simultaneously addresses the divine-human relationship through participation and reflection. These are not new narratives. They exist in the tradition already. But in pulling them out and reformulating their expression to highlight their mediating qualities, it becomes possible to build a trans-contextual narrative of the integrity of life.

Integrity of life not only identifies the basic, social, and intellectual goods of life, but also identifies that life itself is integrated, and these goods are realized individually only when the whole realizes the necessity of integration and lives that integration. Theological humanism provides a meeting point of contextual narratives by its reflection on the nature of our humanity grounded in the divine. The concern is with how reflection of and participation in the divine affects our life in the world and for each other. Matthew 25 is not just about who participates in the life of the divine, but also what it means to live as one who participates. One loves God precisely by loving one's neighbor. So theological humanism recognizes the autonomy of the I, but that autonomy is not radical freedom. It is freedom in relation to the finality of the you – in Kantian terms, life as a kingdom of ends, rather than a means to my own ends. This relationship exists within the domain of the universality of the "they." We do not exist because we are "I," but precisely

because we are "they," inextricably integrated. The universality of "they" rather than "we" or "us" puts the I into the other. I am externalized into the being of the other, and in the process, their being is my being. And I cannot survive if I am alienated from myself.

Yet integrity of life is not only about connection. It is also about value. The you is final because life itself is valuable, regardless of the details. And to live a life of integrity requires one not only to recognize one's own value but also to recognize the value of the other, as life. What motivates this recognition of value when one lives in a system that is tragic, as Farley has described before?[33]

The world we inhabit is filled with narratives of power, exclusion, domination and the like that dehumanize the other and rob the other of his or her humanity or integrity as a living being (take for example the current practice of US border patrol separating children of immigrants from their parents in order to deter immigration and keep "them" out).[34] Yet the same people who would dominate and dehumanize also recognize and celebrate incarnation and *imago dei* as expressions of Divine Eros – kenosis and theosis at the heart of the nature of humanity itself. [35]At our core we are relation to the divine and the divine is relation to us. In reflecting on ourselves we find the divine image and in reflecting on the divine we find human participation. So how is it that anyone can be driven away? The answer is the idolatry of belief, to take one's own view as *The* view of reality.

Imago dei and incarnation are what guarantees the integrity of life. How one narrates these two ideas, then, will either be a hermeneutic consistent with relation and participation both in the divine and in community or in cognitive dissonance with one's own claims. Affirming reflection and participation while at the same time driving people out of the body of Christ by excluding full participation in the Church is an indefensible hermeneutic. *Imago Dei* as cipher of transcendence thus opens up the reflection of the divine as foundation of the "I."Yet at the very heart of *imago dei* is not clarity, but rather mystery. To reflect the divine is to reflect uncertainty, undecidability, the unity of identity and difference in the "I" that is also the structure of the they that is we as participation in the body of Christ as the Church. In that participation is openness mystery, the breaking of idolatry and the opening of Divine Eros.

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