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Reversers and Restorers of Religion:
Mourning and Meaning in Contemporary Psychological Portraits of Religious Leaders

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ABSTRACT

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After reading in psychology of religion and pastoral theology for several years, I began to notice that a certain strand, which might be described as iconoclastic or subversive with regard to traditional religion, runs through both fields, and characteristic of this strand often includes what I call a dynamic of reversals and restorations. That is, pastoral theologians and psychologists of religion, from Oscar Pfister to the present, often use psychological methods to critique (reverse) and then to rebuild (restore) religion. Here I explore this strand as it exists in the present by examining three recent psychological portraits of religious leaders—Donald Capps’s portrait of Jesus, James Dittes’s portrait of Augustine, and William Bouwsma’s portrait of Calvin—in light of each author’s own personal experiences. What I find is that this strand can be understood fruitfully in light of Peter Homans’s writings on, and William Parsons’s elaborations of, mourning religion.
For with much wisdom comes much sorrow;
the more knowledge, the more grief.

Ecclesiastes 1.18
Acknowledgments and Dedication

After writing a dissertation such as this one—one that focuses on the relationship between private experience and public theory, or, in other words, the relationship between life and work—I have come to value reading, and now writing, acknowledgments and dedications, for it is often in places such as these that the most personal revelations are made, because it is in such places where academic writers have permission, as it were, to be personal and warm, rather than cool and detached.

I have many people to thank for the completion of this project. It is my pleasure to thank my parents, William and Barbara Carlin, for loving me and for raising me, and for inculcating in me the importance of education. My father used to tell me, “It’s either education or ditch digging.” So I guess that piece of advice, as well as spending a few summers and winters in the steel mill working with my father, prompted me to pursue a terminal degree. I am also loved by my brother and my sister, who have supported, if not quite understood, my educational odyssey. Regarding the latter point, perhaps the same could be said of my parents. This is not to judge my family, however, for I am the one who changed, after all. This dissertation, in a sense, is trying to explain such misunderstandings. Indeed, this dissertation tries to make sense of the religious changes and the religious losses that one undergoes when studying religion professionally, changes and losses that persons outside of academia are unlikely to understand.

I have many friends to thank, friends who supported me in high school, college, seminary, and graduate school. But I will only note two by name here. The first is my best friend, Phil Shinsky. He supported me through all of my transitions, and I am deeply
grateful for him. If it is true that we experience God’s grace through friendship, then I am
blessed to say that I have known just how abundant God’s grace is indeed. The other is
Kattie Basnett. Kattie proofread an earlier version entire manuscript, and her efforts made
this dissertation read a lot better than it would have otherwise. I’m sure I created more
typos even as I incorporated her revisions, but, as someone once told me, three things are
inevitable in life: death, taxes, and typos.

I have a lot of teachers to thank, many of whom I will mention in detail below. But those of significance whom I do not discuss in detail include Kang Na, Bryan Rennie, and Robert Dykstra. These men are very important to me, and they have taught me a lot. I would also like to thank Lewis Rambo, Editor of Pastoral Psychology, for his support over the years and for giving me an opportunity to work at the journal.

It is a delight to thank my dissertation committee, without whom, of course, this project would not have been possible: William Parsons, Jeffrey Kripal, Carol Quillen, Thomas Cole, and Allan Hugh Cole, Jr. This project is stronger because of their thoughtful criticisms and suggestions. A few words are in order about my relationship with each of these persons.

I met Parsons, the chair of this committee, in 2004, when I came to visit Rice University while I was still a seminary student at Princeton Theological Seminary. I was immediately impressed with his knowledge of the field of psychology of religion and his current leadership in the field. I also appreciated, and still do appreciate, his sense of humor and playfulness. I welcomed the opportunity of learning from him, and he did in fact become a key person in my training at Rice, as he wrote two of my comprehensive exams and, as noted, chaired my dissertation committee. And my dissertation uses a
theory that he further elaborated from his own dissertation advisor, Peter Homans, who just recently passed away.

But I would not have known about Parsons had I not known Kripal first. I met Kripal when I enrolled in the Honors Program at Westminster College in 1999. My honors thesis was essentially a project in psychology of religion—the project was a psychoanalytic reading of a religious autobiography—and Kripal, naturally, served on that committee. Before that project, however, I had not read a single page of Freud. And so, at Westminster, I took an independent study with Kripal so that I could apply Freud’s insights to the religious autobiography that I was studying. I read a few works of Freud. Some years later—about six years later, actually—I took another independent study with Kripal. This time, though, it was at Rice, and this time I read every page of Freud—that is, I read *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*.

But here I am getting ahead of myself. In the intervening years between college and graduate school, I went to seminary. I had the chance of going to either Princeton Theological Seminary or Harvard Divinity School, and Kripal was very influential in my decision. He encouraged me to go to Princeton to work with Donald Capps, a prominent psychologist of religion. And so I went to Princeton. But while I was in seminary, I remained in close contact with Kripal. We emailed regularly. And we would talk on the phone for about an hour one Saturday per month. We would talk about what I was learning, what he was writing, and so forth. And when I came to Rice, Kripal provided me with the kind of encouragement and affirmation that I wish for every graduate student.
And Kripal created opportunities for me. When I was applying to doctoral programs, I was admitted to two: Princeton Seminary’s pastoral theology program and Rice University’s psychology of religion program. Both Donald Capps and Robert Dykstra, my seminary mentors, encouraged me to go to Rice, though they welcomed me to stay at Princeton as well, of course. What sealed the deal for me was Thomas Cole, whom Kripal introduced to me in the fall of 2004. Cole offered me a research associate position that would generously supplement my stipend, effective immediately upon my arrival. I accepted.

Cole and I worked closely together for four years upon my matriculation at Rice. We bonded early and talked deeply about our personal lives. We taught a few courses and published a few articles together. And we began new relationships together. During my first year of graduate school, I fell in love with a young woman in my department, Heba Khan. And I would spend many days and nights love sick, unable to eat and unable to sleep. I was on the verge of a depression, it seemed to me. When I was unable to work and unable, even, to watch television because I could not focus on anything at all, I decided to get professional help. I went to the counseling services at Rice, and Dr. Michael Winters counseled me for three years. He was a wonderful and helpful guide to me. Without Dr. Winters, it is questionable whether I would have made it through the program. And, of course, I would like to thank Heba for her love and for her support. Things had their own way of working out between us, and she enriches my life everyday.

But back to Cole: I told Cole about my situation—that I was in love and unsure about what to do, and that I was having many sleepless nights filled with tears—and he eventually told me about his own situation: that he was leaving his wife and that he was
going to marry another woman, which he did. And so as Cole mentored me into a new field—medical humanities—our friendship evolved as our professional work together continued to grow. Our conversations seemed to move freely over the topics of love and life and friendship and work. Cole gained enough faith in me to create a faculty position for me at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston, my current academic post.

Carol Quillen served as my outside reader. During my first year of graduate school, I took the theory and method course required of all doctoral students in the history program. I am very glad that I took that course, because otherwise it is unlikely that my path would have crossed with Quillen’s. She is a very brilliant scholar, and I am deeply honored that she agreed to serve on my committee.

I met Allan Hugh Cole, Jr. through our common mentor, Donald Capps. I wanted to have Cole, Jr. on my committee because I thought that it was important to have a pastoral theologian on my committee, and Capps recommended that I ask Cole, Jr. I was also impressed with his productivity—he published several books in his thirties, and his forties look as though they will be even more productive. And it was convenient to have him on the committee, because he teaches at Austin Theological Seminary, which is not too far from Houston. And any friend of Capps, I reasoned, is a friend of mine. Following Capps’s advice proved to be a wise decision.

This brings me to Donald Capps, who did not serve on my dissertation committee but nevertheless guided me through the whole process. I also consider Capps to be my academic father. Capps, more than anyone else, gave his time and energy to me generously and consistently, over many years, and he still does so even to this day. He
helped me publish my first few articles, offering pages of typed commentary on drafts of my articles. He would also mentor me by directing me to sources to read; he would correspond with me on a weekly and sometimes daily basis; and he would meet with me on a monthly basis during my seminary years. Often our meetings would last for several hours. On many occasions, for example, we would meet for lunch and we would talk for so long in the seminary cafeteria that folks would begin sitting down around us for dinner. I learned how to think, how to construct arguments, how to establish sources, and how to write by reading Capps’s books, and by implementing his suggestions. When I moved to Rice, I missed him very much, but, as it turns out, distance does indeed make the heart grow fonder: we began to work even more closely together. We’ve authored nearly a dozen articles together, and we even wrote a short book manuscript together last summer.

As intimated above, I would not have known about Capps had I not known Kripal. And it is unlikely that I would have known about Kripal had I not known Russell Martin. I met Martin immediately when I matriculated at Westminster. Martin, my undergraduate mentor, taught me to dream big. He helped me to see through the blue-collar haze that clouds the vision of so many young adults in western Pennsylvania. I forget now how many courses that I took with him while I was an undergraduate student, but I know that I took them all and then some. Indeed, I used to say that I “majored” not in history, but in “Martin.” My “major” in “Martin,” and my liberal arts education at Westminster in general, has served me well. I have always felt on par with students from other institutions, primarily because I have benefited from his mentorship. In a sense, my whole educational narrative leads back to Martin. And for this reason, I dedicate this
dissertation to him. Martin used to tell me that I was “destined for academia.” And although he is not a Calvinist, as I am, it turns out that he was right.
A Note on Permissions

All but one of my illustrations in this dissertation required permission to use. I would like to thank Donald Capps for providing me with a photo of himself; Nancy Dittes for providing me with a photo of her father, James Dittes; and Sarah Bouwsma for a photo of her father, William Bouwsma. I would also like to thank Holly Hayes at Sacred Destinations Photography (www.sacred-destinations.com) for permission to use a photograph of a statue of John Calvin. And I would like to thank Patrick Graham at Pitts Theological Library at Candler School of Theology of Emory University for permission to use Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld’s depiction of Nathan confronting David.

I would also like to thank Carolyn Dittes, Nancy Dittes, Sarah Bouwsma, and Beverly Bouwsma for their help in writing this dissertation. They provided me with much needed biographical data about my subjects—without their help this project would not have been possible.
## Contents

Acknowledgements and Dedication ........................................ iv
A Note on Permissions ....................................................... xi
Contents ........................................................................... xii
List of Illustrations ............................................................ xiii

**Volume One**

Introduction – Michelangelo’s Moses .................................. 2
Chapter One – Vicissitudes of Mourning, Varieties of Meaning:
Reversals and Restorations in Psychology of Religion and Pastoral Theology .............. 26
Chapter Two – Reframing Religion: ........................................ 85
Mourning and Donald Capps’s Psychological Portrait of Jesus

**Volume Two**

Chapter Three – Recalling Religion: ................................. 172
Mourning and James Dittes’s Psychological Portrait of Augustine
Chapter Four – Recovering Religion: ................................. 272
Mourning and William Bouwsma’s Psychological Portrait of John Calvin
Conclusion – Mourning Religion in Psychology of Religion and Pastoral Theology: 368
Making Meaning at the Margins

References ......................................................................... 390
Appendix – Dissertation Oral Presentation .......................... 408
List of Illustrations

Figure 1 – The Moses of Michelangelo
Figure 2 – Donald Capps
Figure 3 – James Dittes
Figure 4 – William Bouwsma
Figure 5 – Statue of John Calvin
Figure 6 – Nathan Confronts David
Reversers and Restorers of Religion

Volume One

Nathan Carlin
A Doctor Confirmed that I was Indeed a Leper

“I went to the *Physicians’ Desk Reference,*” Robert Dykstra writes, “looked up Dapsone, and there it was—the primary drug used to treat Hansen’s Disease, a contemporary (though not the biblical) form of leprosy” (Dykstra, Cole, & Capps, 2007, p. 66). Dykstra continues: “Though I had suspected it since early childhood, at twenty-seven a doctor confirmed that I was indeed a leper” (p. 66). These are the words of a contemporary leading pastoral theologian, words of a professor who, at Princeton Theological Seminary, introduced a course on sexuality and the body that required students to buy a sexual encyclopedia with dozens of glossy pictures, a book that now happily sits in my living room. The course, of course, was controversial at the seminary, but that is not the point that I want to make here. Instead, I would like to point out that Dykstra has spent a great deal of his professional life reading, thinking, writing, teaching, and preaching about issues related to the body, such as sexuality, and that these intellectual issues cannot be separated from his personal experience, such as his leprosy. There is, in other words, a deep and personal connection for Dykstra between his private experience and his public vocation as a scholar. The other point that I would like to make here is that Dykstra, in his adult life, has been working through the leprosy of his childhood and, as a pastoral theologian, he has turned to psychology to do so. If as a child he experienced his body and his sexuality as religiously or theologically impure, as an adult he has more or less come to advocate the reverse upon recognizing and appreciating what he describes as
“a God who was as concerned with my body as with my soul” (p. 67). With the tools and insights of psychology, Dykstra has been able to create a theology that is healing and restorative, especially in terms of the body. This dissertation is about how scholarship, like Dykstra’s, heals.

It is also about how scholarship hurts. As scholars we study things that we are interested in, things, dare I say, that we love. But, as scholars, we study what we love critically. Sometimes this is a painful process, particularly when our critical methodologies lead us to discover troubling and problematic aspects of the objects of our study, that is, troubling and problematic aspects of our love objects. When the object of study is one’s own religion and one uncovers, say, structural problems with that tradition which lead to human suffering, the theologian—especially the pastoral theologian—has the luxury of revising and correcting the tradition, acting like a modern day prophet or reformer. The psychologist of religion in the secular university, however, is more constrained because it is usually not his or her place to advocate faith positions. But what I hope to show in this dissertation is that psychologists of religion also engage in the process of revising, correcting, and restoring religious traditions—in this case, Christianity—by means of their scholarship. I will argue that such scholarship is often an act of mourning, mourning that is characterized by the themes of reversals and restorations. In this chapter, then, I would like to begin by presenting Sigmund Freud’s (1914/2001) “The Moses of Michelangelo” as a typical example of what I am trying to convey by the terms reversals and restorations, while in the following chapter, which is a methodological one, I will further spell out what I mean by mourning and the themes and dynamics of reversals and restorations.
Michelangelo’s Moses

Participating in a well-established tradition of anonymous and pseudonymous literary production, Freud (1914/2001) wrote “The Moses of Michelangelo” anonymously, and was not properly recognized as its author until 1924. The point of the essay, Freud stated, was to find out why art has such a powerful effect on individuals. He states in the essay that “some of the grandest and most overwhelming creations of art are still unsolved riddles to our understanding” (p. 211). Freud believes that “what grips us so powerfully can only be the artist’s intention, in so far as he has succeeded in expressing it in his work and in getting us to understand it” (p. 212, author’s emphasis). By understanding, though, Freud does not mean merely intellectual understanding. He also means emotional understanding. And to get to such understanding, Freud argues that one first needs to interpret the piece of art using the methods of psychoanalysis.

After briefly noting the psychoanalytic literature on Hamlet, Freud then moves on to the Moses of Michelangelo, sculpted between 1512 and 1516, and housed in a church in Rome. Freud describes the statue in this way:

The Moses of Michelangelo is represented as seated; his body faces forward, his head with its mighty beard looks to the left, his right foot rests on the ground and his left leg is raised so that only the toes touch the ground. His right arm links the [t]ables of the [l]aw with a portion of his beard; his left arm lies in his lap. (p. 214)

Regarding the facial expression of Moses, Freud cites art critic Henry Thode with approval, noting that his face suggests “a mixture of wrath, pain and contempt” (p. 214).
The fact that this sculpture has been interpreted in so many various and contradictory ways leads Freud to ask: “Has then the master-hand indeed traced such a vague or ambiguous script in the stone, that so many different readings of it are possible?” (p. 215).

Indeed, Freud grapples with the problem of multiple artistic interpretations when he becomes interested in the question of whether Michelangelo’s depiction of Moses is meant to convey the character of Moses or simply one particular mood at a moment in time. Freud notes that most commentators think that the sculpture simply conveys one particular mood. The scene, they suggest, is the descent of Moses from Mount Sinai, and Michelangelo is depicting the calm before the storm, that is, the time just before Moses is about to scold the Jews for making a golden calf. For this reading to work, then, Moses should appear to be on the verge of springing up to his feet in order to let his rage out on his people. However, like the art critic Thode, Freud does not see this as the most viable interpretation of the statue. Moses is seated, not about to spring up, and this seems to be a study of character rather than a study of a particular moment. Thode bases his interpretation on two observations: 1) the tables appear to be firmly lodged, and not slipping, and 2) this statue is only one of six statues, all meant for decoration around the base of a tomb for a pope. Freud writes, “Both facts contradict the view that Michelangelo meant to record a particular historic moment. For, as regards the first consideration, the plan of representing a row of seated figures as types of human beings—as the vita activa and the vita contemplativa—excluded a representation of a particular historic episode” (p. 219). Freud continues, “And, as regards the second, the
representation of a seated posture—a posture necessitated by the artistic conception of the whole monument—contradicts the nature of that episode” (pp. 219-220).

Freud next turns to the resources of psychoanalysis to add to Thode’s observations. He notes, “[l]ong before I had any opportunity of hearing about psychoanalysis” (p. 222), he was able to learn that the way to tell the authenticity of a particular piece of work is by paying attention to the small details, not the overall impression, for copyists generally do not pay attention to such things as fingernails, ear lobes, and so forth. So, too, with psychoanalysis—that is, psychoanalysts pay attention to small details and previously neglected data, such as slips of the tongue and dreams. Two overlooked details with regard to the Moses of Michelangelo include the right hand and the position of the tables of the law. Freud writes:

[T]he thumb of the hand is concealed and the index finger alone is in effective contact with the beard. It is pressed so deeply against the soft masses of hair that they bulge out beyond it both above and below, that is, both towards the head and towards the abdomen. The other three fingers are propped upon the wall of his chest and are bent at the upper joints; they are barely touched by the extreme right-hand lock of the beard which falls past them. They have, as it were, withdrawn from the beard. It is therefore not correct to say that the right hand is playing with the beard or plunged in it; the simple truth is that the index finger is laid over part of the beard and makes a deep trough in it. It cannot be denied that to press one’s beard with one finger is an extraordinary gesture and one not easy to understand. (pp. 222-223)
Freud continues, “If the left side of Moses’ beard lies under the pressure of his right finger, we may perhaps take this pose as the last stage of some connection between his right hand and the left half of his beard, a connection which was a much more intimate one at some moment before that chosen for representation” (p. 224). In other words, Freud speculates that the right hand was retreating from the beard.

Figure 1: The Moses of Michelangelo
On the basis of this interpretation, Freud constructs this scenario:

1) Moses was sitting calmly;
2) he is disturbed by some noise, which turns out to be the worship of the golden calf;
3) he turns his head in the direction of the noise;
4) he sees the spectacle and is overcome with rage;
5) he grips his beard with contempt;
6) for some unknown reason, he lets go of his anger—and his beard; and
7) we have now the scene depicted in the statue, Moses’ hand retreating from his beard.

What Freud has done here, in effect, is reverse the standard interpretations of this statue. That is, while most commentators have suggested that Moses is about to rise in anger, Freud is suggesting that Moses is sitting, letting go of his anger.

As noted above, Freud focuses not only upon the significance of Moses’ beard, but also upon another curious detail: the tables of the law. Freud suggests that this detail also supports the above scenario, because the reason that Moses’ right hand was retreating from his beard was to prevent the tables from falling. This, too, is in stark contrast to most commentators. Most critics suggest that Moses is about to smash the tables, but Freud argues that Moses is saving them.

What Freud realizes is that Michelangelo’s artistic representation of Moses is not the Moses of the Bible, that, in other words, Moses did in fact give in to his rage in the Bible:
And it came to pass, as soon as he came nigh unto the camp, that he saw the calf, and the dancing: and Moses' anger waxed hot, and he cast the tables out of his hands, and brake them beneath the mount. And he took the calf which they had made, and burnt it in the fire, and ground it to powder, and strawed it upon the water, and made the children of Israel drink of it. (Exodus 32.19-20, KJV)

Freud concludes not simply that the Moses of Michelangelo is not the Moses of the Bible, but, moreover, he writes, “Michelangelo has placed a different Moses on the tomb of the Pope, one superior to the historical or traditional Moses” (p. 233).

Freud suggests that the Moses of Michelangelo depicts “the highest mental achievement that is possible in a man, that of struggling successfully against an inward passion for the sake of a cause to which he has devoted himself” (p. 233). Commenting on this essay, and on this line in particular, Peter Homans (1979) notes the view that “Freud identified with Moses and that the unfaithful mob represented the defections of Adler and Jung that Freud had so recently endured, to which we might add that the tablets of the law symbolized the basic tenets of psychoanalysis” (p. 112). If so, the themes of reversals and restorations become all the more compelling here because they would have had personal significance for Freud. The reversals are clear: Michelangelo’s Moses, on Freud’s reading, let his anger cool and he saved, rather than destroyed, the tablets, which is the opposite of what the traditional Moses is said to have done. The restoration is equally clear: this Moses is a man to be admired, not feared, because he is able to control

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1 I prefer quoting from the King James Version of the Bible for two reasons: 1) this translation is no longer under copyright restrictions, and 2) I believe that this translation of the Bible functions as a cultural selfobject (Capps & Carlin, 2007b).
his passions. Whatever one thinks about the reversal of the biblical story, the portrait of a man in control of his passions is one who can be admired. And, if it is true that Freud identified with Moses, it was the Moses of Michelangelo that allowed Freud to calm himself after his loss of Adler and Jung.

While Freud’s interpretation of the statue is open to debate, the accuracy of his interpretation for the purposes of my argument is beside the point. What I am interested in is the personal significance that his interpretation had for him. And, as we will see, what I am interested in regarding the psychological portraits of other religious leaders produced by psychologists of religion and pastoral theologians is not the accuracy of their portraits, but the personal significance such portraits have for them.

**Locating this Dissertation**

This is a dissertation in the field of psychology of religion. In this project, I am using and modifying Peter Homans’s “mourning religion” thesis by applying it to three recent scholars who have published psychobiographical work on three historical figures: Jesus, Augustine, and John Calvin. Two of these scholars—Donald Capps and James Dittes—are recognized scholars in the field of pastoral psychology (see Pruyser, 1981; Capps & Dykstra, 2003b). The other, William Bouwsma, was an accomplished cultural historian who also wrote an essay on Christian identity (Bouwsma, 1976), a traditional topic in pastoral psychology (see, e.g., Mead, Tillich, Horton, & Homrighausen, 1957), and his work on Calvin has been frequently cited by practical theologians (e.g., Holloman, 1994 & Gorman, 2004) and medical humanists (Carson, 2007; Cole, 1997). Bouwsma, then, although he is a cultural historian, has nevertheless published books and essays that
would qualify as texts in psychology of religion and pastoral theology (cf. Bouwsma, 1996). Homans’s “mourning religion” thesis has been extended to areas beyond which he originally applied the theory (Parsons, Jonte-Pace, & Henking, 2008; cf. Parsons, 2008a & b), but no one has applied it to the field of pastoral psychology. My original contributions, therefore, are my modifications of Homans’s theory and its extension into previously unstudied areas.

In my dissertation, I advance two main arguments. First, I argue that scholars within or related to certain strands of pastoral psychology are “mourning religion” in the sense that Homans has described—that is, pastoral psychologists, pastoral theologians, and psychologists of religion, after becoming disillusioned with some aspect of religion, often recreate new religious meaning in their scholarship. It should be noted, however, that the “mourning religion” thesis is being advanced in various ways, so one cannot really speak of the “mourning religion” thesis.

A few words are in order about the terms pastoral psychology, pastoral theology, and psychology of religion, because what constitutes these fields is disputed (Jonte-Pace & Parsons, 2001). Distinguishing between the fields or disciplines of pastoral psychology and pastoral theology is particularly difficult. In fact, some do not distinguish between the two, but, for the sake of clarity, I think we should make a distinction here. Pastoral psychology refers to the systematic application of psychological insights to problems or questions of ministry. There is no limit on what school of psychology can be used, and ministry should be understood broadly in that it is not confined to the Christian tradition. The meaning of pastoral psychology can be understood more clearly in contrast to pastoral theology. Pastoral theology is also concerned with how psychological insights
can be used in practical, everyday ministry, but pastoral theologians also make explicit theoretical claims. The pastoral theologian is also a critic of other ways of doing theology, blowing the whistle when theology is doing more harm than good. A systematic theologian might explain how the blood of Jesus washes away our sins, but a pastoral theologian might point out that talking about the sacrifice of God’s Son is scary and even abusive to children. A systematic theologian might make a case for the Virgin Birth, but a pastoral theologian would be more likely to ask questions about what the Virgin Birth might mean for women or what it might convey about human sexuality. What does it mean, in other words, for Catholic women that their ideal, the Virgin Mother, is a biological impossibility (a virgin and a mother), something that they could never be? The difference between pastoral psychology and pastoral theology comes down to how they imagine the relationship between psychology and theology. Which one has the upper hand? The term pastoral theology suggests that theology has the upper hand, while the term pastoral psychology suggests that psychology has the upper hand. There has been a great deal of debate regarding this relationship. Some argue that theology should predominate; others say psychology; some say they should be “integrated,” while others suggest “dialogue” and “correlation.” On a historical note, I should mention that the term pastoral psychology has fallen out of fashion because theologians have reclaimed this territory. In the 1950s, 1960s, and even 1970s, pastoral psychologists and chaplains so fully embraced the terminology of psychology that they no longer used the vocabulary of theology. A reaction against this came from Paul Pruyser (1976), a clinical psychologist who argued that ministers need to hold onto their vocabulary and even “diagnose” their “patients” in light of theological problems. This perspective gained
momentum and was enough to change the name of the field. The Society for Pastoral Theology was shortly thereafter established, and society members even created their own academic journal (cf. Myers-Shirk, 2009). In any case, however one defines these fields, persons in each of these fields do, at times, create psychological portraits of religious leaders, and in these portraits, I am arguing, one can often observe the vicissitudes of mourning.

The other main argument that I advance is that I make the case that the way in which these scholars “mourn religion” usually entails (a) a radical critique of the tradition that they are studying and (b) a reversal of the tradition so that (c) the tradition is restored. My project, then, focuses on the scholarship of these individuals and on their personal lives. Similar dynamics have been demonstrated in the classic texts of psychology of religion (Capps, 1997a), but here I focus on recent works on Jesus, Augustine, and Calvin. What has resulted is a project that is in the spirit of the work of Oscar Pfister, the Swiss pastor and longtime friend of Sigmund Freud. In Christianity and Fear, Pfister (1948) read the history of the church through the lens of psychology, and his main concern was to show how Christianity “ceased to be a religion of love and became a religion of fear” (p. 24). He surveyed the dynamics of fear from Jesus to Neo-Protestantism, giving psychological attention to major figures along the way, such as St. Paul, Martin Luther, and John Calvin. Pfister, a pastor in the Reformed tradition, sought the use of psychology—particularly Freud’s psychoanalysis—to restore to Christianity what he identified as its lost element—love. His project, then, was thoroughly one of reversal in hopes of restoration.
So, in part, the purpose of my dissertation is to take stock of this larger project so that it may continue to flourish. And it is my hope to encourage individuals to develop understandings of faith that are uniquely their own (Capps, 2007b). This “mourning religion” thesis is furthering research currently being produced in the field of psychology of religion, but it also has implications for all scholars who study religion as they come to terms, psychologically, with “what we do” as scholars of religion. As William Parsons (2008a), who demonstrated the “mourning religion” thesis with respect to contemporary scholars of Hinduism, puts it: the “mourning religion” thesis “can be expanded beyond psychoanalytic studies of Hinduism to include other creative work within the University [but this] must await further scholarly documentation” (p. 78). My dissertation is following in this suggestion and providing such further scholarly documentation.

Parsons also notes that one way this work could be carried further is by looking at the classic texts and figures in psychology of religion, such as Freud, Jung, and Erikson (p. 78). In one respect, this argument with respect to Jung and Erikson, as well as Otto and James, has already been confirmed, though with slightly different concepts, in the work of Donald Capps. In Men, Religion, and Melancholia, Capps (1997a), whose dissertation advisor was Homans, argued that it is no accident that the formative thinkers in psychology of religion—William James, Rudolf Otto, Carl G. Jung, and Erik Erikson—all suffered from what Capps defines as “male melancholia.” As Capps writes, [T]here is a persistent theme running through the classic texts in the psychology of religion: the theme of melancholy. It seems as though the one thing that the major authors in the psychology of religion share in common is a disposition to be melancholic, and it is this personal disposition that prompts them to write about
religion in the ways that they do. One wonders, in fact, whether to address religion from a psychological orientation is itself a direct consequence of this personal tendency toward melancholia. (p. xii)

To demonstrate this thesis, Capps defines what he means by “male melancholia,” which is a theory derived from two of Freud’s essays—“The Uncanny” and “Mourning and Melancholia.” He then reads a text by each of these authors in light of his theory and his biography. This project is very similar to Homans’s work. The difference, though, is that Capps does not create the same kind of typology that Homans did, instead Capps creates one of his own, which hinges upon the significance of male melancholia. Another difference is that Capps is focusing on melancholia, whereas Homans is focusing on mourning. But, in any case, these projects are similar in that they are both in debt to Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia,” and they are both looking at the relationship between private experience and public theory in psychology of religion. I will return to these differences in subsequent chapters.

A Personal Project: How Scholarship Hurts and Heals

When I tell people about my dissertation, and after I explain the basic thesis (that I am looking at the relationship between private experience and public theory within certain strands of psychology of religion and pastoral theory in light of psychoanalytic theories of mourning), they always ask, “What is the relationship between your life and your work? What are you mourning?” People want to know how the project is personal for me. The project, of course, is deeply personal for me. There is no way that I can deny this, nor
should I. Actually, it seems that the responsible thing to do is to disclose my motivations and experiences up front, as best as I can.

*Odd Thoughts and Strange Visions*

It was on a warm spring afternoon as I was walking back from the gym to Russell Hall—the dorm in which I lived during my senior year at Westminster College—when I had this strange vision, this weird daydream, this odd thought. I saw myself speaking in a stadium. After the talk, I was walking toward a tunnel, and then someone pulled out a gun from his jacket and shot me. I remember clearly that I knew this person, but I just could not identify my attacker, though he seemed to be about my age. I told Jeffrey Kripal, who, at the time, was one of my professors at Westminster College, about this experience, and he suggested that it was my former “fundamentalist self” who had attacked me, that I was being punished for my own intellectual and spiritual developments. I suppose Kripal should know, because he himself once had a dream of being punished, crucified even, for his own spiritual and erotic developments and desires (Kripal, 2001, pp. 90-92). I also suppose it is quite common for young men who are about to begin seminary to have a messiah complex, and perhaps this is especially so for young men on their way to Princeton.

But the beginning of this end began a little earlier, well before I matriculated at Princeton Seminary. While I was at Westminster College, I worked in a steel mill with my father on summer and winter breaks. Sometimes before work I would go to a local restaurant, eat a snack, and read. On one particular night before beginning the midnight
shift at the steel mill, I happened to finish a book that Kripal had recommended that I read: Stevan Davies’s (1995) *Jesus the Healer*. This book was the beginning of the end.

Coming from a church with fundamentalist tendencies, college was a difficult time for me because I was introduced to so many new and convincing ideas. I learned, for example, that Moses did not write the first five books of the Bible. I learned that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John likely did not write Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. And I learned many other such unsettling facts. But what Davies did was too much. Until then, I thought that even if all of the biblical scholars were right, I still had history on my side. I was still holding on to the fact that, because Christianity had been successful, God must have been behind it. The fact that one man (i.e., Jesus) changed the world was a miracle to me. How else but by God’s power could one man do such a thing? Davies, I remember reading, explained how and why Christianity spread, and he did it without appealing to God, or the Holy Spirit, or miracles. I can’t remember now what exactly his argument is (and I am a little apprehensive about rereading it today), but I remember reading it then—and being taken by it. I remember embarrassing tears running down my cheeks as I sat silently in that restaurant where I had my last religious crutch taken away. Silently, but visibly shaken, I drove to the steel mill to begin my shift.

At the mill, as I was knocking molten steel out of its molds on the caster, I thought to myself, *What if God is only a psychological projection? What if we created God in our image because we are too afraid to face the cold realities of life?* It was 3:00 in the morning and during the second metal tap of the night that I wondered: *Is God’s love even real?* And just at that moment, on the next piece of steel, I saw a bright,
No, it can’t be, I thought to myself. It’s three in the morning, and I must have fallen asleep. Or maybe I was hallucinating. Could it be real?

The Vivisection of Jesus

Becoming a scholar of religion, I came to discover, involves learning how to use tools that tear at the very fabric of meaning constructed in religious traditions. Even if the goal is to cut away facades and fabrications to get to the bare bones of the truth, even if these cuts are done in love, aggression is lurking in love’s shadow (Mitchell, 2002). The academic study of religion, after all, is often perceived by communities of faith to be an aggressive act, and this perception is really quite accurate. Indeed, for centuries now, Christians and Muslims alike have employed the tools of historical criticism to de-legitimate other traditions (Lazarus-Yafeh, 1992).

Perhaps more so than any other scholar, Stephen Moore (1996) has written provocatively about the personal effects of studying religion and just how painful it can be. Currently a New Testament Scholar at Drew University, Moore is an Irishman from Limerick who has sometimes struggled with periods of psychosis, initially induced after using LSD/DMT in the summer of 1974 (Moore, 2001). In God’s Gym: Divine Male Bodies of the Bible, Moore (1996) eloquently and subversively presents three distinctive essays that center around a common theme: the relationship between Christianity and the male body. He asks this outrageous but utterly fascinating question: if man is made in the image of God, and if God is perfect, is it the will of God that men strive for perfect bodies? And so Moore, in a highly unconventional way for biblical scholarship, seeks to explore the connections between torture and atonement, anatomy and biblical criticism,
and weightlifting and the Christian life. Indeed, *God’s Gym* is just as much about
Moore’s unique personal journey to becoming a religious scholar as it is about religion
and the unspecified male body.

Moore (1996) begins *God’s Gym* by stating that the book developed out of his
fear of, and obsession with, depth anatomy, physical torture, and surface anatomy. He
writes, “To translate these three obsessions into biblical exegesis (for the New Testament
is what I am paid to obsess about) proved surprisingly easy” (p. xi). He elaborates:

For how do biblical critics examine the corpus (cadaver?) of Scripture except by
dissecting it—opening it up and peering inside, probing as deep as their
instruments allow? And what is the New Testament about (to the extent that it is
about any one thing) if not the death and torture of Jesus of Nazareth and the
subsequent perfection of his (male) body? And what is the essential message of
the New Testament (to the extent that there is any one message) if not that you too
can have a body like this, if only you are willing to pay the price? (p. xi)
The first question, the question of dissection, highlights the fact that critical scholarship is
about “cutting,” about how, in other words, scholarship hurts.

The fears and obsessions that led Moore to ask these provocative questions had
childhood roots. Moore’s father was a butcher, and he recalls a fear of the tools—
especially the knives and the cleavers—in his father’s shop. He remembers the terror in
the eyes of the animals as they were about to be slaughtered, and he remembers his own
fear that he, too, would someday be sacrificed in a similar manner. As an adult, Moore
asks these disturbing but poignant questions about Christianity because, as a child,
Christianity exacerbated his fears of torture and sacrifice.
During one particularly graphic Good Friday sermon, the preacher in Moore’s hometown described in detail the torture of Christ, causing Moore to faint. His father took him outside, and Moore “vomited gratefully on the steps of the church” (p. 4). Strikingly, both his home and the church were places of terror for Moore, because both fathers, in a sense, were butchers. Might we speculate that his struggles with mental illness have their roots in his childhood experiences with his father and his Father God? In any case, his mental illness has certainly affected his scholarship. As Moore (2001) himself has indicated: “Had I set out to create a God in my own image and likeness I could hardly have done better than the one who confronts me in the Book of Revelation. Reading Revelation is, for me, uncannily like looking in a mirror—while having a psychotic episode” (p. 199). Whatever we make of Moore’s provocative interpretations, we do know that the process of becoming a hermeneut was a painful one for him. Moore (1996) tells us of his own pain, and he tells of the pain of his students by suggesting a rather disturbing image—namely, the vivisection of Jesus:

Personally, I do not have the stomach to perform a full dissection of the New Testament for beginning students, even if I had the skill. From what they tell me, and more especially from what they write, I know that some of them are joined at the hip to Jesus, just as I myself once was, permanently in his presence, in his gaze, in intimate proximity to him, and carrying on an unceasing internal conversation with him. I readily confess that I killed this controlling twin. I had to. Beginning in June 1976, and using a knife I had found concealed in the pages of a New Testament textbook, I began to inflict cuts on him, just nicks and scratches at first, but eventually great gashes, until he finally stopped breathing in
my ear. This took a long time. He was breathing faintly, almost imperceptibly, six
or seven years after I began. Sometimes I imagine that I can hear him even today.
(PP. 70-71)
This was similar to my experience, and this, I suggest, is similar to the experience of
many religious students in religious studies.

The academic study of religion, I have come to believe, inflicts a kind of violence
to both the surgeon herself—and here I am assuming that the scholar comes from a
background similar to mine, that is, one in which the scholar comes from a religious
tradition and is professionally studying that tradition—and to the tradition she is
studying. I am not suggesting that one ought not to study religion critically, because this
would be to lose sight of the fact that this process is also an ethical act. In other words,
the academy functions as a certain check for religious traditions. The academic life is
fundamentally about telling uncomfortable truths and dealing with “inconvenient facts,”
regarding everything we study (Weber, 1946). Nevertheless, “inconvenient facts” can be
very painful for religious communities.

Coming to Terms with Madness
Paul Tillich’s (1957) *Dynamics of Faith* helped me pick up the pieces of my faith—a
faith that I had feared was irreparably damaged on that late summer night before going to
the steel mill—because Tillich helped me realize that doubt is a part of faith. Since my
exposure to Tillich, I’m crazy enough to believe that those of us in the academy ought to
have faith enough to doubt, that we ought to have faith enough to remain open to playing
with all sorts of positions, and that we ought to have faith enough to hurl our aggression
at God and our traditions, because God, as opposed to our images of God, is bigger than our doubt and our aggression. Because God is God, we scholars can be scholars, scholars delusional enough to experience God’s grace even in the midst of all of the violence of steel mills—and restaurants.

In his recent volume on images of pastoral care, Robert Dykstra (2005) wonders if “ministers [are] somehow constitutionally endowed with madness” (p. 3). I suggested to Dykstra that, if this were the case, then seminaries just might be mental hospitals or halfway houses! I said this half-jokingly. But it leads me to wonder if religious studies scholars, at least scholars who have come from particular traditions and subsequently study those traditions, might also be “endowed with madness.” I believe so, for are not psychological and emotional issues among the main reasons doctoral students do not finish their programs? And how could it be otherwise when students are taught to tear at and dissect what it is that they love?

To answer the question how this project is personal for me, then, I would have to say that my own journey into the study of religion, especially into psychology of religion, has been a painful one. It has involved the giving up of old beliefs and ideals—dissecting them, as it were. But in their loss has also come new creation and new meaning. In their absence I have been able to imagine in new and deeper ways. I have been able to see myself more as someone with more questions than answers, as someone more comfortable with doubt than belief, as someone who lives by new beatitudes: “Blessed is the one who doubts, for he has enough faith to doubt” (cf. Carlin, 2005).2

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2 I have presented much of the above in a previous essay (Carlin, 2007).
Looking Ahead

I noted above that I would be looking at three psychological portraits of religious leaders by three different scholars. I will do two things with each portrait: 1) I will determine to what extent contemporary scholars are reversing and restoring Christianity (how, in other words, their projects are like Pfister’s). And 2) I will discern how these scholars are “mourning religion” in light of Homans’s theory.

In chapter one, I trace the development of Homans’s “mourning religion” thesis. Homans developed this thesis in a number of publications beginning, most prominently, with *Jung in Context* (Homans, 1979) and concluding with his contributions to *Mourning Religion* (Parsons et al., 2008); Homans, sadly, passed away as I was writing this dissertation in 2009. I modify this thesis for the purposes of this study, particularly by drawing on the work of Pauline Boss (1999), and I also identify a major dynamic in certain strands of psychology of religion and pastoral theology in this chapter, a dynamic that, as noted, I describe as one of reversals and restorations.

In chapter two, I discuss Capps’s (2000) psychobiography of Jesus in light of his personal experience. I argue that the Capps’s portrait of Jesus represents a key moment for the overcoming of his own melancholia, which enabled him to create a new religious typology of and for men, and that this creativity in Capps can be understood in terms of Homans’s theory, more or less in the way that Homans has presented the theory.

In chapter three, I look at Dittes’s (1965 & 1986) two psychobiographical articles on Augustine in light of Dittes’s personal experience. While Dittes’s psychological portrait is indeed deeply influenced by his personal experience—and intentionally so—and while it is also clear that Dittes is doing what he calls “grief work” in his academic
work, the “mourning religion” thesis applies differently to Dittes than it does to Capps. For this reason I draw upon Bertram Cohler’s (2008) modification of Homans’s thesis, particularly Cohler’s notion of “adaptive melancholia.” I argue that religion was both the source of and the solution to Dittes’s central experience of religious loss, which he described as the chronic sense of the shadows of destiny.

In chapter four, I again examine the relationship between a scholar’s work and his life, and in this case I look at Bouwsma’s (1988) psychological portrait of Calvin in light of Bouwsma’s (1990a) notion of “a usable past.” Here I argue that the portrait of Calvin helped Bouwsma separate or individuate from his Dutch Calvinist background, while also helping him to remain connected to it, though at a safer distance, by means of historical scholarship.

In the concluding chapter, I walk away with some lessons and generalizations about certain strands in psychology of religion and pastoral theology. These strands, which are often introspective and influenced by depth psychology and psychoanalysis, routinely take a subversive stance toward traditional religion, but, at the same time, they also offer new ways in which to understand religion. That is, these strands offer those who have become disillusioned with traditional Christianity a way to individuate from the tradition (the dynamic of reversals), while also offering a way to find new meaning in the tradition (the dynamic of restorations)—all of which is, I argue, reflective of a kind of prophetic mourning of and with religion in contemporary psychology of religion and pastoral theology. These dynamics are not new—indeed, as we shall see, they can be observed in the founding thinkers in these fields—but these dynamics have never been
recognized as such, and they have not been interpreted in light of Homans’s “mourning religion” thesis.

**Church History as Train Wreck**

In a preface to a book on church history written by a chaplain, Capps (2007a) writes about a conversation that he had with a church historian in a seminary dining hall. Capps remembered that he asked his colleague the following question about church history: “How do we know that the best views prevailed and the worst ones went down to defeat?” (p. xiii). Capps notes his colleague’s less than affirming response: “His look told me that he had heard some dumb questions before, but this one was in a class by itself” (p. xiii). The church historian replied: “Do you seriously think God would let that happen?” (p. xiii). Without waiting for a reply from Capps, the church historian walked off to class. This episode illustrates that Pfister’s spirit—the willingness to ask whether church history has been one big train wreck, the courage to suggest that what is needed is basically a reversal of the tradition, and the vision to see that what we need is to go back to Jesus—is alive and well, as well it should be, for did not Jesus himself reverse much of his own tradition so as to restore and to fulfill it? I believe that the time has come to take stock of this project—a project that, in the field of psychology of religion, most compellingly originated with Freud’s reading of Michelangelo’s Moses—so that it can continue to thrive today both as a personal and a scholarly enterprise.
1. Vicissitudes of Mourning, Varieties of Meaning

Reversals and Restorations in Psychology of Religion and Pastoral Theology

The Turn to Psychology to Correct Theology

The basic move of turning to psychology to correct theology is a very old move. Indeed, since the inception of psychology of religion in the late nineteenth century, the field has been preoccupied with the psychological problems that religion poses to individuals and to society, and so the themes and dynamics of reversals and restorations have, as it were, existed below the surface from the beginning. In part, this is because, as David Wulff (2001) points out, “most of its earliest proponents saw [psychology of religion] as a means of advancing certain religious agendas or of justifying religion as a whole” (p. 15). The field “was also a manifestation of the reform-minded Progressive movement and in particular the Social Gospel” (p. 15). It should be no surprise, then, that the themes of reversals and restorations were so prominent in the early texts of psychology of religion. To illustrate, we have Stanley Hall’s (1917) argument that Jesus as Christ should be understood as a representation of human ideals rather than statements about God; George Coe’s (1916) functional view of religion, which focused on religion’s ability to heighten social values rather than focusing on humankind’s chief end as glorifying and worshiping God; Edward Scribner Ames’s (1910) belief that psychology could free religion from dogmatic authority; Theodore Flournoy’s (1915) contention that, when one deepens one’s faith, one is likely to become estranged from traditional religious forms; and Georges Berguer’s (1923) argument that “what is ultimately asked of Christians is not dutiful belief in certain miraculous events but a dying and rebirth of the individual self” (Wulff,
27

2001, p. 17). Many of these early figures in the field, Wulff notes, began in theology but, 
after having become disillusioned with theology, they turned to psychology as a 
corrective. The field of pastoral theology today still, to a large extent, has as one of its 
tasks the duty of critiquing and correcting systematic theology, such as systematic 
thology’s historical neglect of issues related to the body and sexuality. I believe that the 
issue of mourning is very often at the heart of scholarship in pastoral theology and in 
psychology of religion and that this mourning over the sins of the church is consistently 
coupled with a desire to set things right (cf. Kripal, 2001). This is why themes of 
reversals and restorations are so prevalent in these fields, an argument that I will extend 
and solidify through the use of Peter Homans’s “mourning religion” thesis.

In this chapter I will do several things. First, I will articulate what Homans means 
by “mourning religion” and elucidate the methodology he employed in order to come up 
with this idea. Second, I will present several case studies to illustrate the theory. After 
explaining my guiding theory and illustrating how it works, I will next modify the theory 
in certain ways so that particular themes and dynamics—the themes and dynamics of 
reversals and restorations—in certain strands within the fields of pastoral theology and 
psychology of religion will become illuminated.

Why Mourning?

But why mourning? Why use the rubric of mourning to think about the relationship 
between private experience and public theory, in this case in the context of pastoral 
thology and psychology of religion? Indeed, it is likely the case that my subjects would
not recognize themselves as mourning in general, let alone mourning religion in particular. I focus on mourning for several reasons.

First, I find the rubric of mourning useful because both psychology of religion and pastoral theology rely on the insights of psychology, and the relationship between psychology and religion has always been strained. Indeed, psychologists are among the highest cohorts of atheists (Wulff, 1997, pp. 209-210; Ragan, Malony, & Beit-Hallahmi, 1980). There is something about the psychological critique of religion, I believe, that makes it the most devastating critique of all. To approach religion from a psychological point of view assumes, in fact, that religion can be explained and accounted for just like any other human phenomenon. And, moreover, because the tools used for psychological critique are emotional as well as intellectual, to be religious and to be convinced by a psychological critique of religion is to experience a profound emotional loss. Those who work in psychology of religion or pastoral theology, I have come to believe, more often than not have worked through or are working through various psychological critiques of religion (cf. Bingaman, 2003).

Second, those drawn to psychology likely have personal issues they are working out, whether they realize it or not. I would wager that marriage and family therapists, for example, do not specialize in these areas simply because they are interested in the idea of marriage. Nor do they do so for the financial compensation alone. They are draw to this type of work because they have deep questions about these intimacies of life, often because they have been disappointed with these relationships in their own lives. Indeed, one study that I found reported that one motivation for family therapy graduate students is that they had a positive experience in family therapy (Paterson & Utesch, 1991).
Similar dynamics are often true, I believe, with psychologists of religion. Those who are
drawn to psychology of religion want to know what religion is “really” about. They want
to know why people think and believe as they do. And they want to know, perhaps above
all else, why they themselves think and feel and believe the way they do. And, just as
marriage and family therapists likely have been disappointed with marriage and family,
so, too, is it likely that those who take a psychological approach to religion have been
disappointed, or have experienced some kind of loss, with regard to religion. In other
words, very often those who are comfortable with religion are simply religious, while, in
contrast, it is those who have found religion problematic who turn to the professional
study of religion.

My third reason for using the rubric of mourning is that mourning can express
itself in a multitude of ways. One common response to grief, for example, is not eating.
Indeed, one common symptom of a depressive disorder is lack of appetite. Another form
of mourning might be exercising, as when basketball players, after experiencing a
personal loss, channel their feelings into excessive practicing. Sculptors, too, sometimes
get their grief out by obsessing over their statues. The point here is that individuals will
often make use of familiar practices to come to terms with their loss, and these practices
are a form of mourning. A practice that scholar’s have readily available is reading and
writing; so we should not be surprised that scholars very often come to terms with loss
through the medium of their scholarship. Following Homans, I suggest that books are like
monuments, that, in a sense, writing a book (or a dissertation) is like building the
Vietnam Wall. The book does for the individual scholar what the wall does for the
collective culture. Not all monuments are the product of mourning, to be sure, but very often they are expressions of mourning.

In “Framing the Argument with Freud’s ‘Little Discourse’ on Mourning and Monuments,” a chapter in *The Ability to Mourn*, Homans (1989) notes one of Freud’s analogies with regard to monuments and mourning:

“What should we think of a Londoner,” he asked his American audience, “who paused today in deep melancholy before the memorial of Queen Eleanor’s funeral instead of going about his business in the hurry that modern working conditions demand?” And, “What should we think of a Londoner who shed tears before the Monument,” when his city “has long since risen again in far greater brilliance?” Yet every single hysteric and neurotic, he concluded, “behaves like these two impractical Londoners.” (p. 270)

Homans continues: “They cling to painful experiences ‘of the remote past,’ and they ‘neglect what is real and immediate’” (p. 270). The creation of a monument, then, is a cultural instance of mourning, an instance in which the culture both “parts from” and “remains a part of” the past. As noted, Homans argues that creating scholarship is like building a monument, where scholars part from one project and set of ideas and move on to another. If, however, a scholar finds herself unable to move on from a set of ideas or to be able to finish a book, this might be analogous to the impractical Londoner who can’t muster the willpower to get on with his day. In any case, religious studies departments and the formation of the American Academy of Religion, too, can be seen as institutional forms of mourning, as religion here is “parted from” (as an object of study, it is not studied from a confessional stance) and yet there is still a “being a part of” (as religious
studies scholars, in justifying their departments and programs, often argue that “religion” cannot be reduced to nothing but the result of social, psychological, and cultural forces).

In sum, I find the rubric of mourning a useful way of thinking about the relationship between private experience and public theory among pastoral theologians and psychologists of religion for the following reasons: 1) the psychological critique of religion is the most challenging critique of religion and, therefore, the critique most likely to induce feelings and experiences of loss with regard to religion; 2) further, individuals drawn to psychology are likely dealing with loss already; and 3) mourning, broadly construed, is a response to loss, and it can manifest itself in any number of ways, including the creation of monuments in the form of books. This is not to say that every book or article that a scholar in pastoral theology or psychology of religion produces can be accounted for by mourning, or that the relationship between personal experience and public theory can be reduced to mourning. Surely, there are other valid ways of thinking about this relationship. Mourning is only one, but I would argue that it is an especially compelling one. Indeed, the dynamics of mourning cannot be excluded with regard to pastoral theology and psychology of religion, because what are pastors and psychologists doing, both for themselves and for others, if not dealing with grief and mourning?

The Development of Peter Homans’s “Mourning Religion” Thesis

*Jung in Context*

Homans developed his “mourning religion” thesis over time. In *Jung in Context*, Homans (1979) put forth his first version of the thesis, though he did not use the rubric of mourning in this work. Instead, he talked of Jung’s creativity as a “creative illness,” a
term that he borrowed from Henri Ellenberger (1970), and he also used Erik Erikson’s (1964) analysis of Freud (in which Erikson used his concept of “psychological discovery”) to understand the life of Jung. Significantly, however, the primary theorist upon whom Homans drew in his attempt to understand Jung was not the well-known Erikson, or the better-known Freud, but, rather, Heinz Kohut, whose work would later become crucially important to Homans’s formation of the “mourning religion” thesis.

Kohut formed a school of psychoanalysis known as Self psychology. The chief difference between traditional (or Freudian) psychoanalysis and Self psychology concerns narcissism and psychosexual development. Kohut believed that narcissism follows a different line of psychosexual development than Freud had postulated. According to Freud, individuals move from autoeroticism, to narcissism, to object love. Human beings, in other words, normally move from loving themselves (as infants and children) to loving others (as adults). This is why, in popular usage, we call someone who is in love with himself or herself a narcissist, and we get the term from Greek mythology—specifically, from the story of Narcissus, who fell in love with his own reflection. For Freud, then, narcissism is a part of normal development, but one ought to move beyond it as an adult to what he called object love.

Kohut saw narcissism in a more positive light and, as such, was able to postulate another line of psychosexual development with regard to narcissism. He believed, in fact, that individuals could, in some circumstances, move from autoeroticism, to narcissism, to transformations of narcissism—that, in other words, object love is not, contrary to Freud’s theory, the only marker for maturity. By “transformations of narcissism” Kohut meant instances in which individuals do in fact focus their libidinal energy toward
themselves, but rather than viewing this self-directedness as maladaptive, he suggests that it leads to great individual and cultural achievements. One transformation of narcissism that Kohut identifies is creativity. The achievements of great individuals, whether artistic, or scientific, or otherwise, can indeed be seen as narcissistic—indeed, great individuals often neglect other relationships (or other love objects) in their life outside of their work—but these achievements ought to be seen as healthy, not as immature or pathological.

In his analysis of Jung, and also vitally important for his later “mourning religion” thesis, Homans is particularly interested in Kohut’s theorization of creativity as a transformation of narcissism. Homans (1979) writes, “As Kohut tellingly notes, when a man enters a phase of creativity he withdraws from his love relations and centers his energies upon the self—in other words, he reenters the stage of narcissism” (p. 39). There are a few other concepts from Kohut that are important for Homans as well: self-objects, idealizing transferences, and mirroring transferences. A self-object experience refers to the infant’s experience of the other as part of itself, because the idealized parent is experienced as part of the infant’s own self (as grandiosity), as the infant has not yet formed a distinct sense of self. Under normal development, the infant’s grandiosity is gently disappointed and thus leads to a more realistic sense of self. But, if certain traumas or disruptions occur—if, for example, the infant’s need to idealize the parent and its need to be great is not honored and embraced—this part of the infant’s desire is repressed, and the child then develops a weak sense of self, ultimately leading to emotional and psychological problems later in life. In adult life, adults may address such failures by means of idealizing transferences and mirroring transferences. In the idealizing
transference, a person attempts to redress previous developmental difficulties by idealizing another. In the mirroring transference, however, the adult is experiencing his or her own sense of greatness that was previously denied in another by being told that he or she is great, such as when Joel Osteen tells his congregation members that they are special (cf. Miller & Carlin, forthcoming). Attention to these types of transferences, Kohut believed, is the task of the Self psychologist. Kohut also talked of cultural self-objects, where objects such as the King James Bible are idealized and help individuals to address previous failures in development (cf. Capps & Carlin, 2007b).

The details of Homans’s Kohutian interpretation of Jung’s life and work are not particularly relevant for our purposes at this juncture. The key point to note here is the movement of his basic argument regarding Jung: 1) Jung idealized Freud; 2) Jung experienced a narcissistic break with Freud that had much to do with religion; 3) this break led to psychotic ideation in Jung, perhaps schizophrenia; and 4) Jung’s interpretations of his psychosis led to the creation of his own psychology, which is essentially a religious psychology because it is an attempt to integrate religious symbols and psychoanalysis. It is no accident, Homans argues, that the core idea in Jung is individuation, because Jung, in order to assert this original idea, had to individuate himself from Freud. The Kohutian angle here is that Jung experienced a narcissistic merger with Freud—Homans thinks it is unclear whether it was of the idealizing or mirroring type, or both—but the breakdown of this relationship led Jung into a previous stage of narcissism, where he had to invest in himself, transforming this narcissism into creativity by creating a new psychology. The fact that Jung’s break with Freud was, in part, due to their disagreement over religion is not insignificant, but even more significant
is the fact that Jung, the son of a Protestant minister, was never satisfied with Christianity.

The basic structure of Homans’s “mourning religion” thesis can be observed here, though, as noted, Homans does not mention the theme of mourning. In Jung’s relationship with Freud, we see idealization, disappointment, individuation, and then creative response—the very elements, as we shall see, of Homans’s later “mourning religion” thesis. It is as though Jung yearned for a religion that was psychological, and a psychology that was religious, but it was not until he let go of both and mourned their losses that he was able to embrace both of them, albeit in a transformed way and with a great deal of pain.

*The Ability to Mourn*

A decade later, Homans directly addresses the theme of mourning in another monograph. In *The Ability to Mourn*, a book that is more a collection of essays on mourning and disillusionment than a cohesive book-length argument, Homans (1989) argues that psychoanalysis is a mournful response to the loss of religious, particularly Christian, meanings in western culture. The book is also a psychobiographical and sociological study of Freud. In any case, he works to emphasize the social-historical aspects of mourning in light of secularization as he argues for the capacity of a three-fold process to explain the phenomena of social and cultural mourning, specifically: 1) disillusionment and loss; 2) individuation and new self-understanding; and 3) creative response. Psychoanalysis, Homans believes, replaced religion in western culture, but it is important to note here that Homans understands religion in a broad sense as “a series of diverse
patterns of powerful, shared, and unconscious idealizations of esteemed cultural objects” (p. 19). Secularization, as Homans is using the term, is the de-idealization of these esteemed cultural objects.

What does Homans mean by “de-idealization”? He notes that several other words have similar meanings: “disappointment, mourning, pining, disillusionment, longing, deploring, renunciation, and disenchantment” (p. 24). What is common to all of these experiences, Homans notes, is object loss. Homans draws especially from Kohut in understanding object loss, and he modifies Kohut’s thinking by taking it in further psychological and sociological directions. Homans describes de-idealization in this way:

It begins with conscious and unconscious idealizations and an enhanced sense of self-esteem, accompanied by feelings of loyalty, merger, and fusion with other objects—persons, ideas, ideals, groups, even a social and intellectual tradition. Since history rarely optimally facilitates psychological development, such mergers are eventually challenged by interpersonal, social, and historical circumstances. As a result, the idealizations lose their firmness and may even crumble, leading to a weakened sense of self, a sense of betrayal, a conviction that important value has been lost, moments of rage at the object (subsequently perceived as having failed the self in some way or other), and a consequent general sense of inner disorganization and paralysis. (p. 24)

“The final disposition of the de-idealization experience,” Homans writes, “usually takes one of three directions: 1) it may move toward new knowledge of self, new ideals, and consequent new ideas, or 2) the paralysis can persist, leading to apathy, cynicism, and chronic discontent, or 3) one may disavow the experience entirely and instead attack,
often fiercely and rebelliously, the events or persons producing the de-idealization” (p. 24). It is the first case with which we are especially concerned, as it is this conception of “mourning” that we find useful in understanding contemporary psychology of religion and pastoral psychology. Yet, as Homans notes, “every outcome is a mixture of all three” (p. 25).

Homans’s basic Kohutian conception of de-idealization has several antecedents. He notes Freud’s (1917/2001) little essay on mourning as an obvious antecedent, where Freud argues that mourning is a natural or proper response to object loss, that the mourning process helps one to let go of a loved object and prepare the individual to be able to invest love in another object. Homans notes other antecedents to his concept of de-idealization, such as Winnicott’s discussion of the ways in which transitional objects help soothe the child in the absence of his or her mother (that is, transitional objects can be viewed as a kind of memorial of the absent mother) and Melanie Klein’s notion of the depressive-position, a natural stage of development that occurs when the infant realizes and accepts that the “good breast” and “bad breast” come from the same mother (cf. Winnicott, 1953; Klein, 1975 & 1996). Homans (1989) also adds a sociological aspect to his meaning of de-idealization, as he invokes Weber’s “account of value change in modern [w]estern culture . . . which he described with the ideas of disenchantment and rationalization” (p. 26). To sum up, the larger picture here is that Homans is making a psychological, social, historical, and cultural argument, and he draws from various (especially, but not exclusively, psychoanalytic) thinkers in the social sciences who write about mourning, separation, and loss, modifying each to forge his own original, though derivative, notion of de-idealization.
An Interview with Peter Homans by William Parsons

In an issue of *Criterion*, a bulletin published by the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, William Parsons (1991) interviewed Homans about *The Ability to Mourn*. Parsons begins the interview by asking about Homans’s personal and intellectual reasons for writing the book. Homans responds to the intellectual aspect of this question, but not so much to the personal aspect. He notes that the book helped him address several topics that he had been interested in over the years, and that it helped him gain a sense of closure in relationship to them. He felt as though he knew that religion and psychology were important components of the modern life—that somehow they contributed to living well—but he didn’t quite understand how. His first take on the relationship was to assume that religion represented the sacred past and psychology represented the secular present, and that the best way to proceed was to identify the latent religiousness of psychology. This initial take on the relationship fell short for Homans, and it wasn’t until he wrote *The Ability to Mourn*—in which he argued in a detailed fashion how religion gave rise to psychology—that he arrived at a satisfactory answer.

Parsons follows up his introductory question by asking Homans directly about mourning, an issue that they both agree is the central theme of the book. Homans notes that he uses the concept of mourning in different ways, sometimes referring to an individual’s personal experience, and other times as a social phenomenon, such as what occurs after the death of a cultural symbol. Homans then begins discussing the main thesis of the book, namely, that modern culture, and especially psychoanalysis, is a
mournful creation derived from the loss of religion’s power to bind people together in the west.

Toward the end of the interview, Parsons asks a remarkable question. It was a question that was certainly implicit in Homans’s argument, but nevertheless one that Homans never directly raises in the book. Parsons asks: “[I]sn’t the university a kind of institutionalized place of mourning in the historical and social sense in which you have developed this concept?” (p. 5). Homans responds: “I didn’t write about the point you are making” (p. 5) and subsequently adds: “[b]ut your question is very stimulating and I do think you are correct in your suggestions. So let me elaborate” (p. 5). He elaborates as follows:

I think that the profession of religious studies, which has evolved in the last forty or fifty years in America and in American universities primarily, and the new departments in which it is found, is the product, in part, of a bit of mourning and a bit of individuation and a bit of creation of meaning. (p. 5)

The situation in which scholars of religion find themselves, Homans notes, is one in which they devote all of their time and energy to studying a tradition that, because they are to be “objective” and “scientific,” they are not allowed to love, at least publicly, in their scholarship. This, as Homans sees it, is an experience of loss. The creativity of their scholarship, Homans suggests, is a form of mourning, a form of individuation, and a form of meaning making. In concluding his comments on this question, Homans notes that he wrote an essay on this topic (Homans, 1984).

In this interview, then, as a result of a question from Parsons, Homans put forth his basic notion of “mourning religion,” though, again, he did not use this term. As we
will see, It would be Parsons, along with Diane Jonte-Pace and Susan Henking, that would push the thesis further in the direction of studying the university and who would explicitly use the term “mourning religion” (Parsons, Jonte-Pace, & Henking, 2008).

*Symbolic Loss*

About ten years after Homans wrote *The Ability to Mourn*, he published an edited volume that carried the cultural mourning theme further. In the preface of *Symbolic Loss: The Ambiguity of Mourning and Memory at Century’s End*, Homans (2000) notes that there have been no full-length studies of mourning “as a lens for clarifying a variety of different cultural processes” (p. ix). In *The Ability to Mourn*, while Homans certainly carries out a sociohistorical analysis—indeed, this is what was distinctive about Homans’s psychological approach, namely, that it drew broadly from the social sciences—he did not deeply engage the literature on mourning. And so here, in this later text, he sketches a brief history of mourning practices in western culture. He observes that there has been much scholarship on the history of mourning, certainly enough to establish it as a cultural universal, that mourning practices have taken specific forms in the west, and that these practices have declined with the rise of modernization, industrialization, and secularization. What is not as clear, but is the central question of his edited volume, is how mourning expresses itself in culture in the wake and absence of previous practices of mourning.

In reviewing the scholarship on mourning, Homans cites the sociological and anthropological work of Arnold van Gennep, Robert Hertz, and Victor Turner to establish a definition of mourning as opposed to grief. Grief, these scholars argue, is an emotional
response to loss, such as sorrow, anger, and confusion. Mourning, on the other hand, is a social practice informed by one’s culture. In other words, grief is a painful emotion, and mourning is a rite that attempts to heal or cure it. Grief and mourning can be understood as a process: attachment, loss, grieving, mourning, and reattachment.

Having provided a working definition of mourning, Homans then moves on to the field of history to illustrate specific mourning practices in the west. To do so, he turns to the work of Philippe Aries. In particular, he uses Aries’s (1977) concept of “the tame death” (i.e., the notion that individuals in a society basically assume that death is a part of life and that death is public and communal) to make the point that death, in western culture, used to be a communal event. In European culture, for example, Christianity provided the rites in which mourning was to be carried out. Ministers and priests gave individuals instructions on what to do with the body, what clothes they should wear, how they should act, how the community should treat those who are mourning, and how long the mourning process should be. And, of course, ministers and priests provided pastoral care for the bereaved. However, modernization eroded the common Christian culture of Europe, and the democratic, industrial, and technological revolutions challenged and fragmented the traditional sites of authority. It was the observation and study of this fragmentation, Robert Nisbet (1966) pointed out, that gave rise to the discipline of sociology. In place of the communal mourning practices provided by Christianity, Homans suggests that a “cultivation of the inner life began,” and “mourning theories and practices [started] to migrate out of the churches and into consulting rooms of psychologists and psychiatrists” (p. 6). Homans also notes that Darwin’s discovery of grief in nonhuman primates contributed to the privatization and individualization of
mourning because Darwin located grief “in” the body, that is to say, in individuals.

Freud, too, assumed as much and also contributed to the modernization of mourning. As Homans puts it, “Darwin and Freud, each in his own way, rendered the traditional view of mourning private and ‘natural’—that is, as natural as any other psychological process” (p. 9). In modern western culture, then, mourning is no longer communal.

After noting this larger, general shift in mourning practices in western culture, Homans next moves on to discuss several recent studies of mourning in greater detail: Gorer (1965), Fussell (1975), and Aries (1977). Homans notes that Gorer’s (1965) study was an early study that recognized the decline of mourning practices in the west. He also notes that Gorer wrote the book for very personal reasons, which are elucidated in an autobiographical introduction. In Gorer’s life (1905-1965), he witnessed a cultural shift: The rituals of mourning that were commonly practiced in Britain during his youth disappeared in his adult life. There was no longer any mourning dress, nor was there any deferential treatment of the bereaved in public. Family customs, too, seemed to have disappeared. His study, which was based on nearly 2,000 interviews, was statistically representative of England, Scotland, and Wales, and he concluded what he had experienced personally—namely, that mourning practices were disappearing or had already disappeared in Britain. Fussell (1975) had a different concern, Homans notes. He wanted to show the connections between the Great War and the production of literature, for the war was remembered in the literary tradition. His use of the word memory—as opposed to history—was intentional, because memory, Homans notes, has an experiential basis. Aries’s (1977) primary contribution, as Homans sees it, was that he showed how death, at the hands of science and technology, became invisible. Death now is a
biological transition, one “without significance, pain, suffering, or fear” (Homans, 2000, p. 10).

From here, Homans reviews four major books that he takes to be representative of collective mourning. I will note two. He begins with Alexander and Marguerite Mitscherlich. In *The Inability to Mourn*, the Mitscherlichs (1975) were curious about how Germany was able to achieve economic and industrial success immediately after their defeat in World War II. They suggest that the Germans denied this loss by responding with a “manic defense,” a term coming from the works of Melanie Klein and D. W. Winnicott. The German people, that is to say, had an “inability to be depressed” and an “inability to mourn.” This argument was very influential, though, Homans notes, the Mitscherlichs did not substantiate their claims with sociohistorical evidence but, rather, by way of analogy.

In *Melancholy and Society*, Wolf Lepenies (1992) is interested in the melancholia of social and economic elites, such as the eighteenth-century German bourgeoisie and the late nineteenth-century Russian aristocracy. Perhaps surprisingly, Lepenies does not mean depression when he discusses the phenomenon of melancholia. Instead, his work is characterized not so much by an interest in clinical illness, as in interest in the boredom of socio-economic elites. Literature, Lepenies argues, is “a primary source for understanding such persons” (Homans, 2000, p. 13). Homans writes, “Among Lepenies’s subjects are some people who, in times of social change and its stresses, undergo loss and alienation but then respond to it by generating fresh and convincing sets of cultural symbols” (p. 14). These are “cultural makers” for Homans: these writers, suffering from
boredom, address their own boredom by means of writing and, therefore, their own personal struggles become “institutionalized” in the form of a literary genre.

Homans, as noted, reviews other works on mourning, but it is not necessary to go into any more detail than I already have. His basic task here was to place his previous work in the larger context of what might be called mourning studies. The result of his literature review can be summed up in this sentence: “The inability to mourn appears to be a modern aspect of mourning—it is not part of the tame death but it is more an inversion of it” (p. 17). As previously noted, Homans’s original contribution with this volume is that he offers a full-length study of mourning in the form of an edited volume that operates “as a lens for clarifying a variety of different cultural processes” (p. ix). Key for this lens is Homans’s notion of symbolic loss:

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1 Homans’s thesis here, as in his previous work on mourning, draws heavily from the psychoanalytic tradition, particularly from the works of Freud (1917/2001), Klein (1996), and Winnicott (1953), concepts that have been previously noted. But he does write about their influence on his thought in clearer fashion here. From Freud he took the idea that mourning is a response to the loss of an object, which can be of a symbolic nature, such as an ideal or an idea. From Klein he took the notion that loss is an inherent part of human development—which universalizes loss and mourning—as she argues that “the depressive position” is a stage that the child goes through around age five. From Winnicott, who was building upon Klein’s work, he took the notion that the capacity to be depressed—that is, the ability to mourn—is a sign of psychological health.
Typically, symbolic loss refers to the loss of an attachment to a political ideology or religious creed, or to some aspect or fragment of one, and to the inner work of coming to terms with this kind of loss. In this sense it resembles mourning. However, in the case of symbolic loss the object that is lost is, ordinarily, sociohistorical, cognitive, and collective. The lost object is a symbol or rather a system of symbols and not a person. And the inner work of coming to terms with the loss of such symbols is by no means always followed by generative or creative repair or recovery, but as often by disillusionment, or disappointment, or despair. Some sort of “resignation,” along with some mourning, is the best way to describe the most common form of this kind of “coming to terms with the past.” (p. 20)

The loss of traditional religion in western culture, or secularization, is a form of symbolic loss that is collective. Strikingly, Homans notes that “[c]ertain forms of literature sometimes serve largely as functional equivalents of monuments” (p. 25). It is an insight such as this that provides the ground for thinking of the literature produced by religious studies scholars as functional equivalents of monuments, that is, for viewing the creation of religious studies as an act of mourning.

*Mourning Religion*

In the introduction to *Mourning Religion*, Parsons, Jonte-Pace, and Henking (2008) note that Homans’s previous thesis in *The Ability to Mourn* has been extended by Jonathan Z. Smith (1991). Namely, they suggest that Smith, via Winnicott, conceptualizes religious studies as an intermediate space between religious communities and secular universities. Parsons, Jonte-Pace, and Henking, though, want to take Smith’s observation in a different
direction by emphasizing the mourning aspect of religious studies—an issue that Parsons asked about in a portion of his 1991 interview with Homans that is cited in *Mourning Religion*.

In “Symbolic Loss and the Re-Creation of Meaning: Freud and Eliade as Culture Makers,” a chapter in this volume, Homans (2008) elaborates on his earlier thesis. His essay “asks how the personal experiences of creative people shape their theoretical constructions and views of the world. In other words, it asks about the interplay between life-course development and work” (p. 13). He continues, “This question is a modern version of a much older one: what is the relation between ‘path’ or ‘way,’ on one hand, and ‘method’ or hermeneutical style or work, on the other” (p. 13). And, as his subtitle indicates, the individuals in question are Sigmund Freud and Mircea Eliade. Homans views symbolic loss as both individual and socio-historical. In the cases of Freud and Eliade, both men suffered losses but addressed these losses by means of their intellectual life as “culture makers”: Freud created psychoanalysis, and Eliade created the history of religions.

What does Homans mean by “symbolic loss”? Homans spells out what he means in this way:

We may theorize these reflections by saying that symbolic loss is a cluster of closely intertwined experiences which often occur in sequential form: attachment, loss,
mourning, the revising of memory, and the re-creation of meaning. Attachment is primary: people do not internalize cultural symbols, as psychoanalysts claimed for many years, nor do people simply believe in cultural symbols, as priests have often said. Rather, people form attachments to their symbols in the same way they form attachments to other people. In much the same way, groups and nations form attachments to symbols. Such symbolic attachments produce a sense of social identity based upon a sense of connectedness or belonging to the social structures and ideals they stand for or re-present. In other words, symbols create and represent cultural integration by grounding persons in a shared understanding of an entire way of life. However, the process of modernization repeatedly disconfirms the authority of these symbols, thereby breaking up attachments to them and to the past they represent. When these symbols "die," experiences of loss ensue and cultural disintegration begins. (p. 18)

Homans continues, “Some creative persons are capable of recognizing this loss for what it is and of letting go of it. Such an experience can in turn generate the discovery of something as yet unseen in the new and emerging situation. In the case of the culture maker, this creative work is the construction of what will later become the work” (p. 18). Once this work is completed and legitimated, it often becomes institutionalized. Homans finds Freud especially suited for his argument, for Freud’s life was filled with loss and creativity. As Homans points out, Freud (1900/2001) himself noted that "this book [The Interpretation of Dreams] has a further subjective significance for me personally—a significance which I only grasped after I had completed it. It was, I found, a portion of my own self-analysis, my reaction to my father's death—that is to say, to the most important event, the most poignant loss, of a man's life" (p. xxvi).
Applications of Homans’s Theory

We are finally in a position to illustrate how Homans’s theory works in practice. I will present four case studies: Jung, Weber, Freud, and Kripal. These cases also will be taken from Homans’s various publications, as he developed his theory over time. The case of Jung will be taken from *The Ability to Mourn*, the case of Weber will be taken from *Symbolic Loss*, and the case of Freud will be taken from *Mourning Religion*. The fourth case, the case of Kripal, is taken from Parsons’s essay in *Mourning Religion* as an example of a contemporary scholar in the university who is mourning religion. It should also be noted that Parsons and Kripal are friends and colleagues who work together in the Department of Religious Studies at Rice University, and that Parsons, when discussing the case of Kripal, draws on Kripal’s published autobiographical disclosures.

*The Case of C. G. Jung*

In *The Ability to Mourn*, Homans (1989) discusses the case of Jung in a chapter titled “Tracking the Ideal-Type.” He also discusses other important figures in the history of psychoanalysis. Thus, his more general argument—that psychoanalysis, in western culture, is a creative response to the loss of a collective Christian past—is supported by figures other than Freud. By “ideal type,” Homans, of course, is invoking Max Weber’s notion of the ideal type, a concept that holds that, by looking at a range of social and empirical data, one can abstract an “ideal type” or typical case that can then be used to orient and thereby understand more data.
Homans notes that Jung grew up in a small rural Swiss village, one that was deeply committed to Protestantism. Jung’s father was a pastor, as were several of his uncles. Homans describes Jung’s parents as “self-absorbed and unempathetic—his father weak and well-meaning, his mother stronger but also mysterious and inscrutable” (p. 145). The young Jung found himself lonely, “not [able to] idealize or internalize much of [his social world] or its socially appointed representatives, parents and community leaders” (p. 145). When Jung was eleven, his family moved near Basel. He found many subjects that he was interested in (e.g., biology and philosophy), he joined a fraternity, and he even lectured to his new friends on matters of theology. Over the years, however, this pluralistic excitement over a number of subjects led to indecision about his future. Jung wanted to pursue a scientific career, but he also wanted to address the depth of the personality, but he felt that these intellectual pursuits simply could not coexist—that is, until he read a psychiatry textbook that claimed that the psychoses were diseases of the personality.

Jung subsequently decided on a career in psychiatry. When he took up a residency at the Burgholzi hospital in Zurich in 1900, he found that, to his dismay, “he could not connect with the rationalized, professional, and bureaucratic world of institutionalized medicine and its representatives,” because he “found the work dull and banal” (p. 148). After doing a report on *The Interpretation of Dreams* at the Burgholzi, Jung began corresponding with Freud—they exchanged letters, personal writings, and then soon met regularly. Jung embraced the psychoanalytic movement, taking on administrative duties for the group, and Freud came to see Jung as his successor, someone to take psychoanalysis to the Gentiles, that is, to the rest of the world.
Around 1909, Freud and Jung’s relationship began to deteriorate, largely because of their disagreements concerning religion. Around this time, Freud argued that religion was the result of a feeling of infantile helplessness, and that a goal of analysis was to rid human beings of this immature sentiment. Jung, however, believed that religion can only be replaced with religion, and that the goal of analysis was to perform a function that religion used to do—namely, help individuals “individuate” by coming to terms with the collective unconscious, the part of the psyche that is not individual but universal and can be observed in myths in various cultures and times. Unable to reconcile himself with Freud, Jung left the movement. Homans writes: “After his exit from it, he severed not only all personal, theoretical, editorial, and administrative loyalties to Freud and his group, but also his teaching responsibilities at the university. Then he entered into a lonely, psychologically stressful period of several years duration” (p. 150). This period—in which Jung may have had a schizophrenic break—ended spontaneously. Shortly after, Homans notes, Jung came up with the core of a new psychology.

How does the “mourning religion” thesis apply to Jung? Again, while this term is new, the thesis is nevertheless present in Homans’s analysis. In the case of Jung one can observe these dynamics in two places. The first, which is both personal and sociological, is with regard to his childhood. Jung was unable to idealize his father as a pastor (because he did not find the ideas of Christianity convincing), and he therefore found himself estranged from his common Protestant culture, as evidenced by the fact that he experienced nothing at his first communion. In terms of Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia,” Christianity became for Jung a lost object. Homans finds evidence for this claim in the fact that Christianity reemerged in Jung’s psychological system, in which
Christ was an archetype of the Self. Homans explains, “As the mind mourns the objects of the tradition which it has lost, it reconstitutes that tradition by creating convincing symbolic representations of it. The objects of religious beliefs were recovered, after the disillusionment process, in the form of psychological theory. What is lost through absence becomes present once again, by means of absence” (p. 150).

The other place in which the “mourning religion” thesis can be observed is in Jung’s relationship with Freud. Homans noted that, although Jung was unable to idealize his father, Jung was able to idealize Freud, and he did so intensely. However, the relationship was not meant to be, and they broke on the point of religion. Jung then de-idealized Freud and his movement, leading Jung into a period of crisis and mourning over Freud, which eventually led to a creative period—in Jung’s words, individuation from Freud—through which Jung created his psychological system. All of the dynamics are here: idealization, loss and de-idealization, mourning, and creative response.

In sum, sociologically speaking, Jung found himself in a situation similar to Freud’s. Both men were living in a time in which their common culture, which to a large extent was held together by Christianity, was fragmenting. They responded in different ways (the case of Freud will be discussed below), but in both cases their psychological theories were responding to and replacing traditional religion. What is distinctive about the case of Jung, however, is that he reconstitutes Christianity, albeit in a psychological way.
The Case of Max Weber

Homans (2000) also discusses the case of Max Weber, arguing that “Max Weber’s theory of disenchantment is an as yet unexplored theory of collective loss, and as such, it is an unexplored resource as well for contemporary discussions of collective loss, mourning, and memory” (p. 225). Homans believes that the experience of disenchantment is an experience of loss, but he realizes that this way of looking at disenchantment is not readily apparent. The purpose of his essay is to make the connection clearer, and he does this by looking at disenchantment in Weber’s life and work.

Homans notes that Weber, as a young man, suffered a nervous breakdown, and that the beginning of his recovery coincided with his writing of The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (where Weber introduced the term disenchantment), which also marked a shift in his interests from law and economics to the study of religion. Just this cursory glance alone suggests a relationship between Weber’s life and work, but a closer look will shed more light and enable us to see how the “mourning religion” thesis applies to Weber. In short, Homans argues that “Weber’s illness was a response to a double loss: loss of frustrating attachments in childhood and adolescence and the loss of a collective past of his family and generation—the waning of Christianity” (p. 225). Homans continues, “His breakdown was a form of mourning, and his writings a creative attempt to come to terms with his own past, in this twofold sense” (p. 225).

Homans suggests that Weber’s family had two central conflicts. One involved his mother and father’s relationship. Weber’s father, like many men of the period, was very controlling of the family in general, but especially his wife. Their relationship was also strained on account of the fact that she was unable to enjoy sexual pleasure with him,
perhaps because she was deeply religious, a sentiment which she encouraged in her children. She also had inherited a large sum of money, which made her financially independent from her husband, a constant source of irritation for him.

The other conflict that Homans notes is Weber’s relationship with each of his parents. His father was emotionally distant. And Weber did not approve of how his father treated his mother. While Weber sympathized with his mother in terms of how she was being treated, he did not share her devotion to Protestantism. When Weber was fifteen-years-old, she tried to inculcate her religious zeal in him at his confirmation, but he declined. Homans writes, “Weber could not accept these solicitations, which centered on the question of an afterlife, but he could not openly reject them, either. Instead, he chose a path of mournful and empty-hearted compliance” (p. 227). The “basic ‘family dynamics,’” Homans writes, “consisted of a set of personal relationships characterized by suppressed, bitter resentments and an overall sense of desperation and sadness” (p. 227).

Weber eventually broke with his father because of his father’s controlling ways. And this break occurred in a specific incident. Weber wanted his mother to come visit him and his wife Marianne alone, without his father, for four or five weeks a year. Instead of allowing his wife to make the visit, however, Weber’s father showed up as an uninvited guest. Weber ordered his father out of his house, effectively bringing about the end of their relationship. Shortly after this heated incident had taken place, Weber’s father went on a trip with a friend and suddenly died. After this, Weber’s breakdown began. Although he entered a sanitarium for the span of only a few weeks, he was ill for about three-and-a-half years. He began to recover during a trip to Rome, a fact that his wife Marianne attributed to the healing powers of the art, the land, and the city.
Homans’s take on Weber’s recovery, in fact, is quite similar to Marianne’s; he writes: “It is not possible to know to what extent the illness remitted spontaneously. But a constant and devoted maternal presence was surely important” (p. 230). With the support of his wife, and with the help of art, Weber’s illness ran its course on its own time.

From here Homans shifts his focus from Weber’s life to Weber’s thought. The central question about Weber’s relationship with his parents, as Homans puts it, is this: “how to describe and understand a world in which spontaneous emotions, especially feelings of warmth and affection between people, have been lost?” (p. 230). Homans writes, “Weber’s work was his reply: the world has become disenchanted” (p. 230). As noted, Weber’s writing of The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism coincided with his recovery. This occasion did not escape his wife, as this book “connected with the deepest roots of his personality and in an unidentifiable way bears its stamp” (quoted in Homans, 2000, p. 231). Homans concurs that the book is deeply personal for Weber, and he also believes that he can identify why: “As Weber began to separate and differentiate himself (that is, to individuate) from the conflict-laden attachment to his mother, he also began to mourn that ambivalent relationship and, as a result, built up a stronger sense of his own self-definition” (p. 231). He continues: “Without saying why, and probably without knowing why, Weber turned away from the study and teaching of law and economics and to the study of Protestantism, the religious tradition or common culture that so decisively shaped his mother’s personality” (p. 231). Homans notes that Weber inherited this culture from her, and that he himself believed “that he had acquired his driven, compulsive work habits . . . from her” (p. 231). Homans adds that his illness can
be seen as an attempt to give these habits up and, therefore, as an attempt to separate from her and her religion.

Thus, Homans argues that Weber’s notion of “disenchantment” was his way of mourning religion. Homans notes that at age fifty-five, one year before his death, Weber gave his lecture “Science as Vocation,” where he argued that “the impact of science on religion was disenchanting” (p. 233). By this he meant that, for the sociologist, there are no mysterious forces; the world is disenchanted in the sense that religious phenomena are explained in terms of sociological categories. What Homans finds in Weber, though, is an inability, rather than an ability, to mourn. Why? When reading the works of Weber, Homans notes, one can feel the loss and grief in them, a grief that seems unresolved. As Homans puts it, “[T]o read them is also to sense that the struggle to lay this loss to rest—to come to terms with the past—is still ‘in progress,’ at least in the case of this author, even as he writes, even as we read” (p. 235).

The Case of Sigmund Freud

Homans (2008) has also recently discussed the case of Freud. He notes that scholars generally agree that Freud’s most creative period occurred during the immediate years preceding the twentieth century, which culminated with his publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Homans adds that scholars also agree that Freud, during this time, achieved a sense of identity and created psychoanalysis as a way of thinking and as a means of treatment. Psychoanalysis provided a forum for Freud to relate his personal experience and his public thought. And in the history of psychoanalysis, Homans
observes, Freud made two substantial revisions to his public theory, both of which occurred at a time of great personal loss in his own life.

Homans tells the story this way. In 1896, Freud was forty-years-old, and married with children. He was living in Vienna, struggling to get by as a neurologist. He had been thinking about the unconscious on account of his correspondence with a friend, Wilhelm Fleiss, but he probed deeper into the concept after the death of his father, trying to make sense of his own feelings. This loss, Freud later came to see, was what prompted him to write *The Interpretation of Dreams* and what led to his view that a man’s greatest loss in life is the death of his father.

Another loss that Freud experienced around this time involved his Jewish heritage. When Freud was a boy, Jews were generally tolerated in Vienna. And Freud recalls that, as a boy, he was engrossed with Bible stories. However, in 1897, Carl Luger, who, as Homans notes, “had campaigned on a platform of anti-Semitism, was elected mayor of Vienna” (p. 21). Freud, who was committed to tolerance and liberalism, was greatly disillusioned by this turn of events because, as Homans puts it, “Luger’s election meant that the liberals had abandoned the Jews” (p. 21). These two losses—the death of his father and the loss of an ideal (the ideal of liberalism)—led Freud to search inside himself. What he discovered was the material for psychoanalysis.

Homans next describes the formation of the psychoanalytic movement. It first began with a few persons interested in Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*. They met weekly, calling themselves the Wednesday Psychological Society. The circle grew and quickly became a movement. In 1908 Jung joined. Freud and Jung grew very close, exchanging many letters and ideas. Freud now had a gifted young student, and Jung had a
mentor. Freud even named Jung as his successor to the psychoanalytic movement, not only because he was so gifted, but also, and perhaps more importantly, because he was a Gentile. The success of the psychoanalytic movement, Freud believed, depended on reaching out to the Gentiles in a world that was becoming increasingly hostile to Jews. However, the relationship went sour, and Freud and Jung cut off relations around 1912. Homans notes that this loss was devastating to Freud and occasioned the onset of depression because Freud believed that Jung’s departure meant the death of psychoanalysis. However, as Freud did after the loss of his father and his disillusionment with liberalism, he responded in a deeply creative way, this time significantly revising his model of the mind and psychosexual development by introducing the concept of narcissism. In this period, Freud also wrote “Mourning and Melancholia,” one of his most influential essays.

After losing Jung, Freud gained a new student, Karl Abraham, with whom he believed he was more compatible because Abraham shared his Jewish heritage. Contrary to Freud’s initial fears, moreover, the psychoanalytic movement proceeded to gain a new stability, despite the seeming deathblow of Jung’s departure. Yet, a new problem, or the return of an old problem, began to preoccupy Freud—namely, Freud’s relationship with his Jewishness. Here Homans finds the third major loss in Freud’s life, that is, the loss of his Jewish identity. Homans notes that Freud, in his later years, turned away from clinical writings and shifted to more cultural explorations. In Moses and Monotheism, Freud (1939/2001) argued that Jews suffer from a collective narcissism which was inculcated in them by Moses. Jews believe that they are God’s “chosen ones,” special and superior to all other races. Freud calls on Jews to disavow this past and to overcome their narcissism.
by means of psychoanalysis, that is, science. In turn, Freud simultaneously calls on others to disavow their nationalism, their sense that they are superior, so that, finally, neither Jewish collective narcissism nor Jewish oppression will exist. “In a basic and general sense,” Homans (2008) writes, “Freud is here simply re-affirming what he had always thought and said. Psychoanalysis was a science and as such it explained and discredited religion. . . . Where then is the loss?” (pp. 25-26). Homans replies: “The loss is in the risk that Freud took in writing this book. He risked offending fellow Jews whose Jewish identity had a strong grounding in belief, and he risked being criticized by them for his merely social attachment to the Jewish historic community” (p. 26). Further, “he also risked rejection by the scientific and nonreligious community, which might find in his minimally naturalistic faith some sort of crypto-religious commitment” (p. 26). This final loss that Homans is describing is more difficult to see than the other two, which are rather straightforward. Here Homans is saying that the loss is in the writing of *Moses and Monotheism*. If so, what, then, is the creative response if the writing of *Moses and Monotheism* is the loss? It seems that this is a unique case in that *Moses and Monotheism* simultaneously represents a kind of loss as well as the creative response to the loss. In other words, in this particular instance of religious mourning, the loss is *anticipated*, and it is this anticipated loss to which Freud is creatively responding. Given that Freud was a gifted writer, and given that *Moses and Monotheism* is perhaps Freud’s most poorly written and convoluted work, perhaps what we have in this final instance is an inability to mourn, more of a melancholic response, something like one finds in Weber’s works.
The Case of Jeffrey Kripal

In “Mourning and Method in Psychoanalytic Studies of Indian Religions,” Parsons (2008a) gives three case histories that apply Homans’s theory of mourning to three psychoanalytically oriented religious studies scholars: Jeffrey Masson, Sudhir Kakar, and Jeffrey Kripal. Here I would like to present Parsons’s observations about Kripal, because I know the work of Kripal better than I know the work of Masson or Kakar, and because Kripal has been and continues to be one of my mentors.

Parsons begins his remarks by noting that Kripal’s (1995) *Kali’s Child* received both a great deal of praise and a great deal of criticism when it appeared. The book won an award from the American Academy of Religion, but it also created a scandal in India among religious believers. Why? Parsons writes: “The cause of this discord was the book’s central thesis: that Ramakrishna was a Tantric practitioner whose visions were fueled by unconscious homoerotic desire” (p. 72). The central problem of the book, however, was methodological and ontological, and can be put this way: [w]hat is the relationship between sexuality and mystical experience? Kripal’s answer to this question is his category of “the erotic” in which he fuses sexuality and mystical experience. In other words, Kripal argues these three positions: 1) not all mystical experience is sexual, but some mystical experiences are sexual; 2) not all sexual experiences are mystical, but some sexual experiences are mystical; and 3) it is the class of experiences that are both mystical and sexual that constitute the erotic. It is important to note here that Kripal departs from classical psychoanalysis and the concept of sublimation that, in other words, Kripal, in a non-reductionistic manner, is arguing for the ontological legitimacy of some mystical experiences. Parsons writes: “It was this seeming paradox, of bringing together
sexuality and mysticism, that was for Kripal both a scholarly knot and a deeply personal crisis. Appropriately, the solution came in the form of a series of methodological formulations produced through the process of mourning” (p. 73).

Parsons next turns to a discussion of Kripal’s biography. He notes that Kripal was born into a Nebraskan Roman Catholic family and that, as a young man, Kripal had gone to a Roman Catholic seminary “with the desire to explore the possibility of a monastic vocation” (p. 75). In seminary Kripal became interested in the relationship between sexuality and mysticism and was troubled by how Roman Catholicism dealt with this relationship.

Kripal also became anorexic in seminary. Through ascetic practices such as fasting, he reduced his 6’1” frame to a mere 125 lbs, and it was only by means of psychoanalytic therapy in the seminary that Kripal was able to discover that his anorexia was related to his Oedipal issues. Psychoanalysis, then, literally saved his life. Kripal eventually decided that his own heterosexuality was simply not compatible with the homoerotic structure of the seminary, in that an all male priesthood has, as its goal, union with a male God, and so he left the seminary for the university.

At the University of Chicago, Kripal turned to the study of Hinduism, where he found “a mystical path ‘in which a heterosexual male could approach the divine in an explicitly erotic fashion’” (quoted in Parsons, 2008a, p. 77). Here he also had the space to think more freely about the relationship between sexuality and mysticism, and he had the time to think more deeply about his own dreams, visions, and fantasies.

A particular fantasy that he came to think about was one that had bothered him since adolescence, a fantasy of Jesus with an erection on the cross while he and the
Virgin Mary stood beneath Jesus. He came to interpret this fantasy, which haunted him since puberty, in light of his previous anorexia, which, as noted, had Oedipal dimensions. Kripal interpreted Jesus, with an erection, as desiring (the Virgin) Mother, and for this, his sexuality had to be crucified. Interestingly, this fantasy charged with eroticism and shame had significant parallels to Kripal’s own life—by training to become a celibate monk, Kripal was also crucifying his sexuality. The anorexia from which he suffered, in fact, played into all of this as demonstrated via this psychosomatic equation: food = mother = sex. If Kripal realized that he could not have mother, he also realized that he could not have food or sex either.

Kripal also had other dreams and waking dream states in Calcutta that were very much like those of Ramakrishna’s, which led Kripal to know that such experiences cannot and should not be reduced, without remainder, to the western categories of psychoanalysis or any other non-religious framework. My point here is to demonstrate the very personal nature of Kripal’s work. That is, there is a very intimate relationship between his life and his work, and one way of looking at this relationship—though, to be sure, not the only way—is by utilizing the work of Homans.

Parsons finds the case of Kripal interesting because it is so similar to the case of Jung, as “both Jung and Kripal repudiated their native religious faith. . . . In the throes of disillusionment both turned inward, there to be subject to visions transcending the conceptual capacity of classic Freudian psychoanalysis to explain” (p. 77).

Perhaps a word about Jung’s fantasy is in order so that the reader can appreciate its resonances with Kripal’s vision. In Memories, Dreams, Reflections, Jung (1989) writes about the following fantasy, which occurred during his school years:
One fine summer day that same year I came out of school at noon and went to the cathedral square. The sky was gloriously blue, the day one of radiant sunshine. The roof of the cathedral glittered, the sun sparkling from the new, brightly glazed tiles. I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the sight, and thought: “The world is beautiful and the church is beautiful, and God made all this and sits above it far away in a blue sky on a golden throne.” (p. 36)

But then a disturbing thought forced its way, or tried to force its way, into Jung’s mind. But he wouldn’t let himself think it. He had the sensation that he “would be committing the most frightful of sins” (p. 36). The sin was blasphemy, and the punishment was eternal damnation. He thought of how sad his parents would be “if their only son, to whom they are so attached, should be doomed to eternal damnation” (p. 36).

Jung was very agitated the rest of the way home. When he arrived at home, his mother could tell that something was wrong. But he was able to convince her that nothing had happened at school—and this technically was not a lie, because this incident occurred on the way home from school. Nevertheless, he was agitated. He barely slept that night, doing everything he could to suppress the thought. He thought about confessing his struggle with his mother, but he reasoned that this would mean that he would have to think the thought, so he declined this possibility. This state of agitation and indecision continued for a few days. On the third night, however, Jung couldn’t take it anymore. He knew that he had to think the thought. He comforted himself about the transgressive nature of his fantasy by reasoning that God was not entirely averse to the idea of sin. And he came to this insight by thinking about the Bible, specifically, the story of Adam and Eve. Jung reasoned, in fact, that God had actually wanted Adam and Eve to sin—why
else would the possibility of sin exist, and how would they know to sin if God had not placed the serpent in the garden? Jung writes, “God in His omniscience had arranged everything so that the first parents would have to sin. *Therefore it was God’s intention that they should sin*” (p. 38).

What happened when Jung tried to think the thought that had been tormenting him for three days? He describes the events as follows:

I gathered all my courage, as though I were about to leap forthwith into hell-fire, and let the thought come. I saw before me the cathedral, the blue sky. God sits on his golden throne, high above the world—and from under the throne an enormous turd falls upon the sparkling roof, shatters it, and breaks the walls of the cathedral asunder. (p. 39)

Instead of feeling judgment and guilt at giving into this thought, Jung writes that he experienced grace. It is striking, too, that he interprets the fantasy in light of his relationship with his father, and his father’s relationship with religion: “A great many things I had not previously understood became clear to me. That was what my father [the pastor] had not understood, I thought; he had failed to experience the will of God” (p. 40). Jung’s father was faithful to the Bible and the church, but he did not realize that “the immediate living God . . . stands, omnipotent and free, above His Bible and His Church, who calls upon man to partake of His freedom” (p. 40).

Partaking in God’s freedom meant for Jung being able to separate the immediate living God from traditional Christianity. Partaking in God’s freedom—though perhaps Kripal would not put it like this—meant for Kripal seeing through the Roman Catholic Church’s teachings on sexuality, and rejecting them. Sexuality need not be crucified for
the religious life; indeed, Kripal came to argue that when sexual experiences and religious experiences coincide, a special kind of mystical experience is possible—namely, experience of what Kripal has called “the erotic.”

As such, there are striking affinities between Jung’s fantasy and Kripal’s vision. About these affinities, Parsons writes, “both used their private visionary experiences as raw data for the creation of a new hermeneutical model for religion. Private visionary experience became public theory” (pp. 77-78). What I would add to this is that the significance of Kripal’s private experiences-turned-public theory can be seen in the way his scholarship mourns his lost Roman Catholicism, as demonstrated in his essay on the sexualities of Jesus (Kripal, 2007b), while also attempting to create new meaning in non-traditional and even subversive ways, as can be seen in his work on Esalen and the American counter-culture (Kripal, 2007a). Parsons concludes by suggesting that these case histories “buttress the thesis that a strong link exists between mourning and method and that, with respect to individual instances, the vicissitudes of mourning can be correlated with fluctuations in method” (p. 78, my emphasis). My dissertation follows from this statement, as indeed does the title for this chapter. Above, I presented four brief case histories of the “mourning religion” thesis. In the following chapters I will offer three new case histories from a previously unstudied area with regard to the “mourning religion” thesis. One way of describing my dissertation, then, is by understanding it as a study in the vicissitudes of mourning.
An Observation about the Sources and Methods of Homans and Parsons

Before moving on to how I will be modifying Homans’s theory, I want to first make an observation about the sources and methods that Homans and Parsons utilize and employ. Their work is psychobiographical and psychohistorical. They add psychological insights to previous biographical and historical work. They also apply historical and social methods to psychology. The bottom line, though, is that their work is interdisciplinary, resting in the spaces between history, biography, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and religious studies. And, as such, they rely on the scholarship of others. Homans, for example, did not set up shop in the Freud archives to do his work. Rather, he relied on the scholarship about Freud, though he did supplement it with his own reading of some primary sources, such as Freud’s own writings and the Freud-Jung correspondence. Parsons, too, when writing about Kripal, relied on information that Kripal had already published, as well as conversations with Kripal.

When possible I, too, will rely on published material on Donald Capps, James Dittes, and William Bouwsma. I will also draw upon personal correspondence and interview material, but my chief source for material will be taken from the published and public writings of Capps, Dittes, and Bouwsma, as they all write in an autobiographical vein from time to time. My three case studies will most closely resemble Parsons’s case of Kripal, because my cases are also recent and have not risen to the status of what Homans calls “culture makers” in the sense that, for example, Freud did.
Modifications of the “Mourning Religion” Thesis for This Study

I am applying Homans’s thesis to an area to which it has not been applied: psychological portraits of religious leaders made by psychologists of religion and pastoral theologians. The primary modification of his theory is that I would like to call attention to particular dynamics—the dynamics or themes of reversals and restorations—in these portraits that I also believe are representative of certain strands of pastoral theology and psychology of religion. By doing so, we will be able to see a common way in which pastoral theologians and psychologists of religion “mourn religion.”

The Themes and Dynamics of Reversals and Restorations

The themes and dynamics of reversals and restorations have a long history in psychology of religion. Oscar Pfister, for example, wrote what is somewhat of a forgotten classic in the field. As noted, Pfister’s (1948) project was to show how Christianity “ceased to be a religion of love and became a religion of fear” (p. 24). I have also noted that Pfister, a pastor in the Reformed tradition, sought the use of psychology—particularly Freud’s psychoanalysis—to restore Christianity back to its roots as a religion of love. His project, then, was thoroughly one of reversals in hopes of restoration.

I want to follow in Pfister’s legacy. What I am interested in doing, though, is not so much a psychohistory of Christianity but, rather, an examination of the work of recent scholars of religion who are writing about the history of Christianity using psychological methods. In other words, I am interested in what we might call, in a reflexive phrase, a psychohistory of the contemporary psychohistory of Christianity.
One of my theses is that very often one can observe a radical critique of Christianity, a critique that reverses the tradition, so that the true or deeper meaning of Christianity can be restored—projects, in other words, akin to Pfister’s. A classic example of this tendency can be found in David Bakan’s (1966) interpretation of the biblical story of the near sacrifice of Isaac (cf. Genesis 22). In Sunday School, children are usually taught that Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son is the perfect example of faith, since Abraham was willing to give everything to God, even the life of his own son. Bakan, however, reverses the meaning of this story and argues that God never called Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, that, rather, this supposed command from God was in fact a projection of Abraham’s own murderous and infanticidal impulse onto God. So the good news here, for Bakan, is that Abraham came to his senses and realized that God was not calling him to do such a horrible act. My point here, then, is that psychologists of religion and other scholars who use psychological methods, while often iconoclastic, still find meaning in religion, albeit a meaning that is often a kind of a reversal, precisely the sort of reversal which Bakan enacted upon the Abraham and Isaac story.

Freud’s Legacy

This tendency toward reversals can be seen as a legacy of Freud’s thinking. In my introduction, I identified Freud’s essay on Michelangelo’s Moses as the archetypical example of the dynamic of reversals and restorations. This trend can also be observed elsewhere in Freud’s writings. As Freud (1901a/2001) points out in “On Dreams,” “Ideas which are contraries are by preference expressed in dreams by one and the same element. Opposition between two thoughts, the relation of reversal, may be represented in dreams
in a most remarkable way. It may be represented by some other piece of the dream-content being turned into its opposite” (p. 661). Reversals, as Freud sees it, are common in dreams, and what dreams appear to be saying is often the opposite of what they mean. In The Psychopathology of Everyday Life, Freud (1901b/2001) carries his ideas about reversals further into the realm of everyday life. He tells a humorous story about a man who is about to open a meeting of the Austrian Parliament and remarks: “Gentleman: I take notice that a full quorum of members is present and herewith declare the sitting closed!” (p. 59). Freud states that “[i]n this particular case the explanation no doubt was that the President secretly wished he was already in a position to close the sitting” (p. 59). Freud concludes: “Now extensive observations have taught me that words with opposite meanings are, quite generally, very often interchanged; they are already associated in our linguistic consciousness, they lie very close to each other and it is easy for the wrong one to be evoked” (p. 59).

Both of these instances reflect the basic spirit of Freud’s psychoanalysis. If Freud wrote in the style of the beatitudes of Jesus (cf. Matthew 5), I believe that they would go something like this: “You have heard that mental life is conscious, but I tell you it is the reverse—the bulk of mental life is, in fact, unconscious.” “You have heard that dreams and slips of the tongue are random and meaningless, but I tell you it is the reverse—given the right technique, one can discern the meaning and order of both dreams and slips of the tongue.” “You have heard that sexuality begins at puberty, but I tell you that children, in fact, are highly sexual, polymorphously perverse, even.” Part of Freud’s genius involves the fact that he was able to observe the fact that what, in mental life, appears to be the case is, in fact, the opposite or reverse. And when Freud interpreted religion, he
often did so in light of his theory of dreams and psychopathology, often, too, using his notion of reversal.

In *Moses and Monotheism*, to return to the example of Moses, Freud (1939/2001) argues that Moses’s background is the opposite of how the Bible tells the story. In Exodus we have a portrait of Moses as coming from a humble Jewish background, but Freud argues that “Moses was an Egyptian—probably an aristocrat” (p. 15), and describes the reversal this way: “Whereas normally a hero, in the course of his life, rises above his humble beginnings, the heroic life of the man Moses began with his stepping down from his exalted position and descending to the level of the Children of Israel” (p. 15).

*Reversing and Restoring Adam, Abraham, Job, and Jonah*

One way to demonstrate my observation of the tendency of reversals and restoration in psychology of religion is by simply looking at psychological interpretations of the major biblical figures.

*Adam in the Garden*

Take the story of creation, for example (cf. Genesis 1-2). The traditional understanding of creation is that God created the world good, and that everything that is wrong with the world is because Adam and Eve ate a piece of fruit that they were not supposed to eat (cf. Genesis 3). Human beings, it is often believed, would have been perfectly happy had they obeyed God. James Dittes, however, reads the story of creation and the Fall differently. Dittes (1996), while writing about men and religion, argues that men are expectant, that
they “live a life that feels chronically destined, ever on the verge—intending for something that is never quite arrived at, an unending not-yet, the perpetual pilgrimage of almost” (p. 3). He continues, “A man looks back at the end of an hour or a day, at the end of a career or a marriage, and finds promises stunted and shunted. Is that all there is?” (p. 3). The key point to note for our purposes is that Dittes thinks that men’s unhappiness, this longing, is a part of the orders of creation and not a result of Adam’s Fall (cf. pp. 15, 31). “The Bible tells it clearly,” Dittes writes, “from the beginning: paradise wanting. Adam looked around Eden and asked, Is that all there is?” (p. 4). Adam was created incomplete, sorrowful. And so Dittes argues that men are “men of sorrow,” that men lead lives of despair. However, this despair reflects a kind of hope as well, for though men’s lives are fashioned by despair, they are nevertheless religiously driven by hope. To say that human beings were created incomplete and that paradise was not perfect is basically the opposite of what one would expect to hear in most traditional churches. Ironically, however, Dittes’s reading is in fact a more literal reading of the creation story.

Abraham and Job (and the Garden of Eden, Again)

I noted above Bakan’s interpretation of Abraham. I will elaborate a bit more on that interpretation here, particularly as it intersects with his interpretation of the Book of Job, because he applies the same line of reasoning to both cases. In Disease, Pain, and Sacrifice: Toward a Psychology of Suffering, Bakan (1968) has a chapter titled “Sacrifice and the Book of Job.” He picks up on a theme that he has previously dealt with in The Duality of Human Existence: An Essay on Psychology and Religion—namely, the infanticidal impulse. Bakan (1966) writes, “Freud’s notion of the Oedipus complex
certainly recognized the psychological significance of the identifications and conflicts in the father-son relationship. I believe, however, that Freud did not carry this sufficiently far to recognize that the Oedipus complex might itself be a reaction of the child to the infanticidal impulse in the father—Laius leaving Oedipus to die as a child—and a defensive response of the child against aggression” (p. 104).

The story of Job is about a man who lived an upright life but nevertheless experienced a great deal of suffering. The book is a part of what is called the wisdom tradition in the Bible, and the Book of Job, like Ecclesiastes, counters the traditional wisdom of the Bible, as particularly found in Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy, we learn that the good receive good things from God, and the bad receive bad things from God. The Book of Job, however, sets out to challenge this logic. Job 1.1 tells us that Job was “blameless and upright,” but on account of some conversations with the Accuser—in Hebrew, Satan—God allows Job to be tortured: he loses his property, his children, and his health. Job’s friends try to comfort him, but, in the end, they find Job at fault: if bad things happen to you it’s because of your sin, Job’s friends say. And that, after all, is what the Torah says (cf. Deuteronomy 28). Job, however, is unwilling to suffer the negative consequences of sins he did not commit and seeks justice. Job confronts God, but God is silent for the majority of the story; it is not until the end of the story, in fact, that God comes to Job in a whirlwind only to declare that he does not have to answer Job, that Job has no right to question him (cf. Job 38).

Bakan, as noted, applies this theory of the infanticidal impulse to both Abraham and Job. God, Bakan argues, did not call Abraham to sacrifice Isaac; Abraham, rather, projected his own murderous wishes onto God and then experienced them as a command.
In *The Duality of Human Existence*, Bakan discusses his notion of the infanticidal impulse and the Abraham and Isaac story, and here Bakan suggests that the “Book of Job is continuous with the story of Abraham” (p. 105). Satan did not sacrifice Job’s children—*this was Job’s wish*. A clue in this regard, Bakan notes, is that the opening of the Book of Job includes the death of his children, which is a signal of the latent, though only thinly disguised, content of the book. Bakan writes:

> The story of the children’s being killed is a fantasy in the biblical mind of their being killed. And a fantasy of their being killed suggests a wish that they be killed. The Book of Job begins with God and Satan involved in a plot to kill Job’s children. The attribution of the infanticidal activity to God and Satan is a thin disguise. In spite of the fact that the killing of the children is attributed to these supernatural beings, the fact is that the Book of Job was written by men and constitutes their fantasy. (pp. 106-7)

Bakan suggests that the infanticidal impulse weighs more heavily in the non-poetic portions of Job, that is, in the beginning and the end. But even in the poetic portions, Bakan finds traces of the impulse, particularly in the “Poem of the Ostrich”:

> Gavest thou the goodly wings unto the peacocks? Or wings and feathers unto the ostrich? Which leaveth her eggs in the earth, and warmeth them in dust, and forgetteth that the foot may crush them, or that the wild beast may break them. She is hardened against her young ones, as though they were not hers: her labor is in vain without fear; because God hath deprived her of wisdom, neither hath he imparted to her understanding. What time she lifteth up herself on high, she scorneth the horse and his rider. (Job 39.13-18, KJV)
Bakan notes that the rabbis of the Talmud offer infanticidal interpretations themselves, indeed, in very close proximity to the “Poem of the Ostrich.” Job 39.1 reads: “Knowest thou the time when the wild goats of the rock bring forth?” And the verse is interpreted as follows: “This wild goat is heartless toward her young. When she crouches for delivery, she goes up to the top of a mountain so that the young shall fall down and be killed, and I prepare an eagle to catch it in his wings and set it before her, and if he were one second too soon or too late it would be killed” (p. 109).

“Psychologically,” Bakan writes, “the Book of Job may be regarded as expressing a transition from the state of mind of father to the state of mind of son, the change coming about as a defense against the guilt associated with the infanticidal impulse. . . . The infanticidal impulse is apparently got rid of by projecting it” (p. 113). He continues, “Job . . . having psychologically engaged in infanticide, as it were, strains to identify himself with the victim, subject to injury only by God” (p. 114). And so “Job’s answer to tragedy is to announce that he is to be understood as a child, as a son and not as a father” (p. 115). Bakan’s interpretation here involves two psychological substitutions with regard to the ritual of sacrifice. Instead of sacrificing for the father, sacrifice is carried out for God (read: the Father), and, instead of sacrificing children, animals are sacrificed.

Hence, Bakan attempts to approach pain from an existential perspective by interpreting the Book of Job psychologically. When faced with the threat of non-being, that is, annihilation, human beings have a tendency to find a replacement for themselves, often a sacrifice in their place. Bakan argues that sacrifice is tied up in the wish for immortality—an illusory hope that Bakan feels human beings should not entertain—and he suggests that the Book of Job teaches us that sacrifice does not do its psychological
work. If human beings have gained this uncomfortable insight (i.e., the fact of our mortality) from eating from the Tree of Knowledge, then, Bakan suggests, we should not lust after the Tree of Life by means of sacrifice. He writes:

Christianity may also be interpreted as an effort to counteract this infanticidal impulse, having arisen against a background in which the then classical Jewish modes of dealing with this impulse were faltering, as witness especially the holocaust of infant slaughter under Herod from which Jesus was saved. Christianity provided new devices for handling the impulse, especially in the sacrifice of the Mass. (pp. 104-105)

What I would argue is that the most imperative thing to take away from my discussion of Bakan is that Bakan sees both the problem of infanticide and its solution in Christianity. Concealed in the stories of Abraham and Job are murderous wishes but, if read in the proper manner, these stories can be read as a counter to the infanticidal impulse.

Jung on Job and God’s Atonement

One of the most well known works in psychology of religion is Jung’s (1969) *Answer to Job*. Concerned with the Book of Job, *Answer to Job* makes the controversial argument that Job was morally superior to God and helped God come to terms with his own unconscious. For Jung, the incarnation was God’s “answer” to Job for God’s own moral shortcomings. In other words, Jung argues that Job was right, that God had wronged Job, and that Job, by confronting God with this fact, showed God the errors of his ways. Moreover, he suggests that by offending Job God caused himself to be indebted not only to Job, but to all of humanity—God paid this debt, Jung concludes, by becoming human
and by suffering on the cross. This, of course, is a complete reversal of the traditional atonement theories, as Anselm, virtually every seminary student is taught, argued that God’s “honor” had been offended by human sin, and that the atonement was God’s way of restoring his own honor.

Jonah’s Bad Dream

Yet another case illustrative of the tendency for reversals and restorations to materialize in psychology of religion can be observed in the interpretation of the story of Jonah. In *The Depleted Self*, Donald Capps (1993) tells the story of Jonah, though Capps’s version is basically the reverse of how the story is usually told. The story usually goes something like as follows.

God calls Jonah to go to the town of Nineveh to tell the townspeople to repent. Jonah does not want to do this because he knows that, in the end, God will show his mercy and Jonah, therefore, will look like a fool because his prophecy did not come true. So, instead of going to Nineveh, Jonah boards a ship headed for Tarshish, which is in the opposite direction. In response to Jonah’s disobedience, God causes a great storm to overtake the ship. The crew, by means of casting lots, discovers that Jonah was the cause of the storm, and they eventually (but reluctantly) throw Jonah into the sea. The storm ceases immediately. Jonah, meanwhile, is swallowed by a large fish, which swims to shore and vomits Jonah up on the dry land. God speaks to Jonah again, telling him to go to Nineveh. Jonah does, he preaches repentance, the people of Nineveh repent, God forgives them, and Jonah is furious, because this is exactly what he had predicted. God and Jonah have an argument, but God has the last word in this story. It does seem
significant, however, that God’s final words are a question. God asks, Nineveh is a great city—should I not spare it?

In *Young Clergy*, Capps (2005c) notes that he once heard a sermon at a graduation event that featured the story of Jonah. Capps writes, “I recall a speaker who suggested to graduating students that, like Jonah, they are likely to discover that they have been sent to modern versions of Nineveh and they, also like Jonah, are likely to experience dejection, frustration, and even anger” (p. 1). Capps notes that the speaker then encouraged the students to return to their “Ninevehs” and that their ministries would thrive “in the very locus of their earlier defeats” (p. 1). Capps notes that he has listened to many such homilies in his day, and that he basically (reluctantly?) agrees with this “take” on Jonah, but adds: “[I]f I had been Jonah, returning to Nineveh would be the last thing that I would do” (p. 1).

But back to Capps’s (1993) interpretation of the Jonah story: Capps notes that the story of Jonah can be read as a dream, and “that the only real solution to Jonah’s problems is that he wake up and say, with obvious relief, ‘It was only a dream’” (p. 160). And this, in effect, reverses the meaning of the story: “Perhaps instead of trying to justify the actions of the God who is portrayed in the story, we need to have the courage to say that the whole thing is a very bad dream, a nightmare, and that Jonah’s salvation lies in his ability to perceive that this is a dream from which he can and must wake up” (p. 160). Capps continues, “The raging sea, the monster fish, the miraculous plant, the ravenous worm—these are the stuff of which dreams, bad dreams, are made. And so is the God who would treat a person as God in the story treated Jonah” (p. 160).
And to read religion in light of dreams, of course, is to take us back to Freud, and so it makes sense to go back to Freud as I conclude this literature overview. In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud (1901b/2001) writes: “I believe that a large part of the mythological view of the world . . . *is nothing but psychology projected into the external world*” (p. 258). He continues, “One could venture to explain in this way the myths of paradise and the [F]all of man, of God, of good and evil, of immortality, and so on, and to transform metaphysics into metapsychology” (p. 259). What I am suggesting is that many psychologists of religion have carried out Freud’s project of transforming mythology—stories such as the stories of Adam, Abraham, Job, and Jonah—from metaphysics into metapsychology, which is often a reversal of projection, a de-projection.

**Counseling Literature and a Practical Approach**

What is somewhat lacking in Homans’s writings is the use of counseling literature. Instead, Homans draws on psychoanalytic theory, academic theorizing of mourning and culture, historical and sociological analysis, and philosophy. The result is that his writing is not very accessible, and it is not very practical. I realize that my own writing up to this point has been rather academic and likely would not be viewed as accessible by the average reader. But, in any case, another modification of Homans’s theory is that I would like to put it into conversation with counseling literature in general and two texts in particular: Pauline Boss’s (1999) *Ambiguous Loss: Learning to Live with Unresolved Grief* and Allan Hugh Cole Jr.’s (2008) *Good Mourning*. 
Ambiguous Loss

Boss, a researcher and family therapist, notes that what Freud called melancholia in his essay “Mourning and Melancholia” therapists today call “complicated grieving” and what she is calling “ambiguous loss.” She also notes that “[s]ometimes whole societies are affected by such a loss” (p. 28), a statement that intersects with what Homans means by symbolic loss.

Her central argument is that “the greater the ambiguity surrounding one’s loss, the more difficult it is to master it and the greater one’s depression, anxiety, and family conflict” (p. 7). She suggests that there are two kinds of ambiguous loss—namely, physically absent but psychologically present (what she calls “leaving without goodbye”), and physically present but psychologically absent (what she calls “goodbye without leaving”). One example of the former includes soldiers who turn up MIA from, say, the current Iraq war. Is the family member dead? Should he be treated as such? Should there be a funeral or memorial service? Should his wife remarry? All of these questions and confusions prevent mourning and complicate grief. They are the product of ambiguous loss. An example of psychologically absent loss is dementia. As, for example, a grandmother’s condition worsens, the rest of her family often does not know how to react, especially because she has good days and bad days. On the bad days, she is physically present but obviously psychologically absent. Is grandmother still there? What happens to the “self” in dementia? If it no longer exists, does she exist as the person her family knew? If not, should they mourn her? If so, how? What if she comes back and is “normal” again? At some point, families have to make decisions, and Boss calls this “the family gamble.” This gamble “is one way to get off the emotional rollercoaster of
ambiguous loss” (p. 94). The gamble, of course, is a risk, and sometimes it pays off. Other times it doesn’t.

“The family,” Boss writes, “is our nearest environment; thus the losses, clear and ambiguous, that occur in a family are especially important in determining how best to help those struggling to move beyond their pain” (p. 60). One case that Boss discusses is the case of the Klein family. In 1951, they lost three of their four boys. The four boys went to a playground near their house, but, along the way, one of the boys stopped to fix his shoelace, while the others proceeded to the park. The boys who traveled ahead disappeared. Betty and Joseph Klein, the parents, still advertise in newspapers for the boys. Boss writes: “Some therapists might call this ‘illusion construction’ and encourage such self-protective behavior, because overly optimistic judgments of the chances of success—the chances, for example, of finding missing loved ones—tend to enhance, not harm, a family’s adaptation to the loss” (pp. 81-82). The Klein’s hope, as it turned out, did not seem to be in vain: in 1996, a man responded to one of the Klein’s advertisements and reported himself to be David Klein, one of the missing boys. Boss notes that “[t]he man told the Kleins things that they thought only a family member would know” (p. 82), and he agreed to meet Betty and Joseph. However, the man never showed, and they Kleins later reported that “we don’t get carried away anymore” (p. 82). Boss sees optimism, rather than unconscious denial, in the Kleins.

“With surprising ingenuity,” Boss writes, “people infuse what looks like a tragic situation with hope. Parents of missing children lobby lawmakers and are successful in having laws changed to be more protective of children; they create international computer networks so that photographs of missing children can be transmitted nationally and
globally in real time” (p. 119). She continues: “If the world is unjust for having caused their ambiguous loss, they resolve to make meaning out of the chaos by lowering the risks of such loss for others” (p. 120). It is this surprising ingenuity that interests me in my case studies—the ways in which these three scholars come to terms with the ambiguous losses in their lives. And, by viewing my cases in light of not only Homans’s theory but also Boss’s notion of ambiguous loss, it is my hope to convey the idea that academic writing serves a practical healing process for scholars. Scholars do this in a variety of ways, of course, and this is what I mean by the phrase “varieties of meaning” in my chapter title. It is also my hope to convey that everyone, whether culture maker or assistant professor, whether Vietnam veteran or hair dresser, whether pizza delivery driver or lawyer, goes through loss at some point in their lives, some of which are ambiguous, and that these theories, however removed from everyday life they seem, are nevertheless practical in that they can help us understand ourselves better.

People Grieve Differently, People Mourn Differently

I have also been informed by the work of Allan Cole Jr., a pastoral theologian and pastoral counselor, throughout my dissertation. Cole’s (2008) *Good Mourning* provides a good balance to Homans’s theoretical work because Cole’s work, unlike Homans’s, is written for people who are bereaved. What I want to take from Cole is his insight that people grieve differently and people mourn differently.

Cole sees bereavement, grief, and mourning as separate but related. Bereavement refers to the fact of having lost something or someone. Grief, however, involves “the various painful and complex psychological, emotional, physical, spiritual, behavioral, and
relational responses to loss that one endures” (p. xvii). Mourning, which occurs after
grief, involves “the process by which a bereaved person gradually changes her
relationship to what has been lost, so that an emotional investment in new relationships
and other aspects of life may occur” (p. xvi).

With these definitions in mind, Cole points out that people grieve differently and
they mourn differently. While, for example, Bob might be wailing loudly at Jane’s
funeral and Sarah remains stoic, this does not mean that Bob loved Jane more than Sarah
did or even that Bob’s grief is deeper than Sarah’s grief. People grieve differently.

And people get through their grief—that is, mourn—differently. Phillip might
need to be in the company of others for a while because he cannot stand to be alone.
Barbara might need to be alone for many months before she can face the world again.
Robert might need to keep himself busy with painting. Jeannette might need to take a
leave of absence from work. William might need to redo the basement to create a kind of
memorial or useful moment, so to speak, with the inheritance money from his mother’s
death. People mourn differently.

In this dissertation, I am suggesting that three prominent scholars who have
written for the fields of psychology of religion and pastoral theology have been engaged
in a mourning process that involved similar kinds of losses and that they each responded
in a similar way—that is, by creatively responding to their losses in their writing. But this
is not to say that they each experienced the same kind of grief. Nor is it to suggest that
they mourned in the same way. Cole is right: each grief experience and each mourning
process is unique. But, just as every snowflake is unique, snowflakes can nevertheless be
compared and contrasted, which is precisely what I do in this dissertation.
The Question of Secularization

Before embarking upon my project to compare and contrast experiences of mourning religion, however, I would like to address, however briefly, the issue of secularization. I feel compelled to do so chiefly because secularization theories inform Homans’s sociological approach to mourning, and his own thesis is its own kind of secularization theory. Broadly speaking, by means of the historical and social changes brought on through industrialization and modernization, Christianity, it has been argued, has lost its power to bind people together—a general process that has been called secularization. Secularization has been addressed in a variety of ways (cf. Taylor, 2007). Freud (1927/2001), for example, wrote as if secularization were inevitable, that science, in the end, would surely triumph over religion. Harvey Cox (1965) and others in the 1960s wrote about secularization as a social and empirical fact, that is, religion is simply on the decline, but Cox, who was living in Berlin when he wrote The Secular City, also argued that urbanization and secularization provide Christians with an opportunity and a hope. Later, however, the view that religion was on the decline was challenged. The early secularization theorists were thought to have conceived of religion too narrowly and geographically arbitrarily. Critics of the early secularization theorists pointed out that their analyses only explained western and industrialized countries; countries in the so-called third world were not, in fact, experiencing secularization. A further criticism was added: religion in America after the 1960s was no longer on the decline. It became obvious that religion, all over the world, was experiencing resurgence. This observation led many, including Cox (1990) himself, to revise their earlier arguments. Some thinkers,
though, began to think of secularization in another way: as a theological and social ideal. Fenn (2001), for example, argued that secularization is the logical outcome of Christianity, and that Christians ought to work to make society more secular, rather than fight against it (cf. Vahanian, 2008 & Altizer, 1967 & Altizer & Hamilton, 1968).

The fact that religion is alive and well does seem to pose some problems for Homans’s thesis. In some parts of western culture, and perhaps the majority of American culture, Christianity is thriving. Religion has not been lost at all, and, therefore, it is not being mourned. Indeed, a few years ago when I was visiting a former teacher of mine who teaches at Princeton University, I told her about the “mourning religion” thesis and that I was thinking of applying it in my dissertation. My former teacher, I think, is an atheist, and I also think she is somewhat disdainful toward religion. In any case, after I explained Homans’s argument that religion is being mourned as a lost object in western culture, she responded: “Oh, I didn’t realize religion had been lost.” I think I mumbled some sort of response, but her comment, even if flippant, is instructive.

Another challenge to Homans’s thesis, which rests on the socio-cultural effects of modernism, is what has been broadly referred to as postmodernism. Theologians who have taken up this line of thinking (e.g., Allen, 1989; Hauerwas & Willimon, 1989; & Hauerwas & Willimon, 1996, p. 11) argue that postmodernism frees the believer from the intellectual challenges posed by modernism. Since, at bottom, there is no grounding for any worldview, there is no grounding for disbelieving, say, a Christian worldview. Those who might have become disillusioned with religion on the grounds of modern scientific assumptions are freed now, so some argue, to embrace their own stories, because their own assumptions are no worse—or better—than anybody else’s. Since there is no grand
narrative, there is no reason to give up one’s own personal narrative (cf. Smith, 2005, p. 22; however, see Hauerwas, 1996).

However one wants to understand secularization, the thrust of Homans’s point still stands—namely that, in the west, Christianity in the twentieth- and twenty-first-centuries no longer holds the power that it once did. Theologians themselves talk about our age with the term “post-Christendom” (see, e.g., Hall, 2000). Further, however one wants to think about secularization, no one would dispute the effects of the Enlightenment—regardless of how one chooses to define the Enlightenment—on intellectual thinkers in the west. In the early twentieth century, and even to this day, religious intellectuals have struggled over the relationship between religion and science. And this is the crucial point: that there is a struggle. The fact that this struggle exists signifies a cultural shift, a cultural shift that religious believers have experienced as a loss, for no longer is their worldview assumed by mass society. This, after all, is what Homans means by symbolic loss. And so the variety of ways in which we are able to think about secularization reflects the variety of ways in which intellectuals have come to terms with the loss occasioned by the phenomenon of secularization. That is, various theories reflect the vicissitudes of mourning, as they are various ways of re-creating meaning after the loss of the religious object. Or, perhaps in some cases, they reflect an inability to mourn as well.
2. Reframing Religion

Mourning and Donald Capps’s Psychological Portrait of Jesus

Donald Capps is one of the most prolific and creative writers in the field of psychology of religion today. Although he made his name in academia in the field of pastoral care and counseling (most of his monographs were written in this field), he also wrote a few monographs in psychology of religion (e.g., Capps, 1997a, 2000, 2002). This chapter is concerned with one of those monographs, his psychobiographical book on Jesus (Capps, 2000; cf., however, Capps, 2008a).

I argue that Capps experienced two ambiguous losses in his childhood that concerned religion. One loss—his Sunday School teacher’s failed prophecy—did not lead him to reject religion, but it did inspire him to view religion with a certain amount of skepticism, especially as this skepticism was modeled in his father. The other loss—his separation from his mother—actually created in him what he believes to be the root of male religiousness in general. The fact that both of these losses were ambiguous (he did not reject religion altogether as a boy, nor did he physically lose his mother), together with the fact that one loss encouraged him to view religion with skepticism and the other loss inspired him to be more religious, testifies to the substantial ambiguity of Capps’s relationship with religion. Capps has written about such ambiguity, loss, and religion in terms of melancholia. I argue that Capps addressed these issues in a deeply personal way in his fifties, especially because he has noted that the topic of melancholia has a personal subtext for him. In terms of Homans’s theory, the processes of individuation and creation of meaning can be observed in Capps’s creation of the religious typologies of honor,
hope, and humor. The processes of individuation and creation of meaning progressed, I argue, as Capps applied his melancholia theory to Jesus, because here he was able to integrate, or perhaps the word is sustain, his various selves and, therefore, open himself up to mourn in a non-defensive way—the way of humor. By writing about humor and being humorous himself, Capps was able to make peace with the ambiguity of religion and the ambiguities within himself, for he had already sought for and found a more reliable truth in Jesus.

There are three basic components of this chapter. First, I will present in some detail Capps’s psychological interpretation of Jesus. I do so because I believe the writing of this book was instrumental in Capps’s mourning, and so that I can demonstrate the ways in which Capps’s portrait of Jesus participates in the larger project of reversals and restoration. I will then present information about Capps’s personal life, drawing on his many autobiographical writings, personal interviews and conversations, and his letters. Finally, I will return to Capps’s psychobiographical book on Jesus, this time in light of his personal history, in order to show how the “mourning religion” thesis also applies to Capps himself.

**Part One: Capps’s Psychological Portrait of Jesus**

In the preface of *Jesus: A Psychological Biography*, Capps (2000) notes that “[t]hree decades ago, biblical scholars began turning to the social sciences (especially sociology and cultural anthropology) to inform New Testament studies” (p. ix). Capps observes that, while this turn to the social sciences has answered many questions, it has also produced new ones—and scholars in biblical studies are often at odds concerning these
new questions. Was Jesus, for example, influenced more by Jewish culture or Hellenistic culture? Scholars also debate the nature of Jesus’ sociocultural identity: Was Jesus “a holy man, sage, magician, messiah, or itinerant Cynic” (p. ix)? Capps does not think that a turn to psychology will answer all of the questions that have been raised since the more general turn to the social sciences within biblical studies, but Capps does claim that “a psychological point of view may be very helpful precisely at those points where scholars find themselves at an impasse” (pp. ix-x). In point of fact, a major question among contemporary biblical scholars, Capps notes, is “Who was Jesus?” and “What did Jesus understand himself to be about?” (p. x). These kinds of questions, which deal with identity, are, Capps argues, inherently psychological and cannot be answered on sociological or theological grounds alone.

The Layout of the Book

Capps divides his book into three parts. In part one, Capps presents four “portraits” of Jesus by four major contemporary historical Jesus scholars. Chapter one focuses on the work of E. P. Sanders and John P. Meier, and chapter two focuses on the work of John Dominic Crossan and Marcus J. Borg. Such a procedure reflects Capps’s belief that “anyone engaged in the task of formulating a psychological portrait of Jesus must build on the work of scholars in the field” (p. x). “Otherwise,” Capps notes, “the resulting portrait will be highly idiosyncratic and not very credible” (p. x). Capps also adds, however, that the psychologist needs to go beyond the scholarship of others in constructing his or her own portrait, utilizing the unique tools of psychology.
In part two of the book, Capps deals with methodological issues in psychobiography and psychohistory. Chapter three deals with psychobiography, chapter four with psychohistory, and chapter five with the social world of Jesus’ day, setting the stage for part three of the book which is Capps’ own psychological portrait of Jesus. Capps realizes that it may seem odd that five chapters of an eight chapter book are setting the stage for an interpretation, but he thinks that such methodological consideration is essential, as he writes: “I am as much as concerned with making a case for the validity of this enterprise as with contending for my own portrait of Jesus” (p. xi). “I contend that the psychobiography of individuals and psychohistory of groups can be done responsibly if one attends to these issues of methodology,” and, Capps goes on, “I make the claim that, for the psychological study of Jesus, it is vitally important that the psychobiographical enterprise be located within the larger context of the psychohistorical one” (p. xi).

In part three of the book, Capps has three chapters on Jesus. Chapter six deals with what Capps calls “the fatherhood question,” while chapter seven deals with Jesus’ healings. Chapter eight deals with the temple disturbance, and it is finally in the concluding chapter that Capps presents his portrait of Jesus as having an “utopian-melancholic personality” (p. xii). This portrait is meant to be understood as a third alternative to two views of Jesus that are often pitted against one another—namely, apocalypticist vs. social reformer (p. xii). Capps sees himself as understanding Jesus as a “whole” person and as having “a coherent self-identity” (p. xii), and in constructing his own portrait of Jesus, he notes that a good psychological portrait needs to be both coherent and complex. That is, the interpretation should make sense of the person as a
whole (coherence), but it should not reduce the person to a psychological caricature (complexity). This project, then, is very much in line with the thinking of Capps’s dissertation advisor, Peter Homans, as Homans argued that such projects need to be historical, sociological, anthropological, comparative, and psychological at the same time. Here I will focus on part three of Capps’s book, his psychological portrait of Jesus.

The Hidden Years and the Fatherhood Question

Capps discusses several scholarly reconstructions of the relationship between Jesus and his father, Joseph. He is interested in this question on the grounds that his approach is psychoanalytic. Biblical scholars themselves have been interested in this relationship, but Capps believes that their work has been insufficiently coherent or insufficiently complex, precisely because biblical scholars have been reluctant to use psychological methods. Next I will discuss several views on the relationship between Jesus and Joseph.

The Meier-Miller View: Joseph the Good Father

The first view that Capps discusses is what he calls the Meier-Miller view. Meier (1991, 1994) suggests that while Jesus’ early years were “ordinary” and “typical,” Jesus, as an adolescent, went through a major change on account of his relationship with John the Baptist. Capps, however, sees a few problems here: “Meier leaves unexplained . . . the fact that Jesus seems to have been oriented toward a ‘celibate’ life prior to meeting John, that there was tension between Jesus and his family, and the reasons Jesus was prompted to join John and his group in the desert” (p. 130). Capps views Jesus’ adult life as being
far from typical, as Meier does also, but Capps thinks that there is more continuity with
his childhood than Meier suggests.

Capps turns to other scholars to consider the childhood of Jesus, such as John
Miller’s (1997) psychological portrait of Jesus, which, in many respects, is congruent
with Meier’s analysis. Miller argues that, because we do not know much about the
childhood of Jesus, it was probably unexceptional. Miller also thinks that Jesus was the
firstborn child (cf. Luke 2.7) and, therefore, carried the weight that went along with the
expectations of firstborn sons. One expectation of all sons—not just firstborn sons—is
that they will marry. Jesus, who apparently was not married, was therefore atypical. Here,
therefore, is a point at which Miller diverges from Meier, as Miller hypothesizes that
when the time came for Jesus to marry, Joseph, who would have been responsible for
finding Jesus a wife, was dead. Since Jesus had younger brothers and sisters, Miller
concludes that Joseph likely died when Jesus was an adolescent, which, Miller argues,
aFFECTed Jesus greatly, as this would have put Jesus in a husband-father role with respect
to his mother and family, leading inevitably to an identity crisis and tensions in the
mother-son relationship. The significance of Jesus’ baptism for Miller was that it broke
the bond with his mother by replacing it with a new bond with his Father in heaven.
Invoking William James’s understanding of conversion, Miller argues that Jesus
experienced a conversion at his baptism and that the death of his father—Joseph—was
the catalyst. On this interpretation, Capps writes:

This hypothesis enables [Miller] to present Jesus as having lived a normal,
emotionally healthy childhood, only to have this tranquility shattered in his
middle adolescence by the trauma of his father’s death. As the firstborn son, his
life would be the most affected by his father’s death. This hypothesis also enables him to explain Jesus’ strained relations with his mother and other family members, as the definition of Jesus’ true mission in life meant that he would no longer be carrying out the responsibilities of the eldest son. (p. 135)

The upshot is that, for Miller, “this father-son relationship was a positive one, and therefore provided an experiential basis for Jesus’ experience of God as, likewise, a loving and caring father” (p. 135).

_The Schaberg View: Joseph the Adopting Father_

Capps next discusses Jane Schaberg’s (1987) thesis that Jesus was illegitimate. Her argument, quite simply, is that Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus, that Jesus was, in other words, a bastard. This view, Capps notes, is in stark contrast to Miller’s (and Meier’s) argument that the childhood of Jesus was normal and ordinary: “More indirectly, her argument offers a counterthesis for why these early years are ‘hidden,’ as it implies that the early Christian community had something to hide or, at the very least, over which to exercise considerable damage control” (p. 137). In making her case, Schaberg examines the genealogy of Jesus as reported in the Gospel of Matthew. She notes the pattern of A begot B, B begot C, C begot D, and so forth. But she also notes that this pattern breaks down when it comes to Joseph. Throughout the genealogy, the fathers were listed as the persons begetting. When it comes to Joseph, however, Schaberg notes: “Jacob begot Joseph the husband of Mary; of her was begotten Jesus, called the Christ” (quoted in Capps, 2000, p. 138). Joseph, in other words, did not “beget” Jesus. Schaberg “concludes that Matthew has created a genealogy ‘whose functions are (a) to admit or at
least raise the possibility of illegitimacy; and (b) to insist, via someone other than the biological father, on the legitimacy of a social/legal type” (Capps, 2000, p. 139). Capps continues, “Thus, Joseph’s adoption of Jesus as his own son, legalizing his fatherhood of Jesus, is the central claim of this genealogy” (p. 139).

Capps finds the argument that Jesus was illegitimate compelling. However, he also finds fault with Schaberg’s argument that Joseph willingly adopted Jesus and that Jesus and Joseph had a good relationship. Given the fact that in Judea, unlike in Galilee, Joseph would have had the law on his side in a case of adultery, Capps believes that it is very unlikely that a Galilean male would be compelled to adopt illegitimate children. In other words, in Judea, Joseph could have proven that he was not the biological father of Jesus, but in Galilee, there was no way to prove this, since they had no laws and procedures to address such situations (pp. 139-140). Since Joseph was in fact Galilean, he went ahead and kept his commitment to marry Mary, but he was not under any legal obligation to adopt Jesus. Schaberg only assumes he did. Capps, though, questions this assumption and suggests that Joseph didn’t adopt Jesus on the grounds that the Gospel of Matthew’s Joseph constructs an idealized portrait of Joseph, a portrait that Matthew endorses. Capps thinks that “[a]cceptance of the view that Joseph was not the biological but the legal father of Jesus thus raises the question whether Matthew presents a rather idealized picture of Joseph, and thus, by implication, of the relationship between Joseph and Jesus” (p. 140). Indeed, as Capps writes, the historical Joseph, “[i]f he proceeded with marriage plans, he may have done so because he realized he was trapped, either because he could not prove that he was not the child’s father or that he did not have the requisite social standing in the community to bring charges that would have been taken
seriously” (p. 145). Matthew, Capps suggests, solves the problem of these un-provable charges by making “a virtue of a necessity, giving Joseph’s change of heart religious legitimation as a response to an angelic voice” (p. 146). Capps is suspicious of this change of heart: “Whether an angelic voice can put a helpless man’s resentment and rage to rest . . . seems doubtful. Matthew’s Joseph is thus highly idealized” (p. 146). “In my view,” Capps writes, “Matthew has created a wonderful portrait of Joseph that reflects Matthew’s own ideal self. He has superimposed his own image on Joseph, and Joseph thus epitomizes the core values of the Matthean community” (p. 147) (cf. Matt. 18.10 & 19.14).

Van Aarde’s View: A Fatherless Son

Capps also discusses a third possibility concerning the relationship between Jesus and Joseph. Andries van Aarde (1997) argues that Jesus was “a fatherless son,” and his analysis hinges on the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. Why was Jesus interested in this rite of the remission of sins? Why did he associate with the outcasts of society? Van Aarde draws on the status envy hypothesis from the social sciences to explore these questions.

Van Aarde’s first point is that Joseph is not mentioned in the earliest sources—that is, Paul, Mark, Q, and Thomas. He next explores the literature concerning the rules regarding personal status relevant for Jesus’ time and place, and he notes that fatherless sons were excluded from the structures of honor including, and especially, religious rituals. Jesus, then, would not have been a part of the assembly of God’s people. However, “[t]hrough John’s baptism, performed at the Jordan river, Jesus could—and
did—experience symbolically what he was deprived of literally, which was the status of ‘a son of Abraham, son of God’” (Capps, 2000, p. 150).

Van Aarde also draws on studies of father-absent households. He notes that this “research shows that ‘war-torn’ boys from father-absent households behaved like girls in fantasy behavior and also showed very little aggression” (Capps, 2000, p. 153). This is because of a primary identification with the mother. A secondary identification with the father also often comes to exist, in which the boys exhibit “fatherlike performance,” where boys would then acquire more “masculine” traits, such as aggression. Van Aarde, though, thinks that Jesus never had a father from whom Jesus could have acquired these traits, thus offering an explanation for “the nonviolence that Borg and others attribute to Jesus” (Capps, 2000, p. 153).

As with the first two hypotheses regarding the relationship between Jesus and Joseph, while Capps accepts much of this argument, he still has several critiques. The first is that, since van Aarde argued all of this in an article, “his arguments are more suggestive than definitive” (p. 153). But, taking the argument as it stands and for what it is, Capps has other concerns as well. He thinks that it is an oversimplification to lump “bastards” and “fatherless sons” into the same category. While both, Capps agrees, would experience significant social ostracism, Capps cites Freud’s notion of “the narcissism of minor differences” to suggest that the apparently minor difference between a bastard and a fatherless son should not be underestimated. Schaberg, Capps notes, thinks that Jesus was a bastard, but was adopted by Joseph. Van Aarde thinks that Jesus was fatherless, leaving open the question whether Joseph was completely absent or whether Joseph simply did not adopt Jesus. Capps supports the hypothesis that Jesus was conceived by
means of rape or seduction and therefore a bastard (Schaberg) and that Jesus was fatherless (van Aarde), modifying van Aarde’s view by suggesting that Jesus did live in Joseph’s house but that Joseph did not adopt Jesus, leaving Jesus both legally and psychologically in need of a father.

Capps critiques van Aarde’s position further. Capps notes that the author of Hebrews implies that “an illegitimate son was not considered worthy enough to receive the discipline that was routinely accorded a man’s legitimate heirs” (p. 159). As the author of Hebrews puts it, “Endure trials for the sake of discipline. God is treating you as children; for what child is there whom a parent does not discipline? If you do not have that discipline in which all children share, then you are illegitimate and not his children” (p. 159; cf. Heb. 12.7-8). Capps adds, “The implication is that illegitimate boys did not receive the discipline that was a sign of a father’s love, and therefore did not become ‘sons’ but remained ‘children’” (p. 159). Van Aarde suggests that Jesus sought a “kind” and “nurturing” father in Abba—“Abba” basically means “Daddy”—but Capps thinks “a more plausible hypothesis would be that he would seek in ‘Abba’ a father who demonstrated his love for Jesus by subjecting him to the same discipline that human fathers bestowed on their legitimate sons” (p. 159). Thus, Capps is suspicious of van Aarde’s view that the baptism of Jesus was a subversion of traditional patriarchal values, but he does believe that this baptism challenged the traditional religion of Jesus’ day. And so, Capps writes, “There may be far more aggressiveness, even militancy, in Jesus’ invocation of ‘Abba’” than is commonly recognized (p. 159). Capps continues: “In fact, his invocation of ‘Abba’ may have an element of antimaternalism if it plays a role similar to the role the father plays in the life of the legitimate son” (pp. 159-160).
What does all of this add up to? Capps writes, “If Jesus was viewed as illegitimate by villagers, and was therefore the victim of considerable social ostracism, this would have affected his marriage-ability, his occupational prospects, his chances for an education, and, of course, for participating in the religious life of the community” (p. 161). Capps continues: “In that case, we would not be surprised if what most scholars believe happened did in fact happen, that is, that he left Nazareth to make his ‘home’ in Capernaum; that he probably did not marry and father children of his own; that, like other dispossessed sons, he became a tekton [a carpenter]; and that he exhibited at least some personality characteristics comparable to wandering Cynics” (p. 161). Given all of this, Capps suggests one could very easily imagine a man such as Jesus venturing out into the wilderness seeking legitimation from a man wearing strange clothes, eating strange foods, and performing strange rituals, such as baptism in the River Jordan, especially if that man promised rebirth and the chance to become a son of God.

Capps, then, out of the four scholars mentioned here (Meier, Miller, Schaberg, and van Aarde), argued for the worst childhood experience. Meier argued that the childhood of Jesus was unexceptional; Miller suggested that it was typical, until the death of Joseph (who treated Jesus well); Schaberg argued that Jesus experienced considerable social ostracism on account of his illegitimacy, but that Joseph adopted him; and van Aarde contended that Jesus was illegitimate and grew up without a father. Each of these positions gradually paints Jesus’ childhood in an increasingly negative light. Capps, though, does van Aarde one better, as Capps argues that Jesus did in fact grow up
“fatherless,” but that this was—in contrast to Schaberg’s view—because Joseph chose not to adopt Jesus. Thus, Jesus was an outcast in his own home. In this light, many of the strange sayings of Jesus, sayings that seem to be anti-family (cf. Matthew 10.37 & Thomas 55 & 101), begin to make sense, as well as his use of Abba and his concern for children. Having dealt with Jesus’ childhood, Capps next turns to his ministry, which, he argues, must also be understood in light of his childhood.

_Disabling Anxiety: The Role of a Village Healer_

In this chapter, Capps draws on the resources of history, sociology, anthropology, and psychology to offer an essentially psychoanalytic explanation to the question of how Jesus healed. He notes Crossan’s distinction between “curing a disease” and “healing an illness.” Curing a disease, for Crossan, concerns what doctors do, attending to physical problems with the body. Healing an illness, however, has a social—rather than a physical—emphasis. Concerning AIDS, Crossan writes: “A cure for the disease is absolutely desirable but, in its absence, we can still heal the illness by refusing to ostracize those who have it, by empathizing with their anguish, and by enveloping their sufferings with both respect and love” (quoted in Capps, 2000, p. 167). Consequently, Crossan views Jesus as a healer of social illnesses, not as a curer of physical diseases.

Capps takes a different view as he, without ignoring the importance of the social, emphasizes the psychological. Capps thinks that Crossan’s view does not adequately recognize that there is a psychological component to both curing and healing, disease and illness. Capps believes that, in the stories of the healings of Jesus, there is a psychological element in both disease and illness because the “common element in the cases of persons
who were either exorcized or healed was,” Capps writes, “anxiety, a reaction to an externally or internally induced sense of danger, manifesting itself in meaningful symptoms” (p. 170).

The first healing of Jesus that Capps discusses is that of a demon-possessed boy (Mark 9:14-29; cf. Matthew 17:14-18 and Luke 9:37-43):

And when he came to his disciples, he saw a great multitude about them, and the scribes questioning with them. And straightway all the people, when they beheld him, were greatly amazed, and running to him saluted him. And he asked the scribes, What question ye with them? And one of the multitude answered and said, Master, I have brought unto thee my son, which hath a dumb spirit; And wheresoever he taketh him, he teareth him: and he foameth, and gnasheth with his teeth, and pineth away: and I spake to thy disciples that they should cast him out; and they could not. He answereth him, and saith, O faithless generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I suffer you? bring him unto me. And they brought him unto him: and when he saw him, straightway the spirit tare him; and he fell on the ground, and wallowed foaming. And he asked his father, How long is it ago since this came unto him? And he said, Of a child. And oftentimes it hath cast him into the fire, and into the waters, to destroy him: but if thou canst do any thing, have compassion on us, and help us. Jesus said unto him, If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth. And straightway the father of the child cried out, and said with tears, Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief. When Jesus saw that the people came running together, he rebuked the foul spirit, saying unto him, Thou dumb and deaf spirit, I charge thee, come out of him, and
enter no more into him. And the spirit cried, and rent him sore, and came out of him: and he was as one dead; insomuch that many said, He is dead. But Jesus took him by the hand, and lifted him up; and he arose. And when he was come into the house, his disciples asked him privately, Why could not we cast him out? And he said unto them, This kind can come forth by nothing, but by prayer and fasting.

(Mark 9.14-29, KJV)

Capps notes that Meier thinks that this boy suffered from epilepsy, though he also notes that a minority of biblical scholars thinks that this resembles a case of hysteria.

Capps (2000) next cites Ian Hacking’s (1998) study of the “mad traveler” in late-nineteenth-century medical theory. “The symptomology,” Capps writes, “was not (as in the case of the possessed boy) that of falling down and writhing on the ground. Instead, it was a strong impulse to travel, often very long distances, without any conscious awareness of how one got there or how one got home again” (p. 172). Hacking is using such cases to demonstrate the influence of culture on psychological symptoms, as it is no accident that the “mad traveler” appeared in an age of mass tourism.

Capps, then, in arguing against a diagnosis of epilepsy, is using insights from medical anthropology to argue that physical symptoms must be understood within the symptoms’ contemporaneous cultural context. If the boy is suffering from epilepsy, his symptoms are, psychologically speaking, meaningless. Capps, however, rejects this possibility and thinks that the symptoms are full of meaning, noting that, “[t]he father reports to Jesus that the boy has suffered from childhood” (p. 174). He continues: “This, together with the severity of his symptoms, may well have been the reason Jesus (or Mark) considered this an especially difficult case to cure” (p. 174). His symptoms do
sound like epilepsy: falling down, rolling around, foaming at the mouth. Yet, an evil spirit is involved, and the father says that the spirit has thrown him into fire and water in an attempt to destroy him. If we do take this to be a case of demon possession, as the father and others believe that it is, then the boy’s actions, Capps notes, can be understood as self-destructive behavior: “While the unconscious motivation behind such self-destructive acts cannot be explained on the basis of the presented facts, we may surmise (on the basis of Freud’s anxiety theory) that these acts internalize a desire to inflict punishments on someone else, quite possibly his mother” (p. 174). Capps suspects that the boy was abused by his mother: “If I were to hazard a guess, I would say that the boy’s mother beat him unmercifully, as prescribed by Proverbs 23.13: ‘Do not withhold discipline from your children; if you beat them with a rod, they will not die,’” and Proverbs 29.15, ‘The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a mother is disgraced by a neglected child’” (p. 175). If this were the case, Capps argues, the symptoms would “reflect his internalization of rage against his mother, a rage that he dares not act upon (e.g., by hitting back), but instead acts out in the form of episodes involving falling into fire and water” (p. 175).

The Healings

Capps also discusses two cases in which Jesus heals paralysis (Mark 2.1-12 & John 5.1-9). Both of these stories involve a man who is unable to walk, and just as in the previous discussion, Capps believes that the symptoms are not arbitrary. The men may be immobilized on account of anxiety about where they are from or could go—that is, perhaps they do not want to return home because of an abusive father (an external threat).
or because they might be inclined to have sexual relations with a sister (an internal threat). Capps thinks that “what Jesus has done here is to confront the anxiety of the paralytic man, commanding him not to be undone by perceived dangers (external or internal), but to have confidence that these dangers, whatever they may be, do not warrant an immobilized existence” (p. 195).

To ascertain the meaning of the symptoms in this context, Capps turns to the resources of anthropology. Specifically, he draws on the work of Sander Gilman. Gilman (1993) writes about the assertion that, historically, Jews have been flatfooted and have suffered from problems of gait. “An alleged consequence of their flatfootedness was that Jewish men were less likely to pass the physical test for induction into the German army and were thus more likely to profit from the inflated wartime economy than to suffer on the battlefield” (Capps, 2000, p. 196). Gilman points out that M. Jastrowitz, a Jewish physician, like many other Jewish physicians, accepted the basic premise that the Jewish body is at special risk for certain problems, such as flatfootedness.¹

Freud also inserted himself in this discussion: Oedipus means swollen foot, his well-known patient Dora limped, and limping was one of his favorite metaphors for the growth of scientific knowledge. Capps also brings Freud’s discussion of paralysis to bear on Jesus’ paralysis healings. Freud, Capps notes, distinguishes between two types of paralysis—namely, peripherospinal paralysis and cerebral paralysis. The former is

¹ Capps thinks that this problem noted in the nineteenth century can be projected back on the basis of intermarriage. In other words, if flatfootedness were a genetic problem among Jews, the problem would likely persist among Jews so long as they intermarry.
paralysis of a specific body part, such as a hand, whereas the latter is paralysis en masse.

Hysterical paralysis falls between these two types.

Capps uses Gilman’s and Freud’s work to conclude that “paralysis among Jews is a complex phenomenon, having physiological aspects (especially involving the neurological system) and sociocultural ramifications” (p. 200). He continues, “In addition, however, a psychophysiological basis to the physiological aspect of paralysis could rarely—if ever—be ruled out, and this, in turn, would add psychosocial implications to sociocultural meanings” (p. 200). In other words, anxiety (a psychological cause) could prevent blood from flowing to the legs (a physiological effect). The cause of the anxiety in turn could be the result of psychosocial pressures that especially affect a certain cohort, such as the Jews, because of their particular beliefs and religious practices. The psychosocial pressure deriving from a religious prohibition could create anxiety that in turn leads to a physiological problem, which then also leads to further sociocultural criticisms, such as anti-Semitic charges: “Because the Jews are flatfooted, they cannot fight in war and in fact profit from staying home and making money while others are off fighting for the country and dying.” These latter criticisms, no doubt, would be the cause of more anxiety.

Capps also discusses the healings of two blind men (Mark 8.22-26 & Mark 10.46-52). A historical note that Capps mentions is the widespread fear of the “evil eye,” a belief that certain persons have the ability to cause others harm by looking at them. Consequently, Capps suggests that one should not be surprised by the fact that, in such a culture, one would find blindness as a symptomatic response to this particular anxiety. In discussing the raising of Jairus’ daughter from the dead (Mark 5.21-24, 35-43; Matthew
9.18-26; & Luke 8.40-42, 49-56), Capps notes that in the nineteenth century, this story would have been understood as a case of hysteria. Today, though, borderline personality disorder seems to have replaced the label of hysteria. Just as hysteria was mainly diagnosed in women in the nineteenth century, borderline personality disorder is also mainly diagnosed in women in the twentieth century, making up about 75% of the diagnoses. Jairus’ daughter was twelve years old—the age of marriage—presumably the age in which Mary married Joseph. “What is also noteworthy,” Capps writes, “is the likelihood that Jairus’s daughter was about the same age as Mary when she conceived Jesus” (p. 214). Capps continues: “By saving Jairus’ daughter, he was doing for her what he could not do for his own mother,” that is, save her (p. 215).

Capps assures the reader that, even while he is offering a psychological explanation for the healings, this in no way minimizes the healing power of Jesus. Capps argues that, in the healings of Jesus, there was a “transfer” of energy. To use more traditional psychoanalytic language, Jesus was able to heal on account of the fact that he was able to encourage transferences, as in the kind of transferences that patients experience with their therapists, or students with teachers. This is reflected in Jesus’ statement: “Your faith has made you well” (cf. Matthew 9.22). “Where Jesus differed from the magicians of the Greek magical papyri,” Capps writes, “is that he used no special, artificially constructed words, but instead employed words that were well known to the afflicted, but had not been addressed to them” (p. 217), words such as “Abba.” Abba is “the very personification of magic, and altogether worthy of trust” (p. 217).
Capps understands Jesus as a “whole person,” but, he writes, “[g]iven two millennia of viewing Jesus as the most perfect human being who ever lived, one is tempted to portray him as having reconciled, in both his internal dynamics and social role, the contradictions not only of his own culture but [also] of human experience itself” (p. 220). Capps’s interpretation of Jesus also tries to bridge “the usual gap in Jesus studies between the ‘man’ and his ‘mission,’ or the ‘private’ and the ‘public’ Jesus” (p. 220).

*Jesus as Utopianist*

Capps takes up the question as to whether Jesus had apocalyptic or egalitarian views, or both. Sanders, for example, argued that Jesus announced the imminent destruction of the temple (an apocalyptic view), whereas Crossan interpreted the Kingdom of God as an ethical and non-violent way of life (an egalitarian view). Capps’s own view of Jesus is close to Burton Mack’s: “Jesus had no sense of mission or purpose; in an important sense, he was aimless” (quoted in Capps, 2000, p. 221). Yet, Capps does not think that Jesus was a Cynic.

Capps next looks at several theorists of utopia. He notes James Scott’s view that in peasant style utopianism there are visions of an alternative reality that is realizable, and thus leads to social activism. Capps, though, thinks that it is unlikely that peasants would concern themselves with social reform, and that their utopianism would be closer to that which is described by Krishan Kumar.

Kumar (1991) notes that there are four kinds of ideal human societies: “1) the golden age, arcadia, or paradise; 2) the land of Cockaygne [a mythological or fabled land
of luxury and idleness]; 3) the millennium; and 4) the ideal city” (Capps, 2000, p. 222).

With regard to the differences between the first two, Kumar suggests a difference in economic class—that is, the first usually reflects the desires of a cultured elite, while the second reflects the desires of those who live in want, as the land of Cockaygne is a place where anything and everything is available for the asking (cf. Amos 7.13). The third form—millennialism—links the future with the past, as reflected in the belief that the New Jerusalem will restore the lost paradise in Eden. The fourth form—the ideal city—is depicted by such writers as Plato, who imagine the perfect society in the form of a republic where the philosopher-king rules—it is a place that has not yet existed, but nevertheless can be achieved. The second form of utopianism, Kumar suggests, is a peasant-style utopianism, and it is this kind of utopianism that Capps argues was the utopianism of Jesus.

Capps also draws on the work of Ruth Levitas (1990), specifically her distinction between hope and desire in utopian thinking. Utopian thinking that is based on hope asks the question: What kind of world is possible? Utopian thinking that is based on desire, in contrast, asks: Of what kind of world can I dream? Further, a utopia that is based on hope is set in the future, but a utopia based on pure desire—a world, for example, where the rivers flow with honey and mountains are made of candy—are realized to be impossible. “Thus, the fact that the Cockaygne myth is an expression of desire and not a view of a possible future,” Capps writes, “liberates its content from the constraint of plausibility and its function from that of stimulus to social change” (p. 226). Capps continues: “Instead, its functions are to provide a compensatory vision and, secondarily, to criticize
the powers that be (which could well include the Creator himself) for the existing world” (p. 226).

Capps draws on a third theorist of utopianism, E. M. Cioran. Cioran (1987) is rather cynical about utopian thinking. In fact, he is surprised that riots do not break out in cities every day, so the very thought that society might be envisioned to be better than it is now is rather astonishing to Cioran. True utopian thinkers, Cioran argues, are hysterical, and such thinking requires “ingenuousness” and “stupidity.” Thus, “the only readable utopias are the false ones, ones written with a spirit of entertainment or misanthropy, like *Gulliver’s Travels*” (Capps, 2000, p. 227). With regard to Jesus, Cioran notes that Jesus argued that the Kingdom was neither here nor there, and that it is within us, but that Christians sought to externalize this interior reality. However, according to Cioran, Jesus sustained this ambiguity.

Capps sees things differently on this point: “The viewpoint that I am arguing for here is that Jesus was not, as Cioran claims, the source of this ‘ambiguity’—for he belonged to the peasant class—but that the ‘externalization’ of the [K]ingdom of God was the work of early Christians, who envisioned a future [K]ingdom, thus adding the element of hope to a utopia originally based on desire only” (p. 227). Capps suggests statements such as those found in Luke 17.20-21 (“The Kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed . . . . [T]he Kingdom of God is among you”) reflect a “peasant-style utopian image precisely because Jesus does not speak of its location in space or realization in time” (p. 228). Utopia, after all, literally means both “no where” and “somewhere good.” “Had [Jesus] represented it as an already present or realizable future,” Capps writes, “peasant classes would not have found it believable” (p. 228). He
continues, “In this sense, the ‘already/not yet’ formulation that has been so attractive to mainstream biblical scholarship on the [K]ingdom of God misses the point, as it futurizes a utopian image based on pure—unrealizable—desire” (p. 228). The value of this interpretation is that it places the contemporary debates about Jesus’ apocalypticism in the larger context of contemporary writings on utopia and, more importantly, it offers a third option and a way through the impasse reached by biblical scholars on the question of Jesus and his mission—it is usually concluded that Jesus was mistaken, failed, or both.

The Melancholic Condition

Here Capps sets the stage to apply his male melancholia theory to Jesus. He begins by noting Robert Burton’s (1979) extensive description of melancholia, and then quickly turns to Freud, from whom he derived his theory. Freud (1917/2001) discusses some similarities and differences between mourning and melancholia, noting that although both are responses to loss, mourning is a part of the normal grieving process, while melancholia represents a complication, a pathological response to loss. The lost object may be a person, or it may be something of a more symbolic nature, such as the loss of an ideal. In any case, as a consequence of the mourning process, the libido is eventually, and slowly, withdrawn from the object so that it is decathecated. Through this painful work, the ego eventually becomes free and uninhibited again and is able to love other objects.

In melancholia, however, the loss is more ambiguous. In some cases, the lost object may be perceived to be within reach, such as after, say, a breakup or divorce. In other cases, the loss may be unconscious; that is, one may not know what one has lost. As Freud puts it, “This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-
loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which nothing about the loss is unconscious” (p. 245). Freud notes that the “distinguishing mental features of melancholia are profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in delusional expectation of punishment” (p. 244). In addition to moral self-criticism, the sufferer also experiences sleeplessness and a lack of appetite. These symptoms are also found in the process of mourning, but in melancholia, there is “an extraordinary diminution in his self-regard, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale” (p. 246). Freud continues: “In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself” (p. 246). Freud then makes an astute observation—namely, that the self-reproaches are not really self-reproaches. In other words, they are directed against the lost object. At a first glance, they might appear to be self-reproaches, but they are in fact reproaches directed against the lost object that has been internalized.

Freud describes the general process as follows: one attaches part of one’s libido to an object but then experiences some kind of disappointment with that object, shattering the relationship. In normal cases, that is, in cases of mourning, the object is decathcted and then the libido recathects another object in its place. But in melancholia, “the free libido was not displaced onto another object; it was withdrawn into the ego. There, however, it was not employed in any unspecified way, but served to establish an identification of the ego with the abandoned object” (p. 249). “Thus,” Freud writes, “the shadow of the object fell upon the ego” (p. 249).
Melancholia, Freud notes, is in many respects similar to mourning, but there is another element—a narcissistic element—that does not occur in the process of mourning. In melancholia, there is a regression from a narcissistic object choice to narcissism. Furthermore, since there was a certain ambivalence about the lost object in the first place, the love for the object is easily transformed into hate, and this hate is internalized and directed against the ego. This, Freud explains, is also why there is often an element of enjoyment in the melancholiac’s self-tormenting, for it is a form of sadism that has been directed toward the self. Suicide in melancholia, then, is not a killing of the ego, but it is a killing of the lost object that has taken the place of the ego.

Hence, the essential difference between mourning and melancholia, Freud argues, is that the relationship to the lost object in the latter is one of ambivalence. The ambivalence could be constitutional—that is, simply how a particular ego forms love relationships—or situational—that is, the loss itself is ambiguous. Oddly enough, “by taking flight into the ego love escapes extinction” (p. 257). How is melancholia cured? Freud suggests two possibilities: the rage directed towards the object can be expended, or the object, for whatever reason, loses its value.

Capps notes that Freud does not specify what the lost object is, that lost objects are case specific and result from individual experiences. However, Capps suggests that parents would often be experienced as lost objects since they are a part of the immediate world of children. Capps uses another essay by Freud to make the case for the mother as the lost object. In “The Uncanny,” Freud (1919/2001) picks up on the theme of the antithetical meanings of primal words, such as, in the case of the German *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. Freud argues that, in experiences of the uncanny, a “return of the repressed”
causes the experience of the uncanny; that is, there is an experience of anxiety concerning
a situation where something that was once familiar is now experienced as unfamiliar,
something that was once heimlich is now unheimlich. Freud notes that the mother’s body
is such an object, which is why, according to Freud, the sight of the vagina is often an
uncanny experience for men.

Capps combines the insights of these two essays to make his male melancholia
argument. The mother, Capps argues, is the original lost object. In mourning, the object is
given up through normal grief work, but in melancholia, the object is not given up; it is
internalized and hated. But given the threat of return, that is, should the mother as lost
object return on account of being hated, the boy experiences her and the possibility of her
return as uncanny.

Melancholia and Jesus

Capps believes that this discussion of melancholia applies to Jesus. To support this view,
he first makes the case that Jesus “lived within a male subculture in which melancholia
(as characterized by Freud) was a prevailing psychosocial reality” (p. 241). In making
this case, Capps turns to three representative sources in the Gospels: food and table, stories
and sayings, and visions of the Kingdom.

Regarding food and table, Capps notes that in Jesus’ day there were considerable
debates as to whether women could eat, drink, and recline at the table with men. He also
notes that Jesus did not recognize the standard social conventions regarding food and
table, as he ate with sinners, tax collectors, and unmarried women. Jesus, of course, was
heavily criticized for this behavior, but his response was that one is not made unclean by
what enters the body from outside, but from what originates in the body (Mark 7.15).
Capps links the discussion of food and table to the issue of melancholia on the grounds that mother “is associated with food—and feeding—from early infancy” (p. 243). Capps argues that the “emotional investment in these disputes about the table was overdetermined (i.e., not wholly attributable to purity laws per se), suggesting that the table was the locus of a profound male ambivalence with melancholic features” (p. 244). “If mother is the melancholiac’s ‘lost object,’” Capps writes, “food and meals are the context in which his ambivalences toward her continue to play themselves out” (p. 244).

Capps next turns to the issue of the “missing mother,” especially as reflected in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15.11-32). Capps notes that this story “is widely considered authentic, at least in its essential form” (p. 245), and that biblical scholarship tends to interpret the story in a maternal light. In the story, the son’s poverty is described in terms of food—a maternal metaphor. Another maternal metaphor is the fact that, when the son returns home, he is embraced and kissed by his father—a nurturing and maternal gesture. The father also addresses the elder son in a maternal way by addressing him as “Dear son.”

Capps cites other scholarship that is related to the melancholia theme and the experience of maternal loss. He notes Richard Ford’s (1997) argument that the father in this story is actually preempting the sons from becoming adults. The younger son, by means of his defiance, is actually securing his dependency on his father, while the elder son remains obedient to his father’s wishes. The sons, Ford argues, experience “something missing,” while the father “sees nothing missing at all” (quoted in Capps, 2000, p. 246). Thus, the “son’s recognition that his father cannot fulfill his longing—that in spite of his father’s best efforts there is still ‘something missing’—points to the utopian
desire for what one knows one never had, as well as to the melancholiac’s conviction that the longing is mother, not father, related” (p. 246). While these interpretations of Luke 15.11-32 challenge one another, they both agree that “something’s missing,” and this “something,” Capps points out, points in the maternal direction.

Capps also reminds the reader that he is not the first psychologist of religion to raise the issue of mother with regard to this story. He writes:

As we have seen, Erikson puts the question of her absence in the parable in this way: Was there no mother, either dead or alive? And if alive, was she not called to say hello too? To which we might add: Did her husband play her role because she was disinclined to be the nurturing parent herself? Did she contribute to her younger son’s determination to leave home, perhaps because she favored his elder brother? And how does the legal code that the story ignores fit into all of this? Are sons resentful when their sisters are given the property and they are forced to “go a-begging”? (p. 247)

“These,” Capps writes, “are some of the questions that the story is likely to have provoked in the male melancholiacs of Jesus’ own time” (p. 247).

Capps also notes sayings that would have a similar resonance for male melancholiacs, such as Matthew 8.19-20, Mark 3.31-34, Luke 9.58, Luke 11.27-28, Thomas 79, Thomas 86, and Thomas 101. Perhaps one of the most telling is Thomas 101, which serves as an epigram for Capps’s chapter: “For my mother gave me falsehood, but my true mother gave me life.” “Through these stories and sayings,” Capps argues, “Jesus addressed the melancholy men (men of sad and penetrating eyes) who were strangers in
the very villages where they had grown up, and who were struggling to find some sense of being at home in their literal or psychic wilderness” (p. 248).

The third place that Capps turns to in making his case for the relevance of the melancholy theme in Galilee is the teachings about the Kingdom of God by Jesus. We have seen that the first place that Capps turned to in making this case was the debate about food and table, and this, Capps argued, was related to the mother’s body. Stories and sayings of Jesus—the second place to which Capps turned—added to this theme, as these teachings involved family dynamics. The teachings about the Kingdom of God add yet another level—the sociopolitical and transcendental. In making this case, Capps here compares the teachings of John the Baptist and Jesus. He notes that John the Baptist’s rite of baptism had political connotations in that it symbolized the taking of the Promised Land. But Jesus, Capps writes, “did not focus on the desire to ‘take control’ of the land—the more aggressive side of male ambivalence—but on the desire to overcome the separation and estrangement between mother and son” (p. 248). While John the Baptist remained in the wilderness, “Jesus returned to village life with the intention of performing reparative deeds there” (p. 248). In other words, if John focused on taking control of the land (i.e., mother) by force, Jesus focused on another way—namely, healings and exorcisms. Indeed, Capps views the last action of Jesus—the disturbance in the temple—as an exorcism of the false mother as described in Thomas 101.

*The Disruption in the Temple*

The disruption in the temple is accounted for in all four canonical gospels, as well as in Thomas (Matthew 21.12-17; Mark 11.15-19; Luke 19.45-48; John 2.13-22; and Thomas
Capps views the actions of Jesus here as an extension and culmination of Jesus’ role as exorcist-healer (p. 252). In this act, Jesus addressed both his own melancholy and the melancholy of other men of his time.

Some view the temple disturbance as an act of intentional suicide by Jesus, but Capps rejects this view, as he makes a case for the spontaneity of this action. The fact that Jesus seems to have acted alone and that he was the only one arrested for the disturbance suggests “this was not part of an orchestrated takeover of the temple” (p. 252). Furthermore, because this action was likely spontaneous, it can be understood in a similar way as a dream in light of psychological research concerning impulsive action. “Dreams,” Capps writes, “are not premeditated or preplanned, yet, as psychoanalysis has shown, they are meaningful for this very reason. The same may be said of impulsive actions” (p. 253). Capps cites psychoanalyst Melvin Lansky’s (1992) view that “[i]mpulsive action is often a part of a larger picture that can be understood as an attempt to recreate and master situations that were traumatic in the past” (quoted in Capps, 2000, p. 253). Capps also notes S. Dickman’s (1990) distinction between dysfunctional and functional impulsivity. Capps views the temple disturbance by Jesus as an example of functional impulsivity that was an attempt to recreate the past by challenging the hierarchical religion there, a religion from which he was excluded because of his illegitimacy. In challenging the temple religion, he was both addressing his own fate and the fate of his mother, exorcising, as it were, the false mother of the temple by engaging in a father-like performance. The beginning of Jesus’ self-exorcism, Capps argues, began with the baptism by John the Baptist, but it was completed with the final act of his life, that is, the disturbance of the temple.
Capps notes although biblical scholars “tend to agree on these two points: that the temple incident happened . . . and that it led to Jesus’ arrest and execution” (p. 255). They disagree, however, over whether Jesus had a trial and was crucified. And biblical scholars tend to understand the meaning of Jesus’ actions differently. One school of thought calls it “the cleansing of the temple,” meaning that Jesus actions here are to be understood in light of the corruption of the moneychangers. Other scholars, though, view it as “the destruction of the temple,” and argue that the gospel writers introduced the imagery of cleansing in order to separate this act from Jesus’ prediction that the temple would be destroyed.

Capps takes the symbolic destruction view, though he thinks this action is, in the language of psychoanalysis, “overdetermined.” Another meaning that emerges here for Capps is the notion that this action, at a deeper level, did in fact represent a “cleansing of the temple.” In Capps’s words: “[T]he deeper layer of Jesus’ action does fall under the terms ‘cleansing of the temple,’ though not in its traditional meaning, that is, as Jesus’ objection to fraudulent buying, selling, and money changing operations” (p. 256). Capps continues: “The ‘cleansing’ was much deeper than that, and was therefore on a continuum with Jesus’ role as exorcist-healer. This cleansing concerned his illegitimacy, and his mother’s role in it. Because of this, it went to the very core of his personal identity conflicts” (p. 256). Capps writes:

Thus, ironically, the temple cleansing tradition, while without historical basis, unintentionally offers a psychoanalytic interpretation of Jesus’ action. Besides the tradition that the temple is God’s abode on earth, a parallel tradition affirmed that it symbolizes the mother. If the temple belongs to God, the temple itself is
maternal. It symbolizes her body. Thus, it may have all the implications of male ambivalence toward it that were brought out in our [previous] discussion. (p. 257)

He continues: “What needed cleansing was his mother’s body, which was polluted by her illicit sexual act, by means of which Jesus was conceived” (p. 258). In other words, “Through this act, he symbolically ‘cleansed’ the mother’s body of its impurity—restoring her to her virginal innocence—and completed his own transformation from the son of a nameless seducer (a mere ‘begetter’) to son of ‘Abba’” (p. 259). “Thus,” Capps writes, “the temple incident was a symbolic rebirth, one through which he triumphed over the ‘false mother’ whom he had internalized and who was the object of his melancholic self-reproach” (p. 259).

Capps anticipates objections to his interpretation. One is that, by making a case for the symbolic meaning of these actions, this reading reduces Jesus’ conscious or intentional role in the disturbance. Capps replies that symbolism and intentionality are not mutually exclusive. In other words, Capps thinks it is entirely possible that Jesus himself intended his actions to be symbolic, and that, even so, such a symbolic action could very well have additional meanings of which Jesus was not aware.²

² As a secular example of this psychological process, consider this scene. As I was watching the 2008 NBA Finals, on one particular play, Kobe Bryant was driving to the basket and he thought that he was obviously fouled. A foul was not called. In rage, Bryant yelled at the referee, knowing full well that he would be called for a technical foul. It was as though Bryant was saying, “A foul needs to be called here, and if you are not going to call it, I am going to make you call a foul, on me, if necessary.”
Another objection that Capps anticipates is the objection that the deeper symbolic meaning behind the temple disturbance was the symbolic destruction, not cleansing, of the mother. Capps thinks that the deeper destructive view would fail to understand the temple disturbance as a reparative act where father, son, and mother are all in one accord. In other words, there would still be “something missing” for Jesus if the deeper destructive view were right.

Having focused in some detail on Capps’s psychological portrait of Jesus, I know want to give the reader some sense of Capps’s biography.

**Part Two: The Relationship Between Capps’s Life and Work**

Donald Eric Capps was born on January 30, 1939 to Holden and Mildred Capps. He had three siblings: Walter, Roger, and Douglas. He married Karen Virginia Docken on August 22, 1964, and they had their only child, John Michael Capps, on July 19, 1970. Capps was ordained in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on June 5, 1972.³

³ Capps received his B. A. (he majored in both English and Philosophy) from Lewis and Clark College in 1960; a B. D. from Yale Divinity School in 1963; and S. T. M. from Yale Divinity School in 1965; a M. A. from the University of Chicago in 1966; a Ph. D. from the University of Chicago in 1970; and an honorary Th. D. from the University of Uppsala in 1989. Capps took an Instructor position in the Department of Religious Studies at Oregon State University in the spring and summer of 1969, and he returned to the University of Chicago the following fall to take an Assistant Professor position. He taught at Chicago from 1969-1974. From Chicago, Capps moved to the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, where he taught for two years (1974-1976) as an Associate
Figure 2: Donald Capps

Professor. Then Capps took an Associate Professor position at the Graduate Seminary of Phillips University. Capps taught at Phillips from 1976 to 1981, and from here he moved on to Princeton Theological Seminary as a Full Professor, where he stayed until his retirement in 2009. Capps also served as the book review editor for The Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion from 1980 to 1983 and the editor for the journal from 1983 to 1988. He has also served as the sub-editor for the religion and social sciences section of Religious Studies Review, as well as on the editorial board for Journal of the American Academy of Religion. He served as President for the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion from 1990-1992. Capps has also received several awards for his scholarship: the William F. Bier Award for contribution to psychology of religion, given by Division 36 of the American Psychological Association in 1995; the Helen Flanders Dunbar Centennial Award, given by Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital, New York in 2002; and the Joseph A. Sittler Award for Theological Leadership by Trinity Lutheran Seminary in 2003.
What makes Capps an interesting case for exploring the “mourning religion” thesis is that he has made many self-disclosures in his writings over the years.

_Capps’s Self-Disclosures in Publications_

Perhaps it is obvious that scholars, especially in the humanities, do what they do for personal reasons, but in a study such as this, a study in which this relationship is the central concern, this point needs to be made explicit. I will thus cite three instances of this relationship in the life and work of Capps. The first, dedications and acknowledgements, intimates some of the personal motivations inspiring his work. The second, what I call incorporating introspection, involves cases where Capps systematically draws on his own life to illustrate his arguments. The third, what I call academic autobiography, is a recent development in Capps’s career. Here his life is not only illustrative, but is actually the focus of study and, hence, includes the most personal moments of his writings to date.

_Dedications and Acknowledgements_

A preliminary step in demonstrating the relationship between Capps’s personal life and his public scholarship can be established by looking at the dedications and acknowledgements in his books. I will simply note three examples. Capps dedicated his book _Reframing: A New Method in Pastoral Care_, Capps (1990) to Walter Holden Capps Sr. (his paternal grandfather), and Linn Beidler Capps (his paternal grandfather’s brother). He notes, “the one taught me the value of wisdom, the other showed me the joys of folly” (p. ix). _Reframing_ deals with the wisdom of folly in pastoral care, making it a book, then, that appreciates what he has learned from his grandfather and his great uncle.
Capps dedicates his later text, *Men and Their Religion* (2002), to the memory of his father, Holden Francis Capps (1904-1990). In the acknowledgments, he notes that “[d]uring the times I knew my parents best, my mother believed that [my father’s] religion was ‘not very deep’” (p. ix). He also noted that one of his mother’s friends thought that he needed “spiritual rebirth.” Capps comments: “I agree with my mother but not with her friend. His religion was not deep. Rather, it was an open book, self-evident, and there for anyone to see” (p. ix). “This book,” Capps writes, “is my attempt to explain how we men come by the religion my father exhibited, what this religion avails us, what it costs us, and why we cling to it as if our lives depended upon it; which, of course, they do” (p. ix). This book, then, is an attempt by Capps to understand his father and himself. In *A Time to Laugh: The Religion of Humor*, Capps (2005a) fixes upon Cervantes’ Don Quixote, whom he calls his alter ego, and about whom he (1999a) had previously written, as the recipient of dedication. He notes that Quixote “was Freud’s rather implausible hero in his teens and early twenties and who become my no less plausible hero in my fifties” (p. ix). He also notes that “[m]y biblical Burma-Shaves [humorous poems written by Capps based on bible verses] placed at ends of chapters make the point that I have made in a more formal way in my article on Don Quixote [Capps, 1999a] that the ability of religion to represent a golden age that never existed in fact is as valuable as its ability to envision a better future” (p. ix). He continues, reflecting on his family history: “Back in the 1940s, the Capps family, in our version of the Quixote adventures, would travel from Omaha to St. Edward, Axtell, or Ogallala, Nebraska, to visit relatives, then continue on to Manitou Springs, Colorado, for summer vacations” (pp. ix-x). “The Burma-Shave signs along the Lincoln Highway,” Capps writes, “were virtually the only relief that the outside
world afforded from the heat and close quarters inside our 1947 Frazer” (p. x). The Burma-Shave signs were advertisements for a brand of shaving cream that were put up around all of the United States along rural roads. Their peak distribution occurred during the 1950s, when there were 7,000 signs in 45 states. These signs also had poetry on them, which was often humorous (Elliott, 1997). In any case, these three dedications and acknowledgements establish, if only in a preliminary way, the obvious point that Capps has personal reasons for his public scholarship and, in these three instances, the personal reasons are explicitly related to his childhood and family.

Incorporating Introspection

Acknowledgements and dedications, while they intimate the personal nature of Capps’s work, do not convey the depth of the relationship between Capps’s personal experience and his public scholarship. Capps’s writing is deeply personal. In Living Stories: Pastoral Counseling in Congregational Context, for example, Capps (1998) shares a story about his romantic life; it is an episode that has affected his whole life, as it contributed to his telephobia.

In his early twenties, Capps had been in a relationship with a woman for several years. At one point, they had been geographically separated for a few months. While they were apart, Capps was trying to resolve an issue that had come between them (in a letter, Capps informed me that the issue was related to her Roman Catholic affiliation and the church’s requirement that a non-Catholic sign a form indicating that he or she would support the other person in his or her intention to raise their children in the Catholic faith), and Capps phoned to say that he had come up with a solution. Capps writes:
“When she answered the phone, I began to relate to her these efforts, believing that she would be very happy to hear of them. But, before I could get it all out, she interrupted and said, ‘There is someone else in my life now, and, in fact, he’s with me now’” (p. 158). Capps continues: “Then, to this ‘someone’ she said, laughing, ‘Stop it John, you’re tickling me.’ I mumbled an apology for the interruption, and hung up the phone” (p. 158). Taken completely by surprise, “I stood immobilized for several minutes, physically shaking,” humiliated from being “literally laughed off the phone and, I might ruefully add, out of her life” (p. 158).

Capps also uses his writing to address his own personal issues. In the preface to his book on social phobia Capps (1999b) reveals that, “[m]y own interest in this book derives from the fact that I consider myself to be a ‘low-grade’ (or ‘sub-threshold’) social phobic; and, like most persons who have this problem, I have not sought professional treatment for it” (p. xii). But Capps did not write this book for cathartic reasons: “My reason for writing this book is not, however, so that I might engage in personal confession . . . [for] the social phobic does not like to make himself the center of attention” (p. xii). “One practical reason for this,” Capps notes, “is that they are especially aware—almost to a paranoidal degree—that their phobia will be held against them in terms of employment opportunities, career advancement, and the making and keeping of friends” (p. xii). Capps’s reason for writing, then, is because there are few books on social phobia for the general reader and, from his own experience, he knows that reading about problems often helps individuals cope. So, while Capps did not write the book for cathartic reasons, he did nevertheless write it for personal reasons, as it was his own social phobia that attracted him to the subject.
It is also interesting to note for our purposes that Capps, at the close of chapter one, reminds us of Pfister. He notes that Pfister’s “basic argument was that the true religious response to fear is love,” but that “Christianity has consistently violated this message by actively promoting fear, usually in the interest of maintaining dogmatic purity” (p. 6). Capps’s book, then, is “an attempt to relate Pfister’s concern with fear to an issue—social phobia—that was not of primary importance to [Pfister] but is every bit as relevant to the attempt to bring religious resources to bear on a frustrating, even debilitating, psychosocial problem” (p. 6). Capps, then, as a contemporary writer in psychology of religion and pastoral theology, is unquestionably taking up the project of Pfister, that is, the project of reversals and restoration.

One of Capps’s major intellectual interests has been child abuse. In 1991, he gave the presidential lecture to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His talk turned out to be quite provocative, as perhaps his title intimates: “Religion and Child Abuse: Perfect Together.” He was making a joke by using the phrase “perfect together,” because this phrase was used in a slogan in New Jersey that many folks living in New Jersey found offensive. The slogan was, “You and New Jersey: Perfect Together.” In New Jersey, some residents were irritated by this advertising campaign because they did not wish to be considered “perfect” for New Jersey. While Capps was making a joke with his title, however, he was entirely serious about his subject matter.

After delivering the presidential lecture on child abuse, Capps (1995) elaborated on this topic and turned his reflections into a monograph. Many, Capps noted, have pointed out that Christianity has encouraged physical child abuse (see, e.g., Greven,
1991), but Capps made the case that Christianity has also fostered a kind of subtle emotional abuse that is inherent in its traditional doctrines. He suggests that theology is abusive because it entails ideas such as an approaching apocalypse, sadistic doctrines of hell, and the story of the virgin birth. Capps also thinks that the traditional interpretation of the atonement, especially as reflected in Hebrews, is inherently psychologically abusive to children.

Why the personal interest in child abuse? Was Capps abused as a boy? Is this the reason that he chose to write about the topic? In other words, if Capps wrote about social phobia for personal (but not cathartic) reasons, is he doing the same with the topic of child abuse? He makes no disclosure to confirm such a hypothesis and, when I asked him—because of certain disclosures—if he experienced his mother as verbally abusive, he said that “I don’t think I would use the words ‘verbally abusive’ to describe her—the control was more like [William] Stafford describes in his poems,” such as “Vacation Trip,” “Vocation,” and “Mother’s Day” (Personal Correspondence, May 28, 2008). None of these poems depict Stafford’s mother in an especially positive light. Capps continues:

I think that I felt she had a way of putting a damper on things when I would have preferred a more positive approach to life. I suppose that the discouragement of my attending Reed College symbolizes this. My own sense of things was that, after all, I wasn’t going to screw up my life by going there, so why not take advantage of an opportunity that was being presented to me? On the other hand, I didn’t want to defy her because I knew that if I did, I would probably go into it half-heartedly and, for all I knew, she could be right. . . . It might be boiled down to this: (1) The desire to challenge: “What makes you the authority?” (2) The 
reasonable doubt: “But maybe she’s got a point.” (3) The resolution: “Let’s see if
I can figure out a way to keep her happy so that I can get on with my life.” But I
don’t think there is anything especially unique in this; in fact, by citing Stafford’s
poems, I imply that it’s probably rather common among mothers and sons.
(Personal Correspondence, May 29, 2008)

Capps’s reason for writing about child abuse, then, was not because he felt that he
suffered anything extraordinary.

In his writing, Capps (1995) discloses stories from his childhood. He writes, for
egative, about an episode that involved his younger brother:

I was nine years old. My younger brother, then four, had been unusually difficult
that day. When my father came home from work, my mother told him about my
little brother, how he was becoming more than she could handle. At dinner that
evening we—my brothers and I—could feel the tension. No one was speaking. A
sense of doom was in the air. After dinner my parents told all of us to stay close.
We were not to go running off. Then my father pulled the car out of the garage
and my mother came out of the house. They directed us to get in the car, my
younger brother between my parents in the front seat and my two older brothers
and I in the back. My father pulled out of the driveway and up the street. “Where
are we going?” one of us had the courage to ask. No answer. My father drove on.
Dusk was approaching. Then, on our right, we recognized the building and began
to realize what was going on. We felt dread in the pits of our stomachs. It was the
orphanage, and our parents were about to send my little brother away. My father
stopped the car and turned to my brother and said, “This is the end of the line.”
My mother opened the door and began to get out so that my brother could follow. The three of us in the back were stunned. I somehow found my voice and, amid sobs, pleaded: “Don’t send him away. He’ll be good. Just give him a second chance.” (pp. 169-170)

Capps continues:

What I did not know, of course, is that they had no intention of leaving him at the orphanage that night. Years later he told me that he suspected it was a ruse because he noticed that no lights were burning on the first floor of the orphanage, suggesting to him that the offices were closed for the evening. But I took them at their word, first believing that they were going to abandon him; next assuming that my pleading in his behalf had made them change their minds. For a very long time—months, maybe even years—I assumed that my parents were capable of abandoning a child of theirs, and I did all in power to make certain that it would never be me. But something surely died in me—in all of us—that night. Life before that night had not been perfect. There had been the usual conflicts between parents and children, the usual fightings and reconciliations. But this was different. This was the threat of abandonment. The sense of dread that this threat produced in me was nearly overwhelming. (p. 170)

Capps realizes that his brother “had provoked [his] parents beyond their patience and endurance,” and that “perhaps [his] parents had good reason to believe that if they did not take decisive action then, they would come to regret it in future years” (p. 170).

This episode raises the question as to what constitutes child abuse. Child abuse might be defined not by the actual events, but by the interpretation of the events. In this
case, then, one might argue that while Capps’s younger brother did not experience this as abusive, Capps did, and this is why he is including his story in a book about child abuse. In any case, in child abuse, something dies inside of the child, and something did die inside of Capps that night. In his fifties, Capps turned to writing to confront that death.

In *The Decades of Life*, Capps (2008c) implies that he thinks that his childhood was rather normal and uneventful. In a section titled “The Less Dramatic Stories of Many of Us,” he writes about an episode he experienced with his father. He was four-years-old. He went with his family to the train station to meet a relative. He writes:

As usual, the train was late, so my father, my older brothers, and I went out onto the walkway between the two train stations maintained by the two companies that provided train service in our city. As we watched, my father apparently thought I would like a better vantage point from which to see the trains below, so he picked me up and held me out over the three foot wall of the walkway. I begged him to put me down, and he eventually responded to my pleas, but it seemed an eternity before I was back on solid footing again. (p. 18)

Capps continues: “A trivial story, perhaps, but the fact that I recall the incident suggests that it had an enduring psychological effect. It also symbolizes, for me, the dynamic conflict of trust vs. mistrust” (p. 18). Capps recalls that he did not doubt that his father was strong enough to hold him, but that, nevertheless, being held over a bridge was a terrifying experience. Further, “I can now think of all sorts of circumstances that might have led to my falling to the train tracks below. Foremost among these would be that my own fear or fright would cause *me* to do something that would cause *him* to lose hold of me” (p. 18). Capps still has questions about this episode today:
Was there a momentary lapse in judgment because he was under some sort of stress? Was it motivated by a genuine desire to enable me to see more easily what my older and more taller brothers could see unaided? Was it meant to teach me the benefits that may accrue from risk-taking? (p. 18)

“If the latter,” Capps writes, “my fright made it impossible for me to look at the trains below. The very fact that I do not know the answers to these questions—years later—makes it difficult to set these mistrustful thoughts aside, or to lay them to rest, and they make the maintenance of trust and hope all the more essential” (p. 18). This story, too, might be interpreted as a subtle form of abuse or as reflecting a kind of death, like the death that occurred during the car-ride to the orphanage some years later. And both of these deaths—one being a near-death experience of a four-year-old boy—compel Capps to write about them even to this day.

_Academic Autobiography_

Capps’s academic work is deeply personal, especially as he advocates the introspective method (cf. Capps, 1997b). He consistently draws on his own life to inform his academic writing. The amount of introspection that he has incorporated into his work has increased over the years, especially as he has ventured into the genre of autobiographical essays. In _Losers, Loners, and Rebels_, which Capps co-authored with Robert Dykstra and Allan Hugh Cole Jr., Capps writes about a few stories from his adolescence. This work comprises his most personal work to date in which he writes about what it was like to be a boy, especially a _religious_ boy.
In a section titled “My Mother’s Tragic Story,” Capps tells the story of his maternal grandfather, a Swedish immigrant who fathered three girls and a boy. When Capps’s mother was thirteen years old, her father died in an explosion at the plant where he worked in South Omaha. This, no doubt, is a tragic story, but Capps’s mother also added that, a week before he died, he had had a “religious conversion” from listening to a Salvation Army band. Capps’s mother took this as evidence that God was at work in these events. About these stories, Capps writes: “Although I never knew my maternal grandfather, this story about his conversion experience and his subsequent death in an explosion had a sobering effect on me as a boy” (p. 141). At a young age, then, Capps learned the importance of religion, and his mother impressed this importance upon him.

In graduate school, Capps came to realize how such stories affected his religious understanding. When reading Henry A. Murray, these lines stood out to Capps:

> Of all these progenitors I was acquainted only with my daughter-venerated grandfather, aloof toward me, but a kindly gent whose white bearded visage resembled God’s as painted, say, by Tintoretto. Remembering him I have been led to surmise that the image and concept of Yahweh must have come not from the all-too-familiar father figure, but from the more remote and lordly grandfather, the overruling patriarch of the clan. (quoted in Dykstra, Cole, & Capps, 2007, p. 141)

Capps added: “I realized that my own understanding of the divine Father was based on stories my mother had told me about my grandfather, a man whom I knew by hearsay only” (p. 141).
Capps also notes that he read Erik Erikson’s “Reflections on American Identity”—where Erikson puts forth his view that the boy’s male ideal, which is given to him by his mother, is usually not his father but often a grandfather or uncle—at about the same time he had read the above lines from Murray. Reflecting on Erikson’s observations, Capps noted that his maternal grandfather seemed more courageous than his father, because his maternal grandfather immigrated and Capps’s father, in contrast, did not even fight in World War II as Capps’s uncles had. On his image of God, Capps further observes:

It was not that I consciously identified God as my maternal grandfather, as though I could look at a photograph of him and say, “There’s God.” There was, however, an experiential link between my maternal grandfather and God, and this link was a sense of the heroic and the dramatic, of something in the works that was much more momentous than the routine life I led day by day in our house on Spencer Street. (p. 142)

Capps continues:

I wanted to be like Jesus, the loyal son of this powerful Father and to whatever he wanted of me. This was to join, in a sense, the “Salvation Army,” to enlist in the “band” of those who had given everything that they were—and possessed—for the sake of the heavenly [K]ingdom and were now looking down upon boys like me from their places in glory, praying that we would make a similar solemn pledge—that we too would enlist, for the battle could not be won unless we too stepped forward. (p. 142)
“The drama and the excitement were in my religious life,” Capps writes, “which was also the life of my imagination” (p. 143).

Another event that had an impact on Capps’s religious life occurred when he was mowing the lawn and came upon a dead robin. He called for his father, expecting that he would take care of it, which he did. But his father also remarked: “His eye is on the sparrow, but I see a dead robin” (cf. Luke 12.6) (p. 145). Capps writes: “The comment implied, of course, that while God was watching over the sparrow, he had neglected the robin. His tone, though, was matter-of-fact, and not one of mockery or sarcasm. Still, although I wanted to laugh, I checked myself because I thought he was being a little too irreverent” (p. 145). In time, Capps would incorporate this irony into his own religious outlook and his theory of male religiousness (which will be spelled-out below, but suffice it to say that male religiousness, according to Capps, consists of honor, hope, and humor). On this subject, Capps writes: “My father’s irony helped me maintain the religion of hope by incorporating into my hopefulness an element of emotional detachment” (p. 145). Capps, then, was able to maintain his religiousness because he learned to take religion a little less seriously.

In time, Capps began to think less highly of what he has called the religion of honor. One experience that helped him in this regard involved the school safety patrol. In sixth grade he was assigned the most strategic position of monitoring, a place adjacent to the school and the intersection with the most traffic. He took the job very seriously, especially because it also involved raising and lowering the flag each day. Further, he was elected by his classmates to become lieutenant of the safety patrol—the highest-ranking position—for the seventh grade. However, during the summer, another boy’s
mother went to the school principle and said that she wanted her son to be the lieutenant and the principal granted this request. Capps notes that both the principal and the boy’s mother may not have realized that this was an elected position but, in any case, Capps lost his promotion and was even moved to a post a few blocks away from the school. He eventually quit the patrol because he “couldn’t endure the fact that [the boy], as lieutenant, came around to check to see if [Capps] was at [his] post” (p. 166). Reflecting on this experience, Capps writes, “the experience created a deep suspicion of how human organizations work” (p. 167) (cf. Capps, forthcoming).

But the religion of honor was not to be put away that easily. In seventh grade, Capps became very close to a boy named Francis. They would get into all sorts of minor mischief together which would result in punishments such as getting get kicked out into the hall and so forth. But one day their antics resulted in their mothers’ being called in to see the principal. At the time, Capps was playing in the playground And he recalls, “as I watched her slow, plodding walk, I suddenly felt very ashamed. This was not the vigorous, determined, almost confrontational woman I had known her to be, the mother who would defend her boys to the hilt” (p. 170). Capps continues: “As I felt the emotional pain of having put her through an ordeal in which she would be deprived of her usual defenses and of her own sense of personal dignity, I decided then and there that it was time to amend my life and to become, in effect, an even more dedicated practitioner of the religion of honor” (p. 170).

I now want to turn to the relationship between Capps’s life and his work in light of the “mourning religion” thesis.
Part Three: Capps’s Mourning Style and the Religion of Humor

How does the “mourning religion” thesis apply to Capps? What, in other words, are the dynamics of disillusionment and loss, individuation, new self-understanding, and creative response in Capps’s life and work? I suggest that Capps experienced two major losses in his childhood, both of which had a religious bearing, losses that Capps addressed in his later adult life by means of his scholarship. I also suggest that the key feature of his mourning style became humor. In terms of Homans’s theory, Capps responded creatively to his personal losses by inventing his public religious typology of honor, hope, and humor. I also argue that his psychobiographical portrait of Jesus is especially important in addressing his previous losses, a work that enabled him to complete the rest of his mourning because it allowed him to both individuate from his childhood religion and also to integrate his various professional selves.

Two Losses in Childhood (Stage One of Homans’s Theory)

The Failed Prophecy

When Capps was eleven or twelve, he had an experience that could have led to a profound disillusionment. The context was Sunday School class. The teacher, who also happened to be a friend of Capps’s parents, was a man who “was very much into biblical prophecies” (p. 143). According to his calculations, the end of the world was going to happen that year and he told the Sunday School class this. Capps writes: “He would tell us what a glorious event it would be when Jesus came in clouds of glory and, after a brief battle with Satan and his armed forces, the present world would end and a new world would replace it” (p. 143). Capps was both anxious and excited about the impending
apocalypse. Capps says that he doesn’t remember talking with anyone about this—not his classmates, his brothers, or his parents. He adds: “If I talked with anyone about it, this would have almost certainly have been my mother, and I doubt that she would have cast doubt on the teacher’s prophesy” (p. 143).

The day that the teacher predicted came and went and, of course, nothing happened. The following Sunday the teacher apologized for the miscalculation and, as Capps recalls, no one made a big deal out of the mistake. While Capps could have become disillusioned with religion as a consequence of the failed prophesy, he did not. Instead, he acknowledges: “I became more determined to lead a life that was pleasing to Jesus and the heavenly Father” (p. 144). In terms of his own theory, Capps explains his reaction to the prophecy episode as follows: “Thus, the beneficiary of the failed prophecy was the religion of honor, its focus having expanded from working hard to win my mother’s approval and admiration to proving myself worthy of Jesus and his Father in heaven” (p. 144). He continues: “If the experience did not lead to disillusionment, it created wariness with regard to the religious imaginations of others. Also, although my own religious attitude remained solemn and serious, a light irony began to play about its edges, and this is where my very human father became significant” (p. 145). This experience, while it did not lead to disillusionment, was nevertheless a kind of religious loss. Religion was not what Capps had thought it to be. He experienced, in other words, a partial loss.
A Boy’s Loss of His Mother: Capps’s Male Melancholia Theory

The other significant loss, I suggest, involved Capps’s relationship with his mother. I make this argument first and foremost on the grounds of Capps’s male melancholia theory, which is described below. Capps argues that men—all men—become religious on account of their separation from their mothers, usually between the ages of three to five. Capps, then, is also disclosing that he is religious in this sense, that his religion, as all men’s religion, is related to the loss of the mother. When Capps first put forth his theory, he did not write autobiographically as he had done in his previous writings on social phobia and child abuse. Nevertheless, he did make a personal comment to confirm what any reader would suspect: “I have profited from many personal conversations in recent years with students and colleagues on the topic of this book, but those that especially stand out in my mind are ones I had with John Capps [Capps’s son], who sensed by the rather serious tone of our conversations that the topic of melancholy has for me a personal subtext, which mercifully remained, for the most part, unspoken but understood” (pp. xii-xiii). However, as we will see, Capps did come to write about his melancholia under what I have called academic autobiography. For purposes of organization, I will next present Capps’s male melancholia theory, even though I believe that the creation of this theory belongs in stage three of Homans’s theory. I do so because Capps created this theory over time, and because he applied an early version of the theory to Jesus before the typology of honor, hope, and humor was created.

Capps defines male melancholia as a form of religiousness that emerges in men’s early childhood through their relationships to their mothers. This male melancholic religion “may or may not manifest itself in religious observances, commitment to
spiritual disciplines, or religious participation in social causes or in acts of personal sacrifice” (Capps, 2002, p. xvi). In fact, it is more often the case that men are not religious in these conventional ways but are often religious in experiential (in contrast to institutional) ways (cf. Capps, 2007c, p. 256). As strange as it might sound, men are often religious in ways that, on the surface, do not resemble religion. As such, by understanding the origins of male melancholia, one can see how men are religious in unconventional ways.

When boys emotionally separate from their mothers (normally between ages three and five), they acquire an ambivalent attitude toward their mothers because, even though (or precisely because), she is still around, things are not the same. “Why has mother abandoned me?” the boy asks himself. He also wonders, “Can this loss be reversed? And, if so, what can I do to reverse it?” “[T]he very ambiguity of this situation,” Capps (2004a) writes, “and the anxieties that such ambiguity promotes are of key importance to the emotional separation that occurs between a small boy and his mother, and this separation is reflected in the form and style of men’s religious proclivities” (p. 108).

In “Male Melancholia,” Capps (2001b) moves beyond the elites he studied in his first book on melancholia to take up the question of whether or not all men suffer from this religious phenomenon. As it turns out, Capps thinks that all men do in fact suffer from male melancholia, which is distinguished from clinical depression, though there is perhaps a relationship. According to Capps’s logic, since all boys separate from their mothers, all men suffer from melancholia, and all men, therefore, are religious in this sense.
Capps suggests that this male religiousness takes three forms, which are all directly related to the boy’s separation from his mother. The first of men’s religious proclivities is the religion of honor. By being a “good boy,” men attempt to “win” their mothers back, perhaps by doing well in school, by earning a lot of money, or by achieving remarkable social standing. The second main proclivity is the religion of hope, and here men attempt to find a replacement for their mothers by finding someone like her or something to replace her. Here men might take interest in literal quests, such as traveling, or the quests can be of a more symbolic nature. The third religious proclivity, which Capps (2002) added in his *Men and Their Religion: Honor, Hope, and Humor*, is the religion of humor, “which stands overagainst the first two ways of being religious in the sense that it humors them” (Capps, 2004a, p. 108). This way of being religious asks, “Can one really win mother back, and can one really find a replacement?” It may also ask, “And why would one want to win mother back?” The religions of honor and hope may have their successes, but they have their defeats and disappointments as well, and one way that a man might cope with the latter is to develop a humorous attitude toward the first two ways of being religious. Here men make light of the commitments and efforts that they engender and, by doing so, they save themselves from bitterness and despair. The religion of humor accepts the reality of the loss, yet refuses to be defeated by this loss. If male melancholia has no cure, Capps suggests that humor is a pretty good antibiotic. Put in theological terms, if the religion of honor correlates with what Christian theology calls “works,” and the religion of hope fits with a mystical searching and faith, though often marked by tentativeness and doubt, the religion of humor, for Capps, paves the way for the religious notion of grace. The other forms of religion involve doing,
whether by working or searching, but the religion of humor is simply being. It mocks and relativizes doing. Honor and hope are retained, but in a chastened, relativized form.

Where Do Women Fit into Capps’s Theory?

But what about women? Where do they fit into Capps’s theory? In Men and Their Religion, a sequel to Men, Religion, and Melancholia, Capps (2002) notes psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva’s view on the etiology of female melancholia. In Black Sun, Capps notes, Kristeva argues that female melancholia “is traceable to the two to three-year-old girl’s need to begin adopting the dominant (‘symbolic’) language of her culture, which is male-oriented, and thus to leave the security of her mother’s language world (which is ‘semiotic’)” (p. 5). Capps notes that Kristeva cites studies that link signs of depression with language acquisition. If this theory is correct, Capps suggests, then “it would follow that boys adapt more naturally to the symbolic language of patriarchal culture and are therefore less subject to lasting melancholia as a consequence of language acquisition” (p. 5). Capps believes this argument has considerable merit. And it may also explain why more women than men suffer from depression.

In his work on the psychology of men, Capps has been greatly influenced by his mentor James Dittes. On the differences between boys and girls, men and women, Dittes (1996) writes:

Girls have the advantage that their primary caregiver (and life-giver) can be their primary role model. They know they are to grow up female, and to learn how to do that—how to behave and feel and think of themselves as female—they have
both model and encouragement at hand in the person they are already closest to
and dependent on. (p. 24)

“For a boy,” Dittes writes, “it is not that easy. He knows he is to grow up male, and he
also recognizes early on that to achieve this he must not honor and strengthen but disrupt
the bonds between himself and his primary caregiver, his life-giver” (p. 24). And so,
“being male costs a connectedness with life” (p. 25). If Kristeva is correct, being female
also costs a connectedness with life, but this cost is different than the one men pay, and it
is one, in fact, that they would share with their mothers, perhaps even strengthening their
bond. For more discussion on melancholia and gender, see Schiesari and Mazzoni (1992),
and for more of a discussion on mourning and melancholia in light of Kristeva’s work,
see Diane Jonte-Pace (2008).

Mother and the Desire to Be Another Man’s Son

As noted, Capps already has disclosed that he believes that his theory of male
melancholia applies to himself. Indeed, he argues that it could not be otherwise, since he
argues that all men are, to a greater or lesser extent, melancholiacs and that they deal with
their melancholia in various ways. While Capps was not especially invested in providing
personal material when he first advanced the theory, he has, as noted, recently written
about his own life in light of this theory. One way that he dealt with the loss of his mother
was reading:

As an early adolescent boy, books were for me a compensation for my earlier loss
of my sense of my mother’s unconditional love, but the Bible was special in this
regard, for the Bible was to a Protestant boy what the Mother Church was to a
Catholic boy. The Bible was a book that I could hold in my hands, turn its pages, and engage its words with all of my senses and not be concerned that I might cause ‘her’ to be angry, upset, or hurt. (Dykstra, Cole, and Capps, 2007, pp. 154-155)

This self-disclosure fits hand-in-glove with the “mourning religion” thesis. Capps experienced a loss (his mother), he found a new object to replace her (the Bible), and he developed a method that would help him to continue to cope and even thrive in the face of the loss (reading). As the boy Capps grew into the adult Capps, his methods of coping became more sophisticated: he went from reading, to writing, to the creation of theory.

Capps also reflected on his relationship with his father. In “The Desire to Be Another Man’s Son,” a section in “The Child Jesus as an Endangered Self” in The Child’s Song, Capps (1995) employed the introspective method to see if he could feel what it would be like to be an illegitimate child like Jesus. Capps writes: “This has proved to be a difficult, even painful exercise, as it has necessarily involved recalling experiences in my own childhood which most nearly approximate his experience, realizing, of course, that Jesus’ sense of being a child with a deep sense of personal tragedy was always with him, whereas,” Capps continues, “my personal grievances against my own life fate were more episodic and less integral to my ontological sense of myself, my core identity” (p. 112).

What did Capps discover? He describes it this way: “what I discovered in myself was something of the desire . . . to have experienced my own father more forcefully than I did, and to have had a greater sense of his palpable presence and support, counteracting my mother’s commanding, if not controlling presence” (p. 112). Capps also discovered a
sense of gratitude toward his father as well, for his dependability and for the personal sacrifices he made for Capps: “He was, indeed, a kind of Joseph to me, hovering in the background, rather self-preoccupied and not very talkative, but stable and steady, and, above all, a man who was moral without making a special point of it” (pp. 112-113). As Capps proceeded with his introspection, he came to a dark realization—namely, “that it may have been better for this child to have had a different man for his father” (p. 113). Capps continues: “Such feelings, long repressed, came to my awareness, and I reexperienced what must have been one of the most painful experiences of childhood and possibly the strongest impetus for repressing our childhood experiences, that of feeling shame not for myself but for a parent whom I also deeply loved” (p. 113). “I also found myself reliving the blame I had placed on my mother for her role in activating this desire to be another man’s son, as,” Capps writes, “she frequently belittled her husband in the presence of her children and revealed through her behavior toward the men her sisters had married that she deserved better” (p. 113). And then Capps came to a profound self-realization: “I believe this desire to be another man’s son was the beginning of my own religious consciousness, as this longing was not directed towards one of my uncles . . . but to the one whom Jesus called Father” (p. 113).

Individuation in Capps’s Psychobiography of Jesus: Integrating the Personal, the Psychological, and the Pastoral (Stage Two of Homans’s Theory)

In exploring the relationship between personal experience and public theory with regard to Capps and his work, this is precisely the point at which to raise the question of Capps’s religiousness and his scholarship on Jesus. I suggest that, in writing his
psychobiographical book on Jesus, Capps was able to integrate or to sustain various aspects of his identity—namely, the personal, the psychological, and the pastoral. In terms of the “mourning religion” thesis, by writing this book Capps was able to respond to his first two losses by individuating himself from unreliable religion and by creating new religious meaning through interpreting Jesus in a way that helped him establish a faith that was uniquely his own (cf. Capps, 2007b).

In “The Letting Loose of Hope,” Capps (1997c) noted that at various points in his career he has felt a tension between his pastoral care identity and his psychology of religion identity. His psychology of religion side is “ambitious,” “iconoclastic,” “anti-traditional,” and “the source of novel ideas,” whereas his pastoral care self “reflects the self committed to values and ideals” and is “more responsible and mature,” “devoted to being genuinely helpful,” “more prudent and cautious,” and “values tradition” (p. 139). The tension, in Capps’s own words, is between the psychological and the pastoral. This tension—a creative tension, to be sure—is also reflected in Capps’s psychobiography of Jesus. The two were able to make their peace by working together to make a coherent portrait of Jesus. A third aspect—tension is not the right word here—is evident in his portrait as well, which I simply call the personal. His “psychological” and “pastoral” selves are, of course, personal as well, but what I mean by personal are influences from his experience, especially his childhood, that are, in some sense, more fundamental than his vocational selves.
The Personal: In Search of a More Reliable Truth

The place to begin looking for the personal motivations for Capps’s psychobiography is in the dedication of the book—the book is dedicated to himself. After noting that, as a boy, his favorite Bible verse was John 14.6, Capps writes, “In the course of writing this book, I was mindful of the desire to keep faith with this boy and have done so, I believe, by striving to write a study of Jesus that was not afraid to ask questions in search of a more reliable truth. This book is dedicated to him” (p. xiii, emphasis mine). The fact that Capps feels that he needs to search for a more reliable truth suggests that, at one point or another, Capps found some religious claims to be unreliable. This, as we have seen, was precisely the case when Capps discovered that his teacher’s prediction about the end of the world was unreliable. The fact that Capps suspects that what he has been taught about Jesus may also be unreliable reflects the depth of his questioning. Indeed, for Christians, questions regarding Jesus are foundational, which is why I believe the writing of this monograph reflects a turning point in Capps’s mourning process.

Capps has written the book, then, for personal reasons, reasons that are religious. He is in search of a more reliable truth, a truth that won’t suffer the same fate as his teacher’s false prophesy. His book on Jesus also addresses his other loss, that is, the loss of his mother, especially as he applies his own male melancholia theory to Jesus. One can also observe specific passages in Capps’s psychobiography that are interpretations only he could make, likely because of his own experiences with his mother. Indeed, in searching for a psychological explanation for the healing of a possessed boy (Mark 9.14-29), a passage that I discussed above. Capps, as noted, speculates that the demon-possessed boy was attacking his internalized mother—who, Capps suspects, beat her son—by means of
fits that resembled epilepsy. His speculation is perfectly reasonable, but one could also have made other speculations, surmises not based on the mother theme. One could argue that Capps is making such surmises on the basis of his own theory of male melancholia, that, in other words, there is nothing especially personal about his speculations. Such an argument, however, overlooks the fact that his male melancholia theory is a theory that has a personal subtext for him. Further, a few paragraphs after Capps explores the mother theme, he makes an observation that has an unquestionable affinity with his own childhood. He notes Jesus’ indignant response to the father who doubted his ability to heal his son. Capps writes: “Jesus’ ‘indignant’ response to the father, especially in light of his own experience of fathers, seems to imply, ‘Why do you expect me to succeed where you have failed?’ Thus, it may well have communicated a veiled critique of fathers who seem powerless to provide their sons genuine assistance into manhood” (p. 176). This insight into the text—the insight that Jesus, a fatherless son, is critiquing a father for not helping him navigate his way into manhood—comes from a man who wished to have experienced his own father more forcefully and from a man who experienced his mother as controlling. Capps’s speculations, then, are not arbitrary or the product of a detached academic interest in psychoanalysis. His speculations are personal.

I’ve established that one can observe personal influences in specific passages of Capps’s psychobiography, but I’d like to suggest that one can also observe personal influences in his overall portrait of Jesus, particularly regarding what Capps calls “The Fatherhood Question.” Among contemporary historical Jesus scholars, Capps imagines Jesus to have had the worst possible childhood with regard to his personal and legal relationship with Joseph. In other words, Capps believes that Jesus was illegitimate and
not adopted by Joseph, leaving Jesus a religious and social outcast. In searching for a more reliable truth, Capps demonstrated that the scholarship on Jesus had not fully realized the depth of Jesus’ struggles with his family and, therefore, had not fully understood the significance of Abba for Jesus, the meaning of his ministry, and how he was able to heal. The birth of the religious consciousness of Jesus—like the birth of Capps’s religious consciousness—began when he became the son of another father, Abba. This interpretation of Jesus, I suggest, enabled Capps to find a more reliable truth concerning Jesus, especially as it intersects with his own experience. This more reliable truth, in turn, allowed Capps to identify with Jesus as he did as a young boy—both Jesus and Capps had the desire to become another man’s son, and, in place of their father, they both chose Abba.

The Psychological: The Theme of Reversals

Another major component of Capps’s portrait of Jesus deals with how Jesus healed, which I have discussed above. This is perhaps the most controversial chapter of Capps’s argument, as he offers psychological explanations for what many religious believers consider to be miracles (in the supernatural sense). Capps assumes a naturalist framework and, so, faithful to his presuppositions, he reads the stories of Jesus’ healings through this framework. Capps realizes that such an interpretation could be considered reductionistic, and that religious believers could take offense at his efforts, but, regarding the latter, Capps points out that it is harder to cure medical problems that have a psychological origin than it is to cure medical problems that are simply physical. In no final or complete
way, then, are Jesus’ healing powers diminished. Yet, Capps knows that such assurances will not ease some religious believers.4

The theme of reversals is especially prominent in his chapter on the healings of Jesus. Capps employs his reversals here by noting Freud’s view that “a fundamental feature of monotheistic religion is that God is subject to image-splitting, with the split off image becoming Satan” (p. 178). In the case of Jesus, Capps believes that the splitting of the God image entailed an image of God as Abba and Beelzebub. In psychoanalytic thought, in demon possession there is a disowned aggression. Capps writes, “The disowned aggression, however, is turned inward, against the self, and becomes self-punitive, that is, one ‘suffers’ from the demon possession itself” (p. 182). What Jesus does in his healings, Capps argues, is reverse “the process of relinquishing one’s aggression to the evil spirit, employing the aggression against the evil spirit, thus legitimating [the] aggression” (p. 182). Capps suggests that “Jesus found such image-splitting unusually convincing because he did not know his natural father and was not adopted by Joseph, and therefore had little if any experience of paternal love” (p. 182). Capps continues: “Each time he commanded Beelzebub to leave another young man alone, and the command worked, he avenged his own victimization at the hands of human fathers” (p. 182).

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4 In a personal letter to me, Capps informed me that a correspondent preached a sermon based on Capps’s psychological understanding of how Jesus healed (that Jesus was a kind of village psychiatrist). After the sermon, one of the parishioners told the pastor that he (the pastor) should see a psychiatrist!
To understand Jesus and his followers, who also healed, Capps also employs the comparative method by drawing on an article by Peter Loewenberg (1971) that examines a Nazi cohort group. Loewenberg is interested in the cohort of German males born between 1914 and 1918, that is, the males born during World War I. And he picks these years with the psychoanalytic assumption in mind that one’s formative years are, indeed, formative. What, in other words, are the long-term effects of war on the psyches of German males born during World War I? Loewenberg argues that war disrupted the course of normal childhood development for these boys, especially as they would not have been able to work through their childhood conflicts involving aggression with their fathers, as many of their fathers were either off fighting the war or dead. He writes: “When a child who is struggling with his aggressive and destructive impulses finds himself in a society at war, the hatred and violence around him in the outer world meet the as yet untamed aggression raging in his inner world. . . . The very murderous and destructive impulses that he has been trying to bury in himself are now nourished by the official ideology and mass media of a country at war” (quoted in Capps, 2000, p. 184).

Another developmental issue for boys is the idealization of their fathers. The same logic applies: Since their fathers were absent, their needs for idealization were repressed and displaced, usually, Loewenberg guesses, onto the image of the soldier. And here a particular kind of splitting occurs: “In wartime the absent father-soldier is idealized. He is glorified and any hostile feelings toward him are projected onto the evil enemy on the other side” (quoted in Capps, 2000, p. 185). But, what happens when the “good guys” lose the war? What happens, in other words, when young boys meet their real fathers, whom they idealized as soldiers but experience as strange and intrusive upon
their return into a house in which they once had mother to themselves? This, Loewenberg argues, is the psychohistorical origin of the Nazi youth cohort. These are just the kind of men one would expect to be attracted to the ideology of the Nazis: “The identification with the father who went out to war served to erase the memory of the feared and hated strange father who came home in defeat” (quoted in Capps, 2000, p. 186). In the Nazi movement, then, this cohort of men found a father whom they could admire who was also distant, a father, in other words, just like the idealized absent father-soldier of their childhoods.

Assuming the comparative method, Capps thinks that Loewenberg’s study has implications for understanding Jesus and his followers. Capps writes, “I suggest that such image-splitting and fatherlike performance would have special appeal to first-century Palestinian young men whose fathers became highly threatening toward them at the onset of puberty . . . thus undermining the more idealized images they held of their fathers during childhood, when their fathers were more distant figures who left the disciplinary role to the boys’ mothers” (p. 186). Capps then asks: “What if the idealized father, however, is not a human person, but ‘Abba’? Such an idealization may then be an empowering one” (p. 186). For Jesus, it “enabled him to redirect otherwise self-directed aggression at the very enemy of his idealized father through his fatherlike performance as an exorcist-healer” (pp. 186-187). To become a follower of Jesus, after all, young men were required to give up their own fathers and to take Abba as their father (cf. Mark 10.29-30; Thomas, 101). Is this not the very splitting that Capps is describing?

Here we come to the heart of why Jesus was able to heal: Jesus was able to heal because of his words. Capps notes Freud’s belief that words were originally magic, and
that words today still retain much of their ancient power. Jesus “seems to have understood the psychological potency of the word itself, attributable to its association with the period in life when words are magic due to their uncanny reversibility” (p. 192). Capps continues, “I conclude that there was, indeed, an element of magic in Jesus’ exorcisms, based on the fact that, for children, words were originally magic, especially those that involved reversal of sound” (p. 192). The magic word for Jesus was Abba, which, of course, is the same word read from left to right or from right to left—a palindrome. This reversible word, Capps argues, allowed Jesus to reverse the self-directed aggression of young men because Jesus was able to convince them to direct their aggression toward Beelzebub. For Christians, could this example—the example of Jesus—be the first instance in the tradition of what I have been calling the dynamic of reversals and restorations? I believe so.

But regardless of how we might want to answer that last question, by offering such a creative, systematic, and even reductionist interpretation of the healings of Jesus, Capps was able to honor his psychology of religion self when the stakes were the highest for a Christian. In other words, if, as a psychologist of religion, Capps made reductionist interpretations of other religions, or of minor figures in his own religion, it would seem that his work would lack a certain courage or authenticity, much like when biblical scholars assume and defend the historical-critical method but then say nothing about or even defend the doctrine of the virgin birth. But, as it is, Capps did have the courage to be consistent in his methodology, and thus faithful to himself, in his search for a more reliable truth.
The Pastoral: The Theme of Restorations

I noted above that Capps stated the reason for his writing was that he was in search of a more reliable truth. He could have kept his search to himself. But in the act of publication he sought to share his more reliable truth with others, which suggests that his book is not merely a book in psychology of religion—it is pastoral at its core as well. Capps has been concerned with the destructive power of religion in various places throughout his writings, but he has also maintained that religion can be a force for good as well (see, e.g., Capps, 1995). Misunderstanding Jesus, Capps argues, has led to a great deal of harm, especially when one focuses on what was done to Jesus (he was crucified) rather than on what he did (e.g., healing, disrupting the temple).

Capps’s portrait has a pastoral emphasis. Capps writes: “Our portrait of Jesus thus concludes on the theme of faith, hardly a novel conclusion” (p. 262). Capps here is viewing faith as the opposite of anxiety, and he notes Jesus’ inner calm when he was on the boat during a storm (Mark 4.37-40). Capps believes that this story would have been the perfect image to have of Jesus after the temple disturbance, for it would capture “the ‘inner calm’ of the man who had at last triumphed over reproachings without and within through this culminating act of healing. It is the inner act of self-exorcism. Dare one imagine that as he stood in the temple court, awaiting arrest, he raised his face to the heavens and said, “It is finished”? (p. 263). This suggestion—the suggestion that Jesus said “It is finished” with respect to the temple disturbance, rather than on the cross, is a kind of reversal (and restoration) that I believe is typical in certain strands of psychology of religion and pastoral theology (cf. Pfister, 1948). As such, Capps’s suggestion is a critique of the Jesus of atonement theology, which maintains that the death of Jesus on
the cross is salvific. Capps, instead, wants to focus on what Jesus did, not what was done to him. This is a radical reversal, but one that is also restorative.

The reversals do not stop here, however. Capps continues on, painting what many Christians would consider an offensive portrait. He writes: “I would suggest either that the stories of Jesus’ appearances originated in dreams—where he appeared to the dreamer—or that the creation of such stories was comparable to the involuntary production of dreams (and not, therefore, driven by ideological purposes of conscious political strategy)” (pp. 263-264). And he continues: “If the temple was the body of the false mother, the dream could be the body of the true mother, and thus the locus of the true utopia—the ‘promised land,’ which is neither ‘here’ (in the empirical world) nor ‘there’ (in a world to come), but in the ‘no-place’ where one dies to the world in order to rise again in the morning” (p. 265). The psychological explanation that Capps offers for the resurrection appearances of Jesus, then, is that Jesus appeared to his followers in their dreams. While “reducing” or “reversing” the resurrection back to the human psyche—that is, by viewing Jesus’ appearances as something that occurred in dreams—Capps’s portrait is also restorative in a certain sense, for the Kingdom of God is precisely as Jesus said it was: neither here nor there (cf. Luke 17.20).

From Melancholia to Mourning: Capps’s Creative Turn to Humor (Stage Three of Homans’s Theory)

I suggest that Capps’s creative response to his childhood frustrations with religion was his creation of his male melancholia theory. As noted, he developed the theory over time. At first he did not explicitly talk in terms of typologies (i.e., honor, hope, and humor). He
talked only in terms of maternal loss, but the themes of honor and hope were implicit in his analysis. After writing his psychobiographical book on Jesus in which he applied his male melancholia theory, he created the typologies of honor, hope, and humor. But, even then, the theme of humor was only addressed in a short concluding chapter. In terms of Homans’s theory, then, Capps’s creative response (stage three) did not occur all at once but, rather, over a number of years. Since I detailed Capps’s typology above, I now want to turn to his use of humor, which intimates Capps’s transformation of melancholia into mourning.

As time went on, the subject of humor took on a larger role in Capps’s writings. To date he has written two monographs on humor (Capps 2005a, 2008b). His first book on humor (Capps, 2005a) is especially light-hearted. On the back of the book, in fact, there are numerous fictional endorsements, some of which are only funny if you know something about the history of Christianity. For example, Erasmus endorses the book saying: “Best book on religion and humor since my own groundbreaking book *In Praise of Folly*!” Luther follows with his endorsement: “Erasmus my assmus! His Dame Folly is all talk. Capps lets her rip! An enviable performance!” Other jokes are personal and relate to his family. Douglas Capps, Capps’s younger brother, says, “I once overheard Mother telling Father, ‘Mark my words! That boy will embarrass us one day! *A Time to Laugh* places her among the minor prophets.” Capps also has an endorsement from Don Quixote, Capps’s alter ego: “Sensible and down-to-earth. My kind of book.” The only serious endorsement of the book comes from Ted Cohen, who writes, “This is an exceptionally good-natured book, likely to persuade you that religion and humor have more affinity for one another than you’d imagined. The author’s affable style carries a
formidable learning which is never intrusive.” Capps (2005a) notes that “[t]he idea that ‘laughter is the best medicine’ became a conviction of mine from an early age, but I didn’t give this particular belief much thought as I entered adulthood” (p. 1). Capps explains that he did not attempt to “make a systematic argument on behalf of [humor’s] capacity to enrich religion, for I believe that an effort to do so would lead to the sorts of generalizations and abstractions that theologians tend to delight in but that leave more ordinary religious people gasping for air” (p. 169).

His most recent monograph is equally light-hearted. In *Laughter Ever After: Ministry of Good Humor*, Capps (2008b) suggests that this book could be used for a Ministry of Good Humor class, and, upon completion, the graduates could receive a Ministry of Good Humor badge, as well as ordination.

Capps has also published articles on humor. One of them is particularly relevant for his male melancholia theory, because this article deals with the mother, specifically the “bad-enough” mother. In this article, Capps is making fun of Winnicott’s often-cited notion of the “good-enough” mother. Capps (2005b) writes, “Winnicott is entitled to his opinion of what makes a ‘good-enough mother,’ but a mother who becomes less actively adaptive as time goes on isn’t my idea of a ‘good-enough mother’” (p. 289). For Capps, this would be a *bad-enough* mother! Capps, as noted, is being humorous here, but he is serious about his argument that “there is a ‘bad-enough mother’ subtext to every biblical story in which a man desires a woman” (p. 292). Capps’s inspiration for this humorous article was the work of Phyllis Trible (1984) and Philip Culbertson (1992), both of whom work on “texts of terror” for women and for men. Capps identified the story of Rebekah
(Genesis 27) as an overlooked “text of terror” for men, as he suggested that Rebekah is a “bad-enough mother” both to Jacob and Esau.

This article suggests to me that Capps was able to “lighten up” regarding male melancholia. Or, perhaps a better way of saying this is to suggest that Capps’s turn to, and utilization of, humor was both reflective of and instrumental in a transformation of his mourning, especially because Capps (2005a) is talking about the religion of humor. I suggest that, in terms of the “mourning religion” thesis, Capps experienced an “ambiguous loss” (cf. Boss, 1999) with respect to religion, as reflected in his experience with his Sunday School teacher’s failed prophecy. He did not lose religion then, or become disillusioned with it, but religion was not what he had thought it was and, in the future, he would take steps to make sure he was not duped again. By studying religion professionally he would find a more reliable truth. This ambiguous loss is reflected in his two competing professional identities, his pastoral care self and his psychology of religion self. His turn to humor was instrumental in and reflective of a transformation in this mourning process because humor allowed him to integrate these professional identities further. Humor has a subversive and iconoclastic aspect (which fit with his psychology of religion self) and a nurturing aspect (which fit with his pastoral care self). The best evidence in support of the claim that humor was so instrumental for Capps is that Capps himself argued that humor is the best remedy for male melancholia, which, as Capps argued, is an ambiguous loss that is the origin of male religiousness.5

5 In October 2008, Robert Dykstra and Allan Cole hosted a retirement conference in honor of Donald Capps. Capps decided to close with a hymn that he wrote, which is to be sung to the tune of “Onward Christian Soldiers,” a hymn that was written by a young
The Timing of Capps’s Transformation

When did this transformation occur in Capps? I suggest that it occurred during his sixties, and this is supported by looking at the dates of some of his most personal publications. Capps was fifty-six-years-old in 1995, the year he published *The Child’s Song* which, even to this day, is arguably his most sustained critique of religion. He next put forth his male melancholia theory in 1997; he published his psychobiography of Jesus in 2000; he added the typology of humor to his male melancholia theory in 2002; and in 2005 he published his first book on humor, following with another in 2008.

I suggest that Capps’s fifties were a time in which he was doing serious personal psychological work, as this was the time when he was creating his male melancholia theory. But, why did Capps confront these issues when he did? One reason can be discerned by looking at Capps’s relocation of Erik Erikson’s stages of life, where Capps (2004b) takes Erikson’s eight stages of life and correlates them with the decades of life. The sixth decade of life is the fifties, which, according to Capps’s schema, is the decade in which the psychosocial task is “intimacy vs. isolation.” And, according to Erikson’s schema, this is the psychosocial task of young adults. Capps (2004b) writes about the fifties in this way:

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vicar, Sabine Baring-Gould, and set to music by the church organist Arthur S. Sullivan. The hymn was in honor of S. S. Adams, creator of the whoopee cushion, sneezing powder, and the dribble glass—all of this supports the contention that Capps’s religiousness is marked thoroughly by humor and playfulness (cf. Capps, 2009).
By relocating the life cycle crises in terms of decades, intimacy takes on a new depth of meaning, and the fifties become that period in life when one engages in a deeper self-process than was previously deemed necessary or even possible. This is the decade in which we may learn to live on more intimate terms with ourselves and gain a more appreciative view of what has, in fact, “become of me.”

Alternately, this may be a period of excruciating self-estrangement, one in which intimate, competitive and combative relations are experienced with and against oneself. . . . If isolation is about repudiation of that which is perceived to be a danger to oneself, then intimacy is the experience of being at peace with oneself, as one no longer engages in internal competition and combat, but becomes genuinely self-affirming. Such self-affirmation will also be reflected in the fact that relations with significant others are more singularly intimate, devoid of competition and competitiveness. (p. 25)

Capps, in his fifties, was on his way to becoming genuinely self-affirming, but in order to do so he had to first deal with his melancholia. And, in dealing with his melancholia, he looked, as any good Christian would, to Jesus.

This line of thinking is rather general, though it is personal in this case because Capps is the one who is advancing this stage model. One would assume, then, that Capps, in his fifties, addressed his own melancholia because this is the decade in which such issues would emerge with greater intensity, given the psychosocial dynamic of intimacy vs. isolation. But there is more direct evidence and specific evidence for why Capps would have addressed his melancholia in his fifties. In 1990, when Capps was 51, his father died. This loss, too, would have recalled the death of one of his mentors or
intellectual fathers, Paul Pruyser, who died in 1987. It is striking that Capps, immediately after the death of his father, began a process that resulted in his most creative and original intellectual achievement—his male melancholia theory—just as Freud, after the death of his own father, began a process that resulted in his own most significant achievement (Freud, 1900/2001). When I asked Capps about this, he said that

I'm trying to figure out why I got interested in melancholy in my fifties. I know it's too easy to say simply that the books I was using in my course in psychology of religion (the ones featured in _Men, Religion, and Melancholia_) pointed me to the idea, as there must have had to be some subjective receptivity to the idea. It may be, as you suggest, that my father's death was a major personal factor. . . . But, if so, this was also the time when I was teaching a course on pastoral care of men, and I was hearing and reading many stories by the men in the class about how their relations with their fathers were never quite what they promised. I suppose I would place myself in the same category except that I felt that early in life (who knows when) I accepted the fact that I was not his "favorite" son. I don't think I had any resentment about this. It simply seemed that this was right and as it should be because I was not one of the oldest. But I had several good memories of him and adopted many of his values—to a greater extent, I think, than my other brothers did. Another factor, one that I do, in fact, allude to in the preface, is my relationship to my son. The 1990s would have been the time when he was no longer around—he began college in 1987 and was in graduate school when I was working on the melancholia theme. I know that I missed having him around.

(Personal Correspondence, September 6, 2008)
Capps continues,

Still, reading Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" at much the same time that I was writing The Child's Song and feeling certain that Freud was really referring to mothers (not fathers) was simply an important insight for me. No doubt, I was reacting against the "don't blame mothers" emphasis in the pastoral theology literature at the time, so there was obviously a bit of perversity in my decision to focus on mothers. Also, this was the time when so many of the books on men were emphasizing the father-son relationship, so I probably wanted to distance myself from that literature as well, especially because so many of the men who were writing these books had nothing very critical to say about their own mothers (if I had known of Freud's distinction between denial and disavowal at the time, I would certainly have used it in this case). At this time, too, I was teaching a course on poetry and the care of souls (my The Poet's Gift was published in 1993 I think) and I was pretty impressed with William Stafford's comment in a video I showed in class about how he had "slandered" his father and mother in his poetry, noting that the poems simply seemed to require it. I found this both rather amusing and liberating—why not "blame" mothers, my own included? Aren't they and our positive memories of them strong enough to take it? (Personal Correspondence, September 6, 2008)\(^6\)

\(^6\) Regarding The Poet's Gift, Capps decided to turn to poetry after he had suffered from a detached retina. Since the print of poems is usually larger, and since there is often a space between each line, he could read poetry better than he could academic books. The Poet's Gift, then, was also the product of loss—the temporary partial loss of his eyesight.
Capps concludes:

What I think I'm suggesting here is that my father's death and the absence of my son from day-to-day relating were certainly factors in my writing on melancholia, and I tried to say something about this in the last chapter of *Men, Religion, and Melancholia*. Yet I think I read Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* around that time and I was really impressed with his argument that poets (he was talking I think about the Romantics in particular) wrote in response to earlier poets, not primarily out of their own experience—in other words, previous works of literature (trying to compete with Keats, for example) were more important in their work than, say, their own ramblings out into the countryside. It struck me that so much of my own life has been book-related and that I write books based on other books. This may weaken your efforts to relate my writings on melancholia to personal experiences but reading books are—or can be—as powerful of personal experiences as familial events, significant as these clearly are. Why book reading became so important to me as a boy is an intriguing psychological question for me. I don't think it was merely escapist. I now like to say that we would all be in dire straights if we had to rely on what our own society today offers us culturally speaking, and maybe I had some sort of intuition about this when I was younger. So maybe there's a connection to be made between being a reader of books and being melancholic. (Books as a substitute for mother's unconditional love? I think we wrote about this in our article on King James and the Bible.) (Personal Correspondence, September 6, 2008; cf. Capps & Carlin, 2007b)
There is much material to think about here, but I want to address Capps’s comment that much of his life has been book-related and that he writes books based on other books. This comment—that Capps is influenced by the texts of other authors—could weaken my thesis that Capps’s public theory is related to his personal experiences, unless reading is considered a personal experience, as Capps believes it should. His comment to this effect and others like it, I think, should be taken at face value. One cannot overestimate the importance of reading for Capps, as he has catalogued a number of books here and in his writings that have been especially important for him. I would only add that the books that he chooses to read are related to his personal experiences, oftentimes relating to childhood, as when he acquired his love for reading the Bible.

Capps experienced other losses near or during his fifties that would have prompted him to take on the melancholia issue. Erik Erikson, whom Capps admired greatly and with whom he even had the chance to talk in Erikson’s house, died in 1994. Capps’s brother, Walter Capps, died in 1997, and his mother died in 1981, the year that he was on sabbatical from Phillips Theological Seminary at Princeton Theological Seminary. Capps writes:

I recall feeling some regret that she did not know that I would probably be offered a position at PTS as I didn't want my parents to know about it until it was definite. I also recall that I was teaching Levinson at the time and that I was therefore in the mid-life transition (42 years old). He says that persons at that age often experience the mortality issue through deaths of family members or friends. I think that my interest in narcissism was strong at the time so that I didn't get around to melancholia until later, but it's probably the case that it dates back to
her death. I've undoubtedly mentioned this before but the minister said at her
funeral that she was a saint and a sinner, and shortly thereafter I had two
dreams—one in which she was on the steps of an impressive marble building
inviting me to come up the stairs, and another, very shortly thereafter, in which all
I saw was that her head was on fire. Well . . . I've mentioned to students in the
pastoral care course that if you should ever be tempted to use the saint/sinner
motif in a funeral sermon, be sure to say the deceased was a sinner before you say
the deceased was a saint—in other words, try to end on a more upbeat note!
(Personal Correspondence, September 12, 2008)

Regarding the death of his brother, Capps writes,

As for his death's bearing on my interest in melancholia, I think this has some
truth to it, but I also think that what I've said about not being the favorite sibling
and realizing that this is the case is one of the possible contributors to melancholia
(and one of the remedies for this is the realization that there are burdens—as well
as rewards—that come with being the favorite sibling!). (Personal
Correspondence, September 12, 2008)

Later, Capps wrote to me:

What I felt at his funeral was that it was such a political event (Jesse Jackson was
there and there was speculation about my sister-in-law taking his place in
Congress) that it was difficult to mourn his loss, brother to brother. However,
after the graveside ceremony had concluded and everyone was leaving, I stood by
the casket and read Stafford's "Allegiances" to him. (Personal Correspondence,
November 26, 2008)
This melancholy image of Capps standing at the graveside of his brother in 1997, the same year that Capps published *Men, Religion, and Melancholia*, somehow seems to be an appropriate way to close my discussion of the various losses that Capps dealt with during his fifties.

During his fifties and reflected in his writing in his sixties, then, Capps experienced a transformation of mourning that integrated what I have called his personal, psychological, and pastoral selves. And this, I suggest, is evident in Capps’s (2005a) integration of Freud and Jesus as reflected in statements such as this one: “Paraphrasing Freud’s oft-stated observation that dreams are the royal road to the unconscious, humor is the royal road to the [K]ingdom of God” (p. 170). Capps, then, is still clearly religious as a psychologist of religion, but it is a kind of religiosity that welcomes Freud and psychoanalysis. Capps, as I have demonstrated, was prompted to address his melancholia in his fifties because it was at this general period of his life that he experienced a number of losses: his son leaving for college, the death of his father, the death of his brother, the death of Paul Pruyser, and the death of Erik Erikson. These personal experiences also affected his choice of reading, the most important of which was Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia,” which directly led to his publication of *Men, Religion, and Melancholia*. The first line of the epigram for *Men, Religion, and Melancholia*, which was published in 1997, the year of his brother’s death, begins: “My mother did not want me to be born” (Capps, 1997a, p. vii). I suggest that the poem from which this line is taken would have spoken deeply to a man who knew that he was not his father’s favorite child and who felt emotionally abandoned by his mother. I suggest that Capps’s male melancholia theory, which centers on a boy’s emotional loss of his mother is the mournful creation that came
out of his experiences with his mother and his father, and that Capps created a number of personal monuments in the form of books. In these books, Capps carried the melancholia theme further, allowing him to mourn various losses associated with religion, many of which had associations with his family life, where, of course, he was originally exposed to his religion.

**Conclusion: The Saving Power of Saving Jesus**

I have applied Homans’s “mourning religion” thesis to the life and work of Donald Capps, arguing that Capps experienced two ambiguous losses in his childhood that concerned religion. One loss—his teacher’s failed prophecy—did not lead him to reject religion, but it did inspire him to view religion with a certain amount of skepticism, especially as this skepticism was modeled in his father (cf. Capps’s story of the dead robin). The other loss—his separation from his mother—actually created in him what he believes to be the root of male religiousness in general; that is, it was responsible for his melancholia. The fact that both of these losses were ambiguous (he did not reject religion altogether as a boy, nor did he physically lose his mother) together with the fact that one loss encouraged him to view religion with skepticism, and the other loss inspired him to be more religious, testifies to the substantial ambiguity of Capps’s relationship with religion.

I also suggest that the ambiguity of this relationship fueled Capps’s creativity and his productivity (no other living author in psychology of religion or pastoral care has
published as much as Capps).\(^7\) As Capps himself has noted, he has experienced a tension in his professional identities, a tension between his psychology of religion self and his pastoral care self. He sustained this tension by writing books in the field of pastoral care and articles in psychology of religion, and in both fields he utilized the introspective method to address his own personal issues in some way, such as his feelings of depletion and his social phobia (Capps 1993, 1999b).\(^8\)

It was only in his fifties, however, that Capps addressed his deepest and most personally resonant issue: melancholia. Indeed, though Capps was not especially personal when he first wrote about the topic, only intimating that it did have a personal subtext for him, his very reticence suggests that the issue was a very sensitive one for him at the time. He continued to write about the topic, a lowering of his own defensiveness or a transformation—if only partial—of his melancholia into mourning that allowed him to become more and more personal with each successive text. The key moment in this transformation, I have argued, was his application of his melancholia theory to Jesus. By discovering a Jesus like himself, he found something much more reliable than his Sunday School teachers had ever offered. In consequence of this discovery, he was able to integrate his various selves and, therefore, open himself up to mourn in a non-defensive

\(^7\) In commenting on a draft of this chapter, Capps wonders if he has an addiction to writing.

\(^8\) It is interesting to note that Capps published *The Depleted Self* before *Agents of Hope*, but he actually wrote them in the reverse order so that a more hopeful book would come after a more depressing book. However, the order in which he wrote the books suggests that his own melancholia was getting worse, not better, in the early 1990s.
way—the way of humor. By writing about humor and being humorous himself, Capps was able to make peace with the ambiguity of religion and the ambiguities within himself, for he had already sought for, and found, a more reliable truth in Jesus. This more reliable Jesus, however, was not the Jesus of church history or traditional Christianity. Quite the reverse, actually, for Capps did not find the Jesus who died on the cross for our sins to be reliable, but he *did* find it reliable to focus on what Jesus did (in other words, rejecting an interpretation based on what they did to him, as opposed to emphasizing what *he* did for himself and for others). This is especially true of Capps in his interest in Jesus’ last action, the cleansing of the temple—as this was the act through which Jesus was able to overcome his melancholia. While some, of course, will not be convinced by Capps’s particular portrait of Jesus, perhaps because they look askance at psychoanalytic interpretations, I trust that the reader will be convinced by my argument of the personal significance—for him—of his portrait of Jesus, for, in his own words, his reason for writing was “to write a study of Jesus that was not afraid to ask questions *in search of a more reliable truth*” (Capps, 2000, p. xiii, my emphasis).

*Reframing Religion*

In this dissertation, I am interested in what I am broadly calling reversals and restorations of religion. Each of my subjects “reverse” and “restore” religion in their own way and in their own language. The language that seems most appropriate for Capps seems to be the reframing of religion.

In *Reframing*, Capps (1990) proposes a new method of pastoral care which, as the title intimates, is called reframing, a technique that has been practiced in secular
counseling for several decades now (cf. Watzlawick, Weakland, & Fisch, 1974). The basic insight of reframing techniques is that “the meaning any event has for us depends on the frame in which we perceive it” (Capps, 1990, p. 10). So, if a person has come to counseling because of a particular problem or difficulty and cannot seem to make any progress, a counselor might try a reframing technique to help the counselee see things differently and, therefore, move ahead or accept a certain difficulty for what it is.

There is also something playful, iconoclastic, and subversive about reframing techniques. An example will prove instructive here:

A therapist is working with a family and the father says, “Nobody in this family has ever supported me by taking care of me. I always have to do it all myself. No one is ever solicitous or takes care of me, and it’s been like this my whole life.” To this lament, the therapist responds, “Thank God!” The father, of course, expected some kind of supporting comment like, “Oh, that’s really too bad. Maybe we can make changes in the family.” Instead, the therapist has forced the man to look at his complaint in a new light: the father has organized his life in such a way that no one in his family feels it necessary to take care of him—a very positive achievement. (p. 11)

The theory of reframing, of course, is much more sophisticated than how I have just presented it here, but my intention is simply to point out its rather subversive nature as a technique that often advocates the opposite of what one would expect the secular or pastoral counselor to say. Above I suggested that Capps’s use of humor and his writing of a psychological portrait of Jesus helped him to integrate and to sustain the tensions between his professional identities as a pastoral theologian and as a psychologist of
religion. I suggest that his ability to embrace and endorse reframing techniques served a similar purpose. By introducing and advocating a subversive method of pastoral care, he could, as it were, satisfy both selves.

I suggest, too, that this language—the language of reframing—captures the ways in which Capps attempted to restore religion. While, for example, Capps did not find the Jesus of traditional Christianity to be reliable, he was able to take the same basic data about Jesus and see the data through a new frame—the frame of psychological analysis—and then he was able to find a more reliable truth.

*He Comes to Us as One Known*

What I do not wish to suggest is that Capps’s portrait of Jesus is merely the product of his own projection, recalling Albert Schweitzer’s critique of the quest for the historical Jesus. In what is an undisputable classic work within the realm of biblical studies, Schweitzer (1998) reviewed the massive literature on the quest for the historical Jesus and convincingly demonstrated the connection between the various portraits of Jesus and the personal agendas of scholars. Schweitzer (1998) writes: “Those who are found of talking about negative theology can find their account here. There is nothing more negative than the result of the critical study of the Life of Jesus” (p. 398). Why? Schweitzer explains:

The Jesus of Nazareth who came forward publicly as the Messiah, who preached the ethic of the Kingdom of God, who founded the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth, and died to give His work its final consecration, never had any existence. He is a figure designed by rationalism, endowed by life by liberalism, and clothed by modern theology in a historical garb. (p. 398)
“The mistake,” Schweitzer suggests, “was to suppose that Jesus could come to mean more to our time by entering into it as a man like ourselves” (p. 399).

Schweitzer thinks that the spiritual Jesus, rather than the historical Jesus, is important for our time:

But the truth is, it is not Jesus as historically known, but Jesus as spiritually arisen within men, who is significant for our time and can help it. Not the historical Jesus, but the spirit which goes forth from Him and in the spirits of men strives for new influence and rule, is that which overcomes the world. (p. 401).

Shortly after these lines come the most quoted lines in the book:

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those men who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: “Follow thou me!” and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as in ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is. (p. 403)

When I was in seminary, Schweitzer’s argument was often reiterated to dismiss John Dominic Crossan’s portrait of Jesus as a social reformer and egalitarian. Seminary students and professors alike liked to point out that Jesus, according to Crossan, had politics similar to what one would expect of an Irish Catholic monk, and that Crossan himself was an Irish Catholic monk. However, in demonstrating the connection between scholars’ personal experience and their public scholarship in no way discredits their
work, for as Jeffrey Kripal (2001) pointed out with regard to how one’s socio-political location affects one’s scholarship on another culture:

Too often scholars parrot the obvious truth that every method, every ([w]estern) cultural perspective, distorts and limits what we can see about another culture. This, no doubt, is true. But why must every concave and convex curve in our vision distort? Concavity and convexity, after all, can be used to correct vision, and lenses can focus and magnify as easily as they can distort. (p. 322)

In other words, and in the context of understanding Jesus, one’s own experiences may in fact enable one to understand Jesus more clearly and deeply just as they could distort one’s interpretation of Jesus.

I suggest, consequently, a reversal of Schweitzer’s argument. I ground my suggestion not in Kripal’s astute comments about the advantages of critical distance, but on Schweitzer’s (1998) own criteria for knowing Jesus: “they shall learn in their own experience Who He is” (p. 403, emphasis added). What Schweitzer failed to realize, even though this was his central argument, is that scholarship is personal. In other words, Schweitzer argues that we come to know Jesus “in the toils, the conflicts, [and] the sufferings,” but Schweitzer did not recognize academic scholarship as a part of these “toils.” Capps, on the other hand, is acutely aware of the fact that working through his own “toils” and “conflicts” within scholarship allowed him to discover from his own experience “Who He is.”

What Schweitzer has demonstrated, finally, is that Jesus comes to us as one known. People usually find exactly what they are looking for in Jesus, and this is so because they need it to be so. This is as it should be. Schweitzer’s point is that Jesus is
beyond us, and Schweitzer denigrates the fact that our portraits of Jesus seem to arise from the act of looking into the mirror at reflections of ourselves rather than any true image of Jesus, for he is unknown. But, where Schweitzer is lamenting, I am celebrating. Over the centuries scholars and believers alike have looked to Jesus and found him mirroring them back to them, giving each what they need. Capps looked to Jesus in his time of hardship and found what he needed, for Jesus came to him as one he had already known. Jesus, for Capps, had been reframed in Capps’s own image and, therefore, found to be a more reliable truth.
Reversers and Restorers of Religion

Volume Two

Nathan Carlin
Introduction

The focus of this chapter is James Dittes’s portraits of St. Augustine of Hippo. Dittes attempts to explain the relationship between Augustine’s life and work by means of psychology. I try to explain the relationship between Dittes’s life and work by means of psychology, and I argue that attention to Dittes’s work on Augustine is a fruitful way of exploring this connection because Augustine is the religious thinker to whom Dittes gave the most psychological attention in his writing.

Who was this man in whom Dittes was so interested? Augustine of Hippo (354-430 C. E.) was born to a pagan father and a Christian mother. After a self-described wild adolescence, he began to work out his own intellectual and religious beliefs by means of trying on a number of ideas. To name a few, he was highly influenced by various strands of Platonism; he struggled with Manichaeism and skepticism; and, finally, he embraced Christianity. As Augustine noted in his *Confessions*—the first western religious autobiography—his heart was restless until it found rest in God. St. Ambrose baptized Augustine in the year 387, and Augustine later organized a monastery that eventually became established in Hippo where he was made bishop in 396. While he impacted the Western Church much more than the Eastern Church, Augustine, for better or for worse, is undisputedly one of the most influential theologians of all time. With regard to the history of doctrine, he is perhaps most well known for his ideas of original sin and just war theory, as well as for his views on the Donatist and Pelagian controversies—more on
these controversies follows below. He also greatly influenced John Calvin, arguably the greatest mind of the Protestant Reformation and the subject of my final case study.

*Dittes and the “Mourning Religion” Thesis*

The “mourning religion” thesis looks differently when applied to Dittes than it does when applied to Capps. This should be expected, and indeed is even appropriate, because the psychobiographical theory used to understand a given subject ought to be fitted to the data. The data, it perhaps goes without saying, should not be forced to fit the theory. Indeed, it would be curious if all three of my cases fit Homans’s theory in precisely the same way.

In the case of Capps, we observed three relatively distinct stages—one of loss, one of individuation, and one of recreation—that more or less fit with Homans’s theory. In the case of Dittes, however, the stages are not so distinct. What one can observe here is a kind of perpetual mourning—to use Dittes’s own words, a perpetual “grief work”—and religion helps in this regard. For Dittes there is, as it were, a continual mourning of religion as well as a continual recovery of religion, which, as we shall see, is most tellingly reflected in his writings on ministry and masculinity. But Dittes’s writings on Augustine, I shall argue, also played a significant role in Dittes own grief work. What we have, finally, in the case of Dittes is more of a mourning with religion than a mourning of religion. This mourning with religion (as opposed to a mourning of religion) is reflected in Dittes’s call for a “recalling” of ministry. Because religion is never fully and finally “lost” for Dittes—religion for Dittes is recalled—his relationship to religion ought to be thought of more as a melancholic relationship than a mourning relationship. Yet there is
mourning, and because this “grief work” is instrumental in Dittes’s creativity, Homans’s theory—and specifically Bertram Cohler’s (2008) modification of the theory by introducing the notion of adaptive melancholia—proves to be insightful here as well.

The Layout of This Chapter

This chapter, like the previous chapter, will have three main parts. Part one will present Dittes’s psychological interpretation of Augustine; part two will present autobiographical and biographical information concerning Dittes’s life; and part three will relate parts one and two in light of Homans’s “mourning religion” thesis.

Part One: Dittes on Augustine

This chapter, in terms of the focus of its analysis, departs from the previous chapter in a significant way. In the previous chapter, I focused on a psychobiographical monograph. In this chapter, however, I am focusing not on a monograph, but on two essays in an edited volume on the psychological study of Augustine’s *Confessions*. Since they focus on the *Confessions*, these essays are methodologically different from the psychobiographical monograph on Jesus, as they do not focus on the whole life of Augustine—indeed, the *Confessions* focus on the first 33 years of a man who lived to be 76—and do not draw on historical and biographical data outside of the *Confessions*. All of this is to say that the nature of this psychological portrait of Augustine is very different from the other two psychological portraits examined in this study. This is a limitation of both the volume and these essays in terms of offering a systematic psychological and historical interpretation of Augustine. But, to be sure, this was not the intent of the
volume; the intent of the volume was to focus on the *Confessions*. In any case, what I am interested in is not so much the strengths and weaknesses of these psychological portraits—whether of Jesus, of Augustine, or of Calvin—as I am interested in the connections between a scholar’s personal life and his or her public scholarship, connections that, I believe, can be fruitfully examined under the rubric of mourning.

The edited volume on Augustine’s *Confessions* is by Donald Capps and James Dittes (1990) and is titled *The Hunger of the Heart: Reflections on The Confessions of Augustine*. Dittes, as I noted in my chapter on Capps, was one of Capps’s mentors—but more on this relationship below. I have three primary reasons for focusing on Dittes and this edited volume on the psychological study of Augustine: 1) Dittes is a major figure in the history of pastoral theology and psychology of religion; 2) Dittes was a major proponent of introspection and reflexivity in academic thinking and writing, thereby inviting such investigations as I am doing in this study; and 3) *The Hunger of the Heart* constitutes a significant moment in the modern psychoanalytic study of Augustine.

Before examining Dittes’s essays in this volume, a few words about the overall volume are in order.

*The Hunger of the Heart and Doing Theology in the Basement*

In the preface to the volume, Capps and Dittes (1990) write, “In writing his *Confessions*, and in writing them in such self-revealing and probing fashion, Augustine issued an invitation to join him in giving scrutiny to his inner life” (p. vii). They note that many over the centuries have accepted this invitation, but that it was William James who described Augustine as a “divided self” and thus inaugurated the modern psychological
study of Augustine. They also note that the period from 1965 to 1990 has been an especially rich period in terms of a broad enterprise that might be called Augustine studies. These studies are scattered across disciplines—history, philosophy, psychology, psychology of religion, sociology, and literary studies—and appear in a wide-range of journals. The purpose of this volume, then, was to provide some coherence to the psychological study of Augustine.

Since the writings on Augustine were so scattered and numerous, it was hard for Capps and Dittes to decide what to include. In informing the reader about their selection of criteria for inclusion in the volume, Capps and Dittes note an important assumption—a theological assumption—that guided their work:

We believe that the *Confessions* cannot be meaningfully read nor Augustine reliably known except as one approaches them with a certain kind of theological sensitivity, the sense that these surges of passion that Augustine recounts are somehow—just as he claims—the way a man—this man, at least—wrestles with God for a sense of blessing. By “theological sense” we do not mean a creedal or ecclesiastical commitment, nor do we mean facility with the conceptual apparatus of formal systematic theology. Quite the contrary. We mean the sense that theological discoveries—discoveries about God and God’s ways—are made in the course of human aspirations and struggles. Thus, we believe that the reader of the *Confessions* is expected by their author to be sympathetic to the claim that knowledge of God comes through self-knowledge, acquired through the trials and errors of life. (pp. viii-ix)
For our purposes, what is crucial to note here is that knowledge of God, according to Capps and Dittes, comes from attention to human aspirations and struggles, which is, in effect, reversing the direction from which systematic and doctrinal theologians usually write about revelation, as they so often write about revelation as God’s own self-revelation, coming from heaven (cf. Migliore, 1991).

Capps and Dittes also note that “this volume has a twenty-five year history, traceable to a seminar at Yale Divinity School in 1964 in which James E. Dittes was the instructor and Donald Capps one of the students” (p. ix). The seminar focused on continuities between the life and work of religious figures—a classic topic in psychology of religion and, indeed, the topic of this dissertation. Interestingly, and appropriately, the seminar literally met in the basement, which:

invited students to a kind of theological work that some, accustomed to the theology “upstairs,” felt risky and alien. This was a theology of personal involvement, the discovery and discernment of God through self-discovery and self-discernment. By exploring the life-history of a Wesley, a Teresa, a Kierkegaard, a Bonhoeffer, a Newman, they discovered that the theological convictions of these individuals were forged in personal life experiences, many of them painful and traumatic. (p. ix)

The perspective advocated here by Capps and Dittes supports the basic premise of my dissertation, though I am, in a sense, turning the tables on them—a move that they no doubt would welcome—as I am looking for continuities in the life and work of three individuals writing in the fields of psychology of religion and pastoral theology. In other words, just as the theological convictions of, say, a Wesley, a Teresa, a Kierkegaard, a
Bonhoeffer, or a Newman were forged in personal experiences that were often painful and traumatic, I am arguing that the intellectual convictions of a Capps, a Dittes, and a Bouwsma were also forged in personal experiences that were often painful and traumatic.

Capps and Dittes close their preface with an explanation of the title for the volume. They note that it comes from one of the essays in the volume (Hawkins, 1990) in which it was noted that hunger is a chief metaphor in the *Confessions*. This metaphor, they believe, captures the essence of what Augustine meant when he wrote that our hearts are restless until they find rest in God. Capps and Dittes (1990) conclude, “So this volume centers on a man who was acutely sensitive to the hungers of the heart and their vicissitudes: to the pangs of emptiness, the aches of loss and of desires unfulfilled; and to the sharp pains of surfeit and glut, of desires fulfilled to nauseating excess” (p. x). What Augustine teaches us, Capps and Dittes believe, is that our deepest hungers are, at bottom, one: a yearning for God. And, moreover, that only God—not fame, not wealth, not knowledge, not power, not sex, not work, not entertainment, not friendship—can satisfy our hunger and make us full.

*Introduction: Augustine as a Model of Embodied Research and Reflection*

In their introduction, Capps and Dittes state quite clearly that the essays in this volume are personal. They write, “Many of the authors whose papers follow have invested themselves in a distinctly personal way in Augustine’s *Confessions*, transcending narrowly conventional academic disciplinary habits” (p. xii). Capps and Dittes support this personal participation, as they believe it follows the example of Augustine himself. Too often scholars become stifled by the letter, as they put it, because all too often “self-
conscious methodological objectivity and conceptual codifications high-jack the purposes of thinking—means sabotage ends—especially in matters religious and psychological” (p. xiii). Capps and Dittes suggest that, especially for the fields of psychology of religion and pastoral theology, Augustine’s *Confessions* offer “a model and a reminder of the power and fruitfulness of the empathic and even passionate involvement of the whole person in reflection and research” (p. xiii).

Capps and Dittes make a rather striking analogy with regard to their point about embodied research. They write, “In psychotherapy, transference and counter-transference are delicate, uncomfortable, and even dangerous experiences, but also, carefully used, essential to the effective outcome of the therapy” (p. xiii). They make this statement at the close of a paragraph that is making the case for personal investment in scholarship, that scholarship should involve the whole person. The implication here, with respect to Augustine, is that if one assumes that Augustine is an “object” of study, akin to the relationship of the therapist and a patient, then the scholar, who, in this analogy, stands for the therapist, would experience counter-transference during the course of scholarship. And this experience, Capps and Dittes suggest, is not detrimental to scholarship but, rather, is essential to it. It is striking that Capps and Dittes use the word transference as well. The implication here, it seems, is that Augustine can also be imagined as a “subject,” not an object, and that we have something to learn from him, that Augustine is, in other words, the therapist, and we are the patients. And here, as Augustine’s student, the scholar would experience transference. And this, too, is not detrimental to scholarship, but essential to it. Along similar lines, Carol Quillen (1998), a historian of the Renaissance who also does work in feminist theory, has used intersubjective
psychoanalysis—specifically the work of Jessica Benjamin—to reconfigure understandings of the relationship among the reader, the author, and the text, to imagine a model of interpretation where, as it were, subjects meet. The point here is epistemological—how is knowledge about a given subject gained or produced? And it is ethical—how should one go about gaining or producing such knowledge? And the point of view being advocated here by Capps and Dittes, as well as by Quillen, is that subjectivity is a tool, not a hindrance, for historical understanding (cf. Kripal, 2001). This point is raised again at the close of Capps and Dittes’s introduction, where they note that, when reading the Confessions, the “reader, feeling so bidden by Augustine, tries to see himself or herself in the story, and so, of course, tries fitting to Augustine theories and interpretations—whether Oedipal, narcissistic, or more subtle—that are, in some sense, self-portraits” (p. xx). Capps and Dittes are well aware of the limitations of such an approach, but, if we keep in mind Quillen’s rendering of subjectivity in historical research, the personal approach advocated by Capps and Dittes can be seen as more responsible and even more ethical than standard historical approaches to Augustine.

Continuities between the Life and Thought of Augustine

The “Continuities between the Life and Thought of Augustine” is Dittes’s (1990b) first essay on Augustine in the volume and was originally published in The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion (Dittes, 1965). In his essay, Dittes (1990b) suggests that the justification for a psychological study of Augustine comes from Augustine’s own blending of thought and experience: “The contents of the Confessions range from the most abstract ideation to the most particular autobiographical recall, and no attempt is
made to distinguish [the] two realms of life and thought” (p. 120). Further, Dittes also suggests that Augustine thought in psychological categories that are similar to our own. The psychological study of Augustine, then, is not only possible, but ought to be encouraged.

Dittes also addresses the problem of reductionism in this essay. He warns that readers should not fall into what he calls the “genetic fallacy,” that is, the view that one has rendered a subject’s insights or experiences false or invalid simply because one has mapped them, in this case, psychologically. He also notes that, especially in Christianity with its doctrine of the incarnation—that God is and has been revealed in history and in humanity—psychological explorations of beliefs do not render impossible the doctrine of revelation. Just because something has been explained does not mean that it has been explained away.

Dittes begins his article by noting that Augustine’s context—the Mediterranean world of the fourth century—was “a context rich with choice” in terms of intellectual development (p. 119). And Augustine, as noted, tested out many of these choices before converting to Christianity in his mid-thirties. Why, Dittes asks, did Augustine come down where he did? Why not another position? “The career of Augustine—precisely because the role of environmental influences seems indeterminate—leaves an especially large amount of room,” Dittes writes, “for entertaining psychological considerations as a factor in his intellectual development” (pp. 119-120). This, then, is precisely what Dittes does, that is, he entertains psychological considerations as a factor in Augustine’s development. “The problem,” Dittes suggests, “is not simply, [w]hy did Augustine become a Christian?” (p. 120). Indeed, one might argue that Augustine was never outside of the
realm of Christianity. The question is, more accurately, why did Augustine become the sort of Christian that he did, given that, perhaps then more than now, there were a variety of Christianities that he could have adopted? In a footnote, Dittes also mentions that there is the question as to why the generation of Augustine and the generation after Augustine chose to endorse his views, as they certainly “had a choice among more than one seminal and prominent thinker, more than one of whom would have satisfied the criterion of fidelity to previous standards of orthodoxy” (p. 121).

Elements of Augustine’s Thought

Dittes next proceeds by identifying six elements of Augustine’s thought.

1) The first is that Augustine adopted “a neo-Platonic scheme of the structure of the universe,” and, as such, he “emphasized the creative and sovereign functions of God” (p. 121). Being and goodness, Augustine argued, emanated from God, the Supreme Being. All of the emanations from God, such as the world and human beings, do not have independent existence, but they are dependent on God, and they are imperfect emanations of God.

2) The second idea that Dittes identifies is that, comparatively speaking, Augustine “put relatively little emphasis on the figure of Christ as a mediator or as a redemptive agent” (p. 122). Christ, Dittes argues, is largely seen as a manifestation of the revelation of God.

3) The third feature of Augustine’s thought that Dittes emphasizes is that “the church becomes the prime authority,” not the Scriptures or even Christ (p. 122).
4) The fourth feature that Dittes notes follows from the first and concerns the problem of evil in neo-Platonic thought. Evil is not a dynamic substance here; it is the absence of good, that is, the absence of God.

5) The fifth feature that Dittes observes is the question of human freedom, particularly as resulting from his debate with Pelagius: “A man’s fate is utterly and absolutely dependent upon the intention of God” (p. 112).

6) A sixth feature included his debates with the Donatists. The Donatists believed that the effectiveness of the sacraments was dependent upon the moral actions or status of the persons who were administering the sacraments. Therefore, the sacraments administered by a corrupt priest were not valid. Augustine argued, in face of this view, that the sacraments received their validity from God’s being and status, not the status and actions of human beings.

All six of these features of Augustine’s thought, Dittes suggests, rest on the “utter dependence of man on God, his own virtual impotence and ineffectiveness before God” (p. 122). Dittes also notes that a “parallel theme is that of remoteness, aloofness, absoluteness, impersonality, [i]napproachability—except in abject humility of confession—of this controlling God” (p. 122).

Internal Conflicts

Dittes next turns to a discussion of what he considers Augustine’s likely internal conflicts, as he believes that attention to these internal conflicts will shed light on why Augustine took the particular theological positions that he did. He begins with Augustine’s early life. He notes that Augustine was a “firstborn son of a young woman
and of an older and aloof father” (p. 123). In the *Confessions*, Monica is portrayed as hovering over Augustine, as when she followed him around the Mediterranean (cf. VI, 1, 1ff.). Dittes believes that “she must have hovered equally insistently in the nursery” (p. 123). Dittes also points out that Monica moved into Augustine’s household later in life and forced the mother of his child away (cf. VI, 13, 23 & VI, 15, 23), sabotaged his marriage plans at least twice (cf. II, 3 & VI, 13, 23), and shared with him a mutual mystical experience, “in which it is difficult to avoid hearing erotic overtones” (p. 123) (cf. IX, 10, 23). One does not need to be a card-carrying Freudian, Dittes suggests, to see that a boy raised by such a mother would develop a strong dependence on her. Indeed, “Augustine’s attachment to his mother seems clear both in his words about her and in the behavior he reports” (p. 123).

Dittes also observes indirect evidence for Augustine’s strong attachment to his mother. For example, Dittes finds it striking that Augustine seems preoccupied with infancy, as he devotes three chapters in the *Confessions* to infancy. Here, too, the mouth seems to be of great importance. Matters of the mouth seemed to retain lasting importance for him: in infancy, Augustine was preoccupied with the breast (cf. I, 7, 11), in adolescence, it was the pear (cf. II, 4, 9), and in his adult life, it was rhetoric (cf. IV, 1, 1.

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1 Augustine’s *Confessions* have been numbered in three primary ways: book, chapter, and paragraph number. The book numbers exist in the Latin versions of the *Confessions*, but the other numbering systems were added later. The chapter and paragraph number systems are independent of one another. I have included both here so as to accommodate both numbering systems. The citation VI, 1, 1 means, therefore, Book 6, chapter 1, paragraph 1.
1). Dittes notes that even the “crisis of the major transition in his life seems especially to have been associated with somatic elements of teeth and of lungs” (p. 123) (cf. IX, 2, 4ff.). Other indirect evidence for Augustine’s dependence on his mother that Dittes cites includes the fact that Augustine seemed to be a “mama’s boy” with regard to the reprimands of his teachers and the shenanigans of his classmates (cf. II).

In addition to Augustine’s strong attachment to his mother, Dittes also observes narcissism in the *Confessions*: “In a number of ways, Augustine seems preoccupied with himself, in a way appropriate for an infant, and relatively unconcerned with the welfare of circumstances and persons beyond himself, except as they affect him” (p. 123). The primary example of this is his abandonment of the mother of his child (cf. VI, 15, 25).

A third conflict that Dittes notes is Augustine’s “strong and strongly disturbing conscience” (p. 123). Dittes speculates that this is the result of a strong mother, who had become internalized. Dittes notes that:

[S]ome troubling, gnawing guilt may be inferred from such elements of the *Confessions* as these: his readiness to blame his errors on others, his peers, his teachers, his parents, and even God; the persevering, compulsive, ritualistic style of the “confessions”—not entirely unlike Martin Luther’s well-known, repetitious, unrelenting, but never satisfied confessions in the monastery; his disposition to even invent wrongs to be confessed, the constant ostentatious self-abasement. (p. 124)

All of this, Dittes suggests, suggests a vigorous super-ego. Dittes then cites a psychoanalytic article (Hoffmann, 1962) that gives support to his hypothesis that Augustine’s vigorous superego was related to close parental ties.
Fourth, Dittes notes that the theme of homosexuality runs throughout the *Confessions* (cf. II, 2, 2; III, 1, 1; IV, 4, 7) and, based on Freud’s Oedipal theory of the origins of homosexuality—a boy identifies with his mother rather than taking her as a love-object so that he can take his father as a love-object (Freud, 1918/2001; cf. Freud, 1911/2001)—this, too, lends support to the view that Augustine was especially close to his mother.

Next, so to speak, Dittes looks at the other side of the coin. That is, he turns from a discussion of Augustine’s attachment to his mother to a discussion of Augustine’s ambivalence toward his mother. Not only, as Dittes has suggested, did Augustine have a deep love for and a deep attachment to his mother, but he also had a great deal of hostility toward her as well. Since Augustine, in effect, “won” the Oedipal battle—his father died when Augustine was sixteen—his relationship with his mother “was all the more difficult and anxiety provoking” (p. 124). This hostility toward his mother, Dittes suggests, did not manifest itself directly. Rather, it was displaced onto other sources. In the *Confessions*, this hostility appears in his excessive complaints about his teachers and adults in general (cf. I, 9, 14), as well as his father (cf. II, 3, 5ff.)—but Monica is not mentioned. Yet, Dittes writes, “At the time of Monica’s death, which concludes the strictly autobiographical material of the first nine books, the only formal prayer that Augustine offers—and this is the only time in the entire thirteen books of the *Confessions* that he mentions his mother by name—is to pray for God’s forgiveness of Monica’s sins. In this safe context, Augustine does manage to recall an awareness of his mother’s imperfections” (p. 125) (cf. IX, 13, 24).
Another reaction, one that is perhaps more significant than hostility, is fearful aloofness. Dittes writes, “Having been caught and ‘burned’ in too intimate and trusting a relationship, a boy is likely to be cautious enough to never let it happen again” (p. 125). What could be taken as evidence of Augustine’s narcissism—e.g., his prolonged adolescent rebellion—Dittes takes as evidence for a conflict in Augustine between a desire to be dependent and a desire to be autonomous, a conflict that has its roots in, and is reflective of, his early experience of his mother’s pervasive presence and his efforts to both maintain this connection and to be free from it.

On the basis of this evidence, Dittes puts Augustine’s journey in psychological language. Indeed, he suggests that one way to understand Augustine’s life would be to view his struggles as a search for an identity. I have noted that some of Augustine’s confusion dealt with matters of vocation and personal beliefs, but part of this search was also a search for a gender identity. As Dittes put it, “Masculine or feminine? Was he, raised more by mother than by father, to assume a submissive feminine role, or an assertive virulent masculine stance?” (pp. 125-126). Or, to think in Oedipal terms, Dittes also notes that the conflict could be understood as confusion or ambivalence about whether he was a father or a son.

Resolution of Conflict

In the final section of the chapter, Dittes asserts what he believes constitutes the continuities between Augustine’s life and thought. Here he has a section on “behavioral solutions,” as well as a section on “his thought as a solution.” As I’ve noted, the basic conflict that Dittes discerns in Augustine is a conflict between dependence and
independence. Dittes thinks that Augustine’s sexual adventures and his participation in Manichean thought—self-described in book four of the *Confessions*—reflect his strivings for independence. How this is the case will be described below.

Regarding sexuality, Dittes notes that Augustine’s adolescent sexuality “apparently comprised an early year or so of promiscuity, followed by about thirteen years of fidelity to one concubine, until she was evicted by Monica, followed by a relation with another concubine, until he assumed celibacy” (p. 127). Dittes notes that we do not know enough about his sexuality to say very much. But, Dittes writes, “we know enough to suspect that considerably more was involved psychologically than simply ‘slavery to lust’” (p. 127). Dittes writes, “Male sexuality implies active self-assertive behavior” (p. 127). His mother disapproved of such sexuality for her son, but as Augustine engaged into it, “he could identify with his father and with his own sought-after masculine self-image” (p. 127). But, Dittes also notes, Augustine could not “go so far in his claim to assume the active husband-father role as to marry the girl” (p. 127).

Dittes next turns to a discussion of Manichean thought, as, in Dittes’s reading, it would have been important for Augustine’s negotiation of his conflict over dependence and independence. One important theme in Manichean thought includes the notion that

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2 For a discussion of the socio-cultural dimensions relevant to the issue of Augustine and his concubine, see Jonte-Pace (1993).

3 Today readers might look askance to Dittes’s language here, as Dittes seems to essentialize gender and sexuality when he speaks of “male sexuality” as “active” and “self-assertive.” But Dittes’s question still remains: What are we to make of the fact that Augustine refused to marry his lover?
there is a struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil, and that every individual needs to pick a side, so to speak, as they can literally affect the outcome of the battle. Such teachings could have served as a compensation for Augustine’s dependency. That is, if he did not have much independence as a child (because of his mother’s consuming presence), he found independence and agency in Manichean thought.

Dittes also sees how Manichean thought would have served Augustine’s dependency needs as well. He humorously writes: “If Augustine’s neo-Platonic understanding of God and the world is monistic, it may not be too facetious to say that it is also mom-istic” (p. 128, emphasis mine). Dittes, however, is also serious about this point, for, in neo-Platonic thought, everything “exists with reference to the single creating, managing force, which is invisible, but nevertheless supremely in charge” (p. 128). Augustine, Dittes believes, experienced his mother as such a supreme force—a force from which he could never escape, no matter where he went in the Mediterranean. And just “as Augustine presumably felt despair and emptiness when Monica turned her approval from him, so is evil characterized as the absence of positive emanations from the Godhead” (p. 128). That is, just as evil is the absence of good in neo-Platonism, emptiness—and despair—is the absence of the mother’s love for Augustine.

Dittes, as noted, observes how Manichean thought might have served Augustine’s need for independence as well. Interestingly, one place that Dittes finds evidence for this claim is in Augustine’s understanding of God’s goodness and power because, for Augustine, God’s goodness is subordinated to his power. God in the Confessions is not personal. Dittes thinks that this conception of God “betrays, in a safely disguised and indirect fashion, some of the ambivalence he feels about yielding and submitting so
absolutely to such a God” (p. 129)—an ambivalence that, Dittes suggests, he would have also felt in submitting to his mother.

Dittes also suggests that the three major intellectual and theological controversies of Augustine’s life—the controversies with the Pelagians, the Donatists, and the Manicheans—were all related to Augustine’s own emotional needs for independence. As Dittes puts it, “It cannot be [an] entirely fortuitous accident that the three ‘controversies’ around which so much of Augustine’s career all centered all have in common his apparent abhorrence of any assertion of an independent human agency” (p. 130). What, in a nutshell, did these groups believe to which Augustine protested? The Pelagians argued that human beings have the possibility of living without sin; the Donatists argued that, if a sinful or immoral priest administered the sacraments, the sacraments had no effect; and the Manicheans, as noted, believed that human beings play a significant role in the outcome of the battle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. In all three cases here, Augustine fought against the idea of human independence.

This discussion also leads Dittes to make a few brief comments on the psychological significance of the doctrine of predestination. “What,” Dittes asks, “does such a doctrine imply about the status of a man?” (p. 130). He writes,

Primarily, it demeans him and puts him in a low and submissive status without responsibility or power over the significant facts of his own life or in his environment. On the other hand, the doctrine does give him a status, and a very special status at that. Each man has received the special and personal attention of God, who has determined his fate. (p. 130)
“There is,” Dittes concludes, “in any doctrine of predestination such a subdued individualism, as counterpoint to the dominant theme of denying individual autonomy” (p. 130).

Dittes closes his article by discussing the maternal associations of the church and suggests that the words of Cyprian, an early church father, could be Augustine’s: “None can have God for a father who has not the church for a mother” (p. 131). Dittes suggests that Augustine fully identified with the maternal church but that he did not identify with Christ (and God as father is omitted from Dittes’s discussion here). Augustine’s struggle, which Dittes portrays here as a struggle between dependence and independence, played out in Augustine’s life and thought by means of struggling and dominating for his mother and her church. The resolution that Augustine came to was a “passive yielding and submission” for the sake of his mother and her church, and his so-called conversion, whether sudden or no, in any case was an act of submission. As Dittes puts it:

He surrendered to his mother, and to her church and to her wishes. He abandoned masculine sexuality. He abandoned all active personal striving, including his vocational roles and aspirations. He abandoned those things that his father particularly endorsed and represented. He abandoned, in short, the effort to be a father. Instead he became an obedient son. (p. 128)

Dittes’s portrait of Augustine here, then, is fundamentally an Oedipal interpretation.4

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4 Dittes’s interpretation has affinities with Freud’s (1928/2001) “A Religious Experience,” where Freud explains an American doctor’s conversion experience as an Oedipal submission to his father. Dittes’s portrait of Augustine understands Augustine’s conversion and his religious life more broadly as an Oedipal struggle with his mother,
Dittes’s (1990a) second essay on Augustine—“Augustine: The Search for a Fail-Safe God to Trust”—deals with one of Augustine’s major losses—namely, the death of his best friend. The man was not named, but Augustine referred to him as his “second self.” Dittes suggests that these paragraphs in the *Confessions* are “by far the most passionate paragraphs of this book” (p. 258), and Dittes chooses to quote some of these lines to intimate this passion. Here I relay a few of the most significant passages:

I thought that my soul and his soul were but one soul in two bodies.

My life was but a horror to me, because I would not live as but a half.

All things grew loathsome. (p. 258)

Dittes writes, “I take his grief to be the clearest definition Augustine gives us of his tormented spiritual search—telling us how his ‘heart is restless until it rests in You.’ It is the vivid portrayal Augustine gives us of the religious quest” (p. 258). There is something in the human heart, Dittes believes, that yearns to trust, deeply and intimately. As Dittes eloquently puts it, “The soul yearns to pour itself out—but not upon the sand” (p. 258). He elaborates:

The longing to become totally alive by becoming totally present, unreservedly committed to another, “all there” in firmly reliable bond, to love God with the

and, in the end, Augustine submitted, like the American doctor did as well. The difference, though, is that Augustine submitted to his mother, whereas the American doctor submitted to his father.
whole heart, whole soul, whole mind (as Augustine quotes Matthew 3.8)—trust unconditionally and absolutely—this is the religious impulse. (p. 258)

The religious dilemma, however, is how to find something worthy of such commitment? How is one to find something that is fail-safe?

Dittes next turns to a brief discussion of the pear-stealing episode in the *Confessions* (cf. II, 4, 9). Dittes notes that this event, which occurred during Augustine’s youth but nevertheless haunts him in mid-life as he is writing the *Confessions*, is one example of Augustine chasing after something that, in the end, did not prove worth the chase. And, this is precisely why the episode is torturing him many years later: the pears were not very good looking, did not taste good, the boys were not hungry and, in the end, they threw them at pigs. Dittes astutely observes that, in the course of writing about this event, Augustine does not reflect on the wrongdoing to the tree owner. Rather,

His brooding is the energy of the taking and paltry worth of the taken. . . . He makes the pear a deliberate metaphor for a conventional roster of worldly idols that seduce and betray such hot pursuit; gold and silver, pleasure of the senses, honor and power, and—with special attention to its allurement and sweetness—“the friendship of men, bound together by a loving tie.” (p. 259)

But these pursuits, Dittes observes, left Augustine wanting, and for him turned out to be idolatrous and self-defeating. Augustine, in other words, poured his heart out on the sand.

Everything, for Augustine, turned out to be untrustworthy: parents, teachers, mentors, students, friends, lovers, and ambitions. The theme of disappointment runs through all of his personal relationships and goals. Nothing was fail-safe, and nothing was satisfying—that is, until Augustine sought after God. Only then did his restlessness
find relief. But, finding God—or, rather, finding out that God can be trusted—took time for Augustine. Dittes suggests that, in book seven of the *Confessions*, Augustine does find God to be trustworthy. “The first six books of the *Confessions*,” Dittes writes, “tell the story of the pains of misplaced trust, the story of emotional energies squandered disproportionately to the quality of the objects of that energy, the story of idolatry and addiction, of soul poured out on sand, the story of Augustine’s first thirty years, the story for which Augustine had to find resolution” (p. 262).

Toward the end of the essay, Dittes’s language shifts. It shifts from an essay about Augustine to a personal reflection of sorts, something like a sermon from the preacher’s own heart. He retells a story that Augustine told about Alypius, a man who went to the area to watch a gladiator match. He did not want to go. His friends dragged him there. He went and closed his eyes, so as to avoid the passions of such madness. However, “[t]he lure was too powerful and he ‘drank in madness without knowing it’” (p. 262). He became just like everyone else in the crazed crowd. After relaying this story, Dittes writes, “[s]hutting the eyes, corking the soul does not work. The soul will pour, will fix on another—our heart *is* restless” (p. 262). Dittes here is not simply writing about Augustine or the *Confessions*, as indicated by his use of the word “our.” Here he indicates that this is how it—the human soul—is for him. And he believes that this is how it is for us as well. He continues, the soul “must find an object for this pouring which will not fail it, an object to trust which will prove trustworthy” (p. 262).

After making these somewhat personal remarks, Dittes shifts his focus back to Augustine. He suggests that Augustine turned to the tools of neo-Platonic philosophy to find such a fail-safe God in Christianity. He finds, or defines, God as incorruptible,
inviolable, and immutable. There are, Dittes notes, other ways to render God fail-safe in the history of Christian theology: the way of the pietist, where God is kept close and face to face; or the way of the sacramentalist, where God’s presence is carefully regulated by an office (the Roman Catholic Church, for example) and officers (e.g., priests) and contained in bread and wine; and there is the way of Augustine, which also became the way of Calvinists, where God is found to be fail-safe precisely because God is distant. Dittes elaborates:

The God rendered fail-safe by remoteness permits thereby some intimacy—but an intimacy rendered more intellectual, abstract, aesthetic than earthy and tender. The cost of no longer pouring the soul out onto sand is, apparently, the distilling of the soul into “harmonies.” (p. 263)

And such a God, Dittes suggests, is precisely what Augustine needed.

Dittes closes the essay by turning to the topic of Augustine’s conversion, which, Dittes argues, is characterized by the paradox of “intimacy and trust rendered safe by remoteness” (p. 263). Augustine’s conversion—detailed in book eight of the

Confessions—took place in a garden, perhaps recalling Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane (cf. Mark 14.32ff.). There were three people there: Alypius, his friend, his mother, and a disembodied voice. And just moments before the conversion, Continence, a seductive female figure, appears, who lures him to chastity.

Dittes notes that all of the figures in the first half of book eight are strangers to Augustine. Augustine gave up on his mentor Ambrose, whom he never met, and turned to Simplicianus, Ambrose’s teacher. And then there was Ponticianus, who was also a
stranger, who told him of Anthony—another stranger. From these encounters with strangers,

Into the radically transcendent he plunged, bypassing a God who could plunge radically, robustly, incarnationally, into history, and save its corruptibility, and fixing instead on a God so safely removed, barriered from the shifting devastating sands of human experience, safely and absolutely beyond the reach of Augustine’s grasp, a grasp which had found crumbled everything it clutched. To such a God, made powerful by distance, made approachable by distance, and only to such a God, Augustine could safely submit, radically trusting, intensely surrendering the very craving, and clutching, the very restlessness—in an act of self-transcendence as bold as his God’s—that had fueled and defined his life (p. 264)

The God that Augustine needed, Dittes seems to be suggesting, needed to be a stranger because everyone else and everything else he knew proved to be untrustworthy. Only strangers, and a God who is eternally a stranger, could be trusted.

**Part Two: Dittes’s Life and Work**

I now want to turn to a discussion of Dittes life, so as to set the stage for interpreting Dittes’s portrait of Augustine in light of Dittes’s own personal experiences. To do so, I will draw from a number of sources: a special edition of *Pastoral Psychology* dedicated to the career of Dittes, Dittes’s published autobiographical material, and personal correspondence with members of Dittes’s family. In part three, I will also add relevant biographical and autobiographical material as I examine Dittes’s work in light of his life.
In 2003, Lewis Rambo, editor of *Pastoral Psychology*, one of the oldest journals in the fields of pastoral care, pastoral theology, and psychology of religion, dedicated two issues to the career of Dittes. Donald Capps and Robert Dykstra served as guest editors. In the preface to the special edition, Capps and Dykstra (2003b) note that they proposed the idea for this issue to Rambo when they learned that Dittes had planned on retiring in 2002, and Rambo, a “disciple and devotee” of Dittes as well, readily agreed.

Capps, as previously noted, was a student of Dittes at Yale Divinity School, and Dykstra became the protégé of Capps at Princeton Theological Seminary. Dykstra earned his doctoral degree at Princeton Theological Seminary under the tutelage of Capps, and currently teaches there as full professor. Allan Cole Jr. is also an important figure in this lineage. Cole also did his doctoral work at Princeton Theological Seminary, and Capps and Dykstra are his mentors. These three scholars—Capps, Dykstra, and Cole—have remained close and work together on various projects (see, e.g., Dykstra, Cole, Capps, 2007), and Dittes’s influence is readily observable in the work of these three scholars. I consider myself a part of this lineage as well, because I have also studied with Capps and Dykstra, and I have co-authored a number of articles with Capps (see, e.g., Capps & Carlin, 2007a & b, 2008, 2009, & forthcoming; and see Carlin & Capps, 2009a & b, forthcoming). Dittes’s influence can also be observed in the work of the scholars who contributed to the special edition (see, e.g., McDargh, 2003). All of this is to say that Dittes’s influence has been vast and deep in the fields of psychology of religion and pastoral theology.
In “James E. Dittes: A Professional Portrait,” Capps (2003), as the title intimates, gives an account of the professional career of Dittes. He begins by noting that “[t]his portrait is necessarily partial and incomplete” (p. 17). He noted that some of the limitations include the fact that Capps did not work, as a colleague, with Dittes at Yale University, nor, of course, did he know him in the ways that Dittes’s own family knows him—as, for example, a husband, a father, or a son. Capps’s portrait is based on, rather, his “habit of reading much of what [Dittes] wrote near the time of its publication” (p. 17). As noted, Capps studied under Dittes at Yale Divinity School and, over the years, their relationship transitioned from a professor-student relationship to “a collegial relationship” (p. 18). The fact that this transition went so smoothly is, as Capps put it, a “testimony to his [Dittes’s] ability to be what others need him to be” (p. 18).

**Personal Background**

Capps discusses Dittes’s personal background in significant detail. He notes that Dittes “was born December 26, 1926, in Cleveland, Ohio” and was an only child (p. 18).
His father, Mercein, “dropped out of high school to become a carpenter,” and later became a high school industrial arts teacher (p. 18). Capps also notes that Dittes and his father “built a new family home single-handedly one summer” (p. 18). As far as religion was concerned, Dittes, although baptized Presbyterian, grew up in a Baptist church because his mother, Mary, was a soloist in the choir. Regarding these interesting facts, Capps writes, “[i]t has probably occurred to the reader . . . that a December 26 birthdate, a mother named Mary, and a father whose profession was carpentry would send a powerful message to a young boy that he was predestined to walk in the footsteps of Jesus” (p. 18). Capps continues, “That the ‘voice’ he heard in church each Sunday was not the authoritative thunderings of a pastor father but the hauntingly beautiful voice of a much-loved mother may also have led some readers to predict, had they known him then, that he would become what he did become, one who made a profession (in all senses of the word) of the ministry of care” (p. 18).

*Education and Professional History*

Capps notes that Dittes applied to both Yale and Oberlin colleges for undergraduate
study, that he was admitted to both. He chose, to the disappointment of his high school teachers, to go to Oberlin, mainly on the grounds that it was closer to home. He matriculated at Oberlin in 1944, but joined the Navy in 1945 and worked as a radio technician in the Pacific Ocean during World War II. He returned in 1946 and graduated from Oberlin in 1949 with a major in English and American literature.

He matriculated at Yale Divinity School in 1949 with an interest in psychology. After the first year, however, he took a leave of absence and went to Turkey to teach English. Toward the end of his first year in Turkey, he decided to apply to the doctoral program in the psychology department at Yale University. He was admitted and, when he returned, he was both a doctoral student in the psychology department and what we would today call a master’s student in the Divinity School (in other words, what we call a Master of Divinity degree today was, in Dittes’s day, referred to as a Bachelor of Divinity degree). In any case, he received his B. D. in 1955. Hugh Hartshorne, a psychology of religion professor at the Divinity School, retired in 1954 and Dittes “was invited to teach in his place the following year while he continued his doctoral studies in psychology” (p. 19). He finished his doctoral degree in 1958 and he was appointed to a position at Yale as Assistant Professor of Psychology of Religion. Capps briefly summarizes Dittes teaching career, which spanned 47 years, all of which were at Yale:

From 1955 to 1968 he moved steadily through the ranks of Instructor, Assistant and Associate Professor, and became Professor in 1968 at the age of 42. When he became a full professor with tenure, he was appointed to the Department of Psychology and the Department of Religious Studies. He was Director of Graduate Studies in the latter from 1969 to 1975, and intermittently from 1985–2001, and
Chair of the Department from 1975 to 1982. In 1984 his position was renamed Professor of Pastoral Theology and Psychology, and in 2001 was retitled Roger Squires Professor of Pastoral Counseling. (p. 19)

One can observe that Dittes was quite successful in rising through the ranks.

Family Life

Capps also notes that Dittes, while establishing himself professionally during the 1950s, was also creating a family: “Married from 1948 to 1983 to Frances Skinner Dittes, he became father to four children in the space of five years. Larry, the first and only son, was born in 1953. Three daughters, Nancy (born in 1954), Carolyn (1956) and Joanne (1958) followed” (p. 19). Larry died in 1959, when he six years old, from heart complications. Larry was also born with Down syndrome.

Dittes went through two divorces. He divorced his first wife, Frances Skinner Dittes, in 1983; he married Margaret House Rush in 1984 but divorced in 1986; and he married Anne Herbert Smith in 1987, and they are still married. In 1994 Dittes was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease and it has gotten progressively worse, making it very difficult for him to communicate these days. Anne has remained by his side to this day.

Dittes’s Writings

Capps’s essay is rather extensive—over thirty pages in print—so not all of the topics in the article will be presented here. In any case, Capps proceeds by discussing Dittes’s early years as a psychologist; his relationship with Carl Rogers, the influential non-directive and client-centered psychotherapist; and his involvement with the Society for
the Scientific Study of Religion (of which Dittes was Journal Editor from 1966 to 1971 and President from 1972 to 1973). Capps discusses several topics or themes that interested Dittes, such as the subject of typologies in psychological studies and secularization. Capps also notes Dittes’s interest in Augustine here and points out that his article—“Continuities Between the Life and Thought of Augustine”—was the first required reading for the psychology of religion course that he took from Dittes at Yale Divinity School, a course that met in the basement. As noted, the main argument of the article was that Augustine’s theology was an expression of his basic inner conflict concerning autonomy and dependency, which centered on his relationship with his mother. “For a group of students who were all in their early-to mid-twenties,” Capps writes, “this essay was far more ‘relevant’ than any of the neo-orthodox, philosophical, or even political theologies being touted upstairs, for autonomy v. dependency was also our personal dilemma, as was, for many of us, its parental locus” (p. 29).

Capps goes on to discuss Dittes’s work on doing psychological testing on candidates for ministry and Dittes’s books on church and ministry. Regarding the latter, Dittes’s (1967) first book, *The Church in the Way*, was made up of a blend of psychological perspectives, themes that are found in the thought of Freud and Rogers. The overall gist of his book is that it was an application of psychology of religion to pastoral theology, and the book especially focuses on the psychological concept of resistance. Capps also relates a personal story here that is relevant:

Having completed a summer unit of CPE between my junior and middler years [i.e., the first and second years of seminary] at Yale Divinity School, it occurred to me that I might use it to waive out of the required course in pastoral care and
counseling so that I could take a course in ethics (a newly acquired interest). So, I made an appointment to see Professor Dittes as I would need the instructor’s approval. After I made my case, he surprised me by informing me that the faculty was discussing some curricular changes and it was more than likely that the course would not be required by the time I planned to graduate. I said something about being willing to take my chances, thanked him, and headed for the door. What I did not anticipate was that he would follow me and say that if I ever wanted to talk about anything, I should not hesitate to make another appointment. Two years later, when I was in my first year of doctoral studies in philosophy at the University of California in Berkeley, and had come to the conclusion that many of the philosophical issues that were being discussed in classes and seminars were inherently psychological, I recalled his invitation, and wrote to the admissions office at Yale Divinity School for an S. T. M. application form. When I returned there the next fall, I signed up for his course in pastoral care and counseling. In a few short weeks, I had learned a new concept—resistance—to interpret my earlier visit to his office. (pp. 31-32)

“My second visit to his office,” Capps writes, “was for the purpose of asking him if he would serve as advisor of my S. T. M. thesis” (p. 32).

Capps next discusses some of the work that Dittes did in psychology of religion. He notes that, while Dittes was writing books on ministry (see, e.g., Dittes, 1970 & 1973), he was also writing articles in psychology of religion. One essay in particular that Capps discusses is an essay by Dittes (1977) in which he created an instrument for understanding Erikson as an investigator. The reason Capps discusses this essay is
because he thinks that this essay reveals information not only about Erikson as an
investigator, but also information about Dittes as an investigator. Capps (2003) notes that
Dittes “identifies four different modes ‘by which the personal reactions of the
investigator . . . do and do not become part of his [or her] investigation’” (p. 33). Capps
continues:

In the incongruent mode, the investigator’s reactions to the object of investigation
are suppressed. In the introductory mode, they lead to the investigation (that is, they
are a major factor in the decision to investigate the object in question). In the
instrumental mode, the investigator’s involvement is an intrinsic part of the
investigation. In the inflated mode, the investigator’s personal involvement
dominates the investigation. Consistent with his earlier support for William James’s
view of his own typology as having heuristic value, not some sort of ontological
status, he immediately makes the disclaimer that this “is, of course, a rough
typology and rougher labeling, no sooner done than needing refinement” [Dittes,

In this context, Capps also discusses Dittes’s take on Erikson’s personal involvement in
writing his psychobiographical book on Gandhi, particularly his point that Erikson turned
to the study of Gandhi—a contemporary figure—after the criticism of his book on Luther
(that, for example, his book on Luther drew on questionable sources, was anachronistic,
and so forth). But with Gandhi, Erikson showed that these criticisms did not hold: there
was plenty of material in the archives, and he could even interview eyewitnesses. Capps
writes, “Dittes was writing here of Erikson’s mode of investigation, but throughout the
essay he assesses the four modes of investigation by means of a personal illustration, his
own conversations with a man who had written [to] him, telling of several mystical experiences and asking if he was interested in hearing more about them” (p. 34). Dittes did follow-up with this man, “Mr. M.” While all of the specific details here are not important, the point that I want to make here is that Dittes advocated a method of personal involvement—what he called the “instrumental mode” of engagement and which was supported in the psychobiographical writings of Erikson—suggesting that, to the extent that Dittes himself employed this method, much of Dittes’s “life” can be discerned in his “work.”

Capps next discusses Dittes’s books on men and masculinity. He notes that Dittes writes for about a decade on men, and this decade of writing on men followed a decade of writing on ministry and the church. But, Capps notes, this transition was accidental, because Dittes’s (1985) first book on men—*The Male Predicament*—was intended to be a book on ministry. I would add that it is in these books that Dittes’s writing becomes more personal as well. Capps also intimates this point when he writes about Dittes’s (1996) last book on men, *Driven by Hope*: “The fact that he informs the reader in the preface that this book ‘aspires to be personal and . . . as conversational as the printed page allows,’ and invites the reader ‘to regard what follows as my way of saying *This is how it is with me*’ (p. xiv), indicates that [the theme explored in his book] is—and has been—‘the most relentless theme’ in his life as well” (p. 39).

The theme explored in *Driven by Hope* is the notion that life is full of disappointment and unfulfilled promises. Capps also notes a personal revelation that Dittes made about one of the “cases” in the book—namely, the case of Howard:

When I happened to mention my own resonance with “Howard” in our recent
conversation, Dittes confessed that “Howard’s” experience recounted in chapter four was his own. So perhaps one may conclude that the author, whoever he may have most resembled in earlier periods of his life, is most clearly present in this book in the form of this particular man, “Howard.” (p. 40)

I will pursue this issue further below.

Capps next turns back to a discussion of Dittes’s articles in psychology of religion. He notes that Dittes taught summer courses for the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1983, 1986, and 1991. All three seminars were on major psychologists of religion: Freud, Jung, James, and Augustine. Regarding the latter, Capps writes, “The inclusion of Augustine signaled his impatience with methodologies that neatly divided theologians and psychologists into two separate camps” (p. 40). In his conversations with Dittes, Capps asked him with which of the major psychologists of religion do you identify? Dittes responded that he most identified with James, because he “doesn’t fret about being accurate” (p. 40). Capps also asked him “the island question”—if you were stuck on an island and only had one book to read, what would it be?—and Dittes said that it would be Jung’s *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. Perhaps one reason for this is on account of the fact that Jung’s psychology is essentially a religious psychology. That is, Dittes saw himself as both a religionist and a psychologist, and Jung, in his own way, provided a model for how to be both. This model, in fact, employed the method of introspection, a method, as noted, that Dittes encouraged in his students and guided his own thinking and writing. If Dittes would choose Jung’s *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* as the one book he would take on an island, perhaps, if he were allowed to take two, the other would be Augustine’s *Confessions*. 
Capps notes that Dittes wrote essays on all of the major psychologists of religion, but Capps takes the opportunity here to discuss Dittes’s (1990a) second essay on Augustine, which I presented in some detail above. Capps notes that Dittes’s main point is that Augustine searched his whole life for something or someone to trust, but he did not find it until he put his trust in God. Augustine’s problem, in Dittes’s view, was that he had a tendency to over-commit, and these over-commitments inevitably led to disappointment. Augustine’s solution, then, was to trust in a God who did not over-commit, a God who was, rather, distant and could teach Augustine to be more distant himself. But, Capps writes:

Does Dittes endorse Augustine’s “solution?” I don’t think so. In Minister On the Spot, [Dittes] asks what is the confidence that permits one to go out on a limb [i.e., take risks in life], and are some ways of doing so “more faithful than others to the traditional Christian understanding of trust and its resulting freedom” (p. 96)? He proposes four possibilities (while aware, of course, that there may be others): the guaranteed soft landing [risks that do not have serious or painful consequences], clinging to the guaranteed limb [risks that are so minute that it is extremely unlikely that anything serious or painful could result], freedom as obligation [risks that risks because they are not taken out of choice but duty], and assurance is in the breaking [risks that are true risks, and, in all likelihood, will often end with serious and painful consequences, consequences that result in new growth]. While Augustine is one who clings to the guaranteed limb, for Dittes, the “assurance is in the breaking” orientation is the most faithful [to the Christian understanding of trust]. (p. 42)

In other words, Dittes portrays Augustine as coming to a position where he rejects risk-
taking, and Capps suggests that this is in opposition to Dittes’s own vision of risk-taking and the Christian life. I will pursue this issue further below.

_Dittes’s Legacy_

Capps continues to discuss other themes in Dittes’s work—he discusses his book on pastoral counseling in some detail (Dittes, 1999)—but I want to turn now, finally, to part of a conversation that Capps and Dittes had while Capps was interviewing Dittes. Capps (2003) writes, “Toward the conclusion of our most recent conversation, I asked him the inevitable and no doubt hackneyed question: ‘What do you view as your legacy, or what would you most wish to be remembered for?’” (p. 46). Capps notes that, “[i]n response, he said that he has tried to focus throughout his career on human relations, and to take special note of what we, individually and collectively, are _avoiding_, for it is in the identification and explanation of these avoidances that we come to know what it means to have faith and to witness to this faith. He also emphasized that he has opposed all forms of reductionism, whenever they appear” (p. 46). Capps adds, “On the other hand, such reductionisms have also drawn his attention to that which stands over and against them, and these opposing moves and forces are what he seeks to endorse and embrace” (p. 46). Capps closes his essay by discussing Dittes’s legacy for himself, and he notes that the greatest lesson that Dittes taught him was “how to be a liberated worker” (p. 48). For Capps, this means that work need not be oppressive and alienating in some kind of Marxist sense, but, rather, work can be liberating and freeing, a way to express oneself.
In “Some Accidents, Coincidents, and Intents,” Dittes (2003a) offers his vocational narrative in his own words, which was also published in the special edition of *Pastoral Psychology*. It is an entirely personal essay without any citations or references, and the basic point of the article is to reflect on his career, to explain, as it were, how he became a pastoral psychologist.

*Dittes’s Essay in the Special Edition*

Oberlin

Dittes begins by noting that he did not know the word “psychology” when he matriculated at Oberlin College as an undergraduate student. The director of admissions suggested to him that he take a psychology course, and so he signed up for one. When he went to class, however, he sat in the wrong room, the room across the hall, which turned out to be a philosophy of religion class. Dittes comments, “I was inadvertently recapitulating psychology’s own identity struggle or at least pre-capitulating my own” (p. 5). Dittes, however, majored in English Literature, and he delighted in such thinkers as Melville and Carlyle. He enjoyed their “willingness to leave their writing sometimes as an inventive puzzle to be worked out” (p. 5). He also appreciated this characteristic in his teachers.

While Dittes did not take the course that the director of admissions recommended in his first semester, he did get around to taking a psychology class in his last semester—perhaps, as Dittes intimates, because in the meantime he had married a psychology major. The course was on human motivation by Jake Finan, and it was taught from a behaviorist perspective. It was a little later until Dittes heard of Freud. Both behaviorism and
psychoanalysis, Dittes notes, came to influence him a great deal. Regarding the former, Dittes writes:

As I came to recognize only much later, behaviorism and rigorous empirical methodology provided a religious solution: the murky and the unruly could be made explicit, the perplexing held to account, passions managed. Mysteries of life needn’t be endured. They could be solved, controlled. It would be decades before I could appreciate that they could also be trusted and savored. (p. 6)

In other words, behaviorism, and later psychoanalysis, resonated with Dittes in a deeply personal way.

**Yale**

But his eagerness for psychology—whether behavioral or psychoanalytic—was not shared by students or faculty when he moved on to Yale Divinity School. Dittes describes what psychology in seminaries was like in those days:

The psychology in seminaries during the first half of the twentieth century was not, as in the latter half, the psychology of the clinic, i.e., attentive, in the wake of a depression, a world war, and Sigmund Freud, to the deeper, darker parts of personality, past, individual differences, and individual extremes. It was the psychology of the classroom, educational psychology, i.e., optimistic, attentive to the emerging, the newly born, the grand future—what William James might have been heard calling the healthy minded, except that William James was not much heard or heeded either. Even William James was too probing and too dark. (p. 6)

In short, Dittes felt alienated because he had nowhere to pursue his psychological interests.

**Turkey**

So, as he put it, he declared a moratorium. That is, he moved to central Asia Minor to teach English to Turkish boys and, in so doing, he put his vocational struggles on hold. As it
turned out, however, he came upon a library built by the U. S. State Department, which had a great number of psychology books. Dittes “soaked them up,” and this interest confirmed to him that he should become a psychologist. It is difficult to say how this experience affected Dittes overall, but Dittes (1955) did write an essay on Turkey, which he titled “The Christian Mission and Turkish Islam.” In the essay, Dittes discusses various strategies for converting Turkish Muslims to Christianity, but he bracketed the theological question of whether one should convert Muslims to Christianity. Perhaps this very hesitation is an indication that his time in Turkey may have opened him up to a more pluralist position.

_Becoming a Pastoral Psychologist_

After his two years in Turkey, he returned to Yale to finish his B. D. and began working on a Ph. D. in psychology. It is important to note here that Dittes never chose between studying religion and psychology. He pursued both. As Dittes put it:

> I could not, however, shake loose the Divinity School and the concerns it addressed and enlivened. Every divinity course paper was an extended and earnest effort to apply to some issue in the theological field the insights to be derived from something in my rapidly growing repertory of psychology. Every empirical psychological study was an attempt to deal with the issue that has gripped me as most central to the religious life and theological reflection. (p. 7)

Dittes also found that his psychological interests were now affirmed in the Divinity School upon his return. The psychology department applauded his efforts to “colonize” the Divinity School, and the faculty of the Divinity School, rather than being threatened, now asked him to become a faculty member. They saw him as a “scout” on their behalf.

In time, Dittes gradually and reluctantly abandoned empirical research. He became impatient with the amount of energy required to do empirical research, research that
offered very little insight. He embraced what he felt to be more meaningful psychologies, those of Freud, Jung, James, and Augustine. Moreover, he came to name his vocation as psychologist/religionist, which, as he puts it, is “clumsy, but accurate” (p. 9). He also called this “theological anthropology” and “pastoral theology.” But, regarding the latter, he has noted, “When I have used the term ‘pastoral theology’ I have meant essentially the same thing, a way of doing theology while looking over psychology’s shoulder. When the psychologist/religionist gives special attention to the role and work of a minister, it is called ‘pastoral psychology’ in my usage” (p. 9). “‘Pastoral counseling,’ ” Dittes writes, “is one portion or perspective of pastoral psychology” (p. 9).

Dittes notes his various teaching and administrative duties at Yale, and he mentions, in passing, that he tried to see his administrative duties as “occasions of pastoral practice” (p. 9).

And so Dittes came to think of himself as a pastoral psychologist. He writes, It is no small irony that this generous retrospective finds focus primarily on “pastoral psychology” and appears in a journal by the same name. For, of the many modes of introducing psychology into theological studies, the many ways of being a psychologist/religionist, none did I try so hard at the outset to resist (I choose that word advisedly, clinically, and invitingly—for those with ears to hear) as pastoral psychology. And in none was I so lightly credentialed—as I am sure I am not the first to notice. (p. 11)

There were, of course, other routes—that is, routes other than pastoral psychology—that Dittes could have followed in pursuing a combination of religion and psychology. Indeed, as he describes, Psychology of religion, pastoral theology, the psychology of clergy, educational psychology, the pursuit of eminent psychological thinkers as they pursued ultimate
and existential questions, the psychological rootings and intents of eminent theological thinkers, the systematic and rigorously empirical pursuit of purely psychological questions—especially in social and developmental psychology—which might have implications and analogies in religion: these and many other ways of being a psychologist in a theological community I found more appealing and myself more suited for and better trained to do than the role of pastoral psychologist. (p. 11)

However, Dittes writes, “A B. D. from Yale Divinity School and a Ph. D. from the Yale psychology department prepared me for much, but not for pastoral psychology” (p. 11). In all his years of training, he “never had a course in pastoral counseling or preaching or religious education or ministry in any form—until I came to teach them” (pp. 11-12). Nor did he have any training in Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE). He had “never heard of Carl Rogers until I came to devise my own syllabus to teach pastoral counseling” (p. 12). To any graduate student coming up in the fields of pastoral theology or pastoral care, as such fields are commonly named now, such facts might seem astonishing, remarkable, and humorous. Indeed, although Dittes gave the keynote address at the founding meeting of the American Association of Pastoral Counselors, which took place in Houston, Texas in 1966, Dittes was not eligible for membership.

Dittes came to discover that pastoral psychology was at the heart of everything that he taught about and wrote, “whether the announced and manifest topic was pastoral counseling or manhood or Augustine or racism or parish ministry or selfhood or commitment or Carl Jung or whatever” (p. 12). One reason for this was because Dittes found that, as he talked with students and clergy, he discovered that pastoral psychology
was the foundation of—not merely an application of—theology. Another reason was that he found that psychology, when it did not attend to the most ultimate matters—questions of God—it was hollow. And so, pastoral psychology became “inevitable” for Dittes (p. 12).

No Accumulated Knowledge, No One Belongs

Dittes notes that he felt that he never belonged to a coherent field, but he came to feel, paradoxically, that this is one characteristic of the field. “No one belongs,” Dittes came to believe, is a common feeling among pastoral psychologists (p. 13). In psychology of religion,

There is no knowledge being accumulated. The occasional attempt to manufacture an accumulation or tradition only proves the point. I came to realize that this is not a collective flaw which we all should repent and correct. This is a merit and strength of those of us who work in some version of psychology and religion. This tentativeness, this everyone-needs-to-start-fresh custom, reflects the way things are. (p. 13)

He continues, “It’s not just that there isn’t accumulation and tradition. There can’t be” (p. 13). Why? Because in matters of religion and psychology, there cannot be closure and codification, for “[t]here is always more than meets the eye” (p. 13). Dittes elaborates:

It is an important discovery that psychology of religion deals with matters that require—not permit, but require—regular return to the foundations of experience for correction and renewal and perspective. It is in the nature of things that meaningful psychology of religion requires—not permits, but requires—enfolding
and unfolding of self throughout as part of the study, so we can’t do it for each other. Maybe in some endeavors such as carpentry or the poring over scriptures and Talmud by young rabbis, it is important to know first what tradition has accumulated, then build from there. (p. 14)

“But not psychology of religion,” Dittes writes, “which is a personalized process regarding a personalized process. You have to plant and tend new seeds every year” (p. 14).

On Mentors

Dittes notes that he never really had mentors in the traditional sense, no one who showed him the way. Instead of mentors, Dittes notes that he had “sponsors,” people who, while perhaps not that interested in Dittes’s own questions, gave him the space and encouragement and endorsement needed for him to follow his own path. They wrote him, as it were, a blank check. Dittes notes some of these persons: Gordon Allport, H. Richard Niebuhr, Liston Pope, and Seward Hiltner, to name a few. Dittes also reflects on his father as a mentor:

Perhaps the most risk-taking angel, who supported my vocation the most even while he engaged it the least, was my father, Mercein Dittes. Nothing in my career much resembled his, a licensed electrician and teacher of junior high metal working and printing. Yet he steadfastly supported me, in his own way, and I find us now more on the same wave length than either of us thought then, when I recall mentoring moments like this: I was standing beside him in a church pew, shoulder to shoulder, struggling to read the bass line of the hymn and teach it to my newly
acquired bass voice. “It’s easier than you think,” he said, “just listen. You can hear the low notes.” (p. 15)

It is interesting that Dittes recalls this memory for several reasons. First, the memory occurs in church, and much of his own ministry has dealt with men and ministry. Second, Dittes’s father is showing young Dittes the way, how to navigate his way in the new world of manhood—he has a deep voice now. And third, his father is showing him the way by means of singing while his mother is in the choir singing. If, as a boy, he was able to sing like his mother, now, as a man, he must learn to sing like a man and, as he struggles to do so, his father, it appears, lends a gracious hand to him.

The Central Theme of Dittes’s Writings

Dittes rhetorically asks, “Is there a gist or focus or motif to my diffuse writings? People have a right to ask” (p. 15). Dittes responds that the answer is “The-ism.” By The-ism he means the word “the” as opposed to the word “a.” For Dittes, “the” emphasizes finality and precision, while “a” reflects tentativeness and imprecision. He elaborates,

I have studied The-ism, and its elusive opposite. I seem not to have got much beyond my doctoral dissertation of half a century ago, entitled, with a pseudo precision that threatens to mock its own thesis, “Effects of changes in self-esteem upon impulsiveness and deliberation in making judgments.” I have come only so far perhaps as to clarify the sequence and emphasize the self-assuring function of certitude; that is, mostly what I have studied has reversed the dissertation title and become “the effects of making judgments on self-esteem.” (p. 15)

Dittes notes that this motif has had many aliases in his writings over the years, and he
even wonders if this motif “will turn out to be an alias or proxy, an approximation of the motif, but only an approximation” (p. 16). Dittes notes that certain theological concepts have stood in as aliases for this motif, concepts such as idolatry and works, which are traditional terms, and concepts such as frozen power and script-ure, which are his own terms. Dittes writes, “There are many vehicles conveying the promises of blessed assurance, and breaking them” (p. 16).

He has written about living beyond the various isms, beyond various scripts. He has talked about such living in terms of faith, grace, and liberation. “It was, of course,” Dittes writes, “the search for models of living without the the-ism that attracted me, over and over again, to William James and to Carl Jung” (p. 16). Dittes elaborates: William James “was never afraid of leftovers, ideas that provided insufficient fit or certitude to any particular system. The leftovers can be used—usefulness being a far more important criterion than certitude or completeness—some other time, some other system” (p. 16).

But Dittes ends his essay by reflecting on the importance of Carl Jung for him, the author of the one book that he would take with him if he were stranded on an island:

Carl Jung who turned inside out the conventional discussion about “subjective and “objective.” The “subjective” is in fact the rawest kind of “objective” evidence that we have, the most reliable and discerning, the truest to experience. It’s just that it is fugitive, revealed only to trust. (p. 16)

I would add that Dittes ends this essay about his career by speaking of reversals, of turning conventional discussions inside out.
I now want to turn to a discussion of Dittes’s writings on men, because these writings reveal a great deal about Dittes personally. This book also contains his most sustained explicit autobiographical reflection in any of his monographs, a reflection that centers on Joseph, the father of Jesus. In the dedication of *The Male Predicament*—Dittes’s first book on men—Dittes (1985) writes, “For Mercein and Larry, my father and my son: We never had a chance to say these things to each other (p. xv). In the preface, Dittes writes, “This book is dedicated to the two important males in my life, my father and my son, with whom I have had to carry on these conversations in the silence of a still grieving heart” (p. xiii). He dedicates the book to many other men and also to “the women who have shared with me the throes and joys of a now and then liberation” (p. xiii). This book, then, was written while Dittes was grieving, presumably while he was grieving the absence of both of these males in his life.

*Learning the Role of Joseph*

In this section, I want to focus on Dittes’s reflections on Joseph. The title of chapter one is “Joseph: Frozen Power.” The central metaphor for this chapter—and perhaps for the book, as well as Dittes’s own life—is an experience that he had when he was thirteen years old. Dittes writes:

I learned to play Joseph, quite literally, the year I became a teenager. Miss Gardener and Miss Swearer, who produced the Christmas pageant that year, cast me in the lead role, they said, and taught me how to do it just right. Though their script was only one of many in a boy’s life, not even the first, not even the most
rigid, it was a clean and spare script, pure manliness, as taught by women—which is how most of us have learned it. (p. 3)

Dittes explains how he ended up playing the role of Joseph: “First, they enticed me with promises: a big part, an important role, top billing, right next to Mary. I said I would do it. Joseph had exchanged promises, too; Mary would become his wife and bear his children” (p. 3). However, “Then, like his, my expectations were shattered. The script turned out quite different from the billing and the built up expectations, different in the same way. Once recruited and on stage, my instructions were simple and absolute: don’t move!” (p. 3). Dittes describes how he was instructed to play the role:

Eyes down, one hand benignly on Mary’s shoulder, the other hand out in open receptive gesture, welcoming all pilgrims, I was to freeze, stock-still, the only person in the pageant unmoving and unmoved, the lead role become part of the scenery. . . . Presiding, in charge but uncharged, steadfastly going through the motions without moving a muscle. I stuck it out manfully as Joseph did, the father who was not the father. (pp. 3-4)

And Dittes reflects on the importance of the whole episode, particularly on what it might mean for men and, in any case, what it did mean for him: “Learning to be Joseph for Miss Gardner and Miss Swearer, I was learning to be a man for them, and for all whom they spoke, and shaped. For is this not every man’s assignment in our culture, that we run in place?” (p. 4).

Dittes believes that our culture tricks or misleads men. Our culture invites men to be leaders, but, at the same time, it asks them to lead by “freezing.” Dittes explains:

When men believe the promise of top billing, the invitation to be the center of the
action, but don’t understand that the script requires them to freeze—when they
misperceive the promises as the script—then they spend many heartbreaking and
ulcer-plagued years trying to make a difference, trying to have impact and effect,
trying to leave the world different from the way they found it. Spent, burned, and
burnt out, at last they discover what the Miss Gardners and Miss Swearers knew all
along, that the script only requires them to freeze, to simulate action, to be prop and
scenery for others to act out their pageantry. (p. 4)

These lines, it seems to me, are full of grief. They are, as it were, a part of the mourning
process. Dittes is not only reflecting on this event from his childhood, but he is also
reflecting on what it is like to be a man today, that is, in 1985, when Dittes is approaching
the age of sixty. The promises made to men, Dittes is suggesting, are not fulfilled. A
man’s destiny is not what he thought it would be.

Dittes’s Grandfather

Immediately after Dittes’s recounting of the Christmas pageant story, and what it came to
mean for him in terms of his own sense of manhood, he tells a story about his
grandfather. His grandfather was a man who “always did what was right” (p. 6). He was a
husband, a father, and a minister. He took extra work outside of ministry so as to not put
stress on the church budget. However,

Already successful as minister to a large city church in is thirties, he relinquished
that when his denomination asked him to move [w]est at the turn of the century to
start a new church. Once he had moved, the denomination abandoned its support,
leaving him stranded and a failure. (p. 6)
He never made it back on the ladder and struggled the rest of his life. He never complained, though—because real men don’t complain, so they are taught—that is, until late in life. He came to find that the Psalms are true, that the wicked prosper, and that the righteous suffer. And he gave this advice to Dittes: “Take a good look down the road before you make any big decisions” (p. 7). Dittes adds: “Why can’t fathers pass this hard-won wisdom to their sons—or at least wink when they pass on the role assignments—this wisdom that the roles of manhood are isolated roles, not part of a genuinely working ecology, that the people supposed to play those complementary roles that are needed to justify the scripts of manhood aren’t doing so” (p. 7). He continues, “Fathers can’t warn or wink because the rules of manhood forbid such confession. Real men don’t confess to feeling duped or angry, because that is to confess loss of control” (p. 7).

Joseph and the Male Predicament

Later in the chapter, Dittes returns to the subject of Joseph. He notes that “[t]he difference between bringing my own energy to the role and getting my energy from the role is the tragic male predicament” (p. 16). That is, men get energy and are rewarded for sacrificing a part of themselves. If one wants the benefits of manhood, one has to act like a man. Dittes recounts the rewards that he received for playing the role of Joseph:

At the cast party “Mary” stood off by herself giving me long wide-eye looks, preteen adoration. And for weeks afterwards, kids who had played kings and shepherds would pass me in hallways with eyes averted, a vestige of the deference they had shown me in the pageant. For, as dutifully, even abjectly, as I may have complied with the script, the script called for me to be magisterial. Though I gave
up playing Joseph my way, their Joseph played me. Their Joseph dominated me, but in such a way that others perceived me as dominating them. (p. 17)

“I may have been frozen, impotent,” Dittes writes, “but I was frozen in a pose of power” (p. 17).

“Men,” Dittes suggests, “are often portrayed as victims of stereotyping and role typing. The principle purpose of this chapter so far has been to draw that very portrait” (p. 21). He continues:

Men are just as often and just as readily portrayed as perpetrators of stereotyping and role typing, forcing people into roles to fit their own schemes. Other chapters in this book draw that portrait. The remaining pages of this chapter propose to show that these two portraits, stereotyped and stereotyper, pushed and pusher, are one portrait. (p. 21)

“These pages,” Dittes writes “will try to make it clear and plausible that the man, frozen in place, fixed, stereotyped, role typed, once he comes to fill the role, to play the script as his, must support that role by enlisting others in the same script” (p. 21).

Dittes notes how other people would fix him in his role. He notes that folks would say to him: “How tidy you keep your lawn,” and “Your voice sounds so good from the pulpit,” and “You have such a nice smile and broad shoulders,” and “You tell jokes well,” and “You are so sensitive” (p. 22). To be a man, it was conveyed to Dittes, one had to keep one’s lawn clean, have a strong voice, have a nice smile, workout so as to have broad shoulders, by funny, and be sensitive. To be a man, Dittes is suggesting, is to be like Joseph, and to be like Joseph is

(1) to yearn for the richness and color and depth of life which you know is your
natural birthright and a God-given promise; (2) to be assigned, instead, a task, a fixed role; (3) to adopt that task as yours, that role as you, and to devise ways of sustaining it, to the point of (a) enlisting others into the script implied by your role and assigning them their corresponding tasks and fixed roles, and (b) bringing vigor and energy and imagination into protecting those roles, theirs and yours, from the erosions and ravages of that rich birthright of life, once—and still?—your treasured promise. (p. 29)

Dittes writes eloquently, perhaps from his experience, about what it is like to be Joseph, about what it is like to be a man:

To be Joseph is to dream of becoming a professor and to live in that dream intently until appointment and tenure are in hand, only to discover that the professional role is so straitened as to be an exile of drudgery: students and public expect you to pronounce and profess, not just search and query; the university expects you to chair committees; the politics of academia requires you to connive; publishers require you to shape your ideas to market needs. The dream has led you into exile from itself. (p. 208)

He continues,

To be Joseph is to come, with bursting high anticipation, to a sexual rendezvous—perhaps your first, perhaps only the newest—tumescent and throbbing with expectation for the intensity and intimacy and the union. And it is disastrous, not just disappointing, not just falling short, but disastrous. The lofting thrill you intended to deliver and receive never happens; instead, self-conscious numbness for both of you. No total merging; instead, an unwanted small secret war and mutual
second-guessing and strategizing; the missed communications, as between strangers, rather than the unspoken, intuitive total blending of lovers. So you lie there in this pit and this exile, brought low by your high dreams. But you are Joseph, so you live into the dismay, together. You say to your lover, comfortably, “We messed that up.” Not just the stiff, subtly protective “I messed that up,” which invites reassurance and more game playing. “We messed that up,” and there is hugging and mock slapping and tears and laughing and an honest intimacy and union never dreamed of in the first dream. (pp. 209-210)

To be a man, Dittes writes, is to be disappointed and disillusioned with one’s dreams, but he is also suggesting that one’s dreams, paradoxically, can somehow be satisfied if they can be honestly engaged, disappointment and all.

In “Joseph: Father Nevertheless,” the final chapter in The Male Predicament, Dittes returns, as the title intimates, to the story of Joseph, because Dittes believes that the Joseph story aptly describes the male predicament. Dittes describes Joseph as a man in exile, a man fleeing Bethlehem to Egypt. And Joseph was an exile in his own home: the man who was a father but who was not the father. He was, as Matthew portrays him and as Dittes was instructed to play him, a part of the scenery. Joseph is a man of the wilderness, but not the wilderness of Moses who was marching toward the Promised Land, or the wilderness of John the Baptist who proclaimed God’s Kingdom, or the wilderness of Jesus who faced the temptations of the Devil. Joseph’s wilderness, unlike all of these, was un-dramatic and off course. “Joseph’s story” Dittes writes, is the “male story, the male predicament: promises hijacked, life diverted, trapped in dreams too big or chores too mean” (p. 202). He continues, “Trapped by our desperate hunger for the
promises to be true, we fiercely latch onto the pieces of the promises that we can reach, and the imitations, and take the part for the whole, the role for reality, the idol for the god” (p. 202, emphasis mine).

Dittes notes that there are three responses to the “exile” in which men find themselves. The first is to escape, deny, defy, and reject the claims of wilderness. The second is to accept and surrender to the wilderness. And Dittes proposes a third way as well—not the way of compromise, because he doubts such compromise is possible—what he refers to as an embracing of both simultaneously. He elaborates:

Play our role heartily, as though it were the real thing, and disdain it with a hearty horse laugh, knowing it isn’t. You may be in the role now, thoroughly playing it out, but you are not the role. You may own it, but it doesn’t own you. Accept the script, but know you are more than any script. Live out the looseness and freedom of hearty overcommitment. (p. 203)

Dittes writes, “What the God of the New Testament learned—and teaches—is what every other creative artist and lover learns: self-fulfillment is found in self-abandonment” (p. 223). He continues, “As the New Testament puts it, in one place, ‘Whoever would save his life must lose it’ (Matthew 16.25). Or, as it is put another way in the New Testament, at the beginning: and as we read at the beginning of this book, ‘When Joseph woke up, he married Mary, as the angel of the Lord had told him to. But he had no sexual relations

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5 Dittes’s use of the word hunger seems significant, as this is a word that he uses to describe Augustine. And Dittes also raises in this context the issue of birthright: “The birthright of life that surges within us gets thwarted by the scripts fashioned to make us ‘men’” (p. 202). I will return to this issue below.
with her before she gave birth to his son. And Joseph named him Jesus’” (p. 223).

And so what we have here, it seems to me, is a restoration or, to use Dittes’s words, a re-calling of the Joseph story. Throughout the book Dittes was lamenting the Joseph story, both as he was instructed to play the role in the Christmas pageant and in the Bible itself—Joseph was the father who was not the father, as he put it. But, by the end of the book, after a sobering reading of the story, Dittes was able to reclaim, restore, and recall this story by taking it as a religious model for men, but only after struggling deeply with the story.

*Family Correspondence*

Part of my research into Dittes’s life included correspondence with his family, primarily with his daughter, Carolyn Dittes. Carolyn followed her father into ministry, as she served as a chaplain to Harvard University. When I first wrote to Carolyn, she mentioned to me that her father was staying at the Health Center at Whitney Center in Hamden, Connecticut. She also mentioned that communicating with him these days is difficult, because the symptoms of his Parkinson's disease are very advanced (Personal Communication, August 11, 2008). Carolyn notes that:

> One of the consequences of my dad's advancing Parkinson's disease is that he does not really know what he can and cannot do. *None* of us know, and it changes from day to day, sometimes better, sometimes worse. It is very unpredictable. Dad seems these days to think he can accomplish more than he really can and he even convinces us around him that he can and will, and then when it doesn't happen it is disappointing and frustrating, for everyone. (Personal Communication, August 25,
She continues,

Up until recently the disease seemed to affect him a lot physically, but not mentally; his mind was still sharp. He couldn't always communicate what he was thinking, but he was thinking clearly. During my last visit with him this month, it was clear to me that this has changed and is changing. His mind is mostly not the clever, sharp, clear, insightful, witty mind that I associate with my dad. His powerful one-liners, [the ones] that completely re-frame entire situations, are very few and far between now. He is often confused or seems very out-of-it and far away. (Personal Communication, August 11, 2008)

Such is Dittes’s life now as I am writing this dissertation.

Carolyn and I corresponded for a number of months. One of the questions that I asked her about Dittes concerned his religiousness. I asked her if she could say a few words about it, describe it in some way. She responded, “I would not describe him as traditional or radical, religiously. I'd say he was the opposite of dogmatic” (Personal Communication, December 20, 2008). She also noted that “[c]ertain passages of Scripture held meaning for him. For example, when my sisters and dad were burying his mother's ashes, it was important to Dad to say Psalm 23” (Personal Communication, December 20, 2008). Carolyn also wrote about the religiousness of her paternal grandfather, Mercein Dittes. She described him as a “gentle, sweet, kind” man, and she remembered that when he was sick and nearing death, his eyes would become filled with tears as he would say grace before meals. Dittes explained to her that he would become emotional when talking with God, because he was ill. She also recalled a story that Dittes
told her about his own childhood. One time when Dittes, as a boy, went camping with his mother and father, the mosquitoes were particularly fierce. But his father did not swat them away. The reason he did not swat them away was so that they would be attracted to him, and not his wife and son (Personal Communication, April 24, 2009).

Nancy Dittes, also one of Dittes’s daughters, also corresponded with me about Dittes relationship with his father. I noted above that Dittes and his father, the carpenter, built a family house together. Nancy provided me with more details on the experience. She writes:

I think [the] project . . . went on for years, starting as a one-room cottage "get-away" from downtown Cleveland; then they winterized it and added on to make it their full-time home, where Mercein kept bees and grew Christmas trees and sunflowers in retirement, until they moved to Florida in 1960 or 1961. (Personal Correspondence, April 28, 2009)

She added, “Recently, Dad gave me the impression that he resented having to work on the house so much, and that there were things that became very annoying about his father” (Personal Correspondence, April 28, 2009). Nancy also wrote to me about how Mercein died:

When Dad got the call that Mercein was going downhill fast, Dad dropped everything (I assume) and hopped on a series of planes and taxis. Alas, Mercein died a very short time (minutes, or an hour?) before Dad arrived at his bedside, and Dad thought Mercein had controlled that. Jim said that he thought Mercein didn't want his son to see him looking so weak and helpless, but I wondered if Dad was really hurt, with other thoughts going through his mind. (Personal Correspondence,
April 28, 2009

These experiences with his father seem to explain, in part, Dittes’s professional interest in writing about manhood.

Dittes does not write about his mother in his writings, though, as noted, he mentions his father from time to time, as well as his grandfather. I asked Carolyn to say a few words about Dittes’s relationship with his mother, Mary. Carolyn wrote,

He tells the story of his mother “taking to her bed for many weeks” when he was around teen-age years. Though Dad didn’t “diagnose” her with categories such as “clinical depression” because such terms were not used during most of her lifetime, I do think that she suffered from some sort of depression much of the time, although she usually presented a “pleasant” front. She could also be very critical in a very quiet, under-the-breath kind of way, again with a smile on her face. Dad got very angry with her when she made comments about his weight gain in the 1970s and 1980s. (Personal Correspondence, April 26, 2009)

Given the fact that Dittes did not write about his mother in his public writings, one might be led to conclude that he did not have much to say about her or his relationship with her, or that it was not as influential as other relationships. However, these comments from Carolyn intimate that it is much more likely that this relationship was deeply important to and problematic for him—and her absence in his writings reinforces—rather than challenges—this importance, especially if one takes into account the notion of resistance, which, not incidentally, was a major academic topic for Dittes (cf. Capps, 2002).

Another part of my correspondence with Carolyn involved her passing along information to me from Anne Smith, Dittes’s wife. Carolyn would pass my questions
along to Anne, and Anne would ask her husband my questions. Below are some of the
questions that Anne asked Dittes, as well as his responses:

Q. Were your parents traditional in their religiousness?
A. My parents were very traditional Baptists. Both sang in the church choir (mother
was a soloist) and my father had his own special seat on the last row, and was on
several committees and very active in the church. My mother was more involved in
the social organizations of the church. They were Republicans who were appalled
by Roosevelt.

Q. Would you call yourself a traditional/radical?
A. More like an outdated radical. I was a far-out radical in line with new ideas that
came out in the 1930s (e.g., about birth control and capitol punishment.) And some
of these were similar to ideas that came out in the 1970s. I took the lead in radical
issues when I was at Oberlin and editor of the college newspaper. I preached my
first sermon at Oberlin: “Open Mind.”

Q. Were your ideas similar to William James’s?
A. No, he was more like a “father” to my ideas. He did espouse openness and I was
influenced by him; I couldn’t say I was in his “school”—he never had one because
his main characteristic was “openness.”

Q. What led you to Augustine?
A. Chance. I ran two different study grants and got extra money for them. There
were six or seven of us in the group and we decided to write papers on Augustine.
Mine was the only one that got published. About twenty-five years later, Don
Capps gathered some of the same group and suggested we write papers on
Augustine and again mine was the only one that got published. I was somewhat of an authority on Augustine by that time and taught courses at Yale Divinity School and for the National Endowment for the Humanities a couple of summers comparing Augustine and Jung. I also taught a somewhat controversial course at the Div School on the Theology of Jung and Freud. I wrote two long papers on Jung’s theology that are in the Yale Divinity School library. (Personal Communication, December 22, 2008)

Although Dittes has trouble communicating—speaking and writing—these days, from these responses it is clear that he can do so very effectively with the appropriate help from others, and his memory is still very sharp. Much of what is here was previously noted in Capps’s biographical essay on Dittes and Dittes’s own autobiographical essay, but it is interesting to note that Dittes thought of himself as an “outdated radical,” while his parents were “Republicans who were appalled by Roosevelt.” It is also striking that “chance” led him to Augustine. If chance did indeed lead Dittes to Augustine, his interpretation, I suggest, was anything but a matter of chance. It was, rather, deeply colored by his own life experiences. It is to this topic I now turn.

Part Three: Mourning and the Relation of Dittes’s Life to His Work

I suggest that Homans’s “mourning religion” thesis (and a particular discussion of the thesis) can shed some light on the relationship between Dittes’s life and work. I suggest that Dittes’s mourning was ongoing, that it did not entail a clear rejection or letting go of religion, and in this sense it would be better to speak of this relationship in terms of melancholia rather than mourning. Dittes’s work, as we shall see, was preoccupied with
grief and mourning, and he believed that religion could be helpful in the mourning process.

What, specifically, was Dittes mourning, and what does this mourning have to do with religion? I argue that the central aspect of Dittes’s mourning entailed his giving up and recalling his sense of personal destiny (what Dittes sometimes called, in general when writing about men, the chronic shadow of destiny), which was rooted, in all likelihood, in the fact that he was the son of a Mary and the son of a carpenter, and born the day after Christmas. How could this boy who was named James (also the name of a brother of Jesus) and who would eventually become a seminary professor not believe that God had great plans for him, a wonderful destiny? This sense of destiny would have been all the more reinforced by his personal successes, such as being admitted to prestigious Yale University and then asked to stay to become a professor there.

Yet Dittes did come to give up this destiny—partially. That is, he re-deemed it and re-called it. In this giving up and in this recalling, Dittes found Augustine as an instrumental guide because he was able to identify with Augustine due to certain similarities in their biographies (e.g., when they were in their thirties, they both lost their only son). Dittes, however, was not able to endorse Augustine’s own religious solution to the problems posed by life; instead, Dittes created his own. Dittes’s rejection of Augustine’s solution is an expression of what I have been calling the dynamic of reversals and restorations in contemporary psychology of religion and pastoral theology. Other losses that Dittes worked through, all of which I noted above, include:

1) his grandfather’s disillusionment with religion;

2) his experience of playing Joseph in the school Christmas pageant;
3) the death of his son;
4) the death of his parents; and
5) his two divorces.

In his writings on Augustine, and in other writings in which he invokes Augustine, Dittes was able to address these losses.

In exploring the relationship between Dittes’s life and his work, I want to turn to several sources by Dittes that I did not discuss above—an essay on grief, an essay on the self, and Dittes’s case of “Howard” in *Driven by Hope*. These sources demonstrate that grief was a central aspect of Dittes’s thought and, I suggest, his personal life as well. Furthermore, they intimate the character of his grief, which was, above all else, a mourning (and recalling) of his own sense of personal destiny. I argue that the best way to characterize Dittes’s relationship with religion and loss would be to utilize what Bertram Cohler (2008) has called “adaptive melancholia.” I will begin with Cohler so as to set the stage for my interpretation of the relationship between Dittes’s life and work.

*Bertram Cohler’s Notion of Adaptive Melancholia*

In “Nostalgia and the Disenchantment with Modernity,” Bertram Cohler (2008) challenges the view that nostalgia is pathological because it is an expression of melancholia, that is, an inability to mourn. Cohler notes that many psychoanalysts share Freud’s negative attitude toward religion, that religion—and nostalgia—are suspect because they are viewed as escapist. Cohler believes, however, that nostalgia can be adaptive. He writes, “We argue that nostalgia is in fact an adaptive solution to the sense of fragmentation produced by significant loss. It is our view that the ability to construct a
past that provides a sense of personal coherence fosters enhanced integration and makes it possible for people to deal more effectively with present problems” (p. 201). As an illustration of how melancholia can be adaptive, Cohler discusses the “memory books produced during and after the Holocaust” (p. 201). “Memory books created by survivors,” Cohler writes, “re-create continuity with the past, reflect and reestablish a sense of coherence, and function in ways that are psychologically soothing” (p. 202).

Making a case for nostalgia (and religion) in psychoanalytic circles might often seem like an uphill battle, as such attempts, in the context of discussions on mourning, would often be interpreted as instances or justifications for the inability to mourn. Indeed, making a case for melancholia seems quite odd. How does Cohler make this case? He does so by invoking object relations theory (Winnicott) and Self psychology (Kohut) and those who have employed these perspectives to point out that stories and songs, for example, have soothing functions. He cites the case of a Royal Air Force pilot who went down in the English Channel during World War II. As the pilot stood on the wing of the plane waiting to be rescued, he sang to himself a Flemish song—a song that his mother used to sing to him when he was just a boy when he was going to sleep. Cohler writes, Even though he knew no Flemish and had never thought of the song in the intervening years, he began to sing this song and was able to hold himself together while he awaited rescue. The song was an illusionary experience based on the soothing he had enjoyed as a child, which he could call upon in the present in a situation of extreme danger facing the threat of attack from an enemy aircraft (p. 210)

Cohler argues that nostalgia, too, can serve these functions. In making this case, Cohler employs Svetlana Boym’s (2001) distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgia. The distinction can be put as follows:

Reflective nostalgia dwells on the themes of longing and loss and on efforts at remembering the past. It is visible in nationalistic discourse. Restorative nostalgia uses evocative symbols to temper present distress and threatened sense of incoherence through enhanced connection with a presently remembered and exemplary past . . . . Reflective nostalgia, as in Greek preoccupation with the “classical age,” focuses on the discrepancy between a glorious past and an ignoble present, while restorative nostalgia attempts repair of a present crisis in the light of the presently remembered past. (p. 207)

And in the context of the Holocaust—Cohler’s focus in the essay—the point of the memory books and the memorials is to enhance melancholia, not to mourn the losses and work through them, because then the danger would be that the Holocaust could be forgotten. Nostalgia is, indeed, restorative here, but precisely because it prevents mourning and enhances melancholia. And, as we will see, the notion that melancholia can be restorative will prove to be very useful when thinking about the life and the work of Dittes.
Three Expressions of Destiny in Dittes’s Writings

Ministry as Grief Work

An early and compelling expression of Dittes’s adaptive melancholia can be observed in one of his earliest books on ministry. In *When the People Say No*, first published in 1979, Dittes (2004) speaks in his way about Homans’s notion of “mourning religion,” though, of course, Dittes did not use these words—Homans did not even use these words in 1979. Dittes writes, “However robust the call to ministry—the vision of need and of impact on that need in partnership with God and his people—equally robust are the disappointments on which that call sooner or later flounders” (p. vii). Yet, Dittes continues, “[m]ore robust still are the new visions that erupt out of those disappointments” (p. vii). Here ministers find a new call, rebirth, and recreation.

The central question of *When the People Say No* is, as Dittes puts it, “[h]ow can I be a minister if they will not be a church?” (p. viii). This question, significantly, was the very question that Dittes’s grandfather struggled with as a minister. This was, Dittes reports, his grandfather’s “greatest problem” as a minister, and Dittes suspects that this is a problem for most ministers. This experience, this disjuncture, this disappointment is best characterized, Dittes argues, as grief. Much of ministry is, at bottom, grief work, and the minister’s task is to “work through the grief” (p. 2, his emphasis). Dittes elaborates:

Ministry must be a partnership; still more essentially, however, ministry is found in apartness, the apartness of people from themselves; from God, from each other; and, inevitably, from the minister and the ministry they have invited. Facing and sharing that grief, and the grief work it occasions, minister and people can discover a new and more binding kind of partnership, a partnership of apartness. (p. 2)
Ministry, then, is found in separateness and apartness. Another way of saying this is to say that ministry is found in loss and in absence.

Ministers, Dittes points out, face a great number of losses weekly, and sometimes daily. While the average person may only experience a few severe losses in their lifetime—for example, the death of a child, a divorce or two, a debilitating accident—the minister regularly deals with such losses in the lives of her parishioners.

Ministers, too, are always on the job, so to speak, always on call and always on duty. In this sense, ministry is totalizing, encompassing a person’s whole identity (Capps, 2001a). This is unlike being a doctor or a lawyer, as members of such professions have patients and clients, times when they are on the job, and times when they are not. And so when ministry does not go well, there is, Dittes writes, the sense of “being nobody” (p. 3). Ministry seems to require total investment, “that dancer’s leap, that actor’s total immersion into a role presupposes just such unswerving partners, equally invested and totally committed” (p. 7). And yet parishioners are never totally committed, and the minister is bound to be let down, bound to the sense of “being nobody.” Ministers, then, face loss in a disproportionately greater degree than most persons, because the nature of their work is very different from the nature of the work of most other people.

How do they and how should they deal with these losses? “There are two ways to swallow grief dumbly,” Dittes writes, “both ways making it more poisonous than nutritious” (p. 8). He explains: “One can deny the life that was lived, the partnership that was shared. Or one can deny the death, the real limits and breakdown of the partnership” (p. 8). The widower, such as one I met in Scotland while doing parish ministry, can make two cups of coffee every morning: one for herself, and one for her late husband. But this
is to deny the death. Or the widower could throw away all of his pictures and so forth, denying that there was any life lived together. But neither of these approaches is healthy, Dittes warns, and both are poisonous, for neither of these ways work through grief.

Dittes also provides a theological rationale for conceiving of ministry as grief work. Indeed, he portrays God as perpetually grieving: “The Old Testament is nothing if not the record of a God who experiences the constant grief of the abandonment of his people and who enters into that abandonment and lives into that grief to unlock the creative energies within it” (p. 11). In the Gospels, Dittes notes that Jesus’ own ministry is filled with disappointments and abandonment, and that “Jesus caused grief and Jesus suffered grief; the grief was necessary for the uncovering of wholeness” (p. 12). By living in grief and working through grief it is possible to attain “new vision, new commitment, new guidance, and new personhood” (p. 12). This is what Dittes refers to as the “creative healing power of grief” (p. 13). Dittes sees the minister’s calling as a “ministry of grief,” that the minister is “re-called to deepen and reform and refresh and redirect . . . ministry by, quite literally, working through the grief that befalls every venture into ministry” (p. 14). Working through grief leads to a re-calling of ministry.

Perhaps what Dittes is calling re-calling Homans would call the (re)creation of meaning. The difference, though, is that Dittes is assuming or advocating a return to religion—what I would call a restoration of religion—whereas Homans would advocate a letting go and complete mourning of religion. As such, Homans would likely see Dittes’s efforts as an expression of an inability to mourn, that is, of melancholia. But this is precisely where Bertram Cohler’s notion of adaptive melancholia is helpful. Dittes, in his own way, is describing the differences between mourning and melancholia, and he is
advocating mourning, that is, a working through grief. However, ministers are special cases. Their lives are filled with multiple losses, and so they need to be perpetually mourning. This is why Dittes says ministry is grief work, and that ministry is found in grief and in grieving, not in avoiding grief or grieving. I suggest that what Dittes means by the phrase “ministry is grief work” correlates with Cohler’s notion of adaptive melancholia, because in both cases religion (for Dittes) and nostalgia (for Cohler) aid in the process of perpetual mourning and in the task of recreating meaning. Both, that is to say, employ stories to combat fragmentation. For Dittes, the stories of God’s perpetual grieving serve as a model for our own.

The Mitigated Self: Dittes’s Letting Go of Destiny

I now want to turn to an essay in which Dittes wrote personally about his relationship to both religion and psychology because this essay reflects, in an abstract and academic way, Dittes’s experience of letting go of destiny.

In “The Mitigated Self,” an essay an in The Endangered Self, a volume edited by Richard Fenn and Donald Capps (1992) that came out of a conference on the topic, Dittes (1992) begins by wondering if the self is endangered in the sense that animals, such as California condor chicks, can become endangered, or is the “‘danger’ itself the natural, inevitable state of the self, by which it is fashioned? Does ‘danger’ threaten selfhood or author it?” (p. 79). If we take the word endanger as in the sense of endangered species, this, Dittes suggests, would be to overlook prior meanings of the word. In Darwin’s worldview, for example, all species are endangered—this is simply the condition of life. In Darwin’s world, in our world, we are all in danger. Life is fragile. As he eloquently
puts it:

We are protected from fatal infection by the thinnest of latex. The odds of death from an asteroid collision are greater than death by aircraft disaster. It is apparently the destiny of all living species, except maybe the cockroaches, to be wiped out and replaced, not necessarily by destructive power, but by the very powers that have made us. Because they want to remake us. (p. 80)

Dittes, then, sides with the view that “danger” authors selfhood: “Endangerment is, apparently, part of the design of creation, part of the energy of creation” (p. 80).

Yet, Dittes warns, the “danger is real—make no mistake—death is at hand” (p. 80). Darwin’s story is one of resourcefulness and recreation—but it is also one of death. To put this in religious language, the convert dies to the old self to gain a new self. Or to put this in Christian terms, one must lose one’s life to find it (cf. Mark 8.35), or, in Jewish terms, one does not get to the Promised Land without first going through the wilderness (cf. Numbers).

The self, Dittes suggests, is not exempt from these dynamics. Indeed, as Dittes puts it:

The self is most itself when it is endangered and knows it. There is no self-hood in Eden, only in the pining and flailing outside its gates. There was no Jewish nation in the settlement in Egypt; it was forged in the anguish and wandering of Wilderness and hardened in exile. There is no selfhood, as there can be no divinity, outside of Gethsemane or apart from Golgotha. (pp. 80-81)

While the self does face certain dangers and distortions from modern forces, and Dittes uses various thinkers to point this out (e.g., Gandhi), Dittes believes that the real danger
to the self comes from within, not from without. And yet this danger needs to confronted, not denied, because as Dittes puts it, “Access to life is through death” (p. 83).

Dittes notes that “Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay on self-reliance is apparently one of the inspirations for this conference” (p. 83). In fact, Dittes claims that rereading it reminded him of his years spent at Oberlin College, where he engaged both Ralph Waldo Emerson and Reinhold Niebuhr. Emerson taught him of the sovereignty of the self, Niebuhr of the distortedness of the self. Dittes writes:

I cheered both; I was cheered by both. I felt recognized by both. Both spoke to me and for me. In the years since, many different voices have spoken the same two messages—“Trust the Self” [and] “Mistrust the Self”—and I have continued to identify with both, letting the inconsistency roll. Maybe it’s time to try to sort them out. (p. 83)

Dittes notes that while he aspired to both Emerson and Niebuhr, his first inclination was to think that Emerson was right but, in his more reflective moments, he felt that Niebuhr was right. The self needs to be exalted; the self needs to be mitigated—Dittes held both views.

Dittes also notes that the voices of Emerson and Niebuhr have taken various forms in his life:

The Emersons in my life have coached me into retrieving my self-respect from thralldom and abuse in any guise. I have been taught to be the assertive consumer; to be a teacher, writer, and therapist shunning glib conventions and guided by intuitive sparks; I have been coached into becoming weaned from all dependencies and dereferences, from addictions and idolatries of all kinds, including those of
work and romantic infatuations, and from the abundant illusions that something or someone else will fill my hungers and make me feel, at last, saved and whole. (p. 84)

The Niebuhrs in his life, however, taught him “the stark limitations and damaging contortions of self-sufficiency, especially of the masculine bravado type, and I have blessed the gifts of collaboration, of adaptability to agendas other than my own, of yielding, on occasion, to conversion, of simply listening” (p. 84).

As the title of the essay suggests, Dittes goes on the make a case for the mitigated self, and, perhaps ironically, he enlists Freud and Jung to help him do so. He notes that while Freud and Jung may be seen as champions of the unmitigated self, he finds Freud and Jung, actually, “on the side of the mitigators, on the side of those admiring the power of vulnerability, or self-surrender, of losing one’s life to find it” (p. 86). He continues, “I even garb them both as priests of the sanctuary of death, the source of life” (p. 86). Dittes does so on the grounds that therapy—both Freudian and Jungian—requires death. There is no transformation, no progress, no healing without pain and grief—no resurrection without crucifixion, Dittes suggests. “Therapy is nothing,” Dittes writes, “if not the loss of self” (p. 86). The trustworthy motif that Freud and Jung have to offer, as Dittes sees it, turns out to be a religious one: “Loose your life to find it” (p. 87). This is a theme that we have seen in Dittes’s writings before, such as in the closing lines of The Male Predicament, and it is a theme we will see again.

Men as Driven by Hope: The Recalling of Destiny

I now want to turn to Dittes’s last major work on men. Here it seems that Dittes both
rejects and re-calls his own sense of destiny in a much more personal way than in his essay “The Mitigated Self.”

Dittes (1996) begins *Driven by Hope* with these words: “This book offers what in these times is an unconventional view: It admires men” (p. vii). He continues, “Still more unconventionally, and far from the common view that men are insensitive and shallow, this book supposes that men are inherently religious, afflicted and impelled by a relentless expectancy that life is created to be more whole and holy than we now know” (p. vii). Further, “[l]ike all longing, this religious longing is painful; it is also energizing” (p. vii).

Dittes’s project in this book is to “re-deem” men. He finds fault with the writings on men, both from women and men, that “amount to a kind of male bashing” (p. vii). Dittes is dissatisfied and unconvinced by the messages to men that say that they should change, which go something like this:

Men are—and shouldn’t be—controlling and dominating, preoccupied with performance and competition, over intellectualizing and under feeling, defensive and withholding, workaholic, narcissistic, disconnected. (p. viii)

And

Men should be—but aren’t—expressive of feelings, sensitive, vulnerable, caring about relationships, wanting to make commitments—and willing to stop and ask for directions. (p. viii)

Dittes here accepts these lamentations about men as accurate descriptions, but he wants to re-deem them, that is, appreciate rather than lament men’s behavior.

Another important argument that this book is making is that Dittes believes that
men are inherently religious, whether or not “the typical man” thinks of himself as religious. “To deem a man religious,” Dittes writes, “is to claim his serious and earnest engagement with the potentials and the limitations of the human experience” (p. ix).

Dittes continues,

Men are inherently religious. That is why, this book proposes, we are as we are. It is not because we are victims of testosterone overdose, or because we are morally defective abusers of others, or because we are afflicted with fragile egos that compel belligerently defensive maneuvers, or because our pathetic narcissism holds us aloof from serious relational commitment. Such diagnosis may be accurate of individual men, or even of all men on occasion, but—like dismissing the prophet or saint for his neuroses—they miss the main point. It is the religious motif that best gives meaning to what can otherwise be characterized as aloofness and withholding, relentless drivenness, impatience, anger, and depression—even the stubborn refusal, when lost, to ask for directions. (p. ix)

Dittes does not propose that only men are religious. He proposes, rather, that men are religious in this way, and that women are religious in other ways.

Dittes believes that his project, although parallel with feminist projects, is separate from them. Dittes thinks that men need to focus on their own experience, and that such attention to their own experience will, in turn, enable them to listen to the needs and frustrations of women. Yet men should not define themselves according to women’s interpretations of their lives, Dittes argues. As he puts it, “To recognize another’s need is not the same as letting that need become a demand. Men should not adopt women’s interpretations and diagnoses of our traits—women’s definitions of men; rather, we
should be prompted to discover our own interpretations, our own self-definition” (p. xii). Sometimes, too, men are asked to be “more like women,” which usually translates as “making men ‘vulnerable,’ more ‘sensitive,’ more ‘expressive,’” and so forth (p. xii). However, Dittes responds, “[t]hat may be a good goal, but it is not a good starting point” (p. xii). Nevertheless, Dittes does appreciate and utilize one insight in particular from feminist criticism in this book—namely, the insight that much of the language of God in the Christian tradition is androcentric, thus making it problematic for women. However, Dittes writes, “the gender bias that makes traditional religious imagery not useful to women should make it particularly useful for men” (p. xiii).

Dittes concludes his preface by noting that this book is theological—intimately theological. By this he means to convey his view that “[t]heology should voice the throbs of the human soul” (p. xiv). Furthermore, Dittes claims that he “aspires to be personal and conversational,” and he invites the reader “to regard what follows as my way of saying This is how it is with me. Is it this way with you . . . or a little different . . . or very different?” (p. xiv). This book, whatever else one may make of it, is personal.

The Case of Howard

I now want to turn to the case of “Howard” in Driven by Hope. I noted above that Capps mentioned in his article on Dittes that Dittes revealed to him that “Howard” was actually himself. I also asked Carolyn about whether or not she could confirm that “Howard” was, in fact, her father writing about himself. At the time, I had not read Capps’s article on Dittes, but Robert Dykstra had mentioned to me that he had heard this or read this, but he did not remember that Capps was the source of “Howard’s” identity. Consequently, I
mentioned Dykstra’s comments on the matter to Carolyn, causing her to read the case
of Howard in *Driven by Hope*. She asked Dittes directly about this issue as well, but was
unable to gather any concrete answers from her father. Carolyn wrote to me, “Regarding
Howard and your project, I am very disappointed that Dad couldn't respond himself,
because I know at another time he would have responded in a way that made us all see
and think about things slightly differently/freshly and somehow with more and deeper
understanding than we even get by reading the book” (Personal Communication, August
11, 2008). She continued, “I did read the Howard sections out loud to Dad and even then
he said he would write a response to you. I was skeptical—he can't use a keyboard any
more—so I suggested he dictate to me and I would write it. But this suggestion went
nowhere, for the time being anyway” (Personal Communication, August 11, 2008). But
she added:

I would like to say, myself, that it would be just like my Dad to be "way ahead" of a
grocery store clerk in nuanced mathematical calculations and it would be like him
to think ahead to needing quarters for the parking meter. It would also be like him
to experience what Howard experienced at the grocery store clerk's misreading of
all his intentions. (Personal Communication, August 11, 2008)

Carolyn also added, “And it would be like him to go away and re-think the whole
experience and his response and then to reframe it in a way that lets God and grace into
the picture” (Personal Communication, August 11, 2008).

I suspect that all of the “cases” in the book were Dittes himself, though perhaps at
different ages or how he remembered himself at those ages. In any case, Dittes has
revealed that he is at least the source for “Howard” in this book.
Looking at the case of Howard, which we know is autobiographical, will yield fruitful data for the application of the “mourning religion” thesis. Dittes introduces Howard with this story:

The checkout clerk at the supermarket is confused. Howard can handle that; he knows how to wait patiently. The register readout says $16.72. He has given her a twenty, plus two dimes and two pennies; she owes him three singles and two quarters. This will give him some quarters for parking—one of the simple survival skills he relishes. He realizes he has outpaced this clerk for the moment, but he can wait for her to catch up. He will explain it to her if he has to. But better to let her punch it out on her keypad: $20.22 received. The computer will understand him and explain it to her: $3.50 change. (p. 49)

But this is not what happened. The clerk assumed that Howard was confused. She explains to him that he gave her too much, and pushes the change back to him. Dittes continues,

She pushes back the coins with exaggerated patience that is impatience. She is polite about it, too polite, as though she is explaining it to a child—or to an old man. “It’s only sixteen seventy-two. See”—she points to the figure 16 on the register readout—“that’s less than twenty dollars.” She spells it all out. (p. 49)

Howard comes to interpret her reactions in light of his age. After all, he is shopping in the middle of the day on a weekday, wearing jeans, hasn’t shaved, and seems to be fumbling with money. However, he is taking it easy because, in fact, he worked through the weekend.

Dittes notes that Howard, as a middle-class white man, hasn’t really been the object
of stereotypes over the course of his life. But, what is worse, Howard begins to feel as though he is not being treated as a man because he is aging. When the clerk reaches out and touches his hand in order to give him back his change, he feels emasculated, because she does not see him as a sexual threat: she touches him as if he were “an elderly relative” (p. 50).

This experience brings to mind other experiences Howard has had recently, like when he went to the dentist (and was stiff in the chair because he had played Frisbee with his granddaughter the previous day) and the dentist said, “Have you slowed down a little?” (p. 50); or when the dentist’s assistant called and changed—or rather informed him—that his appointment was being changed from Tuesday to Wednesday, as though, because he is old, he does not have his own schedule to keep; or when he was downtown, some fifty feet away from a bus stop, the driver of the bus came out to wave him onto the bus, assuming that he was confused and slow but, in fact, he didn’t need to take the bus at all—he was just downtown waiting for his wife to pick him up; or when he was at the airport and the computer agent explained to him, very thoroughly, how to board the plane. Each of these experiences in and of themselves, perhaps, would not affect Howard a great deal, but they were becoming all too common these days, and this troubled him. He felt as though the world was “on a campaign to get him to retire” (p. 52). Dittes elaborates:

For all the jarring strangeness of people treating him as “old,” it is, too, a jarringly familiar sensation, this being put under wraps, consigned to a niche, straightjacketed, involuntarily closeted, this feeling that he can’t break loose and be himself. The moment that you are allowed between all the time you are too young,
Dittes concludes, “He must have missed that moment of being there” (p. 52).

Dittes notes that “[c]onventional wisdom might regard Howard as a victim of the typical male’s addiction to achievement, power, mastery, and control, an addiction that white males can indulge in middle age” (p. 52). Dittes sees truth in this conviction, but such wisdom, ultimately, misses the point. As Dittes puts it, men’s attempts at mastery and control are “better seen as religious strategies, prompted by religious motives; maybe not religious in effect, but religious in intent. They are a form of a man’s aspirations and expectation for a fuller life. They are one way a man tries to claim promises that elude him” (p. 53). “The religious purist,” Dittes writes, “can point out, accurately, that Howard’s is a false trust, the trust that he can ‘save’ himself by his own savvy, by staying ‘on top of things’” (p. 53). However, “it seems more honest and more helpful to Howard to regard his supply of faith as half full, not half empty, to recognize the religious urgency and hope in his lunges to find himself reliably established, the haunting religious quality of his ache for destiny and his sorrow at finding it passing him by” (p. 53). Dittes, as he was nearing retirement, expresses here in “Howard” his feeling of that his own destiny has somehow passed him by.

Dittes returns to the case of Howard in his chapter “Pilgrim.” In this chapter, Dittes wants to reclaim the metaphor of pilgrimage as a religious model for men and masculinity. In everyday life, Dittes suggests that many men who are well settled in life—in family and in work—often feel unsettled and discontent. Dittes writes:

Conventional wisdom sees this as a defect: adolescent churning, or midlife restlessness, or the grief of aging, of roving rogue, or irresponsible, or narcissistic,
or failure of commitment, or just evidence that men value their personal success and satisfaction more than relationships, accomplishment more than belonging. Conventional wisdom sees settledness as normal and unsettledness as flaw. For a remedy, new (feminist) conventional wisdom recommends more settledness and relationality; refurbished (masculinist) conventional wisdom recommends more traditional male heroism and sturdiness: Become a warrior or a mentor. (p. 95)

Dittes, however, wants to make a case for the pilgrim, for unsettledness, for yearning, for despair, for hope—for it is “despair/hope [that] propels the pilgrim on his way” (p. 96). The upshot of re-deeming men as pilgrims as opposed to childish and irresponsible beings is “not to offer rescue from unsettledness (or coaching into heroic postures or contentment and settledness), but instead to invite men to claim pilgrimage as the primary arena of life” (p. 102). Further, “It invites men to believe . . . that sublime discontent is at the same time a sublime hope” (p. 102). That is to say, men are correctly viewed as unsettled, as discontent, but this discontent is well grounded, for life is not as it should be, and we are indeed created to be more. The pilgrim knows this, and this is why he is unsettled, because he is trekking for something more, hoping for something more.

In terms of the case of Howard, Dittes notes that Howard is not disturbed so much by the label “old,” but he is disturbed by the fact that he is being viewed as “slow,” “incompetent,” and “helpless.” This is so because “Howard has been on a pilgrimage, a decades-long pilgrimage, to the shrines of Quick, Able, and Helpful” (p. 106). There is nothing wrong with going to these shrines, Dittes suggests, because theses shrines do indeed bestow a blessing, but Howard’s mistake was that he set up camp there, he tried to settle there, therefore no longer remaining a pilgrim: Howard “converted the blessings
into scripts” (p. 106). In being tied to these shrines, moreover, Howard has neglected others, such as Delight and perhaps even Aging. As a grandparent, Howard could delight in his grandchildren without the responsibilities of parenting. And Howard could also trek to the shrine of Amusement, as though he were a humorous elderly sage or guru, and could chuckle to himself when clerks fumble over their interactions with him. Embracing pilgrimage is a more liberating way of being than denying that one is old and insisting that one is alert, Dittes argues. And, who knows, perhaps there will be even greater shrines to be found than the ones he previously sought and found.

The final place where Dittes discusses the case of Howard is in the chapter “The Manhood of Living as a Son.” He begins by writing, “[a] full term of sonship is the right of every male, son to a father—genuine sonship, not apprenticeship for fatherhood, not a junior manhood, most urgently not a pretend manhood” (p. 123). Dittes continues, “A man needs this term of wholehearted sonship so he can comfortably move beyond it into an adult manhood that is wholehearted, into unmitigated fatherhood” (p. 123). If a man has not had a wholehearted sonship, then he often develops into a pretend manhood, full of charades and insecurity. “Sonship,” Dittes writes, “is not a junior fatherhood, not a shadow of fatherhood. It is an important form of maleness in its own right, to be esteemed and savored, in early years and throughout life, not hurried past” (p. 124).

What does sonship mean, in Dittes’s view? Sonship is living in potential, not status or accomplishment. It is “not yet.” It is to live with “a promise and a hope that is also a hunger and a yearning, a kind of chronic shadow of his destiny” (p. 124). And since this chronic shadow of potential is indeed painful, the temptation for boys and men is to move beyond it too quickly and in an inauthentic manner. “Such a patriarch (all father, no
son),” Dittes writes, “tries too hard, works too hard, frets too much, commands too much, judges himself (and others) too cruelly” (p. 126).

Dittes next provides a theological rationale for advocating sonship. He does so by reminding the reader that Jesus is best known to us as a son, and that the early church councils debated for centuries over the precise way to preserve the sonship of God. Dittes also notes that Adam and Jesus are contrasted in the Christian tradition: Adam is portrayed as a father and as a sinner, while Jesus is portrayed as a son and as a savior. Dittes writes:

   The contrast is clear. So is the understanding of Adam as agent for sin, Jesus as agent for saving. Is there a connection? Is it Adam’s fatherhood, unmitigated by sonship, that is occasion for his decisive distortion of the human or male condition? Is there something particularly remedial and restorative about Jesus’ answering that sin with unmitigated sonship? (p. 129)

Dittes seems to think so: “If it is denial of sonship that distorts and restoration of sonship that saves, this may recommend a similar dialectic within each man” (p. 129). Dittes continues, “Can each of us find in rediscovery and reaffirmation of sonship—even if that feels like a wrenching renunciation of the familiar postures of ‘fatherhood’—a needed and holy healing for the distortions of an overwhelming patriarchal existence?” (p. 129).

Dittes relates this discussion of Howard by noting that the episode with the clerk is insulting only if “Howard is locked into being regarded exclusively as the super-responsible, super-competent adult that he is” (p. 136). The situation, rather than being an insulting one, is an occasion for the freedoms of boyhood. Dittes explains, “Adult men are expected to maintain an alert surveillance of their surroundings, to take everything
into account, to make everything right” (p. 136). If something is wrong, men often feel as 
though it is their job, their duty, to fix it, Dittes notes. But boys carry no such expectation. 
They “can pick and choose what they want to take seriously and what they choose to 
smirk at” (p. 136). If Howard is in touch with his inner boy, then it is likely that he would 
not get so upset by the clerk—the interaction would be something to smirk at, because, as 
a boy, he would not have to live by the scripts of manhood. Dittes sees aging, then, as an 
opportunity to “mature into boyhood” (p. 137).

There are a number of themes here that are relevant to the “mourning religion” 
thesis and, specifically, to Cohler’s notion of adaptive melancholia. The first is Howard’s 
feeling that his destiny has passed him by. All his life he felt that he was not there yet, 
had not arrived, but at some point he realized that his destiny must have passed him by, 
that, in some sense, it was too late. Dittes, as noted, describes this feeling as a chronic 
sense of destiny. I might add that the word “chronic” here resonates with Freud’s 
understanding of melancholia. Indeed, the chronic nature of melancholia distinguishes it 
from mourning in Freud’s thought. The second theme relevant here is being stereotyped 
as old. Dittes notes that this feeling, rather than being an utterly new experience, reminds 
Howard of previous times when he was “straitjacketed” in life, not unlike how Dittes, as 
a boy, was “scripted” into the role of Joseph. The third theme I want to draw attention to 
involves the issue of false trust. Dittes notes that he could scold Howard for putting his 
faith in his own abilities because this would be to make an idol out of competence (or 
what he here calls the shrines of Quick, Able, and Helpful), and these idols inevitably 
would turn out to be untrustworthy. Instead, however, Dittes praises idol making, as it 
were, because it accurately reflects his own sense of religious urgency, a theme that we
have observed both in *The Male Predicament* and in his second article on Augustine.

All three of these themes point to an experience of disillusionment with religion because the religious promise, as Dittes describes it, is that one is destined for great things in life, but life, however, does not deliver on these promises, even when an individual follows all of the scripts and rules. Even so, religion for Dittes is not mourned, though it aids in mourning. In the face of his disappointments with the religious promise, Dittes nevertheless re-deems the perpetual idol making of men as evidence of hope. Disillusionment with religion leads to a re-calling of it. This, in terms of Homans’s thesis, seems to reflect a melancholic relationship with religion but, if we take into account Cohler’s notion of adaptive melancholia, it seems that we have here a case of a melancholic relationship with religion that is restorative.

_The Significance of Augustine for Dittes’s Adaptive Melancholia_

I have made the claim that Dittes’s writings on Augustine were instrumental in his own mourning process or, as he would call it, grief work. Here I want to spell out explicitly how they were so.

Dittes’s second essay on Augustine, which was published in 1986, does indeed seem to be connected to the theme of mourning. When he was writing this essay, Dittes was approaching sixty years old. He was also approaching his second divorce. Paul Elledge (2003), who knew Dittes at precisely this time, recounts his experience of taking a seminar with Dittes at Yale Divinity School. This essay provides some insight into what Dittes was like during this period of his life.
The seminar, sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, was on the theologies of Freud and Jung. Elledge saw the 1986 advertisement for the seminar, and he wrote to Dittes suggesting that he’d be interested in taking it, realizing that it was unlikely that he would be able to do so because he was at a research university and the seminar was intended for college teachers who lacked research facilities. Dittes, however, encouraged him to apply, but also primed him for disappointment. As it turned out, Dittes was able to persuade the National Endowment for the Humanities that Elledge should be able to take the seminar. Elledge writes:

To this day, I don’t know how he persuaded the NEH to act favorably on my application, or why, except that it represented a challenge to his imagination; it gave him a chance to buck the system, to wage a contest of will against higher authority: to act up. It provided an occasion to be different and to encourage difference: it afforded him a struggle, an opportunity to strive. That he strove with the Endowment on my behalf remains one of the great blessings of my professional life and in fact resulted in the pivotal career re-direction he intuitively foresaw for me: our seminar inquiries and my production, with his assistance, of a subsequently published paper on St. Augustine (Elledge, 1988) encouraged the integration of theological thinking into my scholarly agenda and launched my continuing study and teaching of autobiography. (p. 174)

“It was,” Elledge writes, “a large-hearted gift, a mutinous act, a pastoral gesture, an incidence of grace” (p. 174).
Elledge notes that in the course of the seminar Dittes modeled Augustine’s virtue of “spiritual restlessness” (p. 174). Some of this restlessness is recounted in the course’s syllabus, which Elledge reproduced in his essay:

This seminar will examine the ways Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung have shaped the modern mind as much by their theologies as by their psychologies. . . . Specific questions expressed by their theologies include: What are the promises of life . . .? What obstacles thwart those promises, and by whose responsibility? What is fundamentally wrong when things are wrong? How does one characterize . . . the context or power against which or [an afterthought?] with which one plays out the human drama? What does this Other require . . . ? (pp. 174-175)

Elledge also notes that the course had two “introductory” weeks, and during the second of these, they focused on Augustine’s *Confessions*. The syllabus also contained a rationale for the inclusion of Augustine:

The two-pronged rationale for including *Confessions* in our curriculum appeared in an elaborated course description: “(1) Augustine provides an appealing model for taking personal experience as a basis for theologizing: he offers unabashed introspection as a mode of theological reflection. He defines the theological enterprise, like life itself, as a dynamic process, a search. ‘Our heart is restless until it finds its rest in Thee,’ he wrote in his opening paragraph. What is the ‘restlessness’ is a fundamental question to be asked of everyone, and what is the ‘rest’? (2) Augustine’s theology provides a comparative reference point. *His* ‘restlessness’—focusing on guilt and struggles to trust—and *his* resolution—identifying a God reliable and benign enough to warrant a yielding trust—become a
standard which both Freud and Jung were self-consciously resisting. I suspect most of us are somehow part of that same resistance movement.” (p. 177)

Elledge, then, clearly suspects that the inclusion of Augustine says something about Dittes as a person.

Elledge found support for this suspicion in a letter that Dittes wrote to the seminar participants. The letter was dated April 25, 1986 and, in it, Dittes wrote, “Here is a gesture toward introducing myself to you: However much of Freud and Jung may be in the book—I think there is some—there is a lot of me in it” (p. 176). Dittes was referring to *The Male Predicament*, a copy of which he gave to every participant in the seminar.

On the first day of class, July 17, 1986, Dittes asked the seminar participants to say something about themselves. Elledge was the first person to speak, and he gave a rehearsed answer about his professional interests. Then Dittes asked him, “And how about something personal?” (p. 177). Elledge didn’t know what to say, and said something like, “Maybe later.” Dittes was the last person to go. Elledge notes that Dittes “opened up spaciously, even confessionally, with details of challenging and failed associations, broken covenants, crushing betrayals, grievous losses, and yet, with a wink, of his high hopes for a new relationship, as it turned out with the woman to become his next wife, then in its initial stage” (p. 177).

The intimacy of the course seemed to progress rather quickly. A month into the course, Dittes invited Elledge to stay in his condo while he was away for a weekend, so that Elledge might have a pleasant atmosphere in which he could work on his seminar paper. A classmate suggested to Elledge that, by accepting this invitation, he was enacting a wish to kill the father (Dittes) by taking his place in the house. The fact that
Elledge reports this in such a casual way intimates that the seminar members were comfortable about making such interpretations and observations with one another.

In the condo, Elledge notes that there was a poster that had the final lines of Tennyson’s poem, “Ulysses,” which read: “strong in will/To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield” (p. 178). Elledge writes, “It strikes me now more forcefully than then that these lines capture something of the combativeness, the searching, the restlessness, the struggle with the attractions of both submissiveness and autonomy that Dittes recognized and thoughtfully responded to in Augustine because reflected in himself” (p. 178).

Elledge spends the next few pages of his article summarizing Dittes’s two articles on Augustine, with a few evaluative comments here and there. Elledge closes his essay by reflecting on the ending of his seminar with Dittes. He writes, “By the time we completed our course, practically all distance among seminarians had dissolved in a bonding of the sort usually associated with summer camp” (p. 182). He continues:

In and out of class and of Jim’s home and office, over lunch every class day, over pot luck suppers in dorm rooms and on the grounds of the freshman quad where I lived (how expansive my pretense of institutional approbation!), along New Haven streets for early morning jogs and late night dessert runs, and, near the end, with a Jungian eruption of gusto, in two sets of charades where, usefully oiled, the last of our inhibitions fell away, we openly became who all of our seminar presentations and discourses had less successfully shown us to be. Jim joined in these follies, and generously refrained from publicly psychologizing the data they exposed. (p. 178).

The last two seminar meetings were dedicated to class presentations, and Elledge notes that he took this chance to make up for his “paranoid reserve” on the first seminar
meeting. The seminar also had a farewell party, in which Dittes and the seminar participants exchanged gifts.

Ellrige’s account of this seminar reflects to some extent what Dittes was like as a professor, how his students experienced him, how he affected them, and, indeed, how they grew under his guidance. One gets the impression that Dittes was a very gracious and generous teacher, one who was fully invested in his work, but also as one who did not feel the need to dominate his students.

From Elledge’s account we can see that Dittes was personal in the classroom, and it seems that he was even more personal in the classroom than in his writings. His writings, while deeply influenced by his personal experiences, do not contain as much direct information about his personal life as one might expect given his convictions about the use of introspection in scholarship. In any case, what we learn here is that Dittes was on the verge of beginning a new marriage, and so it should come as no surprise that his question would be, Can I trust her? This, I suggest, is the personal meaning of his interpretation of Augustine’s search for a fail-safe God, a God who he could trust. It would be hard not to see the grief in this question given, as previously noted, Dittes’s in class confessions of “challenging and failed associations, broken covenants, crushing betrayals, [and] grievous losses” (p. 177). By writing about Augustine’s search for security— and grief over not fining any until he found rest in God—he was able to mourn the unstable associations in his own life as well as prepare himself to embark on a new one.
Teaching Freud’s Teachings: Dittes’s Final Essay

I now want to turn to Dittes’s final publication, because it sheds light on the personal significance of Dittes’s first essay on Augustine.

In “Teaching Freud’s Teachings,” Dittes (2003b) reflects on what professors ought to tell their students about Freud. This essay was also Dittes’s final publication—his last academic words, so to speak—and, significantly, he chose to write about the legacy of Freud. However, while Dittes wrote about the legacy of Freud, he was also simultaneously writing about his own legacy. Dittes offers ten theorems and strategies—ten nuggets of Freud’s wisdom—that he believes should be passed on to students. The eighth theorem is the one that is most significant for this chapter: “All utterance is autobiography” (p. 260). He elaborates:

Our most earnest and rigorous efforts at an “objective” accounting—whether of the animate or the inanimate, ideologies and epics, credos and their predicates, the grand or the trivial—every accounting we make is not nearly so self-contained and autonomous as we pretend, but is contingent; it is, in some significant measure, an accounting of ourselves. (p. 260)

Dittes puts it bluntly: “The motifs and themes, the patterns and contours I claim I detect in the history are unwitting metaphors for my own story” (p. 260).

Near the end of the essay, Dittes traces a motif and pattern in Freud’s later thought, a theme he finds expressed in Civilization and Its Discontents and Moses and Monotheism. This motif is indeed one that seems to be a metaphor for Dittes’s own story, because we have seen Dittes trace this metaphor before—in the life of Augustine. Dittes writes:
If *Civilization and Its Discontents* has a theme, I think it is the desperate warning that vulnerability leads to pain, suffering, and death; vulnerability is to be avoided at all costs. . . . If *Moses and Monotheism* has a theme, I think it is the search to affirm vulnerability as a path to life and fulfillment. (p. 264)

Dittes continues, Freud “wants us to benefit from his painful experience and not make the excruciating mistake of trusting what is untrustworthy, the mistake of letting ourselves be enfeebled by becoming dependent on what will not abide and what cannot sustain us” (p. 265). Dittes’s Freud here sounds a lot like Dittes’s Augustine—more on this below.

Dittes’s reading of *Civilization and Its Discontents* seems straightforward: “Life is bleak, unfriendly, and unrewarding, and don’t count on being rescued” (p. 265). The book is an argument against religion, a call for human beings to grow up. Religion, Freud argues, is untrustworthy. It is flimsy and a wish-fulfillment.

But Dittes’s reading of *Moses and Monotheism*, on the other hand, is a bit more creative. This is probably because it is difficult to know what to make of *Moses and Monotheism*, as this is one of Freud’s least impressive pieces of writing, both in terms of style and argumentation. In any case, Dittes takes on the question as to why Freud would base his argument on a claim by Ernst Sellin—a biblical scholar and contemporary with Freud—that Moses was assassinated by his followers, because even Sellin himself rejected his own argument by the time Freud was writing and, Dittes suggests, Freud knew this. Why would Freud, then, continue with this line of argumentation, which would be sure to embarrass the cause of psychoanalysis?

Dittes convincingly argues that *Moses and Monotheism* can only be understood in light of Freud’s own biography. Freud was completing the book near the end of his life,
and he was writing in London. He was unsure about his legacy and about whether psychoanalysis would survive beyond him. He saw that Charles Darwin had been buried in Westminster Abbey—Darwin’s legacy was sealed—but where would Freud be buried? What would his legacy be? Would his teachings be honored? As it turned out, Freud was cremated and his teachings have indeed been honored.

Reflecting on these questions, Freud turned to Moses. This wasn’t, of course, the first time Freud turned to Moses. In “The Moses of Michelangelo,” the essay that is serving as a metaphor for my whole project, Freud more or less attacked the traditional Moses, but here Freud is identifying with Moses. This is exactly why, Dittes argues, it is important that Moses was assassinated, because the assassination (and the guilt that followed) was what procured Moses’s legacy. Freud believed that he was, in a sense, assassinated by his followers—Adler and Jung—but in writing Moses and Monotheism Freud’s teachings, like Moses’s teachings, would survive precisely because his followers were unfaithful. Why? Dittes explains:

In Freud’s account, the assassination is essential for Moses’[s] legacy to survive and prevail. As every father comes to prevail in the life of his son just as a son’s murderous wishes, so the once disloyal people eventually atoned for their guilt by conceding adherence to Moses’[s] teachings. This, the motif in Freud’s last years, is the motif of his last book. Once this motif is identified, other puzzling or annoying or distracting sections of the book fall into line. Taken in context, the most distressing part of the text proves to be the keystone the builders rejected. (pp. 267-268)

Following this line of thinking, Dittes notes that the “shift from suspicion of
vulnerability/dependence to a regard for its efficacy” occurs after Freud’s mother dies. Dittes writes, “Freud now had much less need to protect himself against the traps of dependence and much less need to insist on his own (masculine) independence” (p. 268). What is striking here is that Dittes, as noted, reached virtually the same conclusion concerning Augustine. Might we not conclude, as Dittes has covertly invited us to, that this is his own personal motif, his own story, since he finds it in the lives of the great psychological thinkers of the past, Freud and Augustine?

Dittes concludes his essay by reflecting on the study, and the teaching, of religion. He eloquently writes:

There still exists a conspiracy of dishonesty in our religious studies classrooms, the pretense that students, and teachers, and authors are not provoked into the “study” of religion by their own personal religious questioning (or else that the personal questioning can be held irrelevant to the study). With supreme irony, we invoke the authority of the humanities to dehumanize ourselves, our students, our authors, and their authority by consigning personal religious quest to the closet or the corridors or the chapel. (p. 269)

This will not do for teaching Freud, Dittes argues, because “[w]e cannot faithfully teach Freud without confronting the restless depths of our own souls” (p. 269). The same goes for Augustine.

As noted, I believe that this essay, Dittes’s final publication, sheds light on his first essay on Augustine. In his first essay on Augustine, Dittes’s basic point was to show the continuities between Augustine’s life and thought, and the continuity that Dittes stressed concerned the dynamic of dependence and independence. Given that Dittes has
stated explicitly that he advocates the use of personal experience in academic scholarship (he called this the instrumental method), it is curious that Dittes observed that the central dynamic in Freud’s life, as well as Augustine’s life, centered on the issues of dependence and independence. Now it may be true that the dynamic of dependence and independence was central for Augustine and for Freud, but the fact that Dittes chose to write about this topic when contemplating their lives suggests that this was a dynamic in his own life as well. In any case, we should believe Dittes when he suggests that, when reading the *Confessions*, the “reader, feeling so bidden by Augustine, tries to see himself or herself in the story, and so, of course, tries fitting to Augustine theories and interpretations—whether Oedipal, narcissistic, or more subtle—that are, in some sense, self-portraits” (p. xx). That is, we should believe Dittes because his portrait of Augustine indeed looks like his own self-portrait—Dittes’s portrait of Augustine’s relationship with his mother, in fact, sounds an awful lot like how Carolyn described Dittes’s relationship with his mother:

> Mary Dittes lived long enough for Dad to go through many phases of his relationship with her. At times they seemed close and at other times Dad really "pushed her away" and tended to "blame" her for some of his struggles and unhappiness. (Personal Communication, April 26, 2009)

This could just as well be Dittes’s description of Augustine and his mother.

Dittes indeed stressed Augustine’s need to separate from his mother, and throughout this essay Dittes is concerned with how Augustine separates from women. At the time of writing, Dittes was on the verge of turning forty. Dittes, as we have seen, would continue to write about being independent from women in his later writings on
men, and he would indeed separate from two women by means of divorce in later years. Perhaps it is not too speculative to suggest that the seeds of the grief work he performs regarding his separations from the important women in his life were planted by his thinking about Augustine’s own dependency and independency needs with regard to women. In any case, it is not speculative that the theme of dependence and independence is clearly a major personal theme for Dittes. And at this point, it seems as though we have reached a limit of the “mourning religion” thesis. Here, it seems to me, it would make more sense to view Dittes’s first essay on Augustine, which seems very much to be related to his personal life, in terms of, say, life cycle theory or maturation processes rather than mourning. That is to say, this essay seems to be more about coming into adulthood rather than mourning. The personal connection here is that Dittes had just navigated his way through his thirties—Dittes himself was maturing—and so he focused on Augustine’s own maturation process to help him make sense of his own.

**The Corpus of Dittes’s Writings**

Capps and Dykstra (2003a) compiled a relatively complete list of books and articles by Dittes (the list, however, does not include book reviews), and they organized the list by the topics and categories—proposed by Dittes himself—that Dittes had addressed over the course of his professional career. On the vocation of ministry, Dittes published ten articles and four books. On contemporary western male experience, Dittes published one article and four books. On psychological theorists of religion, Dittes published eleven articles and one book. On empirical research in psychology of religion, Dittes published fifteen articles. On psychological testing of ministerial candidates, Dittes published five
articles and three books. And on empirical laboratory research, Dittes published thirteen articles. All and all, Dittes’s corpus comes out to be fifty-five articles and fourteen books, making him a major contributor to pastoral theology and psychology of religion.

The Theme of Reversals and Restorations

One of the primary arguments that I am making in this dissertation is that one can observe what I am calling a dynamic of reversals and restorations in certain strands of psychology of religion and pastoral theology, and one can indeed observe this theme in Dittes’s writings. His writings, though, come across as less iconoclastic than, say, David Bakan’s interpretation of the Abraham and Isaac story, which I presented in an earlier chapter. I also noted in a previous chapter Dittes’s reversal of the Adam and Eve story, where creation is found to be wanting rather than perfect or complete.

Another reversal can be observed in *The Male Predicament*. Dittes writes about the idols that men create: the idols of sex and relationships, the idols of work, and so forth. And he goes into vivid detail about how these idols inevitability disappoint, and he even talks of Augustine’s restlessness in this context. As such, one would expect that Dittes, simply because he is using the word “idol,” would resort to moralizing, that he would scold men and tell them that they should know better, that they should put their trust in God and not make idols. This is not what Dittes does. He does quite the reverse, and this reversal is, arguably, much more helpful, healing, and restorative than the usual moralizing. He writes, “People who talk to us about our idols usually scold us for making them. They are quick to scold us for relying on what is ultimately unreliable” (p. 57). However, Dittes goes on, “[t]he most shrill scolding doesn’t tell us as much as the grief
we already know. Instead, let us rescue our hopes from the scolding and the grief, and let us celebrate idol making, for our idols testify to our persistent hope, our long-range trust and our capacities for urgent commitments” (p. 57). Idols, therefore, are to be celebrated, not lamented—a sentiment, it seems to me, that one would be hard-pressed to find among, say, systematic or dogmatic theologians.

How does the theme of reversals and restorations apply to Augustine? The reversal here is not historical. That is, Dittes does not cut against the grain of historical scholarship and argue, for example, that, while Augustine has been portrayed in such and such a way, I argue that Augustine was in fact such and such. Dittes’s reversal is religious or theological in nature. Dittes makes the case that, while the Christian tradition (or large portions of it) has by and large endorsed the teachings of Augustine, such as his doctrine of original sin or his rationale for just war, Dittes endorses Augustine’s introspective and experiential method. In fact Dittes even rejects Augustine’s fail-safe and distant God, a God that helped Augustine to refrain from taking more risks, from pouring out his soul. Dittes, in contrast, recommends that we keep taking risks, that we keep going out on a limb precisely because it will break and the fall will hurt. Dittes, finally, takes Augustine as a theological and psychological forefather of psychology of religion and pastoral theology, fields that use methods, such as introspection, that are often suspect in seminaries and religious communities. If seminaries and religious communities have tended to endorse Augustine’s teachings, Dittes, in contrast, has endorsed Augustine’s method.
Conclusion: Toward a More Adaptive Melancholia

I want to close by turning to an essay by Robert Dykstra (2003) in the special edition of *Pastoral Psychology* on Dittes. Dykstra’s main point is to demonstrate how Dittes’s thinking about men evolved over the years, that ultimately Dittes became more gracious toward men. He writes:

I first met Dittes at a middle point in what must have been that decade of transition in his thinking [about men]. The occasion was an informal gathering of men he had convened for one evening of the annual meeting of the Society for Pastoral Theology. As a graduate student new to the Society, I sat somewhat in awe of the men around that circle, many of whom were, like Dittes, authors of the texts I had been studying. I was unsure of what to expect but recall being struck by his opening words. In what I have since come to know as his usual, understated way, he said, “I suppose there are only two things we can talk about in a gathering such as this: ‘men’ or ‘women.’” We all chuckled and visibly relaxed, and then he simply sat there silent, Quaker-like, waiting for whomever else to speak. Out of that comfortable silence someone did eventually speak, and a wonderful evening of conversation ensued. (pp. 118-119)

Dykstra continues, “His silence after those opening remarks, however, has lingered to impress me even more, a silence that spoke volumes of his capacity to lead by yielding to others. In the presence of his many colleagues that evening, he appeared to have nothing to prove” (p. 119). “There was nowhere in particular he needed for us to go,” Dykstra writes, and “[o]ur safety was somehow guaranteed” (p. 119).

As noted, Dykstra makes the point that Dittes’s attitude toward men changed over
the years. This, he suggests, is reflected in the titles of *When Work Goes Sour* (Dittes, 1987) and *Men at Work* (Dittes, 1996). *Men at Work* is a reissued version of *When Work Goes Sour*. In the preface to the former, Dykstra points out, Dittes softens his earlier critique of men for treating work as an idol. Dykstra writes, “More than a mere shift in emphasis, Dittes comes to honor, even to celebrate as religious quest the distinctive ways men approach their work” (p. 113). Dykstra calls this transition in Dittes a “maturation into boyhood,” one of Dittes’s own phrases, and this transition in Dittes’s thinking about men, Dykstra suggests, “maps the generous expanses of his own pilgrimage—professional and, no doubt, deeply personal—toward this elusive grace of boyhood” (p. 120).

Dykstra notes that some kind of transition occurred in Dittes between the years 1987 and 1996, a transition that he believes was personal and a transition that is reflected in his professional writings. What, we may then ask, happened during these years in his personal life? While he was preparing for *When Work Goes Sour*, he was going through his second divorce. If, as Dykstra observes, Dittes was hard on men in this book for making an idol out of work, this could perhaps indicate that he believed that one reason for his divorce was due to what he himself referred to as his addiction to work. His mother also died in 1993. If Dittes indeed had an ambiguous relationship with his mother, one that reflected his needs for dependence and independence from her, then we might imagine that this ambiguity came to a close upon her death, as there was no need to, as Carolyn put it, push her away. Finally, Dittes married Anne in 1987 and this marriage proved to last. It is more than plausible to suggest that the fruits of this marriage helped Dittes heal from the hurts of his previous two marriages, and that he was able to accept
himself—and men—because of this relationship. There was no longer any need to blame men, or himself, for being addicted to work.

The portrait I have painted of Dittes is one in which he was perpetually engaging in what he called grief work. Indeed, he conceived of ministry as grief work. Dittes’s relationship with religion, like Capps’s relationship with religion, has been an ambiguous one. For Dittes, it seems that religion provided a deep sense of personal destiny, a sense of destiny that I suggested was rooted in the fact that he was born on December 26 to a Mary and a son of a carpenter, and he was named James (who was a brother of Jesus). This suggestion is reinforced by the fact that his most extensive, explicitly autobiographical, reflection occurs in relationship to the story of Joseph and the birth of Jesus. Indeed, it would be easy, and perhaps inevitable, for this boy to grow up believing that God had a very important destiny for him. But, throughout his life Dittes wrote about how life does not turn out to be the way we imagined it would be, the way we hoped it would be, the way we dreamed it would be. Life is full of disappointment. As a consequence, I suggest that Dittes became, to some extent, disillusioned with religion due to its failure to make good on its promises. When Dittes came to retire, he felt, as reflected in the case of “Howard,” that the promises of life had passed him by, that he had lived, as he put it, in the chronic shadows of destiny.

Dittes’s story, however, is not one of despair and resignation. His story is one of hope. Although Dittes was to some extent hurt and disillusioned by the promises of religion, he did not finally come to reject these promises, and he did not mourn religion. Religion throughout his life instead continued to be a source of meaning for him, allowing him and in fact deepening his capacity to mourn. In fact, as I have argued, the
despair that Dittes felt after becoming disillusioned with the promises of religion was re-called and re-deemed as hope, and hope, for Dittes, became the very essence of his conception of male religiousness.

In terms of Homans’s “mourning religion” thesis, I have suggested that Cohler’s notion of adaptive melancholia is the best way of understanding Dittes’s relationship with religion. I have suggested this because this notion provides a convincing explanation for why Dittes chose not to abandon religion, but to cling to it as a viable means of dealing with his grief adaptively. Dittes’s earliest writings reflect his melancholic relationship with religion, as reflected in his grandfather’s experience in ministry as represented in When the People Say No, and his final writings suggest this relationship as well, as evidenced in the case of Howard in Driven by Hope. But yet there is, as Dykstra has observed, a transition in Dittes. What this transition reflects is a more adaptive melancholia for Dittes, a way of re-calling religion that was, finally, more holy and whole for Dittes. This holiness and wholeness that Dittes found toward the end of his career entails a reversal and a restoration of Augustine, the religious thinker who appears more than any other in Dittes’s writings. The holiness and wholeness that Dittes found entailed embracing the introspective method of Augustine but, finally, a rejection of Augustine’s fail-safe God—Dittes, in effect, reversed and restored Augustine. The Augustine that Dittes gives us, which traditional Christianity has not, is an Augustine who finds God in his own experience.
4. Recovering Religion

Mourning and William Bouwsma’s Psychological Portrait of John Calvin

Introduction

John Calvin was perhaps the greatest mind of the Protestant Reformation. However, unlike Martin Luther, the man who is credited with beginning the Reformation and a man who enjoyed having a good beer, Calvin was probably not very much fun to be around. While, for example, Calvin liked birthday celebrations, this was not because he enjoyed a good party (as perhaps Luther would have), but, rather, because birthdays “give us an opportunity to consider ‘how the time God has given us has been wasted in wickedness and uselessness’” (Bouwsma, 1988, p. 200). Calvin was certainly an interesting man, both in terms of his intellectual and historical achievements, and in terms of his personality.

Perhaps just as interesting as Calvin himself are those who choose to study Calvin. This chapter is about one such man: William Bouwsma. The choice of Bouwsma, former President of the American Historical Association, as my third case may seem to be a little odd because Bouwsma was neither a psychologist of religion nor a pastoral theologian. However, as noted earlier, he did write an important essay on Christian identity that would qualify for the field of practical theology (Bouwsma, 1976). I have two main reasons for including him in this study: 1) he has written the most recent and most in-depth psychological study of Calvin (Bouwsma, 1988); and 2) he is an ideal candidate for such a study because he intentionally drew on his own life experiences to inform his work (cf. Bouwsma, 1990a). Indeed, as Bouwsma (1990a) put it: “But long
before I decided to become a historian, it occurred to me that much of the confusion I discerned in myself might be reduced if I knew where the various pieces of intellectual baggage I carried about had come from” (p. 8). He continued: “History from this standpoint, I thought, might serve, like psychoanalysis at another level, to liberate the conscious mind from the inconvenient legacies of the collective past, first of all for myself but in the classroom for others” (p. 8). What we have here is a clear and direct statement from Bouwsma that there is a deep connection between his life and his work, and so the task of this chapter is to clarify, as far as possible, the contours of this relationship and how, specifically, his portrait of Calvin figures in his personal task of discerning the confusion in himself.

This chapter, like the previous ones, will have three parts. The first part will present in a rather detailed fashion Bouwsma’s portrait of Calvin. This is necessary because the focus of my study is on psychological portraits of religious leaders. The second part will present material from Bouwsma’s biography, and the third part will relate the first two parts—that is, the life and work of Bouwsma—in light of Homans’s “mourning religion” thesis.

I have obtained biographical material about Bouwsma from various places: from his own personal disclosures in his books and articles, from his public addresses, and from correspondence with his family and colleagues. By looking at this material closely, I have been led to the conclusion that Bouwsma did not turn to the study of Calvin arbitrarily, that, rather, his motivation for studying Calvin was, in part, to come to terms with confusions and tensions within himself. This is not to say that this was Bouwsma’s only reason for studying Calvin—after all, his scholarship was filling a needed gap in the
literature. My point, rather, is that one cannot fully appreciate his portrait of Calvin without knowing something of Bouwsma’s personal life and his understanding of historiography. His portrait of Calvin as an anxious man, while it may be historically accurate, was also a vehicle for Bouwsma to address his own anxiety. I also argue that, in terms of Homans’s “mourning religion” thesis, Bouwsma’s portrait of Calvin was a way of mourning his childhood religion, Dutch Calvinism, and a way for him to individuate from his father, who was a strict Calvinist. At the same time, however, this portrait of Calvin helped Bouwsma find a gentler Calvin—and a way to hold onto his father.

**Part One: Bouwsma’s Portrait of Calvin**

*The Layout of the Book*

Bouwsma’s portrait of Calvin is divided into five parts, with an introduction, a conclusion, and fourteen chapters. Part one, “The Man and His Times,” which consists of three chapters, places Calvin in his historical context. Part two, “The Labyrinth,” deals with one aspect of Calvin’s anxiety, and there are three chapters in this section, all of which address Calvin’s relationship with rationality and his desire for order. Part three, however, consists of a single chapter. The section is titled “The Opening,” and the chapter deals with humanism, intimating Bouwsma’s view that humanism was a way out of the labyrinth for Calvin. The next section, part four, has four chapters and is titled “The Abyss.” This is the other form of anxiety that Bouwsma observes in Calvin, and here Bouwsma looks at the topics of being, knowing, power, and drama in Calvin’s life and work. The final section, “A Program for the Times,” deals with Calvin’s take on society, polity, and church.
Introduction: A Portrait with Psychological Depth Based on Indirect Evidence

Bouwsma states that he is creating a portrait, not a biography. One reason that Bouwsma gives for this is that the basic facts of Calvin’s life are well known. But the more important reason for choosing the word portrait over biography is that Bouwsma believes that such an approach enables him to convey the essence of Calvin’s personality—namely, that “Calvin made little advance over the years in those matters that troubled him most . . . [for] Calvin was still wrestling as inconclusively with the same inner demons at the end of his life as he was when he first arrived in Geneva” (p. 4). Bouwsma also states that his book, though psychological, is not primarily a psychological study: “I have thought it necessary to explore Calvin’s complex personality as deeply as the (chiefly) indirect evidence permits; a good portrait, I assume, suggests psychological depths” (p. 4). He continues: “But my book is not simply a portrait; it is a sixteenth-century portrait. I am less interested in Calvin’s inner life for its own sake than in using it to illuminate the momentous cultural crisis central to his century” (p. 4).

Calvin, unlike Luther, did not directly reveal much about himself in his writings. But this in itself, Bouwsma notes, is a self-revelation. And, in any case, Calvin also disclosed himself in various indirect ways that Bouwsma points out:

He also revealed himself by the manner, tone, and imagery of his communication, which sometime seem to undermine its substance. He disclosed himself, too, in broad, protective generalities whose truth is less than obvious. Every Christian, or every human being, he may assert, has had such and such experience, is convinced of this or that. But if we ask how he can know this, the answer may
often be that he was thinking of himself. He may also reveal himself through
remarks that in context seem unexpected, gratuitous or even irrelevant; on such
occasions Calvin’s persona seems suddenly to drop, and a very human self to
peep through. (p. 5)

And so Bouwsma suggests that we can read Calvin, as Kant said of Plato, to understand
him better than he understood himself.

\[\text{Part One: The Man and his Times}\]

\[\text{A Sixteenth-Century Life}\]

Bouwsma (1988) notes that “Calvin was born on July 10, 1509, in Noyon, a small
Episcopal town in Picardy, France, the youngest of four (or possibly five) children, all
boys” (p. 9). His father worked for the cathedral chapter, and it is known that he
remarried when Calvin was four or five, shortly after his biological mother’s death.
Calvin’s father wanted him to become a priest, so he sent Calvin to the University of
Paris when he was twelve. Calvin finished his degree, but, when he was about twenty, his
father decided that he should become a lawyer instead of a priest. Consequently, Calvin
began to work on his law degree. Along the way, Calvin maintained an interest in
humanism, and even published a commentary on an essay by Seneca a year after his
father’s death in 1531. Furthermore, Bouwsma notes that Calvin’s father suffered
excommunication before his death on account of “a dispute with the cathedral chapter”
(p. 10).

Bouwsma observes that the early years of Calvin’s life are often overlooked
because they are before his conversion to Protestantism. However, Bouwsma notes that
conversion narratives in general are problematic because they are as much social phenomena as they are individual, and, with regard to Calvin in particular, the evidence “consists almost entirely of a single passage in the preface to his commentary on the Psalms, written in 1557, nearly thirty years after the supposed event” (p. 10). In any case, Bouwsma believes that Calvin’s early years deserve more attention for a number of reasons:

The death of his mother when he was a small child and his subsequent exclusion from his father’s household may have begun in him a sense of homelessness that would be later deepened by exile; he grieved for his motherland all his life. The loss of mother and home may also have been an element in what seemed to me his undeniably ambiguous feelings about his father. (p. 11)

Bouwsma also adds that Calvin never spoke warmly about his father and, when reporting his death to a friend, Calvin rather coldly spoke of his death as an unwelcome interruption.

As noted, Calvin received his education in Paris, and this education influenced him throughout his life. “Calvin,” Bouwsma writes, “inhabited the Erasmian world of thought and breathed its spiritual atmosphere; he remained in major ways always a humanist of the late Renaissance” (p. 13). “Unlike Luther,” Bouwsma continues, Calvin “rarely attacked Erasmus” (p. 13). Bouwsma also suggests that a reflection of Calvin’s commitment to humanism can be found in his later years, when he established the academy in Geneva, which was “a typical Erasmian ‘trilingual’ institution” (p. 14).

In 1533 Calvin fled Paris after his friend, Nicolas Cop, preached a controversial sermon that championed many of the beliefs common to humanists. Calvin, Bouwsma
notes, likely collaborated with Cop in the writing of the sermon. If not quite heretical by
Roman Catholic standards—Cop criticized the notion that good works could pave the
way to eternal life—the sermon at least threatened the peace, and, with this, Calvin fled.
For the rest of his life, Bouwsma notes, Calvin lived as somewhat of an exile.

Calvin began writing the first edition of the *Institutes* in 1535, the first edition of
which, Bouwsma has noted, served two purposes. One was that, because it was addressed
to the king of France, it was intended as a kind of apology, a defense of his beliefs and
others like him, so that he could live without fear of persecution. The other purpose was
that it afforded Calvin a chance to work out what exactly his own beliefs were.

Bouwsma notes that Guillaume Farel, the leader of the Genevan Reformation,
became Calvin’s mentor. “The sources,” Bouwsma notes, “differ slightly on how they
came together” (p. 18). As Calvin tells the story, he had only intended a short stay in
Geneva, but Farel forced him, against his wishes, to stay. Theodore Beza, one of Calvin’s
disciples, puts it differently. He suggests that Calvin paid a visit to Farel, and that Calvin,
in his younger years, had a talent for friendship (p. 19). Bouwsma notes that Calvin, later
in life, compared their relationship to Paul’s mentorship of Timothy. Bouwsma adds:
“This would not be his last encounter with an older man upon whom he could project his
need for paternal authority, combined at last with affection” (p. 19). Be that as it may,
Calvin and Farel were expelled from Geneva, and while Farel went to Basel, Calvin went
to Strasbourg where Martin Bucer, who was about the same age as Farel, became his new
mentor. The situation was much more stable here for Calvin, and he was able to attend to
both his scholarly and his pastoral inclinations. It was here that he wrote his commentary
on Romans, expanded his *Institutes*, and wrote his reply to Cardinal Sadoletto.
Bucer, Bouwsma suggests, also served as a paternal authority for Calvin. When Calvin came to the decision that a wife might turn out to be practical, it was Bucer, for example, who took responsibility for finding Calvin a wife. Calvin, though, did not marry the first woman presented to him. On the contrary, he eventually married a widow with two children from his own congregation, Idelette de Bure. Bouwsma writes, “[t]his, given the early loss of his mother and his inexperience with women, may have reassured him” (p. 23). “She bore him at least three children,” Bouwsma notes, “but none survived infancy” (p. 23). While he had no biological children of his own, Calvin “boasted that he had ‘in [C]hristendom ten thousand children’” (p. 23). His wife died in 1549, leaving Calvin distraught. He never remarried.

The possibility of returning to Geneva presented itself, as there was a group in Geneva working to return exiled pastors, but Calvin wanted no part of it. He referred to Geneva as “a great abyss” (p. 24). When he was formally invited back, he sought the council of Bucer who told him to return. And so on September 2, 1541, he did. Calvin, of course, was more mature when he returned, and also more cautious. Interestingly, he was more assertive as well. He demanded that the town live “in accordance with the principle that ‘the church cannot stand firm unless a government is constituted as prescribed to us by the Word of God and observed in the early church’” (p. 24). The town council, Bouwsma notes, endorsed Calvin’s position, enacting his *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*. The administration of the church, that is, the consistory, was made of pastors, teachers, elders, and deacons. Bouwsma offers a psychological interpretation of what this might have meant for Calvin:
There was probably a personal element in Calvin’s concern to order Geneva. A righteous community administered by city “fathers” would be a good father writ large. At the same time, as a home, nurturing as well as ordering and protecting, it might represent the mother he could scarcely remember. Exile could also be justified by the creation in another place of something better than—and therefore a reproach to—what he had left behind. (p. 25)

Bouwsma notes two “major causes of friction between Calvin and Geneva”—the fact that Calvin felt the Genevans would not submit to discipline to the degree that he thought that they should, and that the Genevans, unlike Calvin, were not welcoming to religious exiles from France (p. 25). Calvin noted in a letter: “In addition to the immense troubles by which I am so sorely consumed, there is almost no day on which some new pain or anxiety does not come” (p. 26). Bouwsma notes that Calvin’s anxiety continued to build and “reached a climax early in the decade of the 1550s, when the political power of his opponents was increasing and the town council resisted with renewed vigor the right of the ministers to excommunicate” (p. 27).

Bouwsma notes that Calvin spent most of his time on his commentaries when he returned to Geneva. While he did not have much time for writing himself, secretaries would write down his dictations and he would later comment on and revise what they wrote. He also revised and enlarged his Institutes. “If the first edition was written primarily for himself,” Bouwsma writes, “later editions were more clearly intended for others” (p. 29).

Calvin also spent a great deal of time on his pastoral duties. Bouwsma notes that, after his return to Geneva, he preached some 4,000 sermons, which amounts to “more
than 170 sermons a year” (p. 29). In the decade after 1550, Bouwsma points out, Calvin performed about 270 weddings and 50 baptisms. Bouwsma comments: “Calvin, then, was a driven man, driven by external demands but above all by powerful impulses within himself” (p. 29).

Calvin died on May 27, 1564. Bouwsma notes that Calvin had a number of medical problems: “His ailments included, by his own account, arthritis, kidney stones, unspecified intestinal disorders, hemorrhoids, bleeding from the stomach, fever, muscle cramps, nephritis [a severe inflation of the kidney], and gout” (pp. 30-31). He also quotes a passage in which Calvin remarks that he often suffered from severe headaches. Bouwsma ends his chapter on a psychological note: “But it is possible that the tensions and conflicts within himself were even more erosive: notably, as this account of his life may already have hinted, the tension between the trust that he had found in Cop’s address of 1534 and the insecurity that was both hidden and revealed in his need to control himself and his environment” (p. 31).

**Calvin’s Anxiety**

Bouwsma’s focus on Calvin’s anxiety is the distinguishing feature of his portrait of Calvin. To focus on the issue of anxiety intimates Bouwsma’s interest in psychology, especially as Bouwsma suggests that Calvin’s anxiety unconsciously manifested itself in his life and work. Bouwsma also suggested that anxiety was particularly peculiar to Calvin’s era—a psychohistorical claim. Bouwsma does not spell out what he means by unconscious, and so here is a good point to point out that Bouwsma’s portrait is not technically a psychobiography, as psychobiography and psychohistory entail the
systematic application of specific psychological concepts to persons, texts, movements, and so forth. What we find in Bouwsma is biography or history with psychological content, not psychobiography or psychohistory as such.

Bouwsma offers a great deal of evidence in making the case for Calvin as an anxious person. As Calvin once wrote of himself: “I am in danger of being unjust to God’s mercy by laboring with so much anxiety to assert it, as if it were doubtful or obscure” (p. 32). Bouwsma notes that Calvin struggled over the distinction between anxiety and prudence. “But,” Bouwsma writes, “Calvin’s anxiety also operated at deeper levels,” such as in his thinking “about the order of nature” (p. 33). Is there a natural order to the world, or is it contingent upon God’s grace? Storms made Calvin anxious, and Calvin was particularly confused by water. Since, according to traditional physics, water is lighter than other elements, it would cover the earth, and that it was only by God’s grace that the water remained where it was.

Another source of anxiety for Calvin was his penchant for associating sin and disorder. Sin, for Calvin, was “frightful because it gives rise to chaos” (p. 34). He thought of sin as pollution and mixture. As Bouwsma puts it, “[h]is fear of impurity justifies the characterization of Calvin as a puritan; in this way, at least, he points to Puritanism” (p. 36). Calvin detested mixture, both because it suggested impurity, and also because it suggested disorder. God, Calvin thought, established the boundaries, such as boundaries between peoples. Men should not act and dress like women, nor women like men. Bouwsma notes that “[i]t was reassuring to him that ‘the boundaries dividing the reprobate from the elect can never be crossed’” (p. 36). Bouwsma notes further that
Calvin was also anxious about the body, especially his own: “Our body is the receptacle of a thousand diseases,” he commented (p. 40).

Bouwsma notes that “[a] vocabulary of anxiety pervades his discourse; it includes not only *anxietas* and its equivalent *solicitudo* in Latin, but in French, *angoisse, destresse, frayeur, solicitude*, and even *perplexite*” (p. 37). “But Calvin,” Bouwsma writes, “so anxious himself, was also remarkably sensitive to the anxiety of others, with which he doubtless had much pastoral experience. He saw anxiety everywhere, in episodes recorded in Scripture . . . and among his contemporaries” (p. 37). Calvin writes, “Those who are extremely anxious . . . wear themselves out and become in a sense their own executioners” (p. 37).

Life is uncertain, Calvin thought, and, therefore, anxiety is universal. The life of politics creates anxiety, as well as the material life, and even familial life (especially the care of children). Calvin even reduces envy to anxiety, Bouwsma notes. Bouwsma writes: “But for every human being, beyond the future, beyond the limits of time, lurk the uncertainties surrounding death; this is why, in some ultimate sense, all anxiety is about death” (p. 40). Calvin also linked curiosity and anxiety. He especially condemned fortune telling and astrology because such behavior was rooted in anxiety: for “Calvin . . . anxiety is rooted in dread about what might lie ahead” (p. 39).

“All of this,” Bouwsma writes, “Calvin understood, and anxiety is the subjective link between his perception of the human condition and his doctrine” (p. 40). Anxiety for Calvin, Bouwsma notes, was primarily existential, though it also had a personal and historical dimension. For example, Calvin believed that the indulgences of the Roman Catholic Church during his lifetime produced particular anxieties. Anxiety, Calvin also
thought, was part of creation, as it was “the mother of prudence” (p. 44), and anxiety also
prepared one’s heart for the Gospel. “The alternatives open to Calvin in coping with
anxiety, both his own and that of his age, are,” Bouwsma writes, “suggested by two of his
favorite images for describing situations of extreme spiritual discomfort. The images are
of an abyss . . . and a labyrinth” (p. 45). These images, Bouwsma notes, had both
personal and cultural resonances. Bouwsma notes that the term “abyss” has had a long
history in western discourse: For the Greeks it had such meanings as meaninglessness
and non-being, while for the Latin Fathers it meant hell. Later Fathers, though,
interpreted it positively, noting that the infinity of God was like an abyss. Calvin,
Bouwsma also points out, was aware of all of these meanings, though “[u]sually,
however, he meant the term to express his own horror and to induce the horror of others”
(p. 46). The term “labyrinth” was also used to express and to induce certain experiences.
But here Calvin did not mean to convey meaningless and non-being with his term
“labyrinth,” but, rather, he meant to convey “the powerlessness of human beings to
extricate themselves from a self-centered alienation from God” (p. 46). “The Latin root of
anxietas—angustia, literally the sensation of being compressed and suffocated—hints at
what Calvin was trying to convey by ‘labyrinth’” (p. 47). There is, then, as Bouwsma
points out, a note of claustrophobia in Calvin’s usage of the term labyrinth—one can
observe it in Calvin’s discussion of Noah’s ark—and, moreover, Bouwsma detects an
“almost Manichean revulsion” toward the human body inherent in Calvin’s use of the
word. As Bouwsma puts it, “Calvin associated anxiety, then, with two rather different,
indeed almost diametrically opposed sensations: with a kind of vertigo and disorientation
in which his own identity and sense of direction were endangered, but also with a feeling
that the whole of reality was pressing in on him from all directions, crushing out his life
and breath” (p. 47). But, as Bouwsma notes, “Calvin seems to me to have been more
disturbed, and at a deeper level, by the abyss than by the labyrinth” (p. 48). This
observation that there were at least two kinds of anxiety in Calvin ultimately led
Bouwsma to suggest that there were “psychologically and culturally not one but (at least)
two Calvins” (p. 33).

A World out of Joint

Bouwsma thinks that “Europeans during the later Middle Ages were at once increasingly
sensitive to the failings of their world and increasingly anxious” (p. 49). It is hard to
determine, then, Bouwsma notes, how much of Calvin’s anxiety was his own and how
much was produced by his historical context. In any case, Bouwsma believes that
Calvin’s intense moralism signaled the intensity of his anxiety. Calvin’s understanding of
the relationship between sin and community also fueled his anxiety, Bouwsma observes,
as Calvin believed that unpunished sins pollute the community. Thus “Calvin’s emphasis
on obedience to this divine mandate had a negative corollary in his distrust of liberty,
even of that Christian liberty which Luther so valued” (p. 50). Given the choice, Calvin
had said that he would take the rule of the Devil over the complete freedom of
humankind. As such, Calvin denounced a whole host of sins that he associated with
unrestraint: zeal, self-love, pride, greed, sex, and drunkenness. Calvin also denounced
general evils such as war, luxury, and hypocrisy.

Calvin saw sin everywhere. He thought that the rich were especially in danger.
Indeed, Calvin’s critiques were generally directed at the rich, not the poor, and high
ruling officials—both in secular government and in the church—not lower officials. He attacked what he called the tyranny of the papacy above all because of “the claim of the papacy of dominion over Scripture itself” (p. 60). Bouwsma writes: “The world was indeed in a deplorable condition, but the grimmest element in its plight was, for Calvin, the state of the church” (p. 59). The church was “a den of thieves,” “disordered,” and even secular. Bouwsma notes that Calvin “sometimes represented ambition as the root of all evils within as well as outside the church” (p. 59). The church had become greedy, and it had lusted after power. He “believed that true Christians are a small minority in every social group” (p. 57). Oddly enough, however, while Calvin was quick to criticize the sins of other populations he was restrained in his criticisms of the sexual offenses committed by the clergy. He noted that the practice of the confessional made such offenses convenient; that is, “sexual irregularities seemed to him in some degree excusable because celibacy, being contrary to nature, leads to acts against nature” (p. 60).

Bouwsma notes that Calvin believed that “[t]he world he inhabited was endangered not only chronically and in general by the universal sinfulness of fallen humanity but acutely, immediately, and perhaps uniquely” (p. 63). Ancient popes and recent ones disturbed Calvin, and he lamented the state of his beloved France. France had become contaminated by outsiders, and even Islam. Princes no longer ruled for the people, alms were not given from the heart, young people no longer respected their elders, rapes and adulteries were frequent, and, perhaps worst of all, religious ignorance and unbelief were more widespread than ever. “But what gave Calvin particular cause for anxiety,” Bouwsma writes, “was the imminence of divine punishment far more serious than anything the world had yet experienced. For human beings were not repenting of
their sins” (p. 65). Bouwsma concludes, “Clearly, for Calvin, there was much to be anxious about: enough, certainly, to propel even this recluse intellectual into the active life” (p. 65).

Part Two: The Labyrinth

Cosmic Inheritances

Bouwsma begins this chapter by noting that the crisis in western civilization known as the Renaissance included a growing awareness of the tensions between the Hellenic and Hebraic influences in itself. Calvin, Bouwsma suggests, was somewhat aware of these tensions, but, Bouwsma also suggests, “[u]nusually anxious, he also clung to traditional certainties because he preferred the familiar dangers of the labyrinth to an abyss of doubt” (p. 69).

Bouwsma suggests that much of Calvin’s culture was traditional. Traditional culture, according to Bouwsma, believed in the possibility of knowledge—all things were capable of being known as God knows them. Traditional culture was absolutist and authoritarian, and differences of opinion were considered a matter of incomplete knowledge. In traditional culture, Bouwsma notes, words referred directly to things—traditional culture, that is to say, was idealist—while knowing was equated with seeing. “The implications of this view for theology,” Bouwsma writes, “were of special importance” (p. 71). Bouwsma elaborates:

It reinforced the belief that human beings can know God as he is, unhampered by the limitations of the human condition; and it implied that theology is a science, devised by God and communicated in his books of nature and Scripture, that
presents truths from his perspective. For this reason human knowledge, and notably theological knowledge, can claim a *certitude* that reflects its divine origin. For the understanding of Scripture this position notably precluded any awareness of what we now call the hermeneutical problem. (p. 71)

In light of this understanding of knowledge, the cultural resistance to Copernicus and Galileo, Bouwsma suggests, becomes understandable. If, in other words, what one observes about the cosmos is not how the cosmos is actually operating, then the link between perception and knowledge is weakened, as knowledge now requires that perspective be taken into account: the sun and stars are not actually moving around the earth; they only appear to be so. But, Bouwsma adds, “the attack on traditional culture could hardly have been effective had its foundations not been already massively eroded” (p. 72). Bouwsma continues: “Calvin participated in its erosion, but even as he did so he also clung to it” (p. 72). A striking piece of evidence in this regard is that Calvin rejected Copernicus.

The order of the cosmos provided Calvin some comfort and it influenced his notion of “calling.” According to Calvin’s doctrine, just as each heavenly body has its own established orbit, so too do human beings in society. As Bouwsma puts it, “The best way, therefore, to maintain a peaceful life is when each one is intent on the duties of his own calling, carries out the commands that the Lord has given, and devotes himself to these tasks” (p. 74). Calvin also imagined that the notion of calling would be comforting to others.

Calvin believed that society is, or should be, structured by the family, polity, and the church. I would also like to note that Calvin saw the foundations of society as being
grounded in the subordination of women. Women, according to Calvin’s conception of societal order, must obey men; they must not rule. Calvin’s androcentric hermeneutics, in fact, caused him to discount the example of the leadership of Priscilla, a woman who served as an early missionary and leader with Paul (cf. Acts 18), and even to blame the rape of Dinah, who was the daughter of Jacob and Leah (cf. Genesis 34), on the fact that she went too far away from the home than is proper for women (pp. 76-77). Like the subordination of women, the control of children, too, was a part of the natural order of an ordered society. Calvin believed, for example, that men and women should not be able to marry without the approval of their parents, and that their parents should arrange their marriage partners.

If Calvin had a fairly clear notion of how he believed society should be structured, he struggled over how human beings were structured. “Calvin’s basic problem,” Bouwsma writes, “was that he inherited what he took to be an objective and scientific description of personality but which was in fact an artifact of ancient culture loaded with cosmic reference that was fundamentally antithetical to the anthropology of the Bible. Above all it left no room for that literally central element in biblical anthropology, the ‘heart’” (p. 78). Bouwsma also notes that Calvin had some difficulty with the notion of the soul. Although he noted, with approval, that the human being is a microcosm of the larger cosmic order, and that the soul is “the principle part of man,” he was inconsistent in how he described and understood it (p. 78). Sometimes it meant for him “reason” and “intelligence,” and at other times it meant “will” and even “heart.” He was clear that there is a distinction between the soul and the body, that the body holds the soul. Calvin, then, was inconsistent and confused about his theological anthropology. What is clear,
though, is how his doctrine of total depravity affects human beings: it affects the whole human being: mind, body, soul, spirit, will, desire—every conceivable aspect of human being and human nature. But by God’s grace, human beings nevertheless remain in the image of God, and it is chiefly the mind, Calvin argued, that remains in the image of God.

A word here about Calvin’s view of history is also in order. It is one of general decline, but it also includes a notion of cycles, because, from time to time, things get so bad that a spirit of reform is born. Bouwsma writes: “Improvement in the human condition was reform, rebirth, restoration, restitution, renewal, or even revolution, a more obviously cosmological conception” (p. 83). As Calvin put it, “The church will always rise up again and be restored to her pristine and flourishing condition . . . [and] such a restoration of religion has been effected in our time” (p. 84). Thinking about the cosmos comforted him and helped him deal with his anxiety to a certain extent. But “[w]hen pushed to extremes, indeed, the cosmological model proved claustrophobic; it intensified rather than reduced anxiety, so that, in desperate cases like his, the greater the struggle with anxiety, the more anxiety grew” (p. 85).

**Restoring Order**

Calvin believed that the order of the world depended on the control of the lower faculties by the higher faculties. Children should be controlled by parents, women by men, men by civil and religious leaders, and everyone by God. Calvin also believed that moderation was the foundation of order. Moderation, of course, was one of the ancient virtues. Bouwsma notes that Aristotle defined moderation as the mean between two extremes.
Calvin, though, thought of moderation a little differently, as he focused on the dangers of spontaneity. Bouwsma suggests that Calvin’s ethics and commentary on moderation was a personal way for him to set boundaries for himself: “He feared his own anger, even his own grief, which could so overwhelm him, as he once wrote to Farel, that he could ‘set no bounds to it.’ He was anxious above all about what might happen if John Calvin let go” (p. 89).

Calvin thought that there were a number of ways to restore order to the world. Human beings, by the grace of God, do have some ability to reform themselves, and he further believed that individual efforts to reform could be aided by public opinion and shame, not to mention private admonition and guilt. This spirit of self-control and character-shaping had a humanist flavor to it, Bouwsma notes. Other ways of inculcating virtue included the teaching of history, inspiring the fear of punishment, encouraging the imitation of Christ, and biblical exegesis.

Exegesis, however, made Calvin anxious. This was so because there are some biblical stories that troubled him greatly, such as, for example, the story of the Hebrew midwives lying in Egypt, the story of Rebecca deceiving Esau in favor of Jacob, and the lies of Rahab that led to the fall of Jericho. As Bouwsma puts it, “He feared that such morally ambiguous episodes as these might be taken as examples to be imitated” (p. 94). “His moralism,” Bouwsma further observed, “also prevented him from sympathizing with the tribulations of biblical figures” (p. 94). He faulted David for grieving the deaths of Saul and Jonathan, staunchly maintaining that David should have been more in control of his passions. Calvin also had trouble understanding Job, and faulted Job for his
“eloquent blasphemy.” Why is it, Calvin wondered, that individuals cannot be so eloquent when they praise God?

Bouwsma argues that Calvin’s moralism “may have been an antidote to a danger, at least as equally serious, from an opposite direction,” that is, the danger from within (p. 97). Bouwsma continues: “It was commonly said in the eighteenth century that if you scratched a Calvinist, you would find an antinomian” (p. 97). An antinomian is someone who holds that laws, especially moral laws, do not hold for Christians, for Christians are to rely on faith and grace for salvation, not obedience to laws or works. Bouwsma does not expand on the meaning of this eighteenth century saying, but perhaps an implication of the saying is that the most rigid Calvinists were actually the worst sinners of all, or desired to be so, if only in their hearts. In order to keep a lid on their own desires, therefore, they made sure everyone else’s lid, as it were, was on tight. In any case, Bouwsma continues, “Antinomianism, as an extreme expression of inwardness, may well have been attractive to Calvin; but for a person made so anxious by disorder of any kind, the suspicion of an antinomian impulse in himself must have been singularly terrifying” (p. 97). Bouwsma concludes: “Perhaps this accounts for the harshness of his moralism and that of many of his followers” (p. 97).

*Rational Religion*

Calvin proclaimed that, “If we wish to be his disciples . . . we must unlearn everything we have learned apart from Christ” (p. 98). Bouwsma remarks here that Calvin’s use of the word “we” in this context certainly included himself—Calvin was proclaiming that he was making a break with the papacy which had taught many things that did not come
from Christ. Bouwsma remarks: “This was an illusion” (p. 98). “Discontinuities,” Bouwsma proclaims, “historical and biographical, are rarely as decisive as they seem to those involved” (p. 98). The doctrine of sola scriptura was naïve, Bouwsma argued, because much of what Calvin was taught about the Bible—how he was taught to read it—was “unconscious” (p. 98). Calvin inherited cultural assumptions that he could never fully shake off simply because he was not fully aware of them, just as today we are all influenced by certain cultural assumptions of which we too are unaware.

In any case, the subject of this chapter is that Calvin’s Christianity was, above all else, an intellectual form of Christianity. Bouwsma writes, “Fundamental to this kind of Christianity in Calvin was a conviction that all truth, having its source in God, is objectively given, that it is the same for all people in all times and places, and that it is self-consistent and intelligible” (p. 98). Calvin claimed that “there is no faith where there is no knowledge” (p. 100). He believed that true religion was clear and free of ambiguity, and that it was rational. Bouwsma notes that this led Calvin to assert that there was nothing unusual about the Incarnation: “If anyone says that it is strange to be told that our God has been a mortal . . . I reply that there is no absurdity in this, that God, who is immortal in his essence, should have inhabited our mortal flesh” (p. 100). Bouwsma argues that Calvin’s need for certainty reflects the fact that he was a man of his times. Calvin, for example, did not deny that Scripture is rich and inexhaustible in terms of wisdom, but he did deny the possibility of multiple meanings (p. 100). He also justified death for heretics on the grounds that theological “error can do ‘far more evil than swords’” (p. 101).
Calvin held other interesting intellectual and theological positions. Calvin used the Aristotelian distinction between form and substance to think about the Old and New Covenants, just as Aquinas used this distinction to explain the doctrine of transubstantiation, that is, how the bread and wine became the body and blood of Christ in essence or substance, but not in form or appearance. Calvin accepted natural theology. He thought that the beauty of nature proved God’s existence in general, but that the specifics were open to debate, as has been witnessed over the generations. Calvin asserted the doctrine of God’s immutability, meaning that he believed God did not change. This, however, put him in an awkward position when he came to several passages in the Bible where God changes his mind (see, e.g., Exodus 32.14 & Jeremiah 26.19). It is striking to find that Calvin solved the dilemma by, in a sense, devaluing the Bible: Scripture was given in this way on account of the “rudeness” of human beings. But today, Calvin stated, we know better: God really didn’t change his mind.

Calvin also struggled to make complete sense of his theological positions and his reading of the Bible. With regard to the doctrine of God’s immutability—that God has no passions or emotions—Calvin denied that God felt anger or grief, but this again put him in an awkward position when it came to speaking of God’s love since Calvin never denied—and would never deny—God’s love. Yet another difficulty that Calvin faced was his struggle to make sense of what appeared to him to be the irrational nature of God’s wrath. Furthermore, while Calvin believed that human beings are made in the image of God, he still nevertheless maintained his doctrine of total depravity. According to this doctrine, sin taints everything human beings do, and the only good that can come from human beings is on account of God’s grace. As Bouwsma writes of Calvin’s religious
worldview: “God does not receive his full due . . . until all mortals are reduced to nothing” (p. 107).

Bouwsma concludes his chapter by writing that, “in spite of his effort to make sense of the universe and to tie it all together in a single tidy package, Calvin remained anxious” (p. 109). He continues, “Indeed, the more he articulated his orderly universe, the more he worried over the permeability of boundaries, the collapse of categories, contamination and impurity; and the more he felt trapped. He could move, for relief, only in the opposite direction, toward freedom” (p. 109).

Part Three: The Opening

Humanism

In this chapter, Bouwsma argues that Calvin struggled with both traditional philosophy and modern humanism. Bouwsma gives a brief account of humanism, noting that it had roots in the debate between Socrates and Protagoras. Socrates believed that knowledge was possible, that ultimate truth could be known. Protagoras and his followers, on the other hand, believed that philosophical certainty and knowledge were not possible and that only probability and opinion were possible. Teachers of rhetoric in Greece and Rome picked up on these ideas and, during the Renaissance, Cicero and Quintilian represented this line of thinking. Due to the fact that humanists perceived scholastic thinking as too abstract and unrelated to the modern world, they cultivated interest in rhetoric and persuasion instead. Calvin was deeply influenced by humanism. Bouwsma writes, “Calvin’s humanism is apparent, on the most superficial level, in his love of the classics” (p. 114). He also notes that both persuasio and eruditio were important for Calvin. In
terms of *eruditio*, Calvin believed in the slogan *ad fontes* and thus became a capable linguist, mastering Hebrew, Greek, and Latin.

Calvin’s humanism led him to some rather interesting conclusions. He admitted that there were errors in the copying of the New Testament, different interpretations (but not meanings) of Scripture are possible, and that the biblical authors occasionally made factual mistakes. He corrected Matthew, for example, on the issue of the star guiding the magi in the story of the birth of Jesus. Calvin thought that it was a comet. He disagreed with Paul on matters of culture. He also noted that the Gospel accounts do not agree on particular details. To ignore these facts is simply ignorance, Calvin thought.

On issues of problematic themes in the Scriptures, Calvin believed that the Holy Spirit sometimes gave human beings what was necessary for them, but he thought that in later ages, people were are able to discern equally valid truths that were more appropriate for their times. Thus, while it was appropriate for the Jews to use musical instruments in worship, today we know better. As Bouwsma puts it, “Rhetorical culture rested on assumptions about the human condition, the possibilities of knowledge, human experience of the world, and the organization of life that were in sharp contrast to those on which Calvin’s traditional culture rested” (p. 127). Calvin, as we have seen, was quite traditional, to use Bouwsma’s word. He craved and needed order and certainty, but in this chapter, Bouwsma briefly shows that Calvin was also influenced by humanism, which stressed the contingency of knowledge—and even the Bible. This more flexible Calvin was, therefore, not as subject to the anxieties of disorder, but he had something else to be anxious about: freedom.
Here Bouwsma argues that two areas of Calvin’s thought helped him escape from the labyrinth—namely, his view of human personality and his understanding of epistemology. Bouwsma writes, “Through this understanding of the heart, Calvin was also moving toward, though he never quite reached, a conception of the wholeness of human being” (p. 132). He continues, “It can hardly be surprising, then, that much of Calvin’s thought about human being vigorously contested his reservations about the feelings and the body” (p. 133). Calvin, at times, praised feelings and the body. He disliked asceticism and affirmed eating and drinking, even the drinking of wine. He had, at times, a positive view of sexuality in the sense that it was a gift from God. Calvin also argued that women are not only for procreation, and that men and women are spiritual equals before God.

Ironically, Calvin’s more unified conception of the human being can best be seen in his doctrine of total depravity. Calvin’s notion of sin included both actual sins and potential sins, which, Bouwsma notes, “expressed and intensified his anxiety” (p. 140). Furthermore, “[a]nxiety, which is rooted in distrust for the future, is for Calvin also the source of sin” (p. 140). Bouwsma notes that Calvin talks negatively about human beings with regard to sin so frequently that some have argued that he does not believe that human beings still have the image of God inside of them. Bouwsma thinks this is a misunderstanding of Calvin, because this view neglects the fact that Calvin was a rhetorician. Indeed, in other passages in Calvin—passages that are not dealing with sin—one can observe clearly that Calvin believes that human beings still retain the image of
God. The important point to note here is that Calvin’s understanding of the human personality—namely, his rejection of the pagan conception that human beings can use their higher faculties or minds to control their lower faculties or passions—had implications for epistemology, for even our minds are affected by sin.

It is also striking that Calvin’s understanding of original sin paved the way for notions of progress (p. 144). Calvin attacked tradition, custom, and the veneration of the ancients, both pagan and Christian. He lamented, with other humanists, the fact that Rome regressed from a republic to a monarchy, and that religion, too, declined in the empire. In the church, he saw the medieval fathers as building on the mistakes of the ancient fathers. Bouwsma notes that he had little respect for old age, as he thought that all of the stages of life were dismal. According to Calvin, things were not better in the old days. Nor were our fathers more virtuous than us. They were just as sinful as we are—but we, unlike them, have a chance to set things right. And, while Calvin’s understanding of history is, as noted, one of decline, this does not imply that things were once right. Quite the contrary, things have always been bad and have been getting worse, but there is an opportunity to set things right, which was Calvin’s program.

Knowing

This chapter continued with the problem of knowledge. Calvin, as noted, rejected the traditional sovereignty of reason on the grounds that human beings were both more and less than intellectual. They were more than intellectual because Calvin’s conception of the human being moved toward a rejection of the mind and body dualism, and less than intellectual because even the mind was tainted by sin. There had already been a crisis in
human knowledge, Bouwsma notes, but Calvin added to it by means of his conception of the human personality. The criterion for knowledge was no longer its ability to fit within a system of ideas, but its practical use.

Calvin believed that certainty depends on God’s grace, and that the mind does not have the powers it once did before the Fall. “In the absence of divine revelation,” Bouwsma writes, “Calvin recommended, on religious matters, a deliberate agnosticism” (p. 155). Calvin believed, in accord with the humanists, that knowledge must be useful, but in a seeming paradox he at the same time denounced curiosity. What is important to note, then, is that Calvin did not approve of willful ignorance and, instead, advocated a sort of compromise between curiosity and willful ignorance. Calvin insisted that God is rational, but that God’s rationality is not human rationality, and we cannot therefore understand God’s. Based upon this line of reasoning, Calvin could conclude that there is justice and order in the world, even if it appears that this is not so. Theology, then, though a human enterprise, was to Calvin a viable intellectual project, for through theology one sought to discern, as far as possible, God’s goodness and grace.

The point here is that humanism, as Bouwsma understands the term, paved the way for a less stable understanding of knowledge and, therefore, for more room for interpretation. There are mysteries of faith and contradictions in human experience, and this freed Calvin from some of his own rigidity. Calvin was ambivalent about this freedom though, both because it challenged the stability and order that he craved, and because it created new anxieties of its own.
Bouwsma notes that anxiety pervaded Calvin’s discourse. He also notes that power, too, pervaded Calvin’s discourse. Calvin talked of power as “energy, creativity, life, and warmth,” and he talked of “impotence as lethargy, dullness, death, and coldness” (p. 162). He talked of God’s power as infinite. And key metaphors for Calvin included the power of the weather and of rulers. Bouwsma also observes the personal significance of the issue of power for Calvin: “Because it expressed his sense of powerlessness to control the future, his anxiety was itself closely related to his preoccupation with power” (p. 162). He continues: “Power . . . was not, for Calvin, just a philosophical abstraction; his fascination with it had sources deep within himself” (p. 162).

Calvin disliked natural theology to some extent because he was not impressed with “secondary causes” and arguments concerning God’s indirect power in the world (p. 164). He preferred, rather, to think of God’s direct power in the world. He was not so much impressed with the order of nature, but with the disorder, as this suggested to Calvin God’s direct involvement: “since no year is like another, since climate changes from hour to hour and moment to moment and heaven puts on a new face: when we discern all these things, God is rousing up, lest we be benumbed in our understanding and erect nature into a kind of god and the true God is deprived of his due honor” (pp. 165-166). “God’s power,” Bouwsma notes, “is displayed in variety” (p. 166). Interestingly, for Calvin, this also includes differences in individuals, such as disposition.

According to Calvin’s beliefs, God’s power extends over all of life and death. Indeed, he even goes so far as to state that no “sparrow falls to the ground without [God’s] decree” (p. 167) and, that even the wicked “serve his glory” (p. 167). For Calvin,
there was no “role for chance or fortune” (p. 167) As such, all events—those as mundane as the death of a sparrow and those as dramatic and world-shaping as the rise and fall of rulers and kingdoms—are the result of God’s will. God exerts his will sometimes to punish, Bouwsma notes, by means of “pestilence, famine, and war” (p. 170). However, God’s purposes are unknowable. The suffering of the elect is sometimes for the purposes of instruction, but other times for the sake of humility. Why do the wicked sometimes prosper? Why are they not punished immediately? Bouwsma, quoting Calvin, writes: “God, like a Machiavellian prince, knows how to wait for ‘the best possible occasion’ to accomplish his work” (p. 172). God is in control.

To put such matters into explicit theological language, one would likely utilize the doctrine of providence. Bouwsma argued that, with regard to Calvin’s doctrine of providence, “[w]hat is indisputable is the importance Calvin attached to the doctrine for the relief of anxiety,” and that “[i]t comforted him to reflect [on the fact] that the power of God holds the universe in place, preserves its order, prevents it from sliding into the abyss” (p. 171). Regarding predestination, Calvin believed it was “biblical and a necessary corollary of God’s power,” and “we all know that the Gospel has been available to some but not others, and that some reject it” (p. 173). The doctrine, while it did provide him some comfort, also made him anxious as well, as “[h]e thought it ‘terrible’ that, as Scripture compelled him to believe, ‘only a small number, out of an incalculable multitude, should obtain salvation’” (p. 173).
Bouwsma notes that “the sixteenth century was one of the great periods in the history of the theater,” but, however, “the larger cultural significance of its theatricality is [not] commonly recognized” (p. 177). Theater in the sixteenth century “expressed the uncertainties of a period of rapid change in which the possibilities of human existence were expanding, human identity had become problematic, and the modes of human behavior could no longer be taken for granted” (p. 177). There was in culture, and indeed in Calvin, “a dramatic vision of existence” (p. 177). Calvin described the world as “a glorious theater”—God’s theater, to be sure, and one in which human beings admired his works. In addition, Calvin conceived of human beings as the audience in God’s theater while, as Bouwsma notes, they simultaneously performed the role of actors (p.177). Calvin noted that kings “are placed, as it were, in a theater, and the eyes of all are turned upon them” (p. 177).

Calvin viewed his own life and work as dramatic. The church, he believed, was his theater. As one might suspect, however, Calvin was uncomfortable with the notion of “play,” because it was not serious enough and certainly too ambiguous a concept for him to accept without reservations. Calvin was particularly worried about the implication that, when one is acting, one is, in a sense, being disingenuous or inauthentic—that is, lying—because one is simply playing a role. On the other hand, he also believed that playing the role of a repentant sinner actually encouraged genuine repentance. Bouwsma also suggests that Calvin’s notion of “calling” also fits with his vision of a dramatic life, and of the Christian life in particular. Just as actors are assigned roles, so too does God assign various roles or callings to different persons. In other words, actors do not choose their
roles. They are assigned. So, too, the Christian does not choose her vocation or calling in life, but must listen instead to God’s call.

As Bouwsma observes, Calvin told the story of the Christian life according to two plots. One plot is centered on struggle, and Calvin’s analogy here is a military one. Christians are God’s soldiers—they battle through life, face difficult days, and ultimately are granted victory. The other plot is also about struggle, but Calvin’s analogy here is one of pilgrimage. Christians are on a journey; they face unknown territory and sometimes go astray but, in the end, reach their destination. Bouwsma writes: “Just as the militant Christian can depend, with God’s help, on victory, so the Christian pilgrim can be sure that, however slowly, he will reach his goal” (p. 186). Implied in both of Calvin’s metaphors for the Christian life—the soldier and the pilgrim—is the notion of progress. While Calvin was comforted by the fact that, with God’s help, the elect are guaranteed of reaching the goal, he was nevertheless anxious about the idea of progress because, for him, it was a duty. The Christian, that is to say, had the responsibility of using her time wisely for the glory of God. As Calvin put it, “[N]ot only years but every day must be called to account so that each day one may make progress” (p. 186).

Part Five: A Program for the Times

Society

Calvin believed that it was his calling and his duty to confront the moral and spiritual crises of his time, and he believed that on occasion “God [would send] prophets and teachers . . . ‘to bring the world to order’” (p. 191). As a result, Calvin saw it as his task, Bouwsma notes, not to write about theology, but to offer instructions for society. While
he appreciated the contemplative life, and would have preferred it for himself, he believed that “it is not part of Christian meekness, as if in hatred of the human race, to flee to the desert and the wilderness and at the same time to forsake those duties which the Lord had especially commanded” (p. 191).

Calvin conceived of God as “legislateur et roy,” that, in other words, “God governs us” (p. 192). Part of God’s governance included restoring the world to order through the creation of the cosmos and the institution of social traditions and institutions. According to this logic then, the sun, the moon, and the stars were created for human beings in order that they might keep time, while social structures such as marriage and monogamy were useful for providing order to society. Just as the sun, the moon, and the stars have their place, so, too, do men, women, and children.

An important point that Bouwsma notes in this chapter that many people do not realize is that Calvin had a certain flexibility about him, that Calvin believed that one should “not put pressure on others to follow your [own] example, as it were a rule” (p. 192). He also notes that Calvin “was inclined for practical reasons to accept existing social distinctions, [but that] he did not necessarily admire them” (p. 194). Calvin, as one would expect, valued prudence and, as one might also expect, imprudence made him anxious. For this reason, Bouwsma observes, Calvin felt it necessary to provide commentary on the beatitudes. If, for example, one should turn the other cheek, we should not incite our rival to greater anger by the manner in which we turn the other cheek. Giving one’s cloak is commendable, but this does not mean we should not take cases of robbery to the courts.
Regarding economic class, Calvin believed that poorer individuals had closer families, were more hospitable, and were freer from envy. He believed that Christ had come from humble origins, and that Christ was even illiterate. Yet Calvin also defended riches, so long as they were used for the glorification of God. And, for this very reason, Calvin argued that Jesus’ parable about the rich young man was not meant to convey that every rich person should give away their wealth (cf. Luke 18.18-29). As Calvin put it: “A farmer who must live by his labor and support his children would sin by selling his little farm unless he had to” (p. 197). He also believed, Bouwsma writes, that “private property [was] fundamental to social order” (p. 197). Poverty was not a virtue, but neither was extreme wealth. Calvin argued for “moderate fortune,” or, in other words, the middle class. Bouwsma notes that “[m]iddle-class attitudes also shaped his esteem for work,” and that “his doctrine of the calling meant that we should invest our God-given energies primarily in our work” (p. 198).

Polity

Calvin made a distinction between political authority and religious authority, though he also held, of course, that all authority comes from God. Civil authority was, then, a calling or vocation. But Calvin nevertheless thought that clergy should not do the tasks of princes, and princes should not do the tasks of clergy. Rulers, for Calvin, were “God’s tribunal on earth” (p. 205). He thought, in fact, that social discipline was needed to prevent chaos breaking out. According to Calvin, it was the duty of Christians, then, to obey their rulers—even wicked rulers. In cases of tyranny, Calvin still discouraged active rebellion, but he did permit passive disobedience, such as not obeying a tyrant’s
command to do something wicked. The form of government that Calvin advocated was the republic, as he believed that liberty is necessary for the achievement of full humanity. Fathers are rulers in households and provide for their families in a similar manner that states provide basic needs for society.

Church

Bouwsma notes that Calvin believed that the improvement of society depended on the improvement of individuals, and the means of transforming individuals lay with the church. When speaking of the church, Bouwsma observes that “the strong feeling that infused the conventional parental imagery with which [Calvin] discussed the church suggests the depth of his concern for it and hints again at his experience with his own father” (p. 214). Bouwsma observes that “[i]t is scarcely remarkable that Calvin, made so anxious by disorder, was unable to purge himself of attitudes that were, in him, sometimes more rigid than those of the papal church, and that he who had so vigorously denounced the ‘tyranny’ of Rome was sometimes perceived as the tyrant of Geneva” (p. 215).

Calvin believed that the unity of the church was spiritual, that church attendance was necessary, and that individuals should not be free to read the Bible on their own in an attempt to discover what it means. Due to the fact that Calvin thought that one purpose of the church was to organize society, he also believed that “police” were needed within the church. As Bouwsma sums up Calvin’s position, “minister and magistrate seem to be the parallel officers of a body at once ecclesiastical and political” (p. 217).
Calvin tried to transform Geneva into a visible community of saints. Indeed, as Bouwsma writes, “The anxiety that all disorder produced in Calvin also inclined him to favor authoritarian modes of control” (p. 219). Furthermore, “Though he did not directly challenge the doctrine, Calvin did not subscribe to Luther’s priesthood of all believers” (p. 219). Hence, Calvin created the “consistory,” a ruling body of elders, and they used excommunication as a means to keep the church pure. According to Calvin’s logic, the church is mixed, and people are mixed. Clergy, therefore, needed to be able to correct sinners, as well as face some level of persecution in face of, for example, the Roman Catholic Church. This whole scenario made Calvin anxious since he saw that the limitless amount of work needed to correct and police the people meant a pastor’s job would never be done.

While Calvin was deeply authoritarian in matters of church order, at times he could be flexible. This is reflected in his belief that nothing is binding except what is plainly spelled out in Scripture. Calvin had a certain sensitivity to human personality and its impact on religiosity. As Bouwsma puts it, “Calvin recommended an order of instruction whose principles were essentially psychological” (p. 228). Worship must be from the heart, and must engage the whole personality. “Preaching, then, like the church, is ‘a mother’ who conceives and gives birth to faith” (p. 228). Bouwsma’s emphasis on the psychological here reflects not only the depth of Calvin’s psychological intuition, but Bouwsma’s as well.
Bouwsma concludes his book with a discussion of Montaigne. He notes Montaigne’s comment that

\[I\]t has often seemed to me that even good authors are wrong to insist on fashioning a consistent and solid fabric out of us. They choose one general characteristic and go and arrange and interpret all a man’s actions to fit their picture. (p. 230)

This, of course, is the general and usual criticism of psychohistory, namely, that psychohistorians fit their subjects into a neat little theory, a theory that is oftentimes many centuries removed from their subjects and is therefore anachronistic and reductionistic.

Bouwsma believes, however, that he has avoided the charge of reductionism by offering “two Calvins.” One Calvin was philosophical and rational. This is the Calvin who craved order and certainty, distrusted freedom and the world, and sought to control the forces both in himself and in the world. Bouwsma’s metaphor for this Calvin, remember, was “the labyrinth.” The other Calvin was rhetorical and humanistic. This Calvin, in contrast, celebrated “the paradoxes and mystery at the heart of human existence” (p. 231), valued experience over theory, and was generally more flexible and tolerant. Bouwsma’s metaphor for this Calvin was “the abyss.” These two Calvins, Bouwsma writes, “are themselves too complex to be described as ‘ideal,’” as in Max Weber’s use of the term “ideal types” (p. 231). He continues, “In addition, as with genuine ideal types, the contrasting attributes of the two Calvins were, as Calvin might have put it, not only combined but promiscuously jumbled together within the historical
Calvin, much as they have been variously combined in the whole course of western civilization” (p. 231). Bouwsma continues, “In Calvin’s struggle to reduce the incompatible impulses in himself to a comfortable integrity, his philosophical side was more dominant, seeking to reconcile and unite them dialectically” (p. 231). He continues, “He preferred, in short, to integrate rather than to choose between contrary pressures” (p. 231). Calvinism, Bouwsma argues, that is, Calvin’s own Calvinism, was a composite: “[i]t was the product of impulses and needs of varying provenance that defied systematization. The composite character of his thought doomed the philosophical side of his mind, though without destroying it, to failure” (p. 231). For the humanistic Calvin, though, the situation was different. This Calvin relished in mixtures and composites. Originality derived from this Calvin, though, of course, he would have denied that he was offering anything original. But Calvin’s great insight, a humanist insight, was that the old Christian message needed to be suited for a new time—that the rhetorician, in other words, needs to know his audience.

Through the recovery of this humanist and rhetorical Calvin, Bouwsma completed his project. In this next portion of my dissertation I now want to turn our attention to Bouwsma’s own biography so that I can examine the relationship between Bouwsma’s life and work, particularly his psychologically attuned portrait of Calvin which I deal with in full in part three.

**Part Two: Bouwsma’s Life**

William Bouwsma (1923-2004) was born in Ann Arbor, Michigan on November 22—the birthday of his father—and he grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska. He had a younger brother,
who was two years younger than Bouwsma, as well as a younger sister, who was about ten years younger. Bouwsma did his undergraduate and graduate work at Harvard University, receiving a B. A. in 1943 and a Ph. D. in 1950.

Figure 4: William Bouwsma

He married Beverly Bouwsma in 1944 at the age of twenty and they had four children: John, Sarah, Philip, and Paul. From 1943-1946 he served in the Air Force. Before retiring in 1991, Bouwsma taught at the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana, Harvard University, and the University of California at Berkeley. Bouwsma also served as the President for the American Historical Association in 1978 (Bouwsma, 2000/2008; Bouwsma 2001/2008).

My approach in this chapter is a little different from my previous chapters on Donald Capps and James Dittes. This is because Capps has published many books and articles that contain autobiographical content, such as memories from and about his childhood, as well as what I referred to as academic autobiography. Dittes, while not publishing as much material as Capps in this regard, did much the same. While Bouwsma
did not publish as much autobiographical material, he did publish some, and these materials are a major source for this chapter. After writing this chapter, I did come across two sets of published interviews, one with Bouwsma himself, and the other with his wife (cf. Bouwsma, 2000/2008 & Bouwsma, 2001/2008). While, for copyright reasons, I am not permitted at this point to reproduce the material from those interviews in this chapter, suffice it to say that they further everything that I argue here. In this chapter, therefore, I will rely on two such essays—an essay that focuses on the task of the historian, and an essay that focuses on Christian adulthood, that is, maturity—to give the reader a sense of how Bouwsma viewed his own work. This discussion will lay the groundwork for a more detailed discussion of the relationship between Bouwsma’s life and work in the following section. Another difference between the cases of Capps and Bouwsma is that I had the luxury of corresponding with Capps himself about my thinking, but I did not have the opportunity to do so with Bouwsma who died in 2004. I did, however, have the opportunity to correspond with his widow, Beverly Bouwsma, his wife of some sixty years, a their children, and some of Bouwsma’s former colleagues. Yet another difference from the cases of Capps and Dittes concerns the fact that one of my major sources here is a biographical book about O. K. Bouwsma (Hustwit, 1992), William Bouwsma’s father, which I will turn to in the following section.

_A Usable Past_

Bouwsma (1990a) disclosed information about his personal life in _A Usable Past_, a self-edited volume of his own works that he published a year before his retirement. In this volume he writes autobiographically about his career. He dedicated the book to Jean and
Henry May “for the best reasons” (p. v). Henry May was a long time friend and colleague of Bouwsma’s and, in an obituary for Bouwsma, it was noted that Henry May “offered this assessment of Bouwsma’s work: ‘His historical thought was powerful, complex and profound. It was quarried, sometimes painfully, from sources that lay deep in his personality and experience’” (Brucker, 2004). A brief discussion of two of Bouwsma’s essays in this section will support May’s observation that there is a connection between Bouwsma’s life and his work, and a further discussion of Bouwsma’s other works, particularly his book on Calvin, will also confirm May’s assessment.

**Bouwsma as Public Servant**

The introduction of *A Usable Past* is of particular interest for this study, because here Bouwsma reflected on what it has meant for him to be a historian. He begins by noting that he took the book’s title, *A Usable Past*, from Friedrich Nietzsche’s “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life.” Bouwsma writes: “The central argument of this passionate work, judiciously qualified, reflects my own deepest convictions about the value of historical scholarship” (p. 1). For Nietzsche, Bouwsma observes, “a vital historiography must serve the ‘life and action’ of society. . . . History, in this view, much like water and electricity, is a public utility” (p. 1). Bouwsma continues: “This means in the first place that history is not the private preserve of professional historians, just as divinity, law, and medicine do not ‘belong’ to clergyman, lawyers, and physicians” (p. 1). “Like other professional groups,” Bouwsma states, “historians are properly the servants of a public that needs historical perspective to understand itself and its values, and
perhaps also to acknowledge its limitations and its guilt. Historians have an obligation, I believe, to meet public needs of this kind” (p. 1).

*Bouwsma as Cultural Interpreter of Anxiety*

If Bouwsma sees himself as a public servant, one may wonder what type of contribution he sees himself making to society. In other words, to continue with Bouwsma’s own analogy, just as clergyman, lawyers, and physicians meet specific public needs in their areas of expertise—that is, there are various kinds of clergyman (e.g., chaplains and pastors), lawyers (e.g., public defenders and insurance lawyers), and doctors (e.g., oncologists and dentists)—there are various kinds of historians (e.g., political historians and intellectual historians) who meet specific public needs in their areas of expertise.

What kind of historian was Bouwsma? In his early years, he thought of himself as an intellectual historian but, after the influence of historicism, he “began to recognize that the conception of the ‘intellect’ was itself a historical artifact. . . . [It was] a mental construct . . . that far from serving its needs, had been often exploited to justify dominance over society” (pp. 1-2). After this realization, Bouwsma began calling himself a cultural historian, and for his understanding of culture, he was particularly influenced by Mary Douglass, Clifford Geertz, and Marshall Sahlins, anthropologists who all believe that culture—of which religion is a part—can greatly influence human being’s perceptions and behavior (cf. p. 14, n. 5). Here Bouwsma also discloses the major assumption or theoretical insight that guided his work—namely, that culture “is a mechanism for the management of existential anxiety” (p. 2). And it is this kind of history—a cultural history “based on this larger understanding of culture”—that
Bouwsma found “usable” (p. 2). It is also striking that Bouwsma believed that “some areas of culture are more instructive for self-understanding than others” (p. 2). Religion, theology, and, above all, spirituality, have helped Bouwsma find out what, in his words, “a society is finally ‘about’” (p. 2).

*The Origins of Bouwsma’s Interest in Tensions in Western Culture: Dutch Calvinism*

After noting what he had learned from some of his most influential teachers, such as Paul Kristeller and Douglass Bush, Bouwsma goes on to note that he has always been more interested in tensions rather then harmonies in western culture. He attributes this to the fact that he was the son of “second-generation Dutch Calvinist immigrants who were trying to assimilate the high culture of early-twentieth-century America” (p. 8). “[T]hese tensions,” Bouwsma writes, “posed problems for me” (p. 8).

One problem that Bouwsma noted concerned “the compatibility of an ‘inalienable right’ to ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’ with Christianity” (p. 8). And by Christianity, one would assume that Bouwsma means the Christianity of his parents: Dutch Calvinism. So the question, then, was: how can I be an American and a Calvinist? How can I live in the land of the free as a believer in one of the most confining strands of Christianity? The tension between liberty and order, we will see, is precisely the tension that Bouwsma sees in Calvin, and it was the desire to work through this tension that led Bouwsma to the discipline of history.
Bouwsma was particularly drawn to a line in Nietzsche: “Historical knowledge,” Nietzsche wrote, “streams in unceasingly from inexhaustible wells, the strange and incoherent forces its way forward, memory opens all its gates and yet is not open wide enough, nature struggles to receive, arrange and honor these strange guests, but they themselves are in conflict with one another and it seems necessary to constrain them and control them if one is not oneself to perish in their conflict” (p. 8). Reflecting on this passage, Bouwsma writes, “[a]s I entered the world of scholarship on my own, I increasingly saw that my task as a historian would be to try to sort out the major elements in the heterogeneous bundle of impulses that constitute [w]estern culture and lay bare its contraries” (p. 8). And, Bouwsma writes, the “relief of the anxiety engendered by cultural conflict also figured more and more centrally in my project” (p. 8). “A historian,” Bouwsma writes, “might, by exposing contradictions arising out of the eclecticism of [w]estern culture, contribute to conscious and informed choice” (pp. 8-9). Another way of putting this would be to say that the task of the cultural historian, like the psychoanalyst, is to make the unconscious conscious.

“I am not sure,” Bouwsma writes, “that such ideal types [which make sense of the contradictions in western culture] make in any general sense for a usable past, but they have made the past more usable for me” (p. 9). Bouwsma elaborates:

If [w]estern culture is characterized not by its harmonious, but by its fundamental, historically engendered antinomies, the history of [w]estern culture may be conceived as a series of efforts, none successful for long, to constrain and control its internal conflicts. In this context, a culture can be understood as the
psychological equivalent of a constitution; cultural systems, by ordering human behavior through customs and rules, reduce anxiety by regulating human activity and making it predictable. (p. 10)

Bouwsma came to see that there are two kinds of cultural anxiety. As he put it, “to use Calvin’s terrifying metaphors, the anxiety of the abyss, the result of an underarticulated culture (or, to put it more positively, of an excess of freedom), and the anxiety of the labyrinth, the result of excessive and suffocating cultural constraints” (p. 11).

The historical study of cultural anxiety had a personal subtext for Bouwsma, and he explains his anxiety in this way: “The youthful confusion which impelled me to study history was a particular instance of what Leon Festinger has called ‘cognitive dissonance’” (p. 11). He continues, “Until I began to consider it more generally, I assumed this to be an acutely uncomfortable condition. But actually, as I now believe, the minds of most of us are a tangle of confusions of which, far from being terrified, human beings are for the most part unaware” (p. 11). Further: “[i]ndeed, even when we become conscious of our confusions, we usually manage, once past the idealistic expectations of youth, to live with them in relative comfort” (p. 11). The task of the historian is to show acute moments of this chronic condition.

Christian Adulthood

The other essay that I would like to examine in this section is Bouwsma’s “Christian Adulthood.” This paper was given on a panel over which Erik Erikson presided and was later published in a special edition of *Daedalus*. Bouwsma (1990b) notes that he was asked to give this paper because he “took exception to remarks at this conference about
the significance of Christianity in this context,” that is, in the context of a discussion of comparative models of human development (p. 397). He also notes that this essay has been described as “a classic of gerontology,” and that many commentators, according to Bouwsma himself, have found this essay to be surprising.

Bouwsma begins his essay by noting that the “elasticity of Christianity” is well known and, therefore, “it poses special problems for the identification of a peculiarly ‘Christian’ conception of what it means to be an adult” (p. 397). Bouwsma believes that such a conception can be made if one makes a distinction between historical and normative Christianity. Historical Christianity “reflects the composite of those cultural impulses that make up what is commonly thought of as Christian civilization” (p. 397), while normative Christianity “is an ideal type” (p. 397). By “ideal” he means that “it builds upon and is consistent with those biblical norms about human nature and human destiny that give to Christianity whatever precise identity it may posses” (p. 398).

Bouwsma overlooks the fact, however, that this is a peculiarly Protestant way of talking about what should count as “normative” Christianity, and seemingly disregards the fact that there are other kinds of Christianities that have used alternative scriptures, such as the so-called Gnostic Christians, who themselves cannot be thought of in any kind of monolithic fashion (cf. King, 2003).

Regardless, Bouwsma makes another distinction with respect to historical Christianity and maturity—namely, the distinction between manhood and adulthood. He notes that the Germanic word “man,” which typically is gender specific, means “to think,” and so the chief idea being expressed by manhood is to distinguish human beings from animals because human beings can think. The Latin word “adult” means “to grow
up.” Bouwsma notes that “it implies a process rather than the possession of a particular status or specific faculty” (p. 398). Bouwsma elaborates:

    Childhood, in this conception, was conceived not as the positive foundation of maturity but as formlessness or chaos, and manhood was the result of the imposition on this refractory matter, by education, of an ideal form. With the achievement of manhood, childhood was decisively and happily left behind. (p. 398)

To be a man, then, is to be rational. This is also why “the religious quest is understood as a commitment to higher things, with a corresponding contempt for lower” things (p. 399). This has been expressed in Christianity as the opposition between the soul and the body, the spirit and the flesh, reason and passion, adults and children and, even, men and women. There is much to criticize about this conception of maturity, which is essentially androcentric and authoritarian, and Bouwsma notes that there have been many critiques from within the Christian community.

Bouwsma next goes on to assert his own conception of Christian adulthood. Quoting Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, Bouwsma writes, “[s]o shall we all at last attain to the unity inherent in our faith and our knowledge of the Son of God—to mature manhood, measured by nothing less than the full stature of Christ” (p. 401). Bouwsma comments: “But it is of particular importance for our immediate purposes that the measure of true adulthood is finally ‘the full stature of Christ,’ for this is an absolute standard, in relation to which no man, whatever his age, can claim to be fully an adult” (p. 402). Next, Bouwsma turns to Calvin for more insight on the issue, quoting Calvin as follows: “After being born in Christ, we ought to grow, so as not to be children in
understanding . . . although we have not arrived at man’s estate, we are at any rate older boys” (p. 402). Bouwsma concludes, “Christianity has, then, a conception of full adulthood; the goal of human development is total conformity to the manhood of Christ” (p. 402). He continues, “It is in this sense that the Christian life is like adolescence, that stage in which the adult seems, however ambiguously, trembling to be born” (p. 402).

From here Bouwsma makes some interesting theological claims, claims I would add that are well beyond the bounds of “objective” scholarship, and certainly beyond the bounds of the discipline of history. The fact that he is making theological claims is somewhat obscured by the fact that he does not say that this is what he is doing, and he leads the reader to believe that what he is doing is describing “normative” Christianity as a historian might describe the events of the American Civil War. But Bouwsma here is nevertheless constructing, not describing, a normative Christian view of Christian adulthood, a task which normally falls to practical theologians rather than secular historians.

Bouwsma makes the theological claim that “the refusal to grow is, in an important sense, the source of all particular sins” (p. 406). He notes that the Christian story of the Fall (Genesis 3) supports this claim even though by the standards of most the story actually seems to support the opposite view—namely, that Adam and Eve are punished because they want to grow by means of eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Per Bouwsma’s reading, however, Adam and Eve’s sin was that they wanted to be like gods, meaning that they wanted to remain as they were and, therefore, not grow. This is a somewhat idiosyncratic reading, just as is his next theological and psychological claim: “The claim to divinity, therefore, paradoxically results in pervasive anxiety” (p. 406).
The fact that Adam and Eve experienced guilt and shame can be supported in the text, it seems to me, but why anxiety? And why pervasive anxiety? With what kind of evidence could one support the claim that all human beings experience pervasive anxiety after the Fall? One response or kind of evidence could be brought forward is death. That is, it is often assumed by Christians that death became a part of the human experience after the Fall and, therefore, pervasive anxiety became a part of the human condition. However, when one reads Genesis 1 through 3 closely, one finds that death was always a part of God’s creation; indeed, God forbids human beings from eating from the Tree of Knowledge because then they would know to eat from the Tree of Life (Genesis 3.22). Death, then, has always been a part of creation, and in this story God apparently wants to keep human beings from living forever because they would become like gods. Bouwsma is not entirely alone in his reading of the Fall, however. In fact, he notes that his interpretations of sin, anxiety, and the Fall have been largely derived from Paul Ricoeur and Reinhold Niebuhr. Bouwsma also draws on other theologians: Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, and Harvey Cox. Many of these thinkers, and others such as Rollo May, were writing about anxiety from the 1950s onward, and so this may explain Bouwsma’s interest in reading “pervasive anxiety” into Genesis 3.

Bouwsma also writes about the meaning of salvation, in a way that reminds one of Paul Tillich’s correlational method, where theology answers the questions of culture. He writes, “If the Christian analysis of evils in historical existence can be understood as a diagnosis of immaturity, the Christian conception of salvation can be similarly construed as a description of the only way to recover that capacity for growth in which true adulthood exists” (p. 407). He continues, “The basic problem here is to replace anxiety
with faith, so that man can enter an open future with confidence and grow through his experience” (p. 408). Faith, for Bouwsma, is the theological answer to the psychological problem of anxiety.

If there is any doubt that Bouwsma is writing theologically, this doubt should be put to rest when one observes that he offers his own understanding of the beginning of faith: “Faith begins, then, not in illusion but in an absolute and terrifying realism” (p. 408). The same goes for salvation: “Salvation thus begins with confession, the admission of sin and ultimately faithlessness, which is therapeutic in the sense that it demands total honesty and is directed to the removal of every false basis for human development” (p. 408). It is interesting to note that here Bouwsma seems to be engaging in pastoral psychology or pastoral theology, as he is commenting on the therapeutic value of confession. He continues, “Augustine’s Confessions might be described as the Christian form of psychoanalysis, the retracing, in God’s presence and with His help, of the whole course of a life, which aims to recover the health of faith” (p. 408). Bouwsma also claims “the answer to sin is not virtue but faith” (p. 409). “By faith,” Bouwsma writes, “man is dramatically relieved of his false maturity, his claims to a self-defined ‘manhood,’ and enabled to begin again to grow” (p. 409). This kind of faith “supplies the strength to challenge authority maturely, without the rebelliousness, arrogance, or destructiveness symptomatic of insecurity, or to criticize the definition of one’s own life and to examine the dubious sources of one’s own actions” (p. 410).

Bouwsma ends his essay by making a case for childhood and community. Childhood, like the Christian life, assumes growth. Children are open and filled with wonder, and they have a sense of playfulness. They can relax. The can take risks for the
sake of some adventure. He quotes Zechariah 8.5 in support of his view of play: “And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls, playing in the streets” (p. 412). Regarding community, Bouwsma notes that, in this essay, “I have treated these various elements in the Christian conception of adulthood as aspects of an ideal for individual development” (p. 412). But to ignore the communal aspects of growth, Bouwsma notes, would betray the Christian tradition. He notes that Paul’s words about growth and maturity, after all, were intended for a community of believers. He notes that the church is the one body of Christ, and that “[t]he power of growth is thus finally a function of community” (p. 412).

What These Two Essays Tell Us about Bouwsma

These two essays provide us with valuable information about Bouwsma as a person. We learn from his introduction in *A Usable Past* that 1) Bouwsma views the discipline of history as a vocation similar to the vocations of doctors, lawyers, and clergy; 2) the way in which historians carry out this vocation is by making it “usable”; 3) Bouwsma, as a cultural historian, saw it as his personal task to address cultural anxiety, a topic that was of keen interest to psychologists and theologians of his time; 4) Bouwsma indicates that he has addressed his own personal needs by making the past usable for himself; and 5) in making the past usable for himself, Bouwsma stated that he was working out tensions within himself, tensions created by the interplay of his Dutch Calvinist background on the one hand, and, on the other hand, his American context.

His essay on Christian adulthood is also instructive. The fact that he wrote an essay on the topic is itself interesting, especially because the essay is theological in
nature. Bouwsma makes four main theological claims in this essay, all of which are suggestive of his own faith in, or relationship to, Christianity: 1) there is a difference between historical and normative Christianity; 2) Christian adulthood is growing toward conformity to Christ; 3) complete conformity to Christ is not possible in this life, so Christians must continue to keep growing; and 4) the refusal to grow is sin, which results in pervasive anxiety as well as guilt.

What we have here is not an “objective” or even historical account of various Christian conceptions of adulthood. Quite the contrary, we have a normative and theological argument. All such arguments, I suggest, tell us as much about the person making the argument as they do about whatever topic the theologian happens to be advocating. All theological statements, that is to say, are personal. I suggest, therefore, that Bouwsma’s theological reasoning here is also personally revealing, that Bouwsma himself wished to replace his own anxiety with faith and that he wanted to continue growing, maintaining an openness to the future.

And why, after all, would it be otherwise for a historian who believed that the past should be useable, especially for a historian who openly acknowledged that his scholarship was useable for himself? Taken together, Bouwsma’s four theological statements suggest that the task of the Christian, at bottom, is growth, and that Christians should not be anxious about the future, but that they should approach the future with openness and faith. This is the core of Bouwsma’s personal faith. But this, as we will see, was not the faith of his father or Dutch Calvinism. Bouwsma had to let go of and mourn the faith of his father so that his own faith, however conventional or unconventional, could grow, perhaps even toward conformity with Christ.
Part Three: Relating the Life and Work of William Bouwsma

I now want to turn to the application of Homans’s “mourning religion” thesis to the life and work of Bouwsma. The primary loss in Bouwsma’s particular case involved his relationship with his father. Another major loss—a professional loss, namely, a loss of a certain kind of historiography—was also significant, but this loss was not religious in nature even though Bouwsma did bring personal religious resources to bear in order to cope with this loss. All of this is to say that Bouwsma’s professional odyssey was one that was both psychological and religious at its core.

I will focus here primarily on Bouwsma’s relationship with his father, which was a source of considerable burden and, as we shall see, also a source for Bouwsma’s intellectual creativity. Their relationship was strained by religion—particularly Dutch Calvinism—and my general argument is that Bouwsma, by means of his scholarship, worked through his relationship with his father and Dutch Calvinism, individuating himself from both so that, emotionally speaking, he could be free from them. To put things succinctly, Bouwsma achieved individuation and freedom through his ability to reject his father and his father’s religion. Rejection, I’d like to point out, even if one is doing the rejecting, is still a form of loss and losing, and one can expect that mourning can be found wherever loss is, even if the loss is desired and on account of one’s own efforts.

Bouwsma turned to the psychological study of John Calvin shortly after the death of his father in 1978. I suggest that this particular loss prompted Bouwsma to undertake his in-depth study of Calvin, and the fact that his portrait is deeply psychological is quite
suggestive in terms of Homans’s “mourning religion” thesis. That is to say, Bouwsma’s psychological portrait of Calvin helped Bouwsma to individuate from his father by recovering a very different Calvin—a humanist Calvin who was much more human and humane than the Calvin of Dutch Calvinism. I also suggest that Bouwsma’s relationship with his father constituted a kind of ongoing ambiguous loss because he never had the kind of relationship that he desired. As Sarah Bouwsma, Bouwsma’s daughter, put it: My father “was so cautious in what he said. We all knew he suffered from his relationship with his own father, never getting the approval he wanted” (May 20, 2008, Personal Correspondence).

Bouwsma’s intellectual project, which, as he has noted in his own writings, is rooted in his childhood experience, can be understood as a form of mourning as Homans has used the term. The loss is the loss of his familial Dutch past. As we will see, the family, particularly Bouwsma’s father, tried desperately to hold on to this heritage in America and this created a tension in Bouwsma himself as well as, I argue, a tension with his father. By means of his scholarship, Bouwsma was able to separate or individuate—that is, to let go of and therefore to lose or to loosen—himself from his past and his father, thereby reducing the tensions and confusions in himself. But this process was not simply one of individuation. It was also one of creation and restoration because Bouwsma was, in the end, able to recover Calvin for himself, though not the Calvin of his family or the Calvin of his childhood. I argue, finally, that the writing of a psychological portrait of Calvin was the key moment for Bouwsma as he attempted to come to terms with his family’s religion and his relationship with his father.
At the time of writing, I did not have direct evidence in the form of published and public disclosures from Bouwsma concerning his relationship with his father, though Bouwsma’s children and his widow informed me about this relationship. Subsequently, however, I did come across the interviews with Bouwsma and his wife, and it is safe to conclude both from this material and from the published documents on which I focus here that Dutch Calvinism, the religion of his father, was problematic for Bouwsma and created confusion in him. We also have a few words from O. K. Bouwsma—William Bouwsma’s father—about William Bouwsma, which, as we will see, are very suggestive. I also have, from one of his graduate students, a rather extensive portrait of O. K. Bouwsma as a scholar and as a person, and I discovered that there are very strong resonances between O. K. Bouwsma and Bouwsma’s portrait of Calvin. When I discovered this fact, it become clear to me that Bouwsma was working through his relationship with his father in some way by constructing a portrait of Calvin. I will proceed, then, by turning to the portrait of O. K. Bouwsma so that I can then demonstrate how Bouwsma’s portrait of Calvin fits with the person of O. K. Bouwsma and how Bouwsma came to individuate himself from his father while also creating a religious portrait that was useable for him.

I suggest that understanding the life and work of William Bouwsma also requires some understanding of the life and work of O. K. Bouwsma, William Bouwsma’s father, who many have experienced as a very difficult man. One cursory observation about these two men can lead to a preliminary hypothesis. O. K. Bouwsma was an academic. One might say, then, that William Bouwsma followed in the footsteps of his father, that, in psychological language, William Bouwsma identified with his father and became
someone like him in his professional life. His father, though, was not a historian, but a philosopher. So while William Bouwsma may have identified with his father, the fact that he became a historian intimates that he individuated from his father as well. This point of difference—the difference between philosophy and history—did indeed become a point of conflict between this father and this son, particularly as these men thought about matters of ultimate concern, which is to say, religion.

*Hustwit’s Account of O. K. Bouwsma*

In *Something about O. K. Bouwsma*, Ronald Hustwit (1992), one of O. K. Bouwsma’s graduate students, recounts his experiences with O. K. Bouwsma. He notes that O. K. was born in Muskegon, Michigan in 1898, and that his parents were “Dutch-Americans with close ties to Holland and to the Dutch-American communities in Michigan” (p. ix). O. K. took his undergraduate degree from Calvin College and his graduate degree from the University of Michigan. In 1928, he took a teaching position at the University of Nebraska, where he taught until his retirement in 1965. The state of Nebraska then had a mandatory retirement at the age of 65. After his retirement, he went on to teach for twelve more years at the University of Texas at Austin. He won many awards and held various visiting teaching posts. O. K. was interested in Hegel and idealism in his early career, and he gradually became more interested in Wittgenstein—with whom O. K. was a personal friend—and Kierkegaard. His reading of Kierkegaard and others, Hustwit suggests, “gave [O. K.] guidance on understanding the central force in his life—his Christian faith” (p. ix).
Hustwit admired O. K. very much. Before writing this work, he also co-edited O. K.’s papers (Craft & Hustwit, 1982, 1984). Hustwit undertook this project of writing about Bouwsma over ten years after O. K.’s death and, when writing the account, drew not only on his twenty-five year relationship with O. K. himself, but worked closely with the Bouwsma family. About the project, he writes, “I . . . grow weak at the thought of trying to capture the spirit of this person—his unusual and lively character—and to do it in such a way as to show the relevance of his character to his philosophy” (p. 1).

Hustwit first heard the name of O. K. Bouwsma at a certain liberal arts college in western Pennsylvania: Westminster College. At Westminster, Jack Rogers encouraged him to pursue his interests in Christian philosophy with O. K. Bouwsma at the University of Nebraska. Rogers told Hustwit about O. K.’s “persistence in asking for examples and specific cases in response to generalizations” and his “quick wit in philosophical discussions” (p. 1). Hustwit also recalled a story that Rogers had told him about O. K. during his senior year at Westminster. Rogers had just returned from a conference on Christian philosophy at Wheaton College where O. K. had given a paper. One presenter was “trying to make something of Aquinas’ proof based on degrees of perfection in art” (p. 1). O. K., apparently unimpressed, sarcastically asked “some questions about whether one of Beethoven’s symphonies was a more perfect creation than some current Elvis Presley tune” (p. 1). The audience laughed and O. K. continued poking fun at the Thomist by concluding his remarks with the exclamation, “God exists!” The presenter then tried to address some of O. K.’s comments and asked, “What would you say if a voice came to you in the middle of the night claiming: ‘I am the most perfect being greater than which nothing can be conceived’?” (p. 1). “Congratulations,” O. K.
responded. The presenter, apparently irritated at this point, said: “Professor Bouwsma we are waiting for you to say more,” but O. K. would not engage the presenter any further and simply said: “Don’t fall off” (p. 1). After hearing such stories, Hustwit noted that he “wanted to meet this person who dared enter into the arena of philosophical warfare armed with humor alone and who was apparently fearless” (pp. 1-2). He continues, “When I arrived at Nebraska, I had a philosophical hero whom I had never met [i.e., O. K. Bouwsma]. I was convinced of his invincibility in philosophical combat and of his grasp of the philosophical basis of Christianity” (p. 2).

**O.K. Bouwsma as a Teacher**

Hustwit described what it was like to be in a seminar with O. K. by stating that he “would never allow a piece of philosophical terminology go by,” and that “[o]ften he said nothing but looked at you with his eyes twinkling and with a chuckle that said ‘You’re talking nonsense’” (p. 3). He also notes that Stephen Toulmin “once remarked to me that Bouwsma had a glance which said ‘That’s the silliest thing I ever heard’” (p. 3).

Furthermore, Hustwit notes, O. K. sometimes asked students to write what they had just said on the board, and then the class would focus on the “offending sentence” (p. 3). “These,” Hustwit says, “were frustrating exercises” (p. 3). He continues:

One sometimes had the feeling that he was deliberately being obtrusive. “Others may be talking nonsense, but I am not,” one might think to oneself. Or one might feel that if he would only let me finish, he could explain all this to Bouwsma’s satisfaction. Some too felt that he was not taking them seriously when they were speaking of philosophical matters of great significance to them. Another might be
upset over the fact that the argument that he had put forward and had been received so badly was none other than one put forward by some great philosopher in the past. “If I am making an argument identical to one made by David Hume, why is it not good enough to stand when I make it?” He would slow, frustrate, and refuse to understand the arguments of the philosophers of reputation as well as any student’s in a seminar. (pp. 3-4)

While many students and colleagues might have been put off by O. K.’s approach, Hustwit admired it: “The single greatest impression he gave me when I spoke in his presence was that he was listening. By this I do not mean what one usually means by that, namely that one is understanding and affirming what another is saying. What I mean is that he was listening so closely to what one was saying that one had better start to listen to oneself” (p. 4). Talking with other students in his seminars, Hustwit found that his experience was similar to many others.

Hustwit interestingly points out that “[o]ne should understand at the outset that Bouwsma had great respect and approval of Kierkegaard’s works, and that some of the arts which he frequently used in a negative way towards philosophical theories were not so used with Kierkegaard” (p. 10). He continued, “Kierkegaard, who understood differences and who shared many of Bouwsma’s own features—the love of language, the love of humor, the vision of philosophy as an ethical task—became a natural ally for him” (p. 11). O. K.’s skepticism, then, was selective, particularly when it came to matters of the Christian faith.
O. K. Bouwsma as “Doing” Philosophy

Hustwit also notes that O. K. was fond of saying that one does philosophy, that philosophy does not constitute a body of knowledge. O. K. would often say that he didn’t know anything. Contrasting himself with his son, William, he said to Hustwit: “Bill knows things. He knows a lot. I don’t know anything” (p. 4). While this might be interpreted as praise of his son for “knowing things,” more likely this was a criticism, for, as noted, O. K. often said that “I don’t know anything,” implying that he, therefore, was more like Socrates—the wisest man of all. William Bouwsma, as we will see, had his revenge on this point in an essay that he wrote about the historical origins of the humanities.

O. K. Bouwsma’s Humor

Hustwit notes that “Bouwsma’s use of humor was an integral part of his work and character” (p. 12). He adds,

I do not believe that he would use it against someone that he did not think bright and able. He would use it against any serious philosophy student. He would use it to bring someone to self-examination. Everyone who met him or heard him read a paper or response or sat in on a seminar has a humorous anecdote to relate. He did on-the-spot comedy; I never heard him tell a joke. He was the master of every situation. He always had a quip, a pun, a chuckle which he sometimes covered in fake surprise, the mind which loved to play with words, were parts of him that cannot be separated out. I said above that he used his humor for philosophical purposes, and while true, that is misleading. It makes it sound as if he always
calculated the effects of his humor. But he was like this with everyone, as near as
I could tell, it was not something that he could turn on and off. He certainly did
not reserve it for philosophy alone. . . . His natural talent for humor and word play
were a part of his personality, and when he put them to philosophical use it was a
most impressive use of his personal traits in that regard (pp. 12-13)

“Bouwsma,” Hustwit writes, “spared no one the benefit of his wit—a visiting lecturer,
another faculty member, any one of his students—holding each accountable for what he
or she said both in and out of seminars” (p. 22). Yet Hustwit maintained that “[e]veryone
felt accepted in discussing philosophy in Bouwsma’s presence. Our ideas and our
intelligences were constantly challenged, but students were encouraged to talk and to
speak from the heart” (p. 24).

Impressive as it may have been, not everyone appreciated his humor. Hustwit
notes that O. K. and his wife would spend their summers in Berkeley to be near their son,
William. Beverly Bouwsma confirmed this and told me that:

In their later years Gertrude and Oets would come out here every summer and
would stay in a house across the street from us and have dinner with us very often
so there was a lot of conversation. Oets would “tease,” as I am sure he thought of
it as, Bill and the boys (we had three boys and one girl) but never our daughter or
me. And when it got too bad I would always give him a look and he would quit.
(Personal Communication, October 20, 2008)

She continued,

Our poor sons would talk in an ordinary way about their lives and he would pick
out an inappropriate word or one he thought had a doubtful meaning and gave
them a hard time about it. “What do you mean about that?” would be a usual way he would put it and the poor boys would go sort of crazy trying to explain what they meant. Bill would resent this kind of criticism and so would I and certainly so would they. Gertrude would look baffled but so used to it that it didn’t seem at all odd to her. (Personal Communication, October 20, 2008)

If O. K. drove his grandsons “crazy,” one wonders how William Bouwsma would have experienced his own father. It does not seem too far-fetched to suggest that such “teasing” and constant interrogation would create in William a deep sense of anxiety about the meaning of his words.

**Going to Church with the Bouwsmas**

After only spending one semester with O. K., O. K. asked Hustwit if he’d drive him and his wife Gertrude to church on Sunday mornings. Though there were plenty of churches in Lincoln, O. K. wanted to go to Omaha for church—120 miles roundtrip each Sunday. Hustwit agreed. Hustwit notes that the “Bouwsmas attended the Christian Reformed Church which is a splinter of the Dutch Reformed Church” (p. 14). He adds: “I do not understand the division to this day, though I understood the former to be more conservative and evangelical than the latter. Whatever the differences, one knew in one visit that John Calvin had been there” (p. 14). Hustwit continues, “The expression—‘the sovereignty of God’—was a common one and I recognize John Calvin in it. . . . I doubt if these people had read Calvin’s *Institutes* or could discuss the details of that book. O. K. Bouwsma must have read Calvin, but I do not remember discussions of the *Institutes* with him. He once mentioned a chapter to me, but mainly when he referred to Calvin it was
the instantiation of Calvin in the Christian Reformed Church to which he referred” (p. 15).

O. K. Bouwsma told Hustwit that he “came to love a certain form or expression of Christianity,” and that one “gets used to that expression and then everything else seems foreign by comparison to it” and that “it should not be changed” (p. 15). O. K.’s “theological views,” Hustwit observed, were orthodox. He added, “He was not a trained theologian, although he read some theology. He had a great dislike for Tillich’s theology and for liberal Protestant theology in general. He regarded it as bad philosophy” (p. 15).

One may wonder why a staunch Calvinist was interested in the philosophy of Wittgenstein. Indeed, Hustwit asked O. K. this very question during their first trip to Omaha. O. K. replied by noting Wittgenstein’s notion of theology as grammar. For O. K., this meant that, “If one pays attention to grammar—to how a word gets used in everyday expressions and surroundings—then one will know what to do with it when it confuses him in philosophy. It is a kind of map or a key which tells one how to proceed” (p. 16). Further, “[t]he Scriptures are a kind of map or key which tell one how to proceed. Theology is not inventing what to say about God. . . . [Theologians] must retell what is already there” (p. 16).

Hustwit also notes that O. K. was not a fundamentalist. Though he believed in “the infallibility of the Scriptures,” he meant by this not that the Bible is true in the sense that it offers science and history about the world, but that it is true in the sense that it is a book unlike any other. For O. K., “Christianity was not a philosophical system. It was a way of life which one adopted, or tried to adopt, and one could not be aided in that task by building a philosophical system underneath it” (p. 18). “If all problems of philosophy
were merely problems of language, if all philosophical problems could be ‘dissolved,’
what was left?” (p. 22). Nothing. But Christianity, O. K. reasoned, since it is not a
philosophical system, could not, therefore, be dissolved.

O. K. Bouwsma Moves to Texas

Hustwit was one of a handful of students who left Nebraska to go to Texas with O. K. In
Texas, Hustwit and others had the opportunity to practice O. K.’s techniques on other
students and faculty members. Hustwit describes his own techniques, inherited from O.
K., as “annoying” (p. 22). Hustwit also recounts a story about a talk that Chisolm gave at
the University of Texas that demonstrates O. K.’s “annoying” techniques. Chisolm’s talk
was full of the construction “X says that Y believes P.” O. K., responding to the paper,
wanted to make it more specific, so he introduced a construction about a person who
believes that the Queen is blowing bubblegum. O. K. went on at length. Hustwit adds:
“Chisolm, as had many others in similar circumstances with Bouwsma, lost his patience
and complained bitterly about Bouwsma’s lack of respect for philosophy” (p. 25).
Hustwit came back to Texas to observe O. K. He noticed that “[h]e was somehow more
patient with his students now—more accepting of the fact that some good students would
never catch on to what he was trying to do in philosophy” (p. 27).

The Death of O. K. Bouwsma

Hustwit said that O. K.’s death affected him like the death of a father (p. 30). After a
memorial service for O. K., Hustwit had the opportunity to talk with Angelyn Stevens, O.
K.’s sister. She told him two stories about O. K.’s youth. One was that, as a boy, O. K.
loved to make up poems that rhymed but made no sense, though, by the sound of the language, they seemed as though they did make sense. She recited one of these poems that she had memorized for Hustwit. Hustwit comments on this story: “I doubt if it was that Wittgenstein who quickened his ear for nonsense in philosophy. It is more likely that Wittgenstein showed him the significance of paying attention to a natural gift that was already there” (p. 31).

The other story that Angelyn told involved O. K. and his father. During summers while he was still completing his graduate studies, he would work at the golf course his father owned. In exchange for the work, O. K. and his wife were given room and board. Hustwit then recounts this scene:

At dinner one night the talk turned to Darwin and evolution. Oets was explaining and defending Darwin’s theory to the consternation of his father. Their father finally had enough of it, and pronounced that he would not eat with someone who believed him descended from a monkey. . . . Oets and Gertrude [then] had to take their meals to the cabin to eat. (p. 31)

I would add, where Hustwit did not, that O. K.’s commitment to “doing” rather than “knowing” might have been another reason that Wittgenstein became important for O. K., for now he would never have to defend Darwin—or any other body of knowledge—again. He could focus instead on the relationships of words, something much safer, and something he loved to do already. For O. K. Bouwsma, there was no progress in philosophy, that is, no evolution. The question that O. K. struggled with, both at the beginning of his life and at the end, is, what is the meaning of a word?
From Hustwit’s account of O. K. Bouwsma, we learn several things: 1) that O. K. was a deeply committed Christian, of a particularly conservative Calvinist type; 2) that O. K. Bouwsma turned to Wittgenstein to criticize all philosophical systems but that, since he did not view Christianity as a philosophical system, he did not critique Christianity or Christian philosophers such as Kierkegaard in the same manner that he critiqued other systems and thinkers; and 3) that many of O. K.’s students and colleagues were frustrated by O. K.’s “annoying” techniques. From Beverly Bouwsma we also learn that many family members were also frustrated with O. K.’s persistent habit of questioning the meaning of words. These facts—taken together with comments from William Bouwsma’s immediate family—strongly suggest a problematic relationship between O. K. Bouwsma and William Bouwsma. Further tensions in this relationship, we will see, are indirectly intimated in William Bouwsma’s public scholarship.

*William Bouwsma’s Individuation from O. K. Bouwsma*

I suggest that William Bouwsma individuated from his father and his father’s religion by studying and writing about John Calvin. I also think that Bouwsma’s previous scholarship helped in this regard as well, but the book on Calvin was key in this regard because Calvin was the central theological thinker in his father’s religion. In this section, then, I will demonstrate how Bouwsma used the study of Calvin to individuate from his father, but before doing so, I will set the context by showing how Bouwsma used previous scholarship in this regard.
“Bill Knows Things”

Hustwit, as noted, mentioned that O. K. was fond of saying that one does philosophy, that philosophy does not constitute a body of knowledge. O. K. would often say that he didn’t know anything. Contrasting himself with his son, William, he said to Hustwit: “Bill knows things. He knows a lot. I don’t know anything” (p. 4). I noted above that this was likely a critique, not a statement of admiration. Interestingly enough, Beverly Bouwsma mentioned to me in a letter that William Bouwsma always felt that his father never respected his academic work, namely, history, because O. K. was a philosopher. Given O. K.’s rather brash personality, it is unlikely that he remained silent about the fact that his work differed from his son’s work. I do not know if William Bouwsma ever directly challenged his father about such matters in conversations, but, in any case, he had his revenge indirectly in his writings, such as in his essay on Socrates and the historical origins of the humanities.

In “Socrates and the Confusion of the Humanities,” Bouwsma (1990c) notes that “this essay owes its existence to my membership, during the academic year 1976-1977, in the National Humanities Institute, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, in New Haven” (p. 385). Bouwsma also notes that his essay “was a slightly tongue-in-cheek reaction to a certain preciousness about the humanities that I sensed in some of my colleagues” (p. 385). Bouwsma begins the essay by noting the widespread belief that the humanities are in trouble, the fear that, students are no longer taking courses in the humanities (that they prefer, instead, to take courses that will have a tangible “payoff” in the future, such as business and science courses), that budgets are being cut, that faculty-lines are being reduced, and so forth. Bouwsma, however, does not
want to address the (then) contemporary situation (which, I might add, resonates with the subfields of pastoral theology and psychology of religion today). Rather, his point is to show that the humanities have always been in crisis, that there was never in fact a golden age for the humanities. In doing so, he traces the beginnings of the humanities and he looks at the role of Socrates in particular.

Bouwsma argues that the humanities have their root in antiquity, particularly in the split within philosophy between a search for ultimate truth and rhetoric. Bouwsma writes:

This opposition was the analogue, in antiquity, of the familiar tension between the two cultures of our own time, with philosophy then corresponding to natural science now. And the crucial point here is that education in the humanities stems not from the position represented by Socrates . . . but from his antagonists, the Sophists, among whom Protagoras was probably the most influential. (p. 387)

The basic confusion in the humanities, as Bouwsma sees it, is whether or not the goal is to obtain ultimate truth, or if, on the contrary, the truth of the situation is that man is the measure of all things. Is the task of the humanities, in other words, certitude about the world and human nature, or is the task to reflect upon the human condition, deeply, rigorously, and honestly, knowing full well that all knowledge is contingent and limited, just as human beings are contingent and limited? Bouwsma argues that, “[r]hetoric, not philosophy, gave us the humanities” (p. 388).

The humanities, which essentially began with Protagoras, eventually excluded him from the humanistic tradition, ironically in favor of his foe, Socrates. Protagoras became the villain, Socrates the hero. Here, then, Bouwsma is reversing this tradition,
restoring Protagoras as the hero. There is an implicit theological reversal here too, for, as Bouwsma notes, Jesus and Socrates have been, quite often in the western tradition, identified together. To champion Protagoras, then, is to go against Christianity—and also his father, who believed, like Socrates, that he did not know anything.

*Rome and Venice, Father and Son*

In *Venice and the Defense of Republican Liberty*, Bouwsma (1968) states in the acknowledgements that he felt “some obligation to note here that the latter stages of my work were accomplished during the disorders that have agitated Berkeley since 1964, and these well-publicized events have taught me a good deal about the realities that underlie political discourse” (p. viii). He continues, “They have required of me, as of other academic men, some direct participation in the *vita activa civile*; and they considerably deepened my understanding of the relationship between political liberty and intellectual vitality, of the contradictions between idealism and political accommodation” (p. vii). And Bouwsma notes, again from his own experience, that the events in Berkeley helped him to see “the tension between freedom and order and the terrible anxieties this can generate in a crisis, and of the strain such anxieties impose on the sense of community” (p. vii). If there is any doubt that this work was a personal work for Bouwsma, he himself puts any such doubt to rest: “The relationship between my experience and my work also taught me something about the nature of historical understanding, even perhaps when it attempts to grapple with events remote in both space and time” (p. viii).

Bouwsma notes that Hans Baron suggested that the study of Sarpi might be of interest to him. Bouwsma doesn’t say why Baron made this suggestion to him, but
presumably it was because he realized that Bouwsma would appreciate Sarpi’s vision of historiography. As it turned out, Sarpi’s vision of historiography did indeed become Bouwsma’s own vision. Bouwsma praised Sarpi’s work: “It was a masterpiece because it maintained the fruitful tension between the two essential elements of any vital historiography: empirical investigation . . . and an imaginative vision which reflects living needs and values” (p. 623).

Bouwsma also notes that his original intention for the book was to write about Sarpi as a religious thinker and as a historian but, as he progressed in his research, the book became about the tension between Venice and the Counter Reformation, that is, Rome. My correspondence with Beverly Bouwsma proved especially insightful here. She mentioned in a letter that Bouwsma was a “very hard worker” and a “troubled person” (September 11, 2008, Personal Correspondence). When, in a subsequent letter, I asked her what she meant by “troubled,” she replied: “As to Bill being a troubled person, I don’t mean that he was crazy. He certainly wasn’t (October 20, 2008, Personal Correspondence). She continued:

[H]e was very often depressed as I know because of living with him for sixty years and because sometimes he liked to talk to me about his problems. Quite often, in fact, and I was always interested in listening. This was particularly true when he was writing his Venice book, which he thought, was about Rome (his father) against Venice (Bill) which maybe you have read. Well, anyway, that’s the sort of troubled he was. (October 20, 2008, Personal Correspondence)

What is especially striking here is Beverly’s comment about Bouwsma’s association of himself with Venice and his father with Rome. Bouwsma noted that he was writing the
book during the 1960s, which, as he put it, was a struggle between two generations over liberty and order—a struggle that he also had with his own father. By making a case for Venice over Rome, he was individuating from his father in his scholarship. And if Beverly Bouwsma is correct, Bouwsma was aware of what he was doing.

In light of Beverly’s comments, a closer look at Bouwsma’s book on Venice is warranted, especially as Venice is contrasted with Rome. As noted, Bouwsma concerned himself with demonstrating the importance of Venice with regard to the development and preservation of the ideas and ideals of the Renaissance. The decision to focus on Venice with regard to these matters, Bouwsma noted, is in contrast to most Renaissance scholarship that has focused on Florence. In any case, Bouwsma argues that “[t]he complex of values, immediately political but ultimately so much more, that had first been clearly enunciated in Renaissance Florence and then elaborated in Venice a century later, had meanwhile been taking root in other parts of Europe” (p. 625). Bouwsma continues: “The fact that Venice had survived as a working republic, whatever the decline in her actual power and its moral foundations, undoubtedly contributed to her continuing influence. Men could visit Venice still, not only to marvel at her location and her beauty but also to enjoy her good personal freedom” (p. 625). Indeed, “Venice was not, like Florence, merely a monument to past glory but a living demonstration of fundamental truths about life in society” (p. 625). Bouwsma’s project here, then, was to bring to life this living demonstration of “good personal freedom.”

Bouwsma argued that Enlightenment thinkers, such as Voltaire, picked up these values—especially the value of good personal freedom—and that these values were in contrast to Rome and its authorities. Bouwsma quotes Voltaire:
[The Venetians] have not usurped their rights, as Caesar usurped empire, or as so many bishops, commencing with that of Rome, have usurped royal rights. They are lords of Venice—if we dare use the audacious comparison—as God is Lord of the earth because he founded it. . . . Rome lost, by Caesar, at the end of five hundred years, its liberty acquired by Brutus. Venice has preserved hers for eleven centuries, and I hope she will always do so. (pp. 627-28)

Venice, then, achieved and preserved what authoritarian Rome had lost: good personal freedom.

In the epilogue, Bouwsma writes, “This book has been concerned with the contribution of the Venetians themselves to the formation and development of the powerful myth of Venice as the ideal combination of liberty and order” (p. 628, emphasis mine). This tension between liberty and order is a tension that Bouwsma dealt with throughout his career, and, as he himself noted, it was a tension in himself, largely on account of the tension between his Dutch Calvinist background and his American context. One can see, then, that Bouwsma was “using” the past very early in his career—specifically, by finding an ideal combination of liberty and order that was not only good for Venice, but also, I suggest, an ideal combination of liberty and order that Bouwsma wanted for himself.

_The Familial Significance of Bouwsma’s Portrait of Calvin_

I now want to turn to a discussion of how Bouwsma’s portrait of Calvin was “useable” for Bouwsma and how this portrait relates to Homans’s “mourning religion” thesis. The dedication of the book is telling in this regard. Bouwsma writes, “To Beverly and to John,
Philip, Paul, and Sarah for a better understanding of ourselves.” Beverly, of course, is Bouwsma’s widow, and John, Philip, Paul, and Sarah are their children. Since the family had a Dutch Calvinist background, understanding Calvin seems to have been a means for Bouwsma to understand himself, as well as providing a book to help his family understand themselves and each other, especially, perhaps, Bouwsma himself.

In the opening pages of the book, Bouwsma also notes that the icon of Calvin “demonstrates our very human tendency to invent the fathers we need” (p. 2). This statement is also telling. Bouwsma was referring to a specific icon of Calvin: the statue of Calvin in Geneva at the Reformers’ Wall. Bouwsma writes, “Unlike the human Calvin, the statue is difficult to forget, as of course it was intended to be; it is, after all, a memorial. But it is a good deal more than that” (pp. 1-2). Bouwsma continues:

For here Calvin stands, more than twice as large as life, stylized beyond recognition, stony, rigid, immobile, and—except for his slightly abstracted disapproval of whatever we might imagine him to be contemplating—impassive. Drained of humanity, this man, who was singularly eloquent about the universality of human frailty and who, in his own life, was constantly looking within himself for reminders that no human being is ever free from the struggle with sin and weakness, has been converted into an icon in order to create an impression and to stimulate a degree of veneration about which his own views might be interesting to hear. (p. 2)
Bouwsma writes, “this icon of Calvin, however appropriate it may have seemed to its creators in the early twentieth century, would have been familiar, substantially if not stylistically, to the sixteenth” (p. 2). But this is only half of the story. Bouwsma, as we have seen, argues that there was another side to Calvin, one with “ambiguities, hesitations, and contradictions—in a word, his finiteness and humanity” (p. 2). Bouwsma concludes, “The Calvin with whom most of us are acquainted is chiefly an artifact of later Calvinism. He demonstrates our very human tendency to invent the fathers we need, even if it means making very sure that they cannot rise up to contradict us” (p. 2). One purpose of Bouwsma’s book, then, is that the Calvin as given by later Calvinism is an invention and, we might assume, an invented father that they—and we—might do without. In place of the icon of Calvin in Geneva, Bouwsma offered his own portrait or personal icon of Calvin, one that was much more human—one, perhaps, we could do with.
I suggest that Bouwsma’s portrait is, psychologically speaking, a projection of his own internal struggles, particularly against his father. Evidence for this claim can be seen in three major aspects of Bouwsma’s portrait: 1) the polarity in Calvin between liberty and order; 2) Calvin’s anxiety; and 3) Calvin’s lack of progress in his personal life.

The Polarity in Calvin between Liberty and Order

One of the essential features of Bouwsma’s portrait of Calvin is that Calvin struggled with a tension in himself between liberty and order. This tension led Bouwsma (1988) to suggest that there were two Calvins. Above I noted that one Calvin was philosophical and rational, and this Calvin craved order and certainty. He distrusted freedom and the world, and he sought to control the forces both in himself and in the world. Bouwsma’s metaphor for this Calvin was “the labyrinth.” The other Calvin was rhetorical and humanistic. This Calvin celebrated “the paradoxes and mystery at the heart of human existence” (p. 231). This Calvin valued experience over theory, and was generally more flexible and tolerant. Bouwsma’s metaphor for this Calvin was “the abyss.” These two Calvins, Bouwsma writes, “are themselves too complex to be described as ‘ideal’” (p. 231). He continues, “In addition, as with genuine ideal types, the contrasting attributes of the two Calvins were, as Calvin might have put it, not only combined but promiscuously jumbled together within the historical Calvin, much as they have been variously combined in the whole course of [w]estern civilization” (p. 231).
Bouwsma notes that, “[i]n Calvin’s struggle to reduce the incompatible impulses in himself to a comfortable integrity, his philosophical side was more dominant, seeking to reconcile and unite them dialectically” (p. 231). He continues, “He preferred, in short, to integrate rather than to choose between contrary pressures” (p. 231). Calvinism, Bouwsma argues, that is, Calvin’s own Calvinism, was a composite: “It was the product of impulses and needs of varying provenance that defied systematization. The composite character of his thought doomed the philosophical side of his mind, though without destroying it, to failure” (p. 231). For the humanistic Calvin, though, the situation was different. This Calvin relished mixtures and composites. Originality derived from this Calvin, even though he would have denied that he was offering anything original. But Calvin’s great insight, a humanist insight, was that the old Christian message needed to be amended so that it could suit a new time—that is, the rhetorician needs to know his audience. Consequently, Calvin “was both medieval and modern” (p. 232).

“But the mixture of the two Calvins in the Calvin of history,” Bouwsma writes, “also implies—and this too is a paradox—not their equality but a triumph in principle of rhetoric over philosophy, for while philosophy has traditionally excluded rhetoric, rhetoric, intrinsically as impure as life itself, has generally been willing to appropriate, for the sake of utility, bits and pieces of philosophy” (p. 233). Bouwsma also notes that “[t]here has recently been much debate about whether later Calvinists, beginning with Beza, continued or significantly altered the teaching of Calvin” (p. 233). However, “[t]he existence of two rather different Calvins suggests that this way of describing the relationship between Calvin and his successors misses the essential point,” which is that “[l]ater Calvinists were legitimate heirs of the philosophical and systematic Calvin, but
they rejected, in a significantly less ‘modern’ climate, the rhetorical and political qualities that had held Calvin’s own Calvinism together” (pp. 233-234). The loss of this rhetorical and political Calvin is demonstrated in the fractioning strands of Calvinism, many of which are just as rigid and dogmatic as the philosophical Calvin.

I also noted about that Bouwsma disclosed that he was always more interested in the tensions than harmonies in [w]estern culture, and that he attributes this to the fact that he was the son of “second-generation Dutch Calvinist immigrants who were trying to assimilate the high culture of early-twentieth-century America” (p. 8). “[T]hese tensions,” Bouwsma writes, “posed problems for me” (p. 8). One problem that Bouwsma noted concerned “the compatibility of an ‘inalienable right’ to ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness’ with Christianity” (p. 8). It is not difficult to see that there is a deep resonance between Bouwsma’s portrait of Calvin and Bouwsma’s own self-understanding, as both Bouwsma and Calvin were struggling with tensions in themselves that involved their simultaneous desire for liberty and order. That Bouwsma finds two Calvins—a philosophical Calvin and a rhetorical Calvin—and concludes that the rhetorical Calvin triumphs over the philosophical Calvin is also significant, because the triumph of rhetoric over philosophy can be seen as a victory over his own father, O. K Bouwsma, precisely as Venice triumphed over Rome in his earlier book.

*Calvin’s Anxiety as Bouwsma’s Anxiety*

Another essential feature of Bouwsma’s portrait of Calvin involves understanding Calvin as an anxious person. Bouwsma’s book on Calvin was published in 1988, meaning that he was working on it in the mid-1980s, that is, when he was in his 60s and nearing
retirement. It was during this time, 1984 to be exact, that he published an article on Calvin’s anxiety in *The Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*.

I suggest that anxiety was a personal issue, not simply an academic issue, for Bouwsma. One way of making this argument is by looking at how Bouwsma went about creating his own case for Calvin as an anxious person. Bouwsma does not come out and simply say, “I am an anxious person,” but neither did Calvin. Bouwsma notes that Calvin “disclosed himself . . . in broad, protective generalities whose truth is less than obvious” (p. 5). I noted above that Bouwsma observed about Calvin’s reasoning that “[e]very Christian, or every human being, [Calvin] may assert, has had such and such experience, is convinced of this or that. But if we ask how he can know this, the answer may often be that he was thinking of himself” (p. 5). If we accept Bouwsma’s method in assessing statements of Calvin, is this not also an invitation to read similar statements made by Bouwsma in the same way? Bouwsma writes: “All human beings may be anxious; some, individually, in groups, and from time to time, are more anxious than others” (p. 32). I suggest that we can turn Bouwsma’s method back on himself and ask the same question that he asked of Calvin: “But if we ask how he can know this, the answer may often be that he was thinking of himself” (p. 5).

Bouwsma notes that “Calvin understood that anxiety is rooted in dread about what might lie ahead” (p. 39). This statement, while it may appear to be about Calvin, actually reveals information about Bouwsma, for it contains an affirmation by Bouwsma of a definition of, or a hypothesis about, anxiety. Calvin very well could have thought or argued that “anxiety is rooted in dread about what might lie ahead,” but Bouwsma uses the word *understood*, that Calvin *understood* that “anxiety is rooted in dread about what
might lie ahead.” Bouwsma, then, is offering a personal confession here—namely, that he, too, thinks that “anxiety is rooted in dread about what might lie ahead.” A sentence later Bouwsma makes another claim about anxiety: “Anxiety is thus closely related to the awareness of change, which almost universally seemed dangerous to the men of his time” (p. 39). The latter part of this sentence is a descriptive observation, a kind of statement that one would expect from a historian, but the former part of this sentence again is making a claim about anxiety: that it is “closely related to the awareness of change.”

Bouwsma notes that Calvin saw anxiety everywhere: “in episodes recorded in Scripture, the study of which occupied so much of his mature life, and among his contemporaries” (p. 37). Bouwsma, too, saw anxiety everywhere. Bouwsma (1990a) states that his “interest in the relation between anxiety and culture was first stimulated by Huizinga’s *Waning of the Middle Ages,*” and, he also notes, the relationship between anxiety and culture “occupies a prominent place in these essays” (p. 11). In the footnotes, Bouwsma elaborates and states that this relationship, though implied in his essays “Three Types of Historiography in Post-Renaissance Italy” (published in 1965) and “Christian Adulthood” (published in 1976), did not become “prominent” until his “Anxiety and the Formation of Early Modern Culture” (published in 1980) (p. 16, n. 34). Interestingly, Bouwsma argues that “a culture can be understood as the psychological equivalent of a constitution” (Bouwsma, 1990a, p. 10). In any case, his full-treatment of anxiety did not come about until his book on Calvin. Anxiety, then, in his own words, was a major intellectual issue for Bouwsma and, most likely, a personal one as well given his view that history ought to be “useable.”
Calvin’s Lack of Progress as O. K. Bouwsma’s Lack of Progress

A third feature of Bouwsma’s book on Calvin is that he calls it a portrait, and he invokes the word portrait for a specific reason—namely, Bouwsma conceives of portraits as static and his reconstruction is of a man, Calvin, who was static in that he progressed very little in the personal and intellectual issues that he was dealing with over the course of his life. This aspect of Bouwsma’s portrait of Calvin, I suggest, has resonances with Bouwsma’s father, O. K. Bouwsma. O. K. held the view that there could be no progress in philosophy, since all problems in philosophy were, at bottom, a matter of language. Hustwit noted that the question that O. K. struggled with, both at the beginning of his life and at the end, is what is the meaning of a word? If Hustwit is correct, then it can hardly be insignificant that William Bouwsma creates a portrait of Calvin who made very little progress in his personal and intellectual life.

I also noted above that O. K. would make statements such as “Bill knows things,” “He knows a lot,” and “I don’t know anything,” but that these statements were not meant in praise, precisely because O. K. did not believe in progress in philosophy. I suggest that Bouwsma returned the favor by portraying Calvin as a man who had made no progress, and that this, too, was not meant as praise. As Bouwsma writes of Calvin: “Calvin made little advance over the years in those matters that troubled him most . . . [for] Calvin was still wrestling as inconclusively with the same inner demons at the end of his life as he was when he first arrived in Geneva” (p. 4). Hustwit, interestingly enough, makes practically the same conclusion about O. K. Bouwsma.
Homans’s Stages of Mourning

I suggest that in the case of Bouwsma, what we have is all three stages of Homans’s mourning theory occurring at once. The “loss” here in terms of religion was Bouwsma’s rejection of his father’s Calvinism. I am not suggesting, however, that Bouwsma accepted or believed in Dutch Calvinism until he wrote his book on Calvin. Quite the contrary, he was probably never comfortable with it. Indeed, when I asked Beverly Bouwsma about his faith and beliefs, she was uncertain as to whether or not to call him a Christian:

But was he a Christian? I think he was most of the time, although I think not fully and often he wouldn’t go to church for long periods. I took his course called History of Christianity which was entirely historical and I believe that it would have been the same whether he was or was not a Christian. (September 11, 2008, Personal Correspondence)

Regardless of the state of Bouwsma’s belief in Christianity, what I am suggesting is that he did not fully individuate himself from his father’s religion—Dutch Calvinism—until he wrote his book on Calvin. So loss and individuation, stages one and two of Homans’s theory, occur at the same time for Bouwsma: while he was writing his book on Calvin. But so, too, does stage three: the creation of meaning. In other words, as Bouwsma is rejecting Dutch Calvinism, he is still making the case for Calvin—why else spend so many years reading and writing about him? Bouwsma’s Calvin, though, was not (only) the rigid Calvin of Dutch Calvinism; Bouwsma’s Calvin was also in touch with his body, the emotions, rhetoric, and contingency. Bouwsma rejected the Calvin of his father in favor of a Calvin of his own creation, a restoration of the human Calvin.
The key point here is that education and academic scholarship, particularly as related to humanism, provided Bouwsma with a means of mourning as Homans is using the term. As noted above, part three of Bouwsma’s book on Calvin, which is titled the opening, deals with humanism. Unlike the other parts of the book, it is composed of a single chapter, and it provides the transition from part two, titled “The Labyrinth,” and part four, titled “The Abyss.” In other words, Bouwsma is making the case that humanism helped free Calvin from the anxiety of the labyrinth, which is characterized by order, but it also led him to the anxiety of the abyss, which is characterized by liberty.

I noted above that Calvin’s humanism led him to some rather interesting conclusions, such as Calvin’s view that there were errors in the copying of the New Testament, that different interpretations of Scripture are possible, and that the biblical authors occasionally made factual mistakes. The upshot of Bouwsma’s chapter was to make the case that, as Bouwsma puts it, “[r]hetorical culture rested on assumptions about the human condition, the possibilities of knowledge, human experience of the world, and the organization of life that were in sharp contrast to those on which Calvin’s traditional culture rested” (p. 127). Humanist education, in other words, gave Calvin the tools to challenge his own tradition by providing “an opening,” that is, a way out from his own traditional culture, Roman Catholicism. And humanism also gave Bouwsma the tools to find “an opening,” a way out from his traditional culture, Dutch Calvinism.

Reversals and Restorations: Recovering a Rhetorical Reformer

I now want to turn to the dynamics of reversals and restorations in Bouwsma’s psychological portrait of Calvin. Bouwsma began his study by noting that “Calvinism has
been widely credited—or blamed—for much that is thought to characterize the modern world” (p. 1). He also notes that what Calvin thought is not identical with Calvinism but, nevertheless, Calvin is the person who is routinely praised or implicated. However, Bouwsma observes that “[i]t is accordingly remarkable that Calvin himself is now one of the least known among the great figures of his century” (p. 1). He suggests one reason for this is that secular historians, by and large, ignore Calvin. Another reason he suggests that this is the case is that faith communities view Calvin as more of an icon than a man. Calvin, alas, has been left to specialists.

Bouwsma invokes William James to intimate his view of humanistic scholarship and his goal for this book in particular. Quoting James, Bouwsma writes, “[w]hat the system claims to be . . . is a picture of the great universe of God. What it is—and oh so flagrantly—is the revelation of how intensely odd the personal flavor of some fellow creature is” (p. 3). Elaborating on this point, Bouwsma writes, “I believe that one of the basic tasks of humanistic scholarship is to discover the personal, and therefore historical, flavor that constitutes the humanity of all cultural artifacts” (p. 3). The goal, then, of this work is to discover the personal and historical flavor of Calvin as a human being—a goal that has been neglected by the two primary groups that have studied Calvin: specialists, who have focused on what Calvin read, and faith communities, who have studied what Calvin thought. As Bouwsma puts it, “This book, then, tries to interpret Calvin as a figure of his time: as a representative French intellectual, an evangelical humanist and therefore a rhetorician, and an exile” (p. 3). Bouwsma’s task, in other words, was to recover a rhetorical reformer.
Bouwsma does so by, as noted, positing two Calvins—the traditional rigid and philosophical Calvin, and the neglected humanistic and rhetorical Calvin. Both of these Calvins existed in the historical Calvin, not as a synthesis, but as a composite. Bouwsma notes that his portrait will not please any particular group of Calvinists. Regarding the division between scholars and religious believers, however, Bouwsma believes that his portrait will be one that is not easily dismissed by either group. His Calvin is one that is dogmatic, but not as dogmatic as religious believers have presented him to be. Bouwsma’s chief accomplishment, then, is the restoration of the humanistic Calvin, a Calvin who was “particularly sensitive to the subtleties and contradictions of the human condition and can tell us much about it” (p. 234). If, in other words, the Calvinist faith communities have given us a Calvin as depicted in statue of Calvin in Geneva, a Calvin who is larger than life, Bouwsma has reversed this tendency by making Calvin life-size again, restoring his humanity and, therefore, making him more “useable”—for Bouwsma and for those who find appealing that strand of psychology of religion and pastoral theology that I have identified in this study.

**Sociological and Geographical Dimensions**

Homans’s “mourning religion” thesis is obviously psychological, but it is also sociological. Homans argues that “culture makers” sometimes create but always respond to shifts in culture, and his key point is that the shifts and changes in culture induce cultural mourning to which culture makers respond creatively. Personal losses are important as well, and Homans gives such losses a great deal of attention in his cases. I have focused on Bouwsma’s rejection of his familial religion, Dutch Calvinism. Another
loss—a social loss—that Bouwsma experienced involved a shift or change in
historiography, which he details in his presidential address to the American Historical
Association. This lecture, given during the December 27-30, 1978 meeting in San
Francisco, coincided with the year of his father’s death. He titled the lecture “The
Renaissance and the Drama of Western History.”

Bouwsma’s Presidential Address to the American Historical Association

Bouwsma (1990d) began the lecture with these words: “I should like to discuss a
remarkable historiographical event—an event so recent that it may have escaped general
notice, yet of considerable importance both for historians and for the larger culture of
which we are a part” (p. 348). “This event,” Bouwsma proclaims, “is the collapse of the
traditional dramatic organization of [w]estern history” (p. 348). I include a discussion of
this public address here because Bouwsma disclosed the fact that “this essay is also a
kind of oblique professional autobiography, though I point this out only for the sake of
candor, not as a further inducement to your attention” (p. 348).

“Nothing,” Bouwsma writes, “seemed less likely than this development when I
entered the profession some thirty years ago or, indeed, before the last two decades.
Earlier in this century, the Burckhardtian vision of the importance of the Renaissance for
the formation of the modern world had been under attack in the ‘revolt of the
medievalists’” (pp. 348-349). However, by the fifties, “it was common for Renaissance
specialists from various disciplines to celebrate, by reading papers to each other, their
triumph over the medievalists and the world-historical significance of the Renaissance”
(p. 349). He adds: “The notion of an abiding consensus among historians of any complex
subject may now seem rather surprising, and this agreeable situation was probably in part
a reflection of the general consensus of the Eisenhower years, when we were all beating
our swords into ploughshares” (p. 349).

But then the sixties happened. It was a time of social upheaval. Old certainties
were challenged. And with these challenges, historiography also changed. Regarding the
Renaissance, what happened was not so much a challenge of the old view in favor of a
new one, but, rather, a growing indifference toward it. Now, Bouwsma writes, “[w]e go
about our particular investigations as though the Renaissance problem had evaporated;
we neither affirm nor bother to deny that there was a Renaissance. And the venerable
Renaissance label has become little more than an administrative convenience, a kind of
blanket under which we huddle together less out of mutual attraction than because, for
certain purposes, we have nowhere else to go” (p. 350). “[W]e began to describe the age
of the Renaissance,” Bouwsma writes, “as the age of transition to the modern world. And
this formula, which now appears with some regularity in our textbooks, has provoked
little dissent. Indeed, the formula appears to exclude the possibility of dissent, for it is
nicely calculated to accommodate every anomaly and at the same time to protect the
significance of the Renaissance. This, of course, is its purpose” (p. 351). He continues,
“To the objection that every past age might equally be represented as transitional, we can
reply that this one was unusually transitional, that it was an age of accelerated transition”
(p. 351).

However, today the case for the Renaissance is a bit more difficult to make.
Bouwsma explains: “since we are baffled by the modern world, we are hardly in a
position to argue for the relevance to it, at least in the traditional way, of the
Renaissance” (p. 352). He continues, “For the argument that attached the Renaissance to the modern world was based on two assumptions: that the modern world does, in fact, constitute some kind of intelligible entity, and that modernity has emerged by way of a single linear process. Neither, of these assumptions is, at least for me, self-evident” (p. 352). But Bouwsma does make a case for the Renaissance:

Here, I am only advancing on an old position in the historiography of the Renaissance from a somewhat new direction. For the kind of history this approach suggests was very much that of the most distinguished historians of the Renaissance of the last hundred years, Jacob Burckhardt and Johann Huizinga, notable pioneers in what both called cultural history. (p. 358)

“This conception of culture,” Bouwsma writes, “is perhaps the contemporary world's most general legacy from the Renaissance: the recognition that culture is a product of the creative adjustment of the human race to its varying historical circumstances rather than a function of universal and changeless nature, and the perception that culture accordingly differs from time to time and group to group” (p. 359). Bouwsma also suggests that:

Perhaps the most profound indication that a radical shift in the understanding of culture was taking place—and, hence, a shift in the sense of man's relation to the world and to himself—can be seen in the Renaissance crisis of language, that basic instrument in the formation of culture. The first sign of that crisis was a growing uneasiness, at first among the most abstract thinkers but then more broadly, that the human vocabulary was failing to mirror the objective world. Words, it was widely lamented, no longer corresponded to things. This lament was often taken to mean that the vocabulary should be reformed so that this
traditional identity could be restored: a demand, in effect, for a return to the
dependence of culture upon external nature. But then an alternative solution to the
problem began to unfold. Skepticism about the capacity of the human mind to
grasp the structures of nature directly led to growing doubt about the possibility of
such an identity, to a recognition of the conventionality of language and its
susceptibility to change, to the perception of language as a human creation, and
eventually to the conclusion that, as the creator of language, man also shapes
through language the only world he can know directly, including even himself.
(pp. 359-360)

Bouwsma notes that he “began these remarks by announcing the collapse of the dramatic
scheme that has long organized our vision of the general career of [w]estern history.
Since I think that drama is vital to historiography, because it enables us to impose form
on the processes of history and so to make them intelligible, this seems to me an ominous
development, especially since it has invited the substitution of another dramatic scheme
that would deprive us of our roots in the past” (p. 361). He continues, “But, although I
have argued for the continuing significance of the Renaissance, I have not tried simply to
defend the traditional pattern, which seems to me seriously defective, in ways that the
legacy of Renaissance culture also helps us understand,” because “[t]he old dramatic
pattern, with its concept of linear history moving the human race ineluctably to its goal in
the modern world depended on concealed principles of transcendence inappropriate to the
human understanding of human affairs” (p. 361). Finally, “[t]he trinity of acts composing
the great drama of human history and its concept of the modern epoch as not just the
latest but the last act of the play bear witness to its eschatological origins, and such
notions seem to me peculiarly inappropriate to so human an enterprise as that of the historian” (p. 361). And yet, “I also find the traditional scheme unsatisfactory because it is not dramatic enough. It fails to accommodate the sense of contingency and, therefore, suspense—the sense that the drama might have turned out otherwise—that belongs to all human temporal experience” (p. 361). Bouwsma concludes his remarks on the drama of history and the importance of the Renaissance with these words:

But the more human concept of the drama of history that had its effective origins in the Renaissance, understanding of culture overcomes these various disadvantages. Its pluralism implies the possibility of a multiplicity of historical dramas, both simultaneous and successive; and so it relieves us of the embarrassment, inherent in a linear and eschatological vision of time, of repeatedly having to reclassify in other terms what for a previous generation seemed modern. Since it perceives history as a part of culture and also, therefore, a human creation, it permits us constantly to reconstruct the dramas of history and so to see the past in fresh relationships to ourselves. Above all, since it insists on no particular outcome for the dramas of history, it leaves the future open. (pp. 361-362)

And such openness to the future, we might recall, is precisely the kind of openness that, according to Bouwsma, constitutes Christian adulthood. As noted, Bouwsma delivered this lecture the year that his father died, and he wrote his book on Calvin during the following decade. I argued above that his book on Calvin helped him work through his issues with his father, but here I would like to suggest that his Calvin book also helped him address his second major loss: the loss of the old conception of history. If his father
and his father’s religion was too confining, producing in Bouwsma the anxiety of the labyrinth, the social shifts of the 1960s that collapsed the old conception of history was too liberating, producing in Bouwsma the anxiety of the abyss. Bouwsma was able to discern both of these anxieties in Calvin because he possessed both of them himself and, by constructing a psychological portrait of Calvin, he was able to address both.

*The Context of Nebraska: Bouwsma as a Swaddled Soul?*

Throughout the course of this chapter I have been making the case for a connection between Bouwsma’s personal life and his public scholarship, yet I have not made much of the fact that Bouwsma was from Lincoln, Nebraska—a place that is very cold in the winters and, outside of the city, is surrounded by vast, open plains. Both of these facts, I’d now like to suggest, have relevance for Bouwsma’s metaphors for Calvin: the abyss and the labyrinth. To better elucidate my point I want to turn now to a chapter in Erik Erikson’s (1963) *Childhood and Society* that I believe can shed some light on the issue.

In “The Legend of Maxim Gorky’s Youth,” Erikson (1963) gives a psychoanalytic interpretation of a film about Maxim Gorky, an influential Soviet writer of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the course of his discussion of Gorky, Erikson discusses some childrearing practices that are particular (but not unique) to Russia. One such practice is that of swaddling. Erikson writes:

> While the custom of bandaging newborn infants is widespread, the ancient Russian extreme insists that the baby be swaddled up to the neck, tightly enough to make a handy ‘log of wood’ out of the whole bundle, and that the swaddling be continued for nine months, for the greater part of the day and throughout the
night. Such procedure does not result in any lasting locomotor deficiency, although the unswaddled infant apparently has to be taught to crawl. (p. 388)

Erikson continues, “When asked why babies must be swaddled, simple Russians have answered with astonishment: [w]hat other way was there to carry a baby and to keep him warm through a Russian winter? And besides, how could one otherwise keep him from scratching and harming himself, and of scaring himself with the sight of his own hands?” (p. 388). Erikson notes here that it is likely true that infants who have been swaddled have less control over their hands and that they, therefore, could scratch themselves. But the way to deal with such scratching does not necessarily have to be more swaddling. What is being physically taught by means of childrearing is also reinforced culturally concerning the restraint of emotions: infants “must remain emotionally swaddled in order not to fall victim to wild emotion” (p. 389). Erikson concludes, “This, in turn, helps to establish a basic, a preverbal, indoctrination, according to which people, for their own good, must be rigidly restrained, while being offered, now and then, ways of discharging compressed emotion. Thus, swaddling falls under the heading of those items of child training which must have significant relation to the world image of the whole culture” (p. 389). Erikson finds support for his swaddling hypothesis in the writings of Gorky and in Russian literature in general: “People in Russian fiction seem both isolated and effusive. It is as if each individual were strangely imprisoned in himself as in a restraining box of strangled emotions. Yet he is forever seeking other souls by sighing, paling, and blushing, by weeping and fainting” (p. 389).

While there is no way of knowing whether Bouwsma, as a child, was swaddled, could it be that some children who grew up in the 1920s and 1930s in Nebraska were
dressed rather tightly during the winters, especially after the economic hardships after 1929, and that this tightness would have contrasted with the openness of the plains in Nebraska, very much like the geography of Russia?

I realize that this is a very speculative leap to move from a Russian practice to an assumed Nebraskan equivalent. However, we need not hold onto a swaddling practice at all here. We can make very reasonable speculations on other grounds and still take the psychological insights from Erikson. We can simply assume that Nebraska was cold in the winters, which, of course it was, and that to get through the winters people dressed warmly, which meant tightly. If Erikson is right that geographical conditions affect cultural behavior and practices, such as dress and childrearing, and that such practices in turn affect the emotional experiences and expressions of that culture, then one can see how the metaphors of the labyrinth and the abyss were “usable” for Bouwsma: they not only reflected, as he himself has intimated, the tension between his Dutch Calvinist background, characterized by order, and his American background, characterized by freedom, but these metaphors also reflected the contrast induced by his geography. Another way of understanding the personal significance of the metaphors of the labyrinth and the abyss for Bouwsma, then, is by understanding these metaphors in light of 1) Nebraska winters, which perhaps require dressing up so warmly that one might feel constrained and even suffocated, and 2) the Nebraska plains, which might be experienced as a vast abyss. If Max Weber (1930) is correct in his analysis of Protestantism and capitalism—that the cloak was fated to become an iron cage—perhaps the winter clothes in Nebraska shared the same fate in Calvinist households on or near the open plains. And perhaps what Erikson wrote of Russians could also be written of Nebraskans, especially
those Nebraskans of Dutch Calvinist descent: “Whatever the ‘swaddling hypothesis’ proves or fails to prove in regard to the transformation of infantile experience into juvenile and adult patterns, it does seem to point to configurations of experience singularly alive in Russian behavior and imagination” (p. 392).

**Conclusion**

I have argued that the writing of his book on Calvin helped Bouwsma to come to terms with his childhood religion, Dutch Calvinism, which was a source of considerable anxiety for Bouwsma. I make this argument primarily on the basis of three of Bouwsma’s comments, all of which occur in an essay in which Bouwsma was reflecting on historiography in general and his career in particular: 1) Bouwsma’s view that historians are public servants, and that the histories that historians write ought to be “usable”; 2) Bouwsma’s disclosure that his own writing of history has been “useable” for himself; and 3) one such personal issue that Bouwsma was dealing with concerned his Dutch Calvinist heritage. On the basis of these three disclosures alone, one would be hard-pressed to make the argument that Bouwsma did not have personal reasons for writing a book on Calvin.

But I argue more than this virtually indisputable observation. I also argue that Homans’s “mourning religion” thesis can add some specificity to the general claim that Bouwsma’s writing a book on Calvin was “usable” for him. I suggest that, in writing such a book, the past became usable for Bouwsma here as it helped him to reject his childhood religion and to individuate from his father, who was very strict, traditional, and particular about what constituted Calvinism (he would, after all, drive 120 miles
Sunday to attend an appropriate Calvinist church, even though there was a Presbyterian church in town). Paradoxically, this project helped Bouwsma remain loyal to his father as well. Bouwsma, after all, could have studied and written about other things. I argue that Bouwsma experienced this rejection as a loss, despite the fact that it is something that he wanted, and perhaps even needed, because this rejection of Dutch Calvinism inevitably meant that, in matters of religion, there would always be a distance in his relationship with his father.

I am not suggesting, however, that Bouwsma first rejected Dutch Calvinism or first began to individuate from his father when he began to work on this book—quite the contrary, actually, because Bouwsma’s father had already died by this point in Bouwsma’s career. I noted above places where this process had already begun in Bouwsma’s works, such as in his book on the tensions between Venice and Rome, which, as Beverly Bouwsma informed me, Bouwsma understood as the tensions he felt between himself and his father. What I have been suggesting throughout is that Bouwsma’s early scholarship indicates previous movements toward the rejection of Dutch Calvinism and individuation from his father which are incomplete and, therefore, ambiguous. Writing the book on Calvin helped Bouwsma to achieve a complete and final rejection of Dutch Calvinism as well as an ambiguous break with his father because Bouwsma was able to paint two Calvins—one that represented his father’s Calvinism, and one that represented his own. It is as though Bouwsma were able to say to himself: “Look, there are two Calvins, both are correct, and so I can disagree with my father and still be faithful to our heritage, because I recovered a rhetorical Calvin that has been neglected, one that is worthy of study.” And so, loss and individuation in the case of Bouwsma also lead to
creation. The dynamics of reversals and restorations is present in Bouwsma’s piece on Calvin as well, as Bouwsma is reversing the tendency of making Calvin larger-than-life by restoring his humanity.

**Bouwsma’s Funeral**

I would like to close with a discussion of an address given at Bouwsma’s funeral by Thomas Brady, one of Bouwsma’s colleagues. Brady (2004) noted that a Berkeley undergraduate spoke to him about Bouwsma’s book on Calvin, and the student “described this book to me as a ‘biography’ of Calvin, and so it has been taken by many, but in fact it is far more.” Brady adds: “It is no biography but the analysis of a mind.” It is, in other words, a work of psychology and history. Brady continues, “Within the compass of Calvin’s thought is played a perennial *pas de deux* between freedom and order. It is the unending drama of [w]estern thought, the essential fate of Christianity, the experience of Europe, the meaning of Renaissance and Reformation, the life’s work of John Calvin, and, perhaps, part of what Bill earlier described as his own ‘oblique professional odyssey.’” Brady goes on:

Bill had come to the end of his odyssey. We may remember him for his learning, for his gentle irony, and for the twinkle in his eye, but most of all he should be remembered for his intellectual courage. The wreckage of the worldview one has known and supported is a terrible experience, and we all know scholars who, soured and bewildered by the events of the 1960s, never again looked out on the world with sympathy and understanding. Bill was not of that kind. Cut adrift as others were from the great, old moorings, he looked out upon a seemingly endless
sea of skepticism, doubt, and relativism. Unafraid, he set a course and sailed, not knowing where or if he might find land. He charted a passage from the old, ruined intellectual history to the more modestly bounded cultural history of Europe. To his abiding credit, he did not complain of the Renaissance’s fall from grandeur as a “world-historical event.”

In response to loss, we might add, Bouwsma responded creatively, above all else by constructing a psychological portrait of Calvin. If Bouwsma is correct that the statue of Calvin in Geneva represents the human tendency to invent the fathers we need—and I believe Bouwsma is correct about this—then Bouwsma’s own portrait can also be seen as an icon that he needed to create, a father he needed to invent, a reformer he needed to recover, so that he could restore this lost Calvin not to some kind of Protestant version of sainthood, but to humanity.
In the Bible, Nathan was a prophet to David, king of Israel. David is often held up as the greatest king of Israel. His interaction with Nathan, however, does not concern David’s greatness, but instead concerns one of David’s greatest moral failures—his adultery with Bathsheba.

One spring day when David rose in the afternoon and happened to be walking on his roof he saw a beautiful woman bathing on another roof. David sent one of his servants to inquire about this woman, and it was reported to him that her name was Bathsheba and that she was married to Uriah, one of David’s best and most loyal warriors. At the time, Uriah was away fighting for David. David sent for Bathsheba, knowing that her husband was away at war, they slept together, and she became pregnant.

Later, Bathsheba sent a message to David informing him that she was pregnant, which caused David to send for Uriah, recalling him from the battlefield. They talked about how the war was going and so forth and, at the close of their conversation, David instructed Uriah to go down to his house, hoping that Uriah would sleep with Bathsheba so that the pregnancy could be attributed to him. Uriah, however, slept outside of his house, and he refused to be intimate with his wife. The following day David received word of this and then asked Uriah why he did not sleep in his house. Uriah replied that he would not do such a thing—that is, eat, drink, relax, and take pleasure with his wife—while they were at war. David’s plan had failed.
The following day David tried again. This time Uriah and David ate and drank together, but Uriah still would not sleep with his wife. David, as expected, was very dissatisfied with this turn of events. It was now clear that he would have to take responsibility for Bathsheba’s pregnancy.

But, instead of taking responsibility, David devised an even more sinister plan than his previous one. When Uriah went back to the battlefield, David sent word to one of his commanding officers to put Uriah in the front lines and, when appropriate, draw back so that Uriah would be killed. The officer put Uriah in the most difficult fighting position, and he indeed was killed. When Bathsheba heard this, she grieved deeply. When she had finished mourning, David brought her into his house, and she bore him a son.

David’s actions greatly displeased the LORD. And so the LORD sent Nathan to David, and Nathan told the following parable to David, which was presented to David as an actual occurrence:

There were two men in one city; the one rich, and the other poor. The rich man had exceeding many flocks and herds: But the poor man had nothing, save one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up: and it grew up together with him, and with his children; it did eat of his own meat, and drank of his own cup, and lay in his bosom, and was unto him as a daughter. And there came a traveler unto the rich man, and he spared to take of his own flock and of his own herd, to dress for the wayfaring man that was come unto him; but took the poor man's lamb, and dressed it for the man that was come to him. (2 Samuel 12.1-4, KJV)
The narrative continues, “And David's anger was greatly kindled against the man; and he said to Nathan, As the LORD liveth, the man that hath done this thing shall surely die: And he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity. And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man” (2 Samuel 12.5-7a, KJV). Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld's (1794-1872) depiction of this scene is presented below:

**Figure 6: Nathan Confronts David**

Nathan, cleverly, had shown David his own sin.¹

¹ The meaning or a central meaning of the parable seems to be that David acted like the rich man, taking Bathsheba, Uriah’s only “sheep,” from Uriah, who stood for the poor man. David had many wives—i.e., many “sheep”—so there was no need for him to take
I have always identified with the prophet Nathan in the Bible, perhaps always believing that it was my calling and destiny to be a prophet like him. When I was a teenager I believed that this meant that I was “called” to be a pastor—for pastors, like prophets, are the ones who claim to be speaking for God, just as Nathan spoke for God—but I am sure that I neglected then the prophetic aspect of Nathan’s office. Today I am even more inclined to identify with Nathan, because Nathan was not afraid to confront the highest of authorities when they were in the wrong.

In this dissertation, I have focused on the prophetic stands of Capps, Dittes, and Bouwsma—that is, how they have played Nathan—but in other places (e.g., Carlin, 2005) I have focused on the various times that I have played Nathan as well. In one episode, I almost lost my job as a chaplain on account of a sermon that I preached, and in another episode, a seminary professor told me in front of the whole class that I should not be ordained because of the sermon that I preached in his class.

In any case, I have been attracted to psychology of religion and pastoral theology because I see these disciplines as prophetic. It is as though pastoral theologians and psychologists of religion say “Thou art the man” to the dominant voices and authorities in the Christian tradition. This, I submit, is the meaning—or a meaning-making process—that is found in certain strands of psychology of religion and pastoral theology that I have

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another man’s only sheep/wife. On this reading, the parable is obviously sexist and androcentric, viewing women as sexual property. Another problem with the metaphor is that Uriah was the one who was killed, not Bathsheba. Perhaps, then, the story could be read with Bathsheba as the poor man who had her only sheep taken away from her and killed. On either reading, the parable is prophetic, and David is in the wrong.
called the dynamic of reversals and restorations. The prophets in these particular strands of these disciplines have become disillusioned or disappointed with the dominant interpretations of the central religious leaders in the Christian tradition—leaders such as Jesus, Augustine, and Calvin—and these prophets have responded creatively to the traditional interpretations of these leaders because they have been, in one way or another, dehumanizing. These prophets—Capps, Dittes, and Bouwsma—have said, in their own way, “Thou art the man.”

A Summary of My Argument

I concluded the introduction to this dissertation by noting Donald Capps’s question to his church historian colleague about whether church history could have gone down, as it were, the wrong track; that is, could church history be one big train wreck? In this project, I have pursued this perhaps quirky question with utmost seriousness, and I have done so by looking at reversals and restorations apparent in detailed psychological portraits of three of the most influential figures in church history—Jesus, Augustine, and Calvin. These portraits have emphasized the reverse or opposite of what one usually finds in strands of traditional Christianity: Capps focuses on what Jesus did, not what was done to Jesus; Dittes focuses on Augustine’s method of introspection rather than his solutions; and Bouwsma focuses on Calvin’s humanity, not what in Roman Catholic circles would be referred to as his saintliness. All three of these reversals, however, also turn out to be restorations. They are all, in their own way, endorsements of religion: for Capps, Jesus provides a model for how men might address their own melancholia; for Dittes,
Augustine teaches us the religious value of restlessness; and for Bouwsma, understanding Calvin’s anxieties can help us reduce our own.

Pointing out this dynamic of reversals and restorations in what might be called the psychohistory of Christianity is an important observation in its own right. But my project did not stop there. I went on to explain this dynamic, in part, in terms of Homans’s “mourning religion” thesis. Projects in psychology of religion and psychobiography are often interested in the relationship between the life and the work of a given individual. For example, what, in his personal experience, led Shakespeare to write as he did? What, in his personal experience, led Abraham Lincoln to lead as he did? Homans asked this question with regard to academic elites, such as Freud, Jung, Weber, and Eliade. He argued that the relationship between a scholar’s life and work can be understood in terms of mourning, and his understanding of mourning is largely Freudian and Jungian, though he modifies their thinking by incorporating elements from Kohut, Weber, and others. Freud and Jung, Homans argued, lived at a time when the west was losing religion and, their thought, he reasoned, both contributed to this loss and served as a compensation for it. Their creativity, indeed, was spurred on by cultural and collective loss as well as their own personal losses, such as Freud’s problematic friendships and Jung’s disillusionment with his father’s Christianity.

Parsons carried this line of thinking a step farther. He suggested, and Homans concurred, that the whole field of religious studies might be viewed as an institutionalized place of mourning, as religious studies is a place where scholars can (re)create meaning after becoming disillusioned with certain aspects of it. As Parsons conceives of the field, mourning is an essential aspect of the lives and works of scholars working in religious
studies because, by definition, religious studies is not theology. That is, what makes a
religious studies department different from a theological seminary is that religious studies
departments do not, and should not, have faith commitments. On the contrary, they
should interpret and evaluate religion critically. Parsons assumes that those who come to
study religion must have had or still do have some kind of a faith commitment, and the
process of becoming a religious studies scholar, therefore, is one in which these faith
commitments, to some extent, are lost or modified. Consequently, this loss is addressed
or worked-through (i.e., mourned) in their scholarship. While Homans focused on
academic elites (e.g., Freud and Jung), Parsons focused on the “average professor” (e.g.,
Kripal).

I, too, have focused on the “average professor,” though perhaps the word
“average” is not the right word for scholars who have made their careers at Princeton,
Yale, and Berkeley—or Rice for that matter. These scholars are still, to some extent,
elite, though they are not cultural elites in the sense that, for example, Freud was a
cultural elite. A better word for the cases of Capps, Dittes, and Bouwsma would be, say,
“exceptional.”

In any case, I applied Homans’s “mourning religion” thesis to the lives and works
of Capps, Dittes, and Bouwsma. In the case of Capps, I argued that Capps addressed
various personal losses in a deeply personal way during his fifties, and that the key
moment for Capps in overcoming his melancholia occurred after he applied his
melancholia theory to Jesus. I argue this because there, in that text on Jesus, Capps was
able to integrate and to sustain in a satisfying way his various selves and, therefore, open
himself up to mourn in a non-defensive way—the way of humor. After Capps had written
his book on Jesus, then, he was able to create a religious typology for men based on
honor, hope, and humor. I take the creation of this theory to be Capps’s most creative
insight and, moreover, maintain that this insight resulted from his own personal
psychological work.

While the various stages of Homans’s “mourning religion” thesis (loss, individuation, creation of meaning) can be more or less observed sequentially in Capps’s life, these stages do not fit so neatly in the case of Dittes. This is not to be lamented, but expected. Indeed, I suggested that it would be curious if Homans’s thesis fit each of my cases in precisely the same way. I suggested that a variation of Homans’s thesis—specifically, Cohler’s notion of adaptive melancholia—more aptly described the relationship between Dittes’s life and work. Indeed, I argued that Dittes had an ambiguous relationship with religion, a melancholic relationship, because religion both created and alleviated his dissatisfaction with life—what Dittes described as his chronic sense of the shadows of destiny. I suggested, moreover, that this melancholic relationship was rooted in the fact that he was born the day after Christmas to a mother named Mary, a father who was a carpenter, and was given by them the name of James, a brother of Jesus. That is, this boy was sure to grow up with a sense of destiny, and it is likely that this Mary had high (messianic?) hopes for her son. In writing about Augustine and Augustine’s relationship with his mother, Dittes was able to mourn and to recall his own personal sense of destiny by focusing on Augustine’s restlessness.

The “mourning religion” thesis again looks different when applied to Bouwsma. If it is clear in the case of Dittes that he did, finally, hold onto his religion, it is not so clear in the case of Bouwsma, though I do believe that Bouwsma did recover a kind of
Calvinism for himself. The Calvin that Bouwsma found personally useful was a rhetorical Calvin, a Calvin that Bouwsma recovered with the tools of history. The religion that Bouwsma rejected and mourned was his father’s Dutch Calvinism, a strict Calvinism of the churches. Since Bouwsma’s father’s own identity was so tied up in Dutch Calvinism, individuating from Dutch Calvinism and his father was a difficult—and anxiety provoking—process. It took writing a book on Calvin’s anxiety to do such personal work. The other major loss that I emphasized in Bouwsma’s life was the social and political upheavals of the 1960s, which affected the discipline of history. The worldview in which he was trained came crumbling down with all master narratives. Everything was found to be contingent and relative, but the Calvin that Bouwsma had recovered already knew this.

The Central Contributions of This Study

To recap, I have made what I hope are two original contributions in this study. The first is my observation that there is a dynamic of reversals and restorations of religion in certain strands of psychology of religion and pastoral theology, particularly those strands influenced by psychoanalysis and depth psychology, strands, that is, that emphasize introspection. This dynamic can be observed in thinkers such as Freud and Jung, as well as thinkers such as Bakan and Kripal. I have explored in some detail such reversals and restorations in the work of Capps, Dittes, and Bouwsma. The list could go on.

But I am not suggesting that this dynamic can be observed in all strands of psychology of religion and pastoral theology. There are, as it were, more conservative, traditional, orthodox, and non-iconoclastic strands as well, exemplified by, say, Deborah
Hunsinger and Andrew Lester. In this study, though, I have focused on the iconoclastic strands in these fields.

Both psychology of religion and pastoral theology are broad fields, and there is no consensus as to what constitutes these fields. As a consequence, I necessarily had to focus my analysis by limiting by scope. An interesting way to write about both of these fields, I felt, was to write about psychological portraits of religious leaders, because often the scholars who construct such portraits work in both psychology of religion and pastoral theology. Capps and Dittes, for example, are both psychologists of religion and pastoral theologians. I also had the decision as to which psychological portraits I should study—what about portraits of, say, Moses or Paul? In the end I decided that a study that focused on three of the most important figures in church history—Jesus, Augustine, and Calvin—would constitute an especially compelling study, because these figures span the ancient, medieval, and early modern time periods, and these three figures are important for my own church background, the Presbyterian Church.

The other contribution that I have made in this study is that I have applied Homans’s “mourning religion” thesis to psychology of religion and pastoral theology. Homans, to some extent, had already focused on psychology of religion by studying Freud and Jung, but no one has focused on what Parsons has called “the average professor” in these fields in terms of Christianity. This study also constitutes the most sustained analysis of the work of Capps, Dittes, and Bouwsma. More studies by various students and scholars on these figures are sure to follow in the future.
Limitations of the “Mourning Religion” Thesis

While I believe the “mourning religion” thesis is extremely helpful in thinking about the relationship between a scholar’s life and work, especially in psychology of religion and pastoral theology, there are nevertheless limits to the thesis. The relationship between a scholar’s life and work is not only one of mourning. When I was talking with a biblical scholar about this thesis and how it might apply to her life, she didn’t think that it did, and suggested instead that a better way of understanding the relationship between her life and work was liberation, because she was able to break away from the constraining orthodoxy of her youth.

There are also strands or camps in religious studies that are not mourning religion at all because they are, more or less, apologists or caretakers of religion, not critics (McCutcheon, 2001). Scholars in the Society for Biblical Literature, for example, have the reputation of being rigorous in their methodology in terms of historical-criticism and language analysis, but they also have the reputation of being apologists for Christianity. We can, however, find these kinds of scholars in virtually every tradition in religious studies—for example, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. While some may claim that such scholars are not a part of religious studies, it would be difficult to exclude them or their work from religious studies because “apologetic” scholars attend and present at the same conferences (e.g., the American Academy of Religion) as “critical” scholars (cf. Kripal, 2007b).

The focus on mourning might also be overly negative and downward looking. Just as Freud and psychoanalysis has been criticized for constructing a psychology of the basement (as opposed to transpersonal psychology’s psychology of the attic), the
“mourning religion” thesis might be criticized for excluding factors such as curiosity and joy as primary links between a scholar’s life and work.

The relationship between a scholar’s life and work might also be thought of in terms of sublimation. Freud (1910/2001), for example, understood the connection between Leonardo da Vinci’s life and work in terms of sublimated homosexuality. Could we not imagine cases where religious studies scholars also sublimate their own sexuality into their work?

All of this is to say, quite simply, that there are a number of ways in which we can think about what religious studies scholars are “doing” in their work, and mourning is a helpful category in this regard, but it is by no means the only helpful category. In talking with Parsons about these issues, he noted that the “mourning religion” thesis “is a general theory that needs thoughtful nuances in specific cases,” which is precisely what I have tried to do in this project. Parsons also mentioned to me that “Homans’s valorization of individuating completely from religion is only one possibility—there are many others—and one can, as it were, speak of degrees of mourning and degrees of creative response” (May 23, 2009, Personal Correspondence).

A Road for the Brave

What I have offered here is not something definitive, something that, for example, could be replicated as in a laboratory experiment. What I have offered is an interpretation, an interpretation informed by psychoanalytic insights. Another interpreter would likely put the pieces together differently and, therefore, would see the picture in another way.
But, this is just as well because, after all, it is the nature of psychoanalytic interpretations, and perhaps all meaningful interpretations in the humanities. Psychoanalytic interpretations in the humanities are always to some extent idiosyncratic, and there will always be some uncertainty as to the results. We are dealing, after all, with internal states, often times with individuals whom we have never met and, sometimes, we are removed by great spaces of time and distance from our subjects. As a consequence, we must always be humble about our interpretations and our conclusions. As Kripal (1999) puts it, psychoanalysis as a hermeneutic “is a tool, then, not an absolute truth, a road for the brave, not a destination for the certain” (p. 445).

Despite the uncertainty inherent in psychoanalytic interpretations, we should nevertheless continue to offer our interpretations and our conclusions, because psychoanalysis is an important tool to help us understand what it means to be a human being. We should hold onto every tool that we have and use each tool to the best of our abilities, so long as the tool proves to be useful, which, in this case, means making sense of a certain amount of biographical data in a coherent way. What I hope to have offered in this study, then, is not undisputable interpretations of the lives of recent scholars working in the fields of pastoral theology and psychology of religion but, rather, a compelling interpretation that has made sense of these scholars’ work in light of significant biographical facts. The pieces could be arranged differently, but I doubt that the theme of mourning could be dismissed or ignored altogether, simply because loss has proved to be a central theme in the lives of these scholars.
The Notion of Ambiguous Loss

In my introduction, I suggested that Boss’s (1999) notion of “ambiguous loss” is a useful supplement to Homans’s theoretical work on mourning. I make this case because Homans does not especially draw on practical counseling literature and he is not a counselor himself, while Boss is a practicing counselor. Boss’s main point is that ambiguous losses complicate grief and prevent mourning, and she offers two categories of ambiguous losses that especially complicate grief: “leaving without goodbye” and “goodbye without leaving.” An example of the former would be a soldier who becomes MIA during a war, and an example of the latter would be a relative who suffers from dementia. In both of these cases, it is not clear whether one should mourn the loss, and if one should, it is not clear how to do so.

I have shown that Capps, Dittes, and Bouwsma all had an ambiguous relationship with religion, an ambiguity that is reflected in their reversals and restorations of Jesus, Augustine, and Calvin. Capps, Dittes, and Bouwsma were all, to some extent, dissatisfied or disillusioned with some aspect of traditional Christianity and the traditional portraits of these religious leaders. Yet Capps, Dittes, and Bouwsma, while they let go of and mourned certain aspects of Christianity, nevertheless did not let go of religion completely. For Capps, this ambiguity concerned the tension between what he called his psychology of religion self, which is more radical and iconoclastic, and his pastoral care self, which is more traditional and constructive. For Dittes, this ambiguity concerned his feeling of personal destiny. Was this something that he should give up, or was it something that he should hold onto? Religion, and in particular the sense of destiny that it offered, was a source of great despair for him, but it also cultivated—his phrase was
“afflicted with”—a sense of hope in him (Dittes, 1996, p. 4). For Bouwsma, religious heritage was a source of anxiety, but it was also a part of his identity that he could not simply discard any more than he could dispense with the fact that he was born and raised in America. Dutch Calvinism was, so to speak, in his blood.

Boss’s “goodbye without leaving” category seems to be instructive here. That is, religion was still always “in the neighborhood” for these thinkers—indeed, Capps and Dittes made their careers teaching in theological schools—but yet religion was not what it used to be for them. They became disillusioned with certain aspects of traditional Christianity, but yet they did not just leave Christianity or religion behind. They chose, rather, to continue teaching in the theological context and they, indeed, continued being theological themselves. In effect, they said “goodbye without leaving” to religion. Bouwsma, too, seemed to say “goodbye without leaving” to Calvinism. While Bouwsma did leave his father’s Dutch Calvinism, in his book on Calvin, he recovered another kind of Calvinism, one rooted in the historical Calvin’s rhetoric. How, then, does the notion of ambiguous loss add to our understanding of Capps, Dittes, and Bouwsma? While Homans’s theory helps us account for the creative response of Capps, Dittes, and Bouwsma, Boss’s theory helps us to gain a better perspective on the losses that these men experienced.

Boss notes that she “grew up in a [m]idwestern immigrant community where everyone I looked up to came from someplace else” (p. 1). Her parents and grandparents came from Switzerland to Wisconsin in the early 1900s in search of a better life. To some extent, they found what they were looking for in America. But in other respects, they were deeply troubled, for they found their new life bittersweet. Other family members
would send letters, Boss notes, until the second Great War. They would end with lines such as, “[w]ill we ever see each other again?” (p. 1). Boss continues, “I remember my father being melancholy for days after he got a letter from his mother or brother. And my maternal grandmother pined ceaselessly for her mother back in her homeland. She knew that they would never meet again because poverty and then World War II prevented travel” (p. 1). “Homesickness,” Boss writes, “became a central part of my family’s culture” (p. 1). Boss did not know who was in or out of her family, or where her home was. These losses were never resolved, and her entire family continued to live with ambiguous absence—a case of “leaving without goodbye.”

One might wonder why Capps, Dittes, and Bouwsma simply did not just leave religion behind. But if they did, to what would they turn? Would they take up another religion? That possibility seems unlikely because, as academics who studied religion critically, they probably assumed that all religions, in the end, would be problematic. But, on the other hand, studying religion provided a way of being close to religion without being too close. That is, the study of religion afforded its own kind of religiousness (cf. Kripal, 2007b). The cost, however, would be a perpetual partial and ambiguous loss of their former religious selves, and their grief, therefore, would remain complicated. While I used Bertram Cohler’s notion of adaptive melancholia to understand and to present the case of Dittes, I think that it would be fair to say that all three of my subjects had, to some extent, a melancholic relationship to religion. What Cohler (2008) says of western culture’s response to the loss of religion in modern times seems to be especially true of certain strands of psychology of religion and pastoral theology:
In the twenty-first century we can see that our cultural response to the losses associated with religion has been melancholic rather than mournful. Religion is in some sense both the lost object and the nostalgic re-creation of meaning in face of that loss. We find ourselves creating nostalgic narratives of religious and spiritual meaning, nostalgic monuments and museums that provide sources of solace. (p. 216)

I have argued that Capps, Dittes, and Bouwsma have created personal monuments in the form of books and articles on the figures of Jesus, Augustine, and Calvin. As Capps (2000) said of his book on Jesus: “In the course of writing this book, I was mindful of the desire to keep faith with this boy [i.e., Capps’s religious boyhood self] and have done so, I believe, by striving to write a study of Jesus that was not afraid to ask questions in search of a more reliable truth. This book is dedicated to him” (p. xiii).

I have suggested here that Boss’s notion of “goodbye without leaving” helps us to understand the nature of the ambiguous losses that my subjects have experienced with regard to religion. But, the notion of “leaving without goodbye” seems to be appropriate as well. As we age, in some sense we leave our previous selves behind, though they continue to live in us. This situation is something like Boss’s familial experience of moving to America—they moved to America and, at some point, realized that they would never see their other family members again. Similarly, as we age, at some point we realize we will never see our childhood selves again. When Capps is writing about keeping faith with his boyhood self—which, to some extent, I believe Dittes and Bouwsma were trying to do as well—he knows that he will never see this boy or this boy’s religion again, but that he can—and does—at least keep faith with him.
Boss (1999) argues that “the greater the ambiguity surrounding one’s loss, the more difficult it is to master it and the greater one’s depression, anxiety, and family conflict” (p. 7). She argues, and I have noted, that there are essentially two kinds of loss: “goodbye without leaving” and “leaving without goodbye.” The fact that my subjects’ relationships to religion can be understood in terms of both of these kinds of losses suggests a great deal of ambiguity and, therefore, a great deal of difficulty in mastering the depression and anxiety related to these losses. One would expect that it would take a lifetime of dealing with these losses to work through them because they are so ambiguous. And, indeed, it did take a lifetime of writing about religion for my subjects to work through their losses, personal work that they were able to do through their professional work.

**Scavengers Making Meaning at the Margins**

What is the upshot of this study? What have we learned? My work suggests that the strands in psychology of religion and pastoral theology on which I have focused in this study can be understood in light of mourning, and productively so. However, it seems that in all three of my cases, religion is, in some sense, restored after it has been criticized and reversed. Certain aspects of religion are mourned, but religion for my subjects is never entirely given up—they continue to find meaning in religion. However, the meanings that these thinkers make or create out of their mourning experiences are situated at the margins of traditional Christianity. Their insights, from time to time, will be called quirky, and the paths they walk will oftentimes be lonely. Creative mourners of religion will have to face and work through not only their personal losses but, potentially,
their colleagues’ rejection—their voices and ideas might be shunned and, as in the case of
Capps, they might literally be abandoned by their colleagues in the seminary dining
room.

Robert Dykstra (2005) notes that Valerie DeMarinis, a pastoral theologian, once
heard two of her colleagues, who both were systematic theologians, talk about the field of
pastoral theology. She writes:

The topic was pastoral psychology in general, and the pastoral practitioner in
particular. One said to the other, “They are just like scavengers. They have no real
theory, just a hunting and pecking, a grabbing and applying. There is no order for
them. And they can never explain what they do or why they do it, only that
something works or not. It is all technique, and at best has some rationale to
measure if it works. It is a very sad state of affairs. (quoted in Dykstra, 2005, p. 9)

Dykstra adds, “DeMarinis acknowledges that while she was initially troubled by the
disparaging nature of this professor’s depiction of her field, on further reflection she
came to embrace the image” (p. 9). Why? DeMarinis came to see that scavengers are
actually “highly skilled at collecting, extracting, and cleansing,” and that the “responsible
scavenger is one skilled at survival, one who knows how to search, salvage, purify, and
transform the elements of the world into that which nurtures and sustains life” (p. 9).

Very often pastoral theologians are marginalized in seminaries and divinity schools
because their work is seen as subversive and iconoclastic, especially to systematic
theology, the “bread and butter,” as it were, of theological schools. But what is discarded
and rejected by systematic theologians—attention to, say, human experience, the inner
life, and individuals—is often made the cornerstone in, and reclaimed by, the fields of pastoral theology and psychology of religion.

Psychologists of religion are also marginalized in colleges and universities. Indeed, it is very rare these days for a new job posting to be listed as a position in psychology of religion. One reason for this is on account of the trend toward specialization in the religious studies. Students usually do not specialize primarily in a method now; they specialize in a tradition, and a very narrow aspect of that tradition, and write dissertations with titles such as the following: “Understanding Jonathan Edwards’s Use of Prepositions: 1722-1723.”² They may learn and employ psychological methods—and this, in my view, does constitute work in psychology of religion—but the work of a historian or biblical scholar who uses psychological methods is qualitatively different from the work of a psychologist of religion who studies history or a scriptural text. The work of clinical psychologists who study religion is also markedly different from the work of humanistic psychologists of religion. In any case, the trend has been to reward and to promote those who have specialized in particular traditions, as well as “credentialed” psychologists. Humanistic psychologists of religion, who in the United States were at one time primarily trained at the University of Chicago, are becoming something of an endangered species. If they are to survive, they, like pastoral theologians, need to cultivate their skills at scavenging.

While there is no indication that psychology of religion will become institutionalized in any final and stable manner or that pastoral theology will come to be seen as anything but marginal and liminal (cf. Turner, 1995), perhaps this is as it should

² This is an exaggeration, but not by much.
be. Prophets should not aspire to the security and stability that is afforded by the offices of the king or the president, because then the prophets would lose their prophetic voice. Sometimes, of course, prophets are a part of the king’s court but, even then, they must remain at least partial outsiders. If prophets simply tell the king what he wants to hear, they are ineffective (cf. 1 Kings 22). Prophets, if they are truly prophets, must speak truth to power. This prophetic voice, I have argued, often takes the form of reversals and restorations in the contemporary psychology of religion and pastoral theology, and this prophetic voice has come from the margins.

**Concluding with a Theological Claim**

If I may close with a theological claim: psychologists of religion and pastoral theologians may indeed be scavengers, but scavengers, too, are a part of God’s good creation. God calls these scavengers to pick through and recover what has been thrown away, to ask church historians if church history has been one big train wreck, to stand up for the poor men who have their only sheep taken from them, to confront the Davids of this world with Nathan’s words: “Thou art the man.”

Or, as Oscar Pfister (1948), the Reformed pastor who was the first psychologist of religion and pastoral theologian to point out that church history has indeed gone down the wrong track, wrote, “[m]any readers as well as myself have experienced grief at the monstrous volume of anti-Christianity discoverable in the history of Christianity” (p. 9). “The history of Christianity,” Pfister continued, “which ought to unite men in competing for the realization of love of Jesus in every walk of life, in fact revealed innumerable instances of savage and uncharitable disputes about dogmas, sacraments, and
ecclesiastical powers” (p. 9). I have demonstrated how this history has caused grief to Capps, Dittes, and Bouwsma, and I have also intimated my own grief concerning this history. I have, furthermore, demonstrated how Capps, Dittes, and Bouwsma worked through their grief and, by writing about how they have worked through their grief, this dissertation has helped me to work through, or begin to work though, my own.
References


Capps, & M. Bradford (Eds.), *Encounter with Erikson* (pp. 347-373). Santa Barbara, CA: Scholars Press.


After reading in psychology of religion and pastoral theology for several years, I began to notice that a certain strand, which might be described as iconoclastic or subversive with regard to traditional religion (which, in this dissertation, means traditional or orthodox forms of Christianity), runs through both fields, and characteristic of this strand often includes what I call a dynamic of reversals and restorations. That is, pastoral theologians and psychologists of religion often use psychological methods to critique (reverse) and then to rebuild (restore) religion.

Having noticed this strand, I became curious. *Just how common and substantial is this strand? How far back can the strand be observed?* So I did a little homework. The short answer is that this strand is observable in many of the major thinkers of psychology of religion and pastoral theology. I noticed it in the work of Donald Capps and David Bakan. I noticed it in the work of James Dittes and Jeffrey Kripal. I noticed it in the work of C. G. Jung. And I noticed it in the work of Oscar Pfister, arguably the first pastoral psychologist. What is common to all of these thinkers is that they were and are greatly influenced by Sigmund Freud. And when I looked to Freud, indeed I found the dynamic of reversals and restorations there as well, particularly in his essay “The Moses of Michelangelo.” Next I wondered, *How can we understand this strand?* This became the question of my dissertation.
Toward an Answer

To answer this question, I turned, in part, inward. Why, after all, did I notice this strand in the first place? Why am I so interested in it? As I thought about these questions, two thoughts came to mind. First, it occurred to me that there is something both deeply honest and deeply hopeful about these reversals and restorations: critique is not to be withheld from religion, but neither is religion to be simply discarded; it is to be creatively remade. And this dynamic, I came to see, reflects my own basic approach to religion; that is, I aspire to be both honest and hopeful when studying religion. Second, it also occurred to me that Peter Homans’s “mourning religion” thesis—a thesis that immediately resonated with my own experience—could be of use here, since the theory is about religious loss and recreation. A few words about the theory.

The Theory

The “mourning religion” thesis can be spelled out as follows. Scholars in religious studies are often if not always drawn to the study of religion out of some religious conviction of their own. However, during the course of their study and also by means of some personal life experience of loss that is connected with religion in some way, scholars of religion become disappointed or disillusioned with religion, and they subsequently “mourn religion” in various ways, often by means of their scholarship—and this mourning can be observed to have several stages: loss, individuation from the loss, and re-creation of meaning. That is to say, religious studies scholars separate or individuate themselves from their religious loss and subsequently create new meaning that is often outside of the realm of their former or current religious tradition, and the new meaning that they create
is usually in the form of articles and books. For some scholars, reading and writing, as it were, take the place of fasting and prayer, but these activities are still nevertheless religious, albeit in a non-traditional and heterodox way.

It should also be noted here that Homans emphasized the socio-cultural dynamics of mourning and how they affect and intersect with personal experience, and that there a number of variations of this theory, so one cannot really speak of the mourning religion thesis. Bertram Cohler, for example, speaks of a melancholic relationship with regard to religion where there is not so much of a mourning of religion as there is a mourning with religion.

Choosing a Focus

Now that I had a question and a tentative theory or tool to use to explore my question, I had to find a way to focus my analysis. I had to narrow my scope. But, at the same time, I wanted to write about both psychology of religion and pastoral theology. A striking way to do this, I felt, was to choose psychobiographical writings of religious leaders by pastoral theologians and psychologists of religion. And so in my dissertation I chose to explore this strand of reversals and restorations as it exists in the present by examining three recent psychological portraits of religious leaders—Donald Capps’s portrait of Jesus, James Dittes’s portrait of Augustine, and William Bouwsma’s portrait of Calvin—in light of each author’s own personal experiences. My dissertation, then, is about the relationship between a scholar’s life and his or her work.
The Sources and Evidence

At this point, half of my sources had been determined: I had completed my literature review; my theoretical works were more or less set; and I had determined my focus for each scholar’s "work." Now the task was to gather information about each author’s "life." I relied on the following materials: 1) published autobiographical reflections and statements by each author; 2) to the extent possible, personal correspondence with each author; 3) personal correspondence with friends, colleagues, and family members; 4) biographical publications about each author; 5) implied or covertly autobiographical statements by each author in their "work"; and 6) in the case of Bouwsma, nearly 300 pages of interview material published by Berkeley.

The Findings

What did I find? I found that Homans’s thesis and elaborations of it, with certain modifications, can be used to understand—fruitfully—the relationship between the life and the work of Capps, Dittes, and Bouwsma, and that the dynamic of reversals and restorations in their work seems to be reflective of their own mourning and meaning-making.

In the case of Capps, I argued that Capps addressed various personal losses (e.g., the loss of his Sunday School religion and the emotional loss of his mother) in a deeply personal way during his fifties, and that the key moment for Capps in overcoming his melancholia occurred after he applied his melancholia theory to Jesus. I argue this because there, in that text on Jesus, Capps was able to integrate and to sustain in a satisfying way his various selves and, therefore, open himself up to mourn in a non-
defensive way—the way of humor. After Capps had written his book on Jesus, he was able to create a religious typology for men based on honor, hope, and humor. I take the creation of this theory to be Capps’s most creative insight and, moreover, maintain that this insight resulted from his own personal psychological work.

While the various stages of Homans’s “mourning religion” thesis (loss, individuation, creation of meaning) can be more or less observed sequentially in Capps’s life, these stages do not fit so neatly in the case of Dittes. This is not to be lamented, but expected. Indeed, I suggested that it would be curious if Homans’s thesis fit each of my cases in precisely the same way. I suggested that a variation of Homans’s thesis—specifically, Cohler’s notion of adaptive melancholia—more aptly described the relationship between Dittes’s life and work. Indeed, I argued that Dittes had an ambiguous relationship with religion, a melancholic relationship, because religion both created and alleviated his dissatisfaction with life—what Dittes described as his chronic sense of the shadows of destiny. I suggested, moreover, that this melancholic relationship was rooted in the fact that he was born the day after Christmas to a mother named Mary, a father who was a carpenter, and was given by them the name of James, a brother of Jesus. That is, this boy was sure to grow up with a sense of destiny, and it is likely that this Mary had high (messianic?) hopes for her son. In writing about Augustine and Augustine’s relationship with his mother, Dittes was able to mourn and to recall his own personal sense of destiny by focusing on Augustine’s restlessness.

The “mourning religion” thesis again looks different when applied to Bouwsma. If it is clear in the case of Dittes that he did, finally, hold onto his religion, it is not so clear in the case of Bouwsma, though I do believe that Bouwsma did recover a kind of
Calvinism for himself. The Calvin that Bouwsma found personally useful was a rhetorical Calvin, a Calvin that Bouwsma recovered with the tools of history. The religion that Bouwsma rejected and mourned was his father’s Dutch Calvinism, a strict Calvinism of the churches, a Calvinism that forbid him from having lunch with his friends on Sundays. Since Bouwsma’s father’s own identity was so tied up in Dutch Calvinism, individuating from Dutch Calvinism and his father was a difficult—and anxiety provoking—process. It took writing a book on Calvin’s anxiety to do such personal work. The other major loss that I emphasized in Bouwsma’s life was the social and political upheavals of the 1960s, which affected the discipline of history. The worldview in which he was trained came crumbling down with all master narratives. Everything was found to be contingent and relative, but the Calvin that Bouwsma had recovered already knew this.

A Final Comment, Claim, and Confession

This project, as noted, has been a deeply personal one for me. For over a decade now I have been studying religion first at a college, then at a seminary, and finally at a university. And studying religion critically has proven to be difficult emotionally. It is hard to dissect something that you love.

During these years I have been reminded of the serpent’s gift in the Garden of Eden: the forbidden Tree of Knowledge (Genesis 3). It took some time for me to accept the serpent’s gift. It took some time, indeed, for me to taste and see that the fruit is good. But I also learned along the way that the Tree of Knowledge does indeed cause death. God was right about that. And so is Ecclesiastes: For with much wisdom comes much
sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief (1.18). But given the chance to do it over, would I eat from the Tree of Knowledge again? My answer would have to be a resounding—but melancholy—yes. Why? Because it is better to know than not, and it is better to eat than not, no matter what the cost. And so if I have found that God was in fact right, this does not mean that the serpent was wrong—the fruit is good.

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