

Discovering “God Almighty”: An Exploration of Kurt Vonnegut’s Mythmaking in *Sirens of Titan*, *Cat’s Cradle*, and *Slaughterhouse-Five*

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Introduction

Despite being a self-proclaimed atheist, Kurt Vonnegut had a great deal to say about God, faith, and religion. In an interview with Charlie Reilly, Vonnegut says, “I think what will finally kill *us* will be God. God will kill us by the millions quite soon. I think – by starvation, with flu, through war, in any number of ways. He is killing us by the millions right now on the growing margins of the Sahara Desert and in places like Bangla Desh” (14). Because God is not, according to Vonnegut, a real deity, this claim does not deal with God the person, but God the concept. Even if natural disasters are the real culprit, many who believe in God understand him to command nature, thus disasters are his will. In the case of war, many use God’s will as a justification for its continuation. It is not that God is literally killing people, but that these often preventable deaths are perpetuated by a belief in God. One could also argue that if God is in control as many of his followers believe, then he is ultimately responsible for these deaths. Vonnegut is opposed to this idea, both in that he disagrees with those who abide by a strict religion and he regrets a system of belief that persists despite its insufficiency in answering for death and destruction. David L. Vanderwerken, who studies Vonnegut’s depiction of God in his novels, explores Vonnegut’s belief that the idea of a God who directly impacts mankind is responsible for both the complacent reception of war and the belief that individuals can know and carry out God’s will effectively (49). Even in the case of non-religious wars, those who initiate wars must rely on some justification, some sense of righteousness. No justification, however, is as strong as the belief that one is acting on behalf of the Almighty. Peter A. Scholl responds to Vonnegut’s assessment of the religious justification for war by saying “[Christians] commit all sorts of monstrosities — wage wars — in the name of God: ‘You don't count the dead when God's on your side.’ Take away God and you take away one of man's chief alibis. Take

away this kind of God and Just Wars are just wars” (6). The kind of God Vonnegut mentions here is an idol of war and power. He is a figurehead for the self-righteous, even is, as Vonnegut assumes, he does not exist. Because of the violence he inspires, God is not just a myth, that is, a story; he is an antagonist. Vonnegut would see him removed entirely, leaving behind only man to take responsibility for the world’s failings. In studying the fictional religions and unusual depictions of God in three of Vonnegut’s novels, I offer a reading of Vonnegut which reveals how he replaces God in his fictional realities and what shape Vonnegut’s new worlds take in God’s absence. In *Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut tells a story about an indifferent God, and through God’s inaction, man discovers untainted agency and personal responsibility. In *Cat’s Cradle*, man shapes God according to man’s will; however, this story becomes a cautionary tale when man squanders his creative power by idolizing his created God rather than mankind. Finally, *Slaughterhouse-Five* follows the story of one single protagonist who imitates Vonnegut by replacing God in his personal narrative, thus achieving escape, peace, and a new reality in which human cruelty is arbitrary and every person may realize happiness. In each case, Vonnegut displays the power of story and tests its ability to satisfy mankind in ways that God Almighty cannot.

Rather than relying on traditional religious explanation, Vonnegut prefers to approach epistemological dilemmas without the help of a higher being. This partiality comes into play in the aforementioned works, as Vonnegut takes liberties to dismantle traditional religion. His atheism and his approach to epistemology and story allow him to make changes to established doctrine without hesitation. He explains his approach in an interview with Zoltán Abádi-Nagy:

VONNEGUT: I might be a Catholic. I would have a certain outlook. Or I might be a loser, or a Jew, or whatever, and I would have this religious heritage. I do have a religious heritage.

Q: What is that heritage?

VONNEGUT: It's freethinking. (25)

Vonnegut can build his worlds as he pleases because he is bound only by his own self-regulated morality, his own mind. Though Vonnegut's creative energy focuses largely on assessing the validity of Christian doctrine specifically, he opposes any religion that emphasizes the importance of a higher being, and he seeks an alternative approach to faith in his novels. The religious heritages that he critiques operate according to the assumption that God is in control, that his will takes precedence over human needs. Vonnegut's behaviors are also dictated by a heritage, though he reforms the beliefs he inherits as he sees fit. Vonnegut believes that the ability to think for oneself and take as necessary from one's religious heritage gives more answers and relief than relying on God, and he uses his novels as a way of showing his audience how that can adopt his religious heritage. Vonnegut opposes not only the concept of God but the need for God. He rejects not just God's antagonism, but the limits of even an ambivalent God.

Wrestling with Religion

Because Vonnegut does not believe in God, any qualms he has with "God" are inevitably directed at religion. Religion, according to Vonnegut, is a deeply engrained story that is perpetuated by many people at once. It is what causes man to believe in a need for God, and thus it prevents the freethinking that Vonnegut emphasizes. In *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*, Mircea Eliade, who, like Vonnegut, struggles to reconcile religion with modernity, elaborates on how religion is a hindrance to freethinking:

[Nonreligious man] accepts no model for humanity outside the human condition as it can be seen in various historical situations. Man *makes himself*, and he only makes himself completely in proportion as he desacralizes himself and the world. The sacred is the prime obstacle to his freedom. He will become himself only when he is totally demysticized. He will not be truly free until he has killed the last God. (203)

Based on Eliade's claim, belief in God forces man to filter the world through the assumption of an active God. It colors man's perception of the world around him, making him less capable of objectivity and logical assessment, and that weakness is only exacerbated by the pressures of religious doctrine. This is the problem Vonnegut identifies in religion. However, it applies only to universal religions, stories that are regulated and practiced by many people. Because so many hold to the same belief, that belief is unchangeable; it cannot be modified to fulfill individual needs. According to Vonnegut and Eliade, religion, because it relies on the sacred, prevents absolute scrutiny and encourages blind acceptance. That is why Kathryn Hume claims, "Ironically, Vonnegut shows religion as most effective in helping man and the world on their way to oblivion" (225). Religion prioritizes the needs and will of God, protecting the sacred. However, Vonnegut points out that in essence, God cannot need anything. For that reason, man owes their attention to community, to other people (Abádi-Nagy 26). That is religion's greatest failing, according to Vonnegut. It can still function according to its doctrinal demands even while people are suffering. Religion benefits those in power, not the masses.

Vonnegut's solution to the problems caused by religion, necessarily, is a change of priority from a celestial being to humankind, as is practiced in The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent in *Sirens of Titan*. This shift, this rewriting of universal stories, seeks to satisfy Vonnegut's humanist ends. Todd Davis sees Vonnegut's hope for a human-centered world in his

speech at Bennington College, during which Vonnegut entreats, “I beg you to believe in the most ridiculous superstition of all: that humanity is at the center of the universe, the fulfiller or the frustrator of the grandest dreams of God Almighty. If you can believe that, and make others believe it, then there might be hope for us. Human beings might stop treating each other like garbage, might begin to treasure and protect each other instead” (qtd in “Kurt Vonnegut” 248). This transition is not marked by an actual change in responsibility, as Vonnegut believes man has always been fully responsible for war and tragedy. Instead, it is the acknowledgment of responsibility. He asks people to accept that the future of mankind rests in the knowledge that only individuals can bring about real change, that only kindness and mutual respect can protect people from violence and mistreatment. Scholl asks that people recognize that God will not save humanity, and therefore people must care for each other of their own free will, not to satisfy a higher being. Only then may humanity see true peace (6). Many argue that religion provides a moral compass. People fear that, without a clear reason, few will be compelled to act rightly. In *Man Without a Country* Vonnegut writes, “We humanists try to behave as decently, as fairly, as honorably as we can without any expectation of rewards or punishments in the afterlife” (79). Kindness, Vonnegut would argue, should be apparent. Moreover, kindness that is only performed to protect from punishment is not kindness at all.

The Merit of Story

Vonnegut’s opposition to religion, however, does not mean he rejects all facets of religion. He picks and chooses ideas and scriptures to help form his freethinking religion and to create his fictional religions like Bokononism or The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent. For example, Farrell notes that Vonnegut shows admiration for Christ, especially for the Sermon on the Mount (*Critical Companion* 432). This sermon is notably left unchanged in Kilgore Trout’s

novels in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. Vonnegut does not believe that Christ is a manifestation of God, nor that Christ is in any way divine. However, Vonnegut values the words of Christ and the instruction they offer. In fact, in another article, Farrell argues, “Throughout his work, [Vonnegut] professed a real love for Christ’s message of mercy and redemption” (“Daydreaming” 141). It is important to note that Vonnegut is not inherently opposed to anything with religious undertones. His critiques are not formed purely by biases. Instead, he simply avoids what Eliade argues is the greatest fault of religion, the protection of the sacred. That is why, as Farrell observes, Vonnegut’s admiration for Christ does not prevent him from critiquing religion or rewriting scripture (*Critical Companion* 432). Vonnegut shapes his religious heritage without special regard for one single religious doctrine. He borrows from the sources in a way that aligns with his primary doctrine: humanism. Todd Davis aligns Vonnegut with Robert Merrill’s definition of humanism, claiming, “modernist humanism draws all cognitive, aesthetic, and ethical maps to the scale of the individual subject who believes in the originality and individuality of a unified self” (*Kurt Vonnegut* 31). By focusing on the individual, humanism prioritizes man’s innate value apart from any religious affiliation. So, when Vonnegut finds that scripture, tradition, or doctrine, even the very words of God, do not support his humanist ends, he ignores them, critiques them, or even modifies them.

By destroying the sacredness of religious texts, that is, the infallibility founded in divine affiliation, what is left behind is simply a useful tool for instruction. The religious stories Vonnegut values are essentially parables. They aid in learning moral lessons and help to organize human purpose and instruction in individuals’ minds, but they have no universal value. Vonnegut’s novels as well as the fictional religions they contain emphasize this ability to instruct and direct without the invasion of the sacred. Scholl asserts that Vonnegut values many of the

ethical implications of many religions but rejects their theological origins. The only faith-based principle he maintains is that of man's inherent, cosmic worth, though he admits he cannot reconcile that belief with logic (11). Vonnegut admires the attempt to justify ethics, to give a reason for moral behavior, one that helps to explain man's purpose. While he insists that humanists do not need this kind of justification, he acknowledges its merit. Again, his problem is not with the stories of religion, no matter how improbable he considers them to be. His scruple is with the sacred, which allows man to justify all actions, right or wrong.

Vonnegut, then, still believes that myth is beneficial to mankind, so long as it is absent of sacredness. That is, stories can inspire and empower, and that ought to be enough. Vonnegut explores this dichotomy in *Man Without a Country*: "I say of Jesus, as all humanists do, 'If what he said is good, and so much of it is absolutely beautiful, what does it matter if he was God or not'" (80)? He encourages his reader to remove the sacredness from their religious stories while still accepting the moral lessons. By eliminating sacredness, the story is suddenly fallible, as is the character God. One's morality determines the direction and value of the story, not the other way around. Because Vonnegut does not accept one irrefutable truth, he allows and invites the individual to reinvent truth. Without sacredness, there is nothing at stake, no risk of being wrong. Vonnegut declares, "We are all on Earth to fart around. Don't let anybody tell you different" (*Man Without a Country* 62). Vonnegut does not believe that there is one definitive answer for why humans exist on Earth, so everyone is free to answer that question independently, to "fart around" and find happiness on one's own.

Escaping Religious Rigidity Through Myth

Accordingly, Vonnegut's idea of religion is simply a story that enough people believe to be true. When sacredness and its resulting absoluteness and pride are removed, the religion

becomes just a collection of popular stories and ideas. Or, one could say, when people stop affirming the universal truth of a religion, that religion becomes myth. This same process also works in reverse. Eliade argues, “To tell a myth is to proclaim what happened at its origin. Once told, that is, revealed, the myth becomes apodictic truth; it establishes a truth that is absolute” (95). Stories told about the purpose of mankind and man’s origin, should enough people accept them, gain the assumed absolute truth of organized religion. Eliade continues, “By all his behavior, religious man proclaims that he believes only in being, and that his participation in being is assured him by the primordial revelation of which he is the guardian. The total of primordial revelations is constituted by his myth” (94-95). Here, religion and myth are used interchangeably. However, for the sake of my argument, myth refers to the story itself, while religion is the strict conformation to that myth as though it is absolute truth. Religion, then, is what influences man’s sense of being. Under the assumption of religion, man is automatically granted purpose. Therefore, there is no need to seek out or create purpose. Religion accommodates passivity when it is made the only source for discovering human purpose.

At the same time, a myth, even a religious myth, does establish a standard for behavior. A personal myth reaffirms the self by regulating integrity, expectations, or a moral code. Collective myths, or what Charles Taylor calls a “social imaginary,” helps societies set expectations for one another and give meaning to existence (23). These myths can be as complicated as organized religions or as simple as the age of societal adulthood. Regardless, Taylor continues, “[A social imaginary] incorporates a sense of the normal expectations we have of each other, the kind of common understanding that enables us to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life. This incorporates some sense of how we all fit together in carrying out the common practice” (24). Myths are typically relational. They help to situate an individual among a group, a

society, or humanity as a whole. Taylor, like Eliade, agrees that these stories help to understand “...where we stand in our history, in the narrative of our becoming...” (27). Myths help unify people, and they explore man’s place in the universe. Even if these stories are untrue, they offer a sense of purpose and a way to respond to that purpose.

Vonnegut, as an atheist, does not hold to one specific, universal myth. However, he is no stranger to mythological history. In Susan Farrell’s *Critical Companion to Kurt Vonnegut*, the author notes that *Player Piano* is inspired by the Iliad, and *Birthday* and *Wanda June* are both inspired by the Odyssey (446; 460). Vonnegut is comfortable bending myths to align with his own narratives. He builds his personal myth from pieces of larger systems of belief, just as he admires some tenets of Christianity and utilizes them in his writing. In his analysis of Vonnegut’s popular novels, Robert Tally argues that Vonnegut utilizes both utopia and dystopia to direct the mythologies in his novels:

Vonnegut’s novels partake of this utopian mythmaking, which is really quite the same thing as—or the flipside of—a dystopian jeremiad. Insofar as Vonnegut’s postmodern iconography highlights the failed promise of an American Way that Vonnegut himself knows to be mythic at best, he nevertheless insists upon a utopian critique of the present with recourse to a somehow purer past, or—again the flipside—a dystopian near future that warns of the logical and negative consequences of our decision not to turn back before it is too late. (20)

In both cases, Vonnegut’s ultimate goal is the ends, not the means. Still, his mythologies are the means by which his ends are carried out. He has an understanding of what the world should look like (or at least, what it should not), and he creates his myths to justify and realize that humanist world. Because Vonnegut values the result more than the process, he is free to play with

mythology in a way that those who value the sacred are not. Charles J. Shields claims that Vonnegut experiments with different answers to questions such as “whether there was a God, what the good life consisted of, whether we should expect a reward for moral behavior” (36). His novels challenge common answers to these questions, disregarding beliefs that many hold sacred. Vonnegut’s atheism allows him to approach these questions without guilt or conviction. Hume claims that “Vonnegut tries out Christian myth and American labor history as a way of embedding meaning in the text” (210). He creates fictional worlds and applies his experimental myths as a way of working through his critiques and testing how a human-centered world may come to fruition. Because these myths are isolated in Vonnegut’s novels, they are tested only within those boundaries. His characters endure the trial of Vonnegut’s epistemological experiments; they are stand-ins for humanity, and he fulfills the role of God in his created worlds.

Vonnegut and Character

As the subjects of his experimental myths, Vonnegut’s characters demand special attention. Vonnegut is well-known for his approach to character. In the prelude to *Bagombo Snuff Box*, Vonnegut offers personal advice to approaching character, including that writers should “[g]ive the reader at least one character he or she can root for” (12). Vonnegut emphasizes the connection between reader and character, and he wants his characters to be representatives of the human experience. However, he immediately follows with the advice: “Be a sadist. No matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them – in order that the reader may see what they are made of” (12). The result is catharsis, a vicarious experience of pain or tragedy that could just have easily been personal. The characters in Vonnegut’s works make many of the same common mistakes that Vonnegut sees as typical of all

of mankind. Todd F. Davis, referencing *Cat's Cradle*, claims that Vonnegut “explores the very real physical and emotional needs of humans, needs that he claims may be met by the value structures found in folk societies” (*Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade* 11). Vonnegut traces man's problems to their base desires, and he seeks to offer alternatives through which those desires may be satisfied. His works are experimental, speculative, and suggestive, and they work together to answer some of man's most pressing questions. Hume claims, “When Vonnegut's characters are confronted with the shifting currents of his universe, they are naturally insecure. They want meaning, or at least a recognizable pattern” (223). His stories challenge his characters, and those challenges are translatable to the real world. He satisfies his characters with a palatable, humanist mythology so that his readers may also be satisfied, or better yet, seek their own satisfaction in reality by creating similar mythologies.

Vonnegut has a distinct and peculiar approach to character in that many of his characters exist across several of his novels. They are not bound by the fictional world in which they are first created, not sacred beings. They develop and change in the same way God Almighty does, to facilitate Vonnegut's desired end. Hume notes that Vonnegut's fictional worlds exist on a distantly connected web. Characters that seem entirely unrelated in one novel may be indissolubly linked in another (216). However, each new novel brings about a new and diverse fictional world. Characters change as necessary to adapt to the universes they occupy. Hume continues, “Characters reappear in two or more of his books, often so totally transformed that one would not recognize them as the same people if they did not have the same name” (Hume “Heraclitean Cosmos” 216). Characters change often in personality, displaying values and priorities unique to the needs of the fictional world. Other times, the changes are more objective. Charles B. Harris identifies several biographical inconsistencies in Vonnegut's repeating

characters, ranging from birthdates, to physical appearances, to changed spellings or different names altogether (“Time” 241-242). Most of these inconsistencies, Harris believes, are either intentional or the result of Vonnegut’s apathy for literary convention. Vonnegut does not expel a great deal of energy on biographical details, as he is more concerned with the behaviors and systems of mankind as a whole. In fact, Hume claims, “personality, identity, and even biographical facts are unreliable” (“Heraclitean Cosmos” 219). Vonnegut’s levity is partially responsible for this unreliability. However, emphasizing biography also risks overinterpretation, that is, a shift of focus from overarching themes to specific characters.

This flippancy with detail is not where Vonnegut’s peculiarities end. Vonnegut is also famous for dissolving the lines between fiction and reality by placing himself in his novels. Creed Greer, in his article, “Kurt Vonnegut and the Character of Words,” describes this phenomenon by saying, “When the narrator recognizes himself as both "author" and "character," he is on more or less equal footing with them; his interaction with the character seems to suggest the impossibility of an "author" separate from the text” (313). Vonnegut does not try to distance himself from his work. His opinions and perspectives overwhelm his fiction, which is why, according to Greer, “Some of Vonnegut's critics refer to the struggle between author and character in Vonnegut's books as a "personalization" and his later works as "the personal novels” (Greer 312). And as Vonnegut’s personality and ideology enter his work, so does his theology. God Almighty is reimagined and molded to serve Vonnegut’s humanist end, and the author is far from reticent in his delivery. Vonnegut takes control away from God Almighty and usurps the place of creator and dictator. God Almighty is a singular instance of Vonnegut’s repeated method of breaking boundaries and utilizing characters as he sees fit. However, because God Almighty maintains some distant connection to Yahweh, the instance is especially sensitive.

The Character of God Almighty

God Almighty is another manifestation of Vonnegut's approach to character, but the practice of using God as a character in fiction both precedes and succeeds Vonnegut. In his article on God's presence in literature, Martin E. Marty explores God's movement from an active character in Western epics, to a foreboding character in Dante and Milton, onto a minor character in Shakespeare and Blake, eventually devolving to a background character if not thematic presence in Western modernity ("Christianity and Literature" 268). Eventually, blatant representation of God in fiction is practically nonexistent, evangelical works aside (Marty 263). Vonnegut, despite being a secular writer, employs each form of representation to some degree. God is an active character in *Cat's Cradle*, one who dialogues and engages with other characters. In *Sirens of Titan*, he is more of a threat, an idea. Finally, in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, God Almighty exists both as a sub-character in contained texts and as a background character whose quiet presence influences the narrative. Vonnegut is different from Christian authors, from whose history his depictions draw, in that he is more willing to manipulate if not altogether violate canon, to desecrate God Almighty as necessary. God Almighty is connected to Yahweh by inspiration, but ultimately, God Almighty enjoys the freedoms and versatility of a fictional character. Meanwhile, Yahweh is tightly bound by his religious affiliation and cannot deviate from the nature of his doctrine character.

God Almighty is a secular adaptation of Yahweh, a character modified for the fictional world in which he now exists and functions. He is reimagined by Vonnegut in order to facilitate a humanist mythology. In *Character: Three Inquiries in Literary Studies*, Rita Felski notes, "Characters are movable, teleporting into new media and milieus, times and places. They swarm among us, populating the world with their idiosyncrasies, accessories, trademarks, sidekicks, and

sayings” (86). Characters are constructed of every media in which they appear, growing and becoming more dynamic over time. This theory is why Felski also acknowledges that characters that are based in history can never be totally separated from their historical counterparts (88). The same is true for those characters grounded in culturally significant ideologies like myth and religion. Characters are clusters of words on a page, but they still connect deeply to reality and evoke deep emotional connections with their readers. They engage with history, religion, philosophy, psychology, etc., all while existing primarily in the imagination. For this reason, God Almighty is still recognizable as a revised depiction of the Christian God. The difference between the two characters, however, is that the Christian God cannot be modified, as Christianity regards the Bible (or arguably the Pentateuch), Yahweh’s original text, as sacred. He cannot exist in multiple texts, as sacredness defies fiction. God Almighty, then, is still a distinct character.

Discovering God Almighty

Vonnegut applies his strategy of creating myth in three key novels, and in doing so he creates a version of God Almighty that accommodates his new myth and helps identify and theorize a solution for a major problem of traditional religion. Each novel has some form of a counter religion, which is intended to act as a contrast to Christian mythology. God Almighty takes shape in these novels according to the primary mythology of the novel, which dictates the tenor of the fictional world. God Almighty operates as a character and a figurehead of a new mythology all at once. Vonnegut advises, “Every character should want something, even if it is only a glass of water” (“Snuffbox” 12). With each novel, God Almighty wants something different. His motivations shape the fictional world and are shaped by it in return. In addition to representing the novel’s presented mythology, however, God Almighty’s desires are reflective of Vonnegut’s

own. That is not to say that God Almighty wants what Vonnegut wants. In fact, often God Almighty is an antagonist, and his actions are meant to be scrutinized. In that case, God Almighty serves as a counter to Vonnegut's humanist end. God Almighty is a character like any other, subject to the author's imagination. For once, God Almighty is subservient to a creator, to Vonnegut. And, though Vonnegut claims the power of a creator, he disperses that power among mankind, allowing them to create meaning in the vacuum of God's absence. Therefore, by looking at God Almighty as Vonnegut presents him, the reader can better understand both the fictional world in which God Almighty exists and the ideas of God Almighty's own creator: Vonnegut.

Sirens of Titan

In my first chapter, I study the Indifferent God Almighty and his effect on Vonnegut's created world in *Sirens of Titan*. *Sirens* deals heavily with the contrast between God Almighty's Christian Church and Rumfoord's "Church of God the Utterly Indifferent." This contrast questions God's attention to human life and his willingness or unwillingness to intervene in human affairs. The same question brings about the discussion of whether or not man can truly have free will or if God or some other external force has ultimate control over humanity. The fictional church suggests that God, though he is certainly the creator of the universe, does not care for not intervening in human affairs. Luck, then, is the primary dictator of man's success or failure. Without God's favor, everyone is equal, and the church tries to emphasize unity and equality. To show the absurdity of faith in the divine, the story ends after discovering that the actions of man are manipulated from many lightyears away, by aliens known as "Tralfamadorians." They orchestrated millennia of human history for the sake of sending a single message. Thus, some of man's most noble pursuits are rendered arbitrary. According to the

narrative, man's created mythology should hinge on the understanding that man has no divine purpose, that God is not concerned with the pursuits of man, and that man's primary responsibility is to one another, not to a higher being.

Cat's Cradle

In the following chapter, I look more closely at mythology in *Cat's Cradle* as it pertains to character/ human behavior. *Cat's Cradle* pays special attention to Bokononism and the new religion's implications and effects on God Almighty's reception. As Bokononism is an idealized (though openly fabricated) religion which serves as a critique of Christianity and other established religions, looking at Bokononism helps to elucidate Vonnegut's depiction and understanding of God. Like *Sirens of Titan*, *Cat's Cradle* deals with determinism and the will of God, as well as the impact of technology on mankind. Tamás Bényei notes the relationship between God in technology as it relates to Vonnegut's approach to world building: "In Vonnegut, God had always been a popular and widely known subcategory of science-fiction clichés" (447). In both novels, God Almighty falls in line with other absurdities, such as alien life, doomsday technology, or highly developed space travel. However, the tone of *Cat's Cradle* is more threatening, as man's end is inevitable, God is wrathful and unpredictable, and technology eventually leads to the apocalypse. In this novel, God is flippant, temperamental, and casual about the life or death of people on Earth. *Cat's Cradle* also established a much more clearly defined mythology than in *Sirens of Titan*, as most chapters begin with excerpts from the Bokononist scripture, *The Books of Bokonon*. These texts include an origin story, Bokononist psalms, and religious instruction. The texts suggest that God Almighty meticulously controls man's affairs, all for the fulfillment of his will. Thus, everything is determined, and man is liberated of any guilt or responsibility. However, the apocalyptic end of the novel illustrates the

fallacy of this mythology. Therefore, Vonnegut asks that his readers see Bokononism as a dangerous extreme to be admonished. God, in fact, is not in control, and man must be held entirely responsible for the state of the world.

Slaughterhouse-Five

Finally, in my final chapter, I apply the foreknowledge from the previous novels to *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which looks at the individual rather than the community and limits God Almighty's intervention in the fictional world. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, God Almighty is a much more minor character. However, Christ, who is both the Son of God and an extension of God according to Christian canon, is a more significant character. Christ appears regularly in novels within the novel, which are written by the fictional author and repeated character Kilgore trout. These serve as pseudo-religious texts because they are consumed and admired by the novel's protagonist and Christ figure, Billy Pilgrim. Though God Almighty is less of an actor in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he is still impactful and significant, even from the background. His hand is objectively present (or unfortunately absent) amid war and tragedy. The Tralfamadorians serve as a primary foil to God Almighty. They establish a new mythology in the work, one to which Billy Pilgrim converts early in the novel. This mythology sees time as nonlinear and nonbinding while suggesting a rigid determinism. Everything, according to Tralfamadorianism, is predetermined and fixed in time and space, thus unavoidable. Tralfamadorianism, despite its flaws, allows Billy Pilgrim to accept the trauma of his past and exists painlessly in the present. The world in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is particularly grim, saturated by the effects of World War II. Here, Vonnegut's suggestions for a personal mythology are less explicit. Instead, he emphasizes choosing one's Gods, accepting whatever reality allows healing from the traumas of war and the

redemption of humanity as good beings. Vonnegut encourages relying on escapist methods, so long as they do not harm others.

Vonnegut's Approach to Mythmaking and World Building

In studying Vonnegut's approach to storytelling in these three novels, I identify three distinct steps in his process. First, he recognizes a primary problem of traditional religion and its consequence on mankind. In *Sirens of Titan*, for example, he seeks to design a narrative that solves the problem of man claiming God's will as their own. In *Cat's Cradle*, he responds to the need for hope and community in hopeless circumstances. Finally, in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Vonnegut tries to create an escape from the trials of war. Next, Vonnegut imagines a world in which that problem might be solved. He speculates what alterations, no matter how dramatic, might need to be made in order to facilitate the world he imagines. Finally, he tells his story, establishes his mythology, and sees where the narrative leads. Farrell notes that "Vonnegut's experimental, nonconventional writing style suggests that if we want to change reality, we must first change the way we tell stories about reality" ("Nation of Two" 61). He puts this idea into practice and puts some of mankind's greatest strengths and greatest errors on full display in hopes of inspiring change or at least sobering his readers to the need for change. Across all three novels, one common theme is clear: humans need to take priority over wealth, nationhood, or God. Farrell argues that allowing man to be, as Vonnegut says, "the center of the universe," the imagined world becomes "saner, kinder, and more just" ("Daydreaming" 149). These novels are not just commentaries. They are glimpses of the world Vonnegut wants to create, one which gives humans full dominion over their own lives and identities. Vonnegut even goes as far as to place himself in several of his novels, becoming a character and existing in his new world. Greer identifies this method as a 'personalization' (312). While Vonnegut does make extraordinary

claims and stark changes to reality, it is not important that his audience agrees with his modifications. Instead, they should understand the significance of his attempt. By displaying the power of his creative liberties in his fictional worlds, Vonnegut invites his audience to do the same, to create their own narratives.

Vonnegut's problem with religion, which his novels try to solve, is that it tries to create a universal narrative, a universal means for achieving an idealized end. Religion makes objective claims about right and wrong, or more accurately, righteousness and unrighteousness. Religion is also limited in the questions it answers and the comforts it provides. This limitation often leads to intentional misinterpretation. People try to build a personal mythology from a preexisting religion, which can lead to the unjust assignment of righteousness and unrighteousness as one sees fit. A personal narrative, however, like those Vonnegut creates in his novels, is meant to be founded on lies, to apply only to its creator. Tally explains the limits of personal narrative and explains its function: "Often utopia functions less as a means for imagining or organizing ideal social formations, and more as an imaginary way of understanding ourselves and our place in the "real" world" (21). A utopia is an imagined reality void of the troubles of true reality. It is constructed by the imagination, not intended to be regarded as absolute truth. When people imagine their own utopias, they shape the world according to their individual needs, and they do so with the understanding that others may not share their vision for the world. No one, then, is inherently right, and no one is inherently wrong. Each person is free to believe whatever is necessary to, as Shields suggests, make "destruction a bit more tolerable" (27). Though these utopias are founded on lies, and thus cannot actually bring about change, they are not useless. The stories people tell themselves also encourage them to live however is necessary to see their utopia come about. They acknowledge that no one really knows the purpose of human life. They

are united by ignorance and encouraged by the ability to create the world they wish to see.

Vonnegut puts himself into his imagined worlds as a character, and in doing so invites his readers to do the same. People are characters in their own stories, and they write their stories every day. They, like Vonnegut, are author, narrator, and character alike.

Chapter 1

The Sirens of Titan's Distant God

Taking on a casual, almost whimsical voice in *Sirens of Titan*, Vonnegut adapts, rewrites, parodies, and plays with familiar approaches to anthropology, religion, scripture, science-fiction, and politics. By presenting God Almighty through the lens of science-fiction, Vonnegut explores a dynamic relationship between mythology and science. Science works alongside religion, sometimes as a counter, other times as its own mythology. All of this experimentation, as Zoltán Abádi-Nagy records in an interview with Vonnegut, is in pursuit of one primary hypothesis:

So what I will do in a book is take a premise, as in *The Sirens of Titan*: suppose there were somebody who needed us to do something down here, was trying to make us help him up there-you know, he is way up there-what if we do have a purpose here, and this person is trying to steer us. Of course, that's a premise of religion: that there is such a creature, who needs serving way up there. (27)

This description is an appropriate representation of Vonnegut's approach to story and to literature. His process is that of play, of seeing what works, what satisfies; with his humanist end in mind, Vonnegut blends science and mythology in order to find a balance between the two often conflicting approaches. He seems to reject the pressure of taking one's work or oneself too seriously, and that attitude permeates his novel. In essence, Vonnegut values stories that are changeable and open to critique, and he encourages people to allow their own stories to be subject to modification. Similarly, he entices those who hold close to science to allow the influence of mythology and those who abide strictly by religious doctrine to make room for science and technology.

Vonnegut's three-step process as it pertains to this novel is as follows: Vonnegut identifies that religion, specifically in the case of Bobby Denton's Christian church, hinders human development and encourages complacency and the blind acceptance of God's will. Next, Vonnegut imagines a humanist world in which man operated according to his will, not God's, in which case every individual would be responsible for his action or inaction. Vonnegut finally brings this fictional reality about through the Church of the Utterly Indifferent, which gains its power through scientific phenomena that supplement the need for a divine being. This new church provides God Almighty as an indifferent creator. God Almighty consigns his power to mankind, giving them responsibility for their own lives. God Almighty also refuses to grant favor or disfavor to any individual, which eliminates man's ability to claim righteousness over another. Therefore, God Almighty makes space for man to maintain a uniting myth without the hazards of sacredness.

Presenting Reality through Science-fiction

Sirens of Titan sets out to discover how mankind would operate without the assumption of God's will, though it examines this theme through unconventional means. The work is epistemological in nature, emphasizing man's place in the universe. Despite the significance of Vonnegut's aim for this novel, however, Tamás Bényei, who studies science fiction in Vonnegut's works, argues, "The depicted (diegetic) world of *The Sirens of Titan* is undeniably a science-fictional world, complete with creatures from outer space, space travel, and space war" (439). As such, the plot and the characters are subject to the influence of the genre, which deals with pseudo-science and fictional technologies. Science fiction is quickly expanding and changing, but many tropes are still staples of the genre. For instance, Bényei notes that, like other novels in the genre, "'serious' or 'proper' questions are asked in an 'unserious' or 'improper' language or

register, with the result that the very mode of posing the questions is inscribed into the questions themselves, and the metaphysical questions are allowed to appear only as already contaminated by the alien language, cultural baggage, and silt of science-fiction” (38). However, this “contamination” is not heretical to the metaphysical themes. The apparent impropriety, Bényei argues, may make the content more accessible. (Bényei 39). Language is a primary component for achieving accessibility, both through genre-specific vocabulary and inviting allegory. Earth becomes “God’s spaceship,” and hyper conditioned war criminals become “invaders.” The unbridled control of those in power becomes a matter of brainwashing technology rather than systematic oppression perpetrated by socially fabricated institutions. By portraying human experiences and struggles according to the tropes of the genre, they also become less aloof. The inaccessible and intimidating are suddenly palatable.

Science fiction and fantasy are commonly regarded as low-brow, thus more appropriate for a wider audience. Vonnegut does away with the inflated language of high literature and philosophy and instead opts for the simplistic language represented in most science-fiction. Consequently, the major metaphysical questions explored in *Sirens* – such as man’s place in the universe, man’s search for meaning, and the desire for a gifted purpose, are presented through the familiar and less intimidating method of science fiction. Humans themselves are parodied and simplified to emphasize right and wrong, questions of origin are answered using alien intervention or absurd technologies, and even God Almighty is reduced to an archetype that can be easily adapted to a science-centered reality. He is subject to the same absurdity and parody as the genre suggests, as, Vonnegut would argue, God Almighty is himself a fictional being. Therefore, he is not owed the same reverence with which the Christian God is typically regarded; he is de-sacralized. Science fiction as a genre tends to favor a dilettante audience, as its

fantastical elements are safer and, frankly, more fun. This is with whom Vonnegut tries to engage, for whom he styles his approach, his fictional world, and his story.

However, because of his exigent themes, the novels are not, like many other works of science-fiction, for children. *Sirens* is certainly science-fiction, but above all, it is literature. In her article on time structures in Vonnegut's novels, Sharon Lynn Sieber remarks that Vonnegut blends magical realism and transrealism (130-131). Though he incorporates fantastical elements, the focus of his work is ultimately the everyday. Science fiction and fantasy are known for making the human condition less intimidating by allowing readers to experience ordinary problems in extraordinary worlds. Often, the objective is a sort of subconscious catharsis, a subliminal self-recognition and assessment. Readers can see a symbolic or even parodical representation of real human issues and identify right from wrong or justice and injustice while subconsciously comparing that representation to the real. Vonnegut does not mask his claims in allegory to the same degree as fantasy writers like C.S. Lewis and J.R. Tolkien. The primary conflict in the work still focuses on the establishment of The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent through means of extreme violence, and God Almighty is still a present primary character. However, as an atheist and a black humorist, Vonnegut is freer to be outright in his stories. He writes about God Almighty in the same manner he writes about Tralfamadorians. Because he does not believe in either, there is less at stake. He is free to reimagine religion as freely as he does space travel.

Science Fiction as a Mythology

Vonnegut uses science fiction as a mythological framework, a lens through which the reader may understand the fictional world. Therefore, it provides, like other mythologies, answers to questions of origin, human purpose, and even life after death. However, again,

mythology, unlike religion, does not have to be regarded as true. Mythology inspires culture and affects human behavior, but it does not necessarily claim absolute or universal applicability. More importantly, while mythology contains religion, religion demands service and practice from its followers, while mythology only implies a story that relates to human purpose.

Vonnegut scholar Gilbert McInnis discusses Vonnegut's tendency to frame his novels around provided mythologies, most notably, his use of evolution as a mythology (383). Evolution takes metaphysical precedence and thus dictates the significance and direction of several of Vonnegut's novels. The plot, the characters' motivations, and even the novels' interpretation are determined by the reigning mythology of Vonnegut's fictional worlds. In *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade emphasizes the importance of myth to establishing cultural standards: "To tell a myth is to proclaim what happened *ab origine*. Once told, that is, revealed, the myth becomes apodictic truth; it establishes a truth that is absolute" (95). From that absolute develops cultural ethics, practices, and religion. In the novels McInnis highlights, the mythology of evolution is synonymous with religion, as its practitioners ascribe to a firm system of beliefs and act on those beliefs. In *The Sirens of Titan*, science fiction functions similarly as a mythology. It is a persistent assumption that affects the character's actions as well as the plot's significance.

Bényei argues that religious and metaphysical systems are consequently filtered through applied science fiction (440). That is, questions about human existence, morality, or meaning are all answered under the assumption of science-fictional elements. This assumption affects the novel on many levels, the first being that science fiction uses science or mock science as a basis for every exceptional occurrence or aspect of world building. According to Bényei "Scientific discourse is by definition allied to science fiction that often appeals to science (for instance, paroxysms of highly technical language that deliberately turn into their opposite and end up as

mystification) for its pseudo-legitimation” (440). Any mythical or fantastical occurrences must be at least loosely explained by science in the same way that fantasy uses magic to explain the presence of any elements that do not or cannot exist in the known reality. Therefore, the story relies on technology or scientific anomalies to rationalize preternatural incidents. Vonnegut moves away from the religious supernatural and uses pseudo-science as the source of the novel’s mythology. In the novel, science is responsible for that which is often attributed to God.

Science fiction as a mythology also differs from science fiction as a genre in that characters are bound by science fiction in the same way people are bound by their mythologies. Characters are influenced by science-fictional elements, as these elements explain their place in the cosmos. In his book, *Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade*, Todd F. Davis argues that “Vonnegut...while still concerned with humanity, approaches his work macrocosmically; he consistently struggles with the overarching philosophical questions of human existence” (51). Vonnegut’s primary focus in the work is humanity, though he engages with humanity through the science-fictional lens. Davis also observes that Vonnegut often violates the conventions of the genre in order to further his emphasis on humanity. This violation further proves that science fiction is more effective as a mythology than as a genre. Mythology, like religion, offers meaning and justification to its practitioners. By offering sense to an otherwise mysterious origin, myth is meant to serve those who facilitate it. Eliade notes that this role is hindered by man’s tendency to rely on myth to define him. He seeks only to be, to exist according to the validation of his origin story (94-95). In this case, myth is then revered as a dictator rather than a servant. It is no longer a comfort, but a necessity and a motivation. When believers in myth feel compelled to serve the myth in return, that is when one enters into the realm of organized religion, and that is what Vonnegut aims to combat. Science does not demand the same sacredness and reverence as

organized religion, which makes room for a more accommodating God. Vonnegut's God Almighty demands nothing in response to his surrounding mythology, unlike the Christian God. God Almighty is a mythological figure, not a religious figure. He, like evolutionary mythology, gives meaning to man's origin, but he does not ask that man's lives revolve entirely around him. Instead, God Almighty gives an *ab origine* and then allows man to make meaning and find his purpose as he sees fit.

Scientific Religion as Anti-Christian

Because story elements in science fiction are filtered through the assumption of scientific justification, science plays a major metaphysical role in the novel. As McInnis observes in the case of Vonnegut's use of evolution as a mythology, a scientific *ab origine* can influence the actions and ideas of those who believe in it. Radford, though he acknowledges the major impact of science in *Sirens*, hesitates to call science a religion: "Science comes with the same dual nature as religion, in that it can improve life but can also be used to destroy life (Harris 2010, 6). Science is not a religion in *Sirens*, science is just a tool of human progress, but the industrialization of the world results in the isolation of humanity" (12). However, science acts in all significant ways as a mythology. It serves its practitioners through the creation of new life-changing technologies and valuable innovations. In this way, science is consistent with Vonnegut's ideal image of myth. According to Donna Foran, who writes on Vonnegut's primary theories, Vonnegut favors only that which is valued for its contributions to humankind and the human experience (183). Science, then, is similar to faith in that both can be used to ease pain and offer comfort, but also to oppress and ruin. Science can extend human life through medical advancements and minimize labor through developing industry, but it can also be used to create weapons, to help the rich stay in power through associability gaps, and to distract unhealthily

from reality through innovations in entertainment. Similarly, faith can offer hope and comfort, especially in the face of suffering. Many find comfort in the hope of an afterlife or trust in an all-knowing and ultimately good creator. But faith, specifically confidence in the validity of God's will, can also justify cruelty and, like science, only distract from truth. Many wars have started because people believe in both the infallibility of God's will and trust their own understanding of that will. Many others comply with cruelty and accept oppression because they believe God will either deliver them or their suffering serves some greater purpose.

The Christian religion in *Sirens* is also problematic in that it opposes the natural motion of the world and tries to stifle human development. This idea is illustrated and expressed through the words of Vonnegut's character, the preacher Bobby Denton. He compares the recent innovations in space exploration that allows Rumfoord to build a spaceship to Old Testament men building the tower of Babel (26). The tower of Babel is widely regarded as an allegory for the folly of trying to reach or challenge God. In the Biblical story, men try to construct a tower that will reach heaven, and as punishment, God scatters their languages so that they cannot understand each other, which causes the tower's construction to cease suddenly. By referencing the Babble story in response to the development in space travel, Denton claims God's intervention as proof that trying to reach God and move above one's inherent position in the cosmos is sin. Additionally, scattering the languages suggests collaboration and innovation are the roots of that sin. Because of the language divide, men are suddenly thrust into otherness, and their differences hinder their ability to form community and improve together. Denton also suggests to his congregation that it is the will of God for people to stop "talking the language of science to each other" because the "Lord God on High wants things restrained from you, so you will quit thinking about crazy towers and rockets to Heaven, and start thinking about how to be

better neighbors and husbands and wives and daughters and sons” (27). Denton blames science for dissatisfaction among men, who he believes should invest their energy in their relationships and their already established lives on Earth, which he refers to as “God’s spaceship” (28), suggesting that everything man could need is already provided by God and readily available. Meaning is inherent and consistent with God’s greater purpose; thus, there is no need to look beyond Earth. Space travel and other pursuits that emphasize man’s place in the universe, according to Denton’s logic, are contrary to Christian belief. The Christian religion demands improvement that is consistent with the innate purpose provided by God, while scientific mythology suggests no innate meaning and encourages its discovery through human effort. That is, by breaking away from Christianity’s understanding of God and human purpose, people are free to create meaning. God Almighty, then, offers a mythology that allows this free creation. He is the foil to Bobby Denton’s God, and understanding God Almighty helps the reader understand Vonnegut’s critique of Christianity.

The invented religion in *Sirens* challenges the idea that man owes anything to their established myth or faith. This idea of humanity “helping” God implies that humanity exists, at least largely, for a predetermined purpose, to serve their creator. Man’s own pursuits and desires, then, either aid in fulfilling this purpose or are in opposition to human purpose and are thus harmful. Raymond Radford, who writes on free will and determinism in *Sirens of Titan*, sees a contradiction in that, while man is endowed with free will according to the Bible, free will is cheapened by God’s omniscience. Because God already knows all that was or will be, free will inevitably becomes determinism. (13). Determinism would also, according to this logic, be a symptom of a God who demands service, as he would possess the power to see his will be done. The entire world, all human action, would be in pursuit of some ultimate will, thus not

individually valuable. Vonnegut satirizes religious determinism in *The Sirens of Titan* by crediting the whole of human history to Salo, an alien-built robot who, along with other Tralfamadorians, manipulates humans into creating elaborate messages through which the Tralfamadorians can communicate. These messages include Stonehenge, the Great Wall of China, the Golden House of Nero, and the Moscow Kremlin. All of these are incredible feats of human creativity, ingenuity, and determination; however, when it is revealed that all were unknowingly dictated by the Tralfamadorians, they lose their significance. While science fiction requires a scientific explanation for strange occurrences, Vonnegut utilizes the trope to explain away centuries of human history. Simultaneously, he mocks religious determinism and shows how one greater purpose would reduce individual human achievement to be essentially meaningless. Therefore, Vonnegut's God Almighty does not offer a greater purpose. He creates mankind and then leaves them to their own will.

Battling Meaninglessness

One major fear that often leads to a deterministic worldview is that, with no purpose, humans can only find gratification in individual and temporary accomplishments. Though they are void of any divine significance, these accomplishments, according to Rumfoord's Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, are still preferable to being controlled or influenced by God. Thus, the church ascribes to the idea of man being free from any obligation to God, of finding meaning on one's own terms. Chapter 10 begins with an excerpt from the preaching of Redwine, a leader of the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent: "Oh mankind, rejoice in the apathy of our Creator, for it makes us free and truthful and dignified at last" (218). While many Christians take pride in an active God who cares for them and the events of their lives, the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent prefers a passive God who permits them to pursue their own happiness. This God also

serves as an equalizer, as no one can claim God's favor. Radford, however, sees a flaw in the Church's ideology: "Those who submit to the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent would consider themselves as having acquired freedom. For humanity to achieve natural freedom in a world like that of *Sirens*, it would involve a higher power, or even just the ability to have answers which would allow natural law" (16). Again, The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent does not confront the problem of a unifying and communal meaning and law for all humans. The need for natural law is due primarily to the fact that, without any meaning, there is always a risk of hedonism or despair.

One solution the novel offers would then be that mankind needs to operate under guidance, not command. Rumfoord tries to assume this role. The novel makes it clear that, though Rumfoord glories in his position as religious head and man's self-proclaimed savior, he never actually claims to be God (Vonnegut *Sirens* 243). However, he is still serves as a counterpart to God, and he is treated as a god by many, including Malachi Constant: "Constant, who had offered his services to God as a messenger, now panicked before the very moderate greatness of Rumfoord" (Vonnegut *Sirens* 16). Rumfoord gains his power after he intentionally flies into a chrono-synclastic infantibula, a fictional scientific anomaly that bridges universes and supersedes time and space. Though he is just a mortal man, he can also tell the future and has knowledge that allows him to influence other humans. Radford observes that "Rumfoord states that he is not like God, but regards himself as better than any deity, simply because he can provide answers that gods cannot" (13). Of course, Rumfoord is not necessarily more powerful than the Christian God, as both exercise a sort of omniscience, while only God has immeasurable power. Rumfoord can provide answers that God cannot because Rumfoord actively chooses to.

He engages in close contact with humans, and he makes an exhibition of his power through his predictions. In that way, he violates the primary doctrine of the church he establishes.

Understanding the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent as a Religion

Because of Rumfoord's blatant inconsistencies, analyzing Rumfoord as a microcosm for the novel's religion is not entirely sound, even though he is the religious head in the novel. Instead, one must look at the Church itself, independent of Rumfoord's behavior and the Church's controversial establishment. One must also consider how the Church's doctrine affects God Almighty's nature and vice versa. The Church, as it is first introduced by Rumfoord, is the facilitator of a religion that claims it will eliminate borders, war, and hate between men. The religion's primary doctrines are that man does not need to do anything in the service of God Almighty, as the main actor in human affairs is not God, but luck (182). Rumfoord also claims that his followers should believe in the religion because of the power he has to predict the future. The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, then, is neither a faith nor a religion as either is commonly understood. The Church's faith is different from other faiths in that it is based on shared hard and contingent evidence that is experienced by many, and that evidence is based on prophecies given by one man. The followers of the Church saw the miracles of their faith for themselves, rather than relying on secondary accounts.

Religion is not only a belief but also intentional action as a result of that belief. The religious doctrine in *Sirens* is notably much different than other religions. Arguably, the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent does act according to its system of belief, though those acts are separate from God Almighty. God Almighty does not need direct service or praise. Instead, the Church practices their religion by honoring one another. They give themselves handicaps, physical or intellectual burdens that help to ensure no one is better than anyone else. They also

avoid phrases like “thank God,” as they do not offer God Almighty credit nor blame for any earthly event. They also welcome Unk to Earth with an elaborate celebration, as his coming is prophesied by Rumfoord, and they sell effigies of Malachi Constant, who is said to be the antithesis of the religion’s ideologies. All of these practices are clearly displays of their religious belief. However, unlike other religions, these practices are not in worship or even acknowledgment of their deity. The Church of the Utterly Indifferent celebrates ideas rather than a god, even while God Almighty still exists in the Church’s mythology. God Almighty does not participate in human affairs, and neither does the Church engage with God Almighty. Instead, the religion is focused on humanity, on how it can exist for and among itself. God Almighty’s indifference, then, allows for man to take priority over reverence for any God. That is how Vonnegut’s mythology achieves a humanist end.

God Almighty According to the Church, the Myth, and the Novel

So how does God Almighty function in a church and a world that does not acknowledge him? What purpose does he serve? Again, religion tends to be an exchange between entity and followers, be it through worship, ritual, prayer, or offering. The Church of God the utterly indifferent does not connect to God Almighty in any of these ways. Their practices are limited to their community on Earth. So, why have a god at all? Despite his lack of intervention, God Almighty is still doctrinally vital to the functions of life on Earth. First and primarily, Redwine refers to God Almighty as “Creator” (218). God Almighty is still responsible for and is credited for the existence of mankind. That is why the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent exists at all, why they do not simply call themselves atheists and act accordingly. They believe in a god, which offers credit to their religious system. That is, they can take comfort in the idea that an all-powerful deity validates their beliefs, even passively; therefore, the Church is not at risk of

falling into Nihilism. The world is not just randomness; it is God-ordained randomness.

Rumfoord explains this concept when he first establishes the new religion: “‘Luck,’ said

Rumfoord up in his treetop, ‘is the way the wind swirls, and the dust settles eons after God has passed by’” (256). So, God Almighty’s movements and actions do play a role in human life. A

being as powerful as God Almighty is bound to leave behind some kind of cosmic footprint.

Rumfoord calls this “‘Luck,’” but specifies, as part of the Church’s motto that it is “‘not the hand of God’” (182). God may pass through the dust, and such is evidential of his power, but he does

not care to try to control where the dust settles. Still, it settles, and the consequence is all of

human life. That is why Rumfoord revises the Christian scriptures to say “‘*In the beginning, God became the Heaven and the Earth... and God said, ‘Let me be light,’ and he was light*” (199).

This verse is of course a modification of Genesis 1, which reads, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth... And God said, ‘Let there be light’” (*New International Version*, Gen.

1:1-3). The differences are again of agency. God Almighty creates because he is. Earth is an

extension of himself, a natural consequence of his nature. Its creation is not, then, an intentional

labor or act of love, at least not for the benefit of man. His decision to be light and to be heaven

and earth are intentional, but only for his own entertainment or gratification. How he affects man

in the process is not a determining factor.

In the same sentence that Rumfoord claims luck is not the hand of God, he also asserts

that “‘[p]uny man can do nothing at all to help or please God Almighty (182). The idea that man

has a responsibility or even the ability to serve God Almighty is an error of human pride. First, as

previously established, God Almighty does not meddle in human affairs. He has no emotional

investment in what happens to a nation, let alone an individual. Again, it is all just dust.

Secondly, and more imperatively, even if God Almighty did want for something, there is nothing

mankind could do for his benefit, hence another of Radfoord's claims: "God Almighty will take care of himself" (182). The deity who could create the universe with ease and whose movements ripple through human history has no need of help. The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent recognizes that, regardless of their willingness, they are powerless to serve God Almighty. Redwine exemplifies this idea by referring to himself when regarding his followers as "a germ on a flea on your dog" (225). He then promises to try to serve his church as they are willing to serve God Almighty. He both humbles himself before his congregation (an act that is consistent with the church's idea of human equality and unity) and reminds his congregation that their possible desire to serve God Almighty is empty. A germ on a flea on one's dog can do nothing in the service of a human being, and it would be irrational to imagine a human being that is invested in the events of a germ's life.

The absurdity of this image is why Redwine questions Unk so severely when Unk unconsciously says "thank God" after he realizes he has landed safely on Earth. Redwine asks, "Why thank god?...He doesn't care what happens to you. He didn't go to any trouble to get you here safe and sound, any more than He would go to the trouble to kill you" (229). Initially, especially to those who value an involved god, Redwine's statement seems pessimistic. Unk and the rest of mankind are abandoned creations, left to live or die without a thought or response from their creator. However, while apathy implies a lack of care, it also implies a lack of maliciousness. To many, this would not be an appealing exchange. However, the implications of an apathetic god or even the practice of a belief in an apathetic god are significant. Rumfoord makes a prediction for how a belief in an apathetic god would change human life: "National borders...will disappear. The lust for war...will die. All envy, all fear, all hate will die...The name of the new religion...is The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent." (182). The concept of

national borders is justifiable only when paired with ideas of otherness, separation, and innate right. Because people believe in divine providence, they can justify their right to the land in which they were born, as it is fated by God. War is no different. Because people feel that their land, their religion, or their ancestry is right according to the commands or favoritism of God, they can justify killing over land, converting or cleansing through violence, or seizing resources by force. Finally, envy could not prosper in an equal world, there would be no need to fear without war or violence, and one who regards himself as a germ on a flea on a dog cannot reasonably hate.

Based on the religious standards perpetuated through the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, it is still possible to praise and honor God Almighty. Granted, God Almighty cannot be moved or touched by praise. Still, according to the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, some attitudes are blasphemous, and others sanctioned. For example, when Redwine explains to Unk that he must address the crowd who had gathered to await his arrival on Earth, he warns, “...you mustn’t say anything that would indicate that God took a special interest in you, or that you could somehow be of help to God. The worst thing you could say, for instance, would be something like, ‘thank God for delivering me from all my troubles. For some reason, He singled me out, and now my only wish is to serve Him’” (231). Suggesting that God Almighty played a role in delivering one to safety would consequently suggest that those who were not delivered to safety did not have God Almighty’s favor or priority. But God Almighty, according to the Church’s revised scripture, does not show favoritism. Additionally, the risk of trying to serve God Almighty after assuming one has been awarded favor is that any actions taken in this “service” would be falsely justified. Anyone who would oppose a servant of the lord would be seen as a blasphemer. Malachi Constant is the quintessential example of this error, and that is

why he is sacrificed by the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent. First, Malachi's father, Noel, came into his wealth by dividing a verse in Genesis into pairs of letters and investing in companies that had the same initials (70). Noel gives some cosmic priority to the text, and from then on, his wealth seems fated by God. In fact, this is a great example of coincidence misinterpreted as favoritism, and Malachi practices the same attitude by treating his inherited wealth as his divine right. Malachi assumes he is destined for greatness. He offers himself as a messenger (Malachi means messenger) to God, and he expects to deliver "a first-class message from God to someone equally distinguished" (12). God Almighty does not need Malachi's service, nor does God Almighty regard Malachi as superior to other people. In fact, God Almighty does not regard him at all. Malachi's desire to serve God Almighty is actually a service to himself, a way to prove that he has a cosmically significant purpose, which is why he is only willing to deliver a message if it is "first-class."

For one to truly honor God Almighty, according to the tenets of this fictional religion, one must obey the primary teaching of the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent: "Take care of the people, and God Almighty Will Take Care of Himself" (182). All people are individually unimportant. Their meaning cannot be found in their relationship to God Almighty. Their creation is purposeless, and each individual is simply a lucky occurrence. To truly honor the nature of God Almighty means to acknowledge the implications of that truth, to see that all people are united in their purposelessness. Then, instead of trying to understand the will of God Almighty, humankind can begin to create meaning, serve one another, and try to make the most of the circumstances luck deals. God Almighty's most important role in the Church and in the novel, then, is to stay out of man's way, to not interfere nor offer preference as each person creates meaning independently.

Understanding Religious Morality through God Almighty

Kurt Vonnegut was a self-proclaimed atheist. He did not ascribe to his fake religion, just as he did not believe Tralfamadorians are responsible for the Great Wall of China. However, his invention of The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent and his depictions of God Almighty in *Sirens of Titan* are still suggestive of major claims about human purpose and his critiques of religion.

First, the novel's perspective on human purpose borrows heavily from Existentialism. Sieber claims that the fruitlessness of space travel is symbolic of the fruitlessness of searching for meaning from divine sources. As man slowly realizes that a god cannot offer fulfillment, they begin to search for meaning among themselves (127). The novel's connection to Existentialism is realized most clearly through the Church of the Utterly Indifferent, which actively rejects any suggestion that God shapes human identity. However, Sieber also traces existentialist themes throughout the novel's plot. For example, she argues the physical death of Stoney Steven at the hands of Malachi Constant takes precedence over the fact that Constant kills Stoney under the influence of a mind-control device (132). The murder itself is a demonstrable event, the effects of which will continue to be felt after its completion. Regardless of Constant's motivations, he kills Stoney. While he may not be at fault, he is the cause, and he is still subject to responsibility for the event. Similarly, people cannot blame innate circumstances for their actions. Beatrice is self-righteous because she chooses to be, not because she is born into wealth. Vonnegut is suggesting a determinate human responsibility to act rightly regardless of one's "luck."

Initially, Rumfoord seems to be a perfect example of this ideology. After he flies into the chrono-synclastic infantibula, he is presented with new and formidable power, and he uses it to try to improve life on Earth, end war, and teach people to be kind. In his essay for the *Cambridge*

Companion to American Novelists, Davis explores Rumfoord as a protagonist in the novel, referencing the work of other scholars: “Allen...argues that Rumfoord is the intellectual hero of the novel because he ‘sees through all the fake programs limiting the understanding of others and breaks through to pure existential freedom’” (“Kurt Vonnegut” 45). The claim has merit.

Rumfoord tries, to the best of his ability, to create meaning, to shape the world around him.

Davis, however, pushes back against the idea: “Rumfoord is only one more characterization of humanity’s struggle for power, and ultimately Vonnegut will not reward him” (“Kurt Vonnegut” 54). True, Rumfoord never pretends to be a God. He readily claims his mortality, yet not his fallibility. He convinces even himself that his plan for the new religion and for the direction of humanity is right and true, not because God declares it, but because he is thrust into power that allows it. Davis explains that Rumfoord’s mistake is in trying to force his hand into the lives of others, to inaugurate his plan set by his will. This need to reign over human agency or to “play God” makes him just another human dictator (“Kurt Vonnegut” 54). Rumfoord takes extreme measures to institute his plan for humanity, including significant loss of life. Even founding the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent is a violation of his responsibility as a human being. Yes, his objective is to eventually leave man to himself, to let human beings find their own purposes. However, his indifference, after so much intervention, means nothing. His creation is imperfect, and it cannot continue to sustain mankind. He is not God Almighty.

Acknowledging Fictionality

Of course, God Almighty is a myth. Vonnegut, again, was an atheist, and thus did not believe in an indifferent nor in any perfect creator. God Almighty, more than anything else, is a satirical, meant to oppose and critique the Christian God, or more specifically, the Christian church. The tenor of the satirical work is established before the story begins, in the epigraph:

“All persons, places, and events in this book are real. Certain speeches and thoughts are necessarily constructions by the author. No names have been changed to protect the innocent, since God Almighty protects the innocent as a matter of Heavenly routine” (Epigraph). It would be an injustice to read these lines as anything other than sardonic. The novel is science fiction, laden with fictional technologies, impossible scenarios, and of course, aliens. From early on, Vonnegut makes it abundantly clear that the events of the novel are not real. Beginning with a blatant untruth allows him to present his sarcastic and critical claim about God Almighty, who Vonnegut neither believes in nor trusts to protect the innocent. The claim is further debunked as the story later sees the meaningless death of thousands of innocent people. The statement is situated in such a way that shows the absurdity of faith in a caring, loving, divine protector. Davis understands Constant to be another representation of Vonnegut’s use of juxtaposition to show absurdity: “Appropriately, Malachi’s name actually means “constant messenger,” and within the novel’s frame, he consistently reinforces Vonnegut’s claim that, indeed, there is no deity above showing favoritism toward one group of people while insuring the misfortune of another group of people” (*Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade* 49). Even though Rumfoord intentionally grooms Constant for failure and sacrifice, the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent is a false creation, and the church’s faith is based largely on Rumfoord’s prediction, the ideas for which they stand are still sound. Vonnegut takes his final swing at the Christian God by creating his own explanation for the direction of human history: the Tralfamadorians. Tamás claims, “The ultimate irony of this strategy is its potentially deflating absorption of the metaphysical thought structure of ultimate irony and deflation of human aspirations: in the well-known rewriting of human history (it is a message sent by a spaceship asking for a spare part), cosmic irony, an inherited topos of romantic metaphysics and aesthetics, is redeployed as truly cosmic, galactic,

specifically science-fictional irony, as well as the parody of the theological concept of Providence” (440-441). Vonnegut intentionally reinforces the idea of a passive creator throughout the novel. He allows his reader to deeply consider the possibility of man creating his own purpose. Then, when the novel reveals that aliens were controlling humans for millennia simply for the purpose of asking for spare parts for a ship, the idea of any celestial dictator seems all the more preposterous, be it aliens or God.

So, man is alone. There is no higher purpose or will to be served. Davis, however, considers this knowledge promising. The futility of human life, he considers, leads to a conclusion Vonnegut reaches in another of his novels, *God Bless You Mr. Rosewater*: ““God damn it, you’ve got to be kind”” (*Kurt Vonnegut’s Crusade* 11-12). Davis equates this conclusion to Malachi’s own revelation about the meaning of life: ““It took us that long to realize that a purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved”” (qtd. by Davis 11-12). So, the moral of Vonnegut’s story, then, is threefold. First, there is no divine ruler of the universe. Human life is just happenstance, just luck, or unluck, depending on one’s perspective. Second, with no creator, there is no superior will to be obeyed, sought, or served. All people are equally without meaning and equally without favor. Without a God to take responsibility for human error, man must take action to improve the world around them. Because all are equal in absence of God’s favor, no one is more or less responsible for caring for others. No one can justify seeking power over other human beings. Finally, bearing the prior conclusions in mind, the only logical conclusion is to treat one another with kindness. There is no justification for selfishness or self-righteousness if all life is equally meaningless. Mankind must work together to make life on Earth worth living.

Chapter 2

Cat's Cradle's Affirming God

Cat's Cradle is a creative space in which Vonnegut plays with the relationship between God and man. Through an invented religion and a complex new God Almighty, Vonnegut explores the motivations behind and effects of communal human behavior, especially storytelling. Donald E. Morse notes that an early draft of *Cat's Cradle* served as Vonnegut's anthropology thesis for the University of Chicago. The thesis was rejected, though, after the novel was published, the university awarded the author his master's degree (208). The novel seeks to explore religion and its relationship to human society, thus its relationship to anthropology. While *Sirens* analyzes the effects of both faith and religion in all facets of human life, *Cat's Cradle* is particularly concerned with religion as myth and how the stories humans tell shape both communal and individual narratives. Also, while *Cat's Cradle* still incorporates science-fictional elements, religion in the novel is not filtered so finely through a scientific lens. Instead, *Cat's Cradle* uses science fiction to make the problem of war even more imperative in the novel. By doing so, Vonnegut makes the need for escape even greater. Vonnegut challenges man's understanding of and desire for truth by creating a fictional religion that, even within the novel, is founded entirely on lies. In doing so, he shows the pitfalls and advantages of people creating their own personal narratives. These narratives can also be shaped by creative and material culture, politics, or technology, and the novel situates God Almighty in competition with these already competing forces. Here, unlike in *Sirens of Titan*, God Almighty is directly involved in human affairs. However, his motivations for intervening still differ largely from that of the Christian God.

In this novel, the primary problem Vonnegut addresses is that of war, especially war perpetuated by religion, and its effects on man's hope and determination. In addition, technology, following the events of World War II, is de-sacralized, and the threat of technology is intensified through the fictional weapon ice-nine. Vonnegut uses the fictional island of San Lorenzo as an example of the effects of war and technology. On San Lorenzo, there is no real hope for peace, as the island does not have the resources to retaliate against oppressors. Therefore, Vonnegut's imagined resolution does not include an actual escape from war. Instead, through the counter-religion Bokononism, Vonnegut offers the sufferers of war comfort and unity even in the face of trial. Because this religion claims to be entirely falsified by its creator, Bokonon, both the mythology and God Almighty himself are de-sacralized. The Bokononist God is deeply involved in human affairs. However, his will is never revealed. Therefore, no one can claim God's will to justify war, yet people can still find comfort in believing that their seemingly meaningless suffering is somehow a part of a greater plan. Man uses story to gain power; they create their own God Almighty to improve their reality, much like Vonnegut.

Filling in the Gaps

In *Sirens of Titan*, science fiction works alongside religion in a strenuous tension to create a fictional world that can facilitate the novel's absurdities. These competing mythologies establish the conflict of the plot as well as the tone of the narrative. In Vonnegut's later work, *Cat's Cradle*, the two are again at war. Jesse Weiner, who studies Vonnegut's connection to mythology, traces the tension between knowledge (science) and mythology (Bokononism) throughout the entirety of the novel (132). However, science fiction and religion are approached much differently than in *Sirens of Titan*. In *Sirens*, science is a starting place for all extraordinary events. Even the fictional religion in the novel is established through scientific anomalies.

Science is an assumption, while religion is more closely scrutinized for its necessity. It is through this scientific lens that the novel explores war, politics, humanity, and even God Almighty, an important character and a parallel to science in the novel. Everything must be explained pseudo-scientifically, and even religion can be disregarded, updated, or modified according to man's practical needs.

In *Cat's Cradle*, science is no longer the assumption. The narrative exists alongside World War II, and the real-world effects of the war inevitably permeate the fictional world of the novel. In the narrative's depiction of the creation and detonation of the atomic bomb, the creators of the weapon announce, "Science has now known sin" (17). Before the World Wars, science seemed to promise an improved quality of life. Technological innovation meant new opportunities and the reduction of labor and suffering. After the World Wars showed the danger of technology through new weaponry, people became more skeptical. That is, science lost its sacredness; it was suddenly fallible. The problem of war as it is exacerbated by science and permitted by religion is the primary problem that Vonnegut hopes to solve in the novel. *Cat's Cradle* situates science in a religious context and vice versa to see how each lends to morality and the study of human purpose. Science is scrutinized, subjected to examination for its service to mankind, whether it can "fill the little gaps" (*Cat's Cradle* 42). This skepticism can be detected early in the novel, and it shapes the plot and the language of the work. Peter B. Messent, notes the novel's unique tone and the significance of its content, as he claims that *Cat's Cradle* is "the novel in which Vonnegut attains perhaps his most perfect balance between humour and nihilism, is concerned with apocalypse" (102). Similar to how, in *Sirens*, unchecked religion can result in war and genocide, in *Cat's Cradle*, the practice of immoral or unregulated science can result in an apocalypse.

In order to prevent a catastrophic event, one may gather, science must be founded on the desire to improve human life, be that through the reduction of labor, the furthering of human life through medicine, or the increase of access to natural resources. Scientists, then, must operate by humility and service rather than hubris. In the novel, there is great potential for either. Davis notes Dr. Felix Hoenikker as an example of excessive pride, as Hoenikker believes science to be the foundation of absolute and objective truths. Thus, he believes science is exempt from skepticism, that is, he allows it to become sacred. Hoenikker is willing to suppress feelings of shame or guilt by justifying his actions as necessary for scientific advancement, a problem Vonnegut often observes in organized religion. Contrarily, Dr. Von Koenigswald, a physician in San Lorenzo, represents the potential of science to improve the human experience (*Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade* 63-64). His motivations are built on his defined view of morality, not driven by a need for power. Koenigswald, an ex-Nazi, is converted from a life of cruelty for science's sake and consequently devotes his time to using his knowledge to help others. Both men are coerced by the power of discovery and creation, though their motivations are vastly different. Hoenikker and Koenigswald show that man is ultimately responsible for the consequences of war, not God.

Hoenikker comes into wealth through the industry of war, and he is largely responsible for the creation of the atomic bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima. The act is entirely destructive, void of any purpose besides violence. The World Wars saw a new and terrible surge in war technologies, proving that science itself can be a weapon when wielded for the wrong reasons. Later, Hoenikker continues to serve the war cause. He believes this pursuit fulfills the responsibility of science to "fill in the gaps." Hoenikker, however, believes advancing war technology fulfills this commission, and he ignores the potential for saving or improving human

lime. The novel's narrator, John, also called Jonah, interviews a bartender and a woman Sandra, who recall Dr. Hoenikker claiming that science would replace superstition and provide the meaning of life(24-25). Hoenikker has deep-rooted confidence in science because he can understand it. Accumulated knowledge elevates him and offers him a sense of superiority. Weiner predicts the danger of this philosophy: "*Cat's Cradle* explores the potential for catastrophic global consequences resulting from the pursuit of knowledge for knowledge's sake" (118). Hoenikker is motivated by his own desire for self-fulfillment, not by a desire to serve or improve. Because building an atomic bomb is such a powerful display of knowledge and talent, Hoenikker is not compelled to justify its creation. He creates weapons, including ice-nine, because he can. Though Hoenikker is able to reject religion in favor of logic and in pursuit of a personal sense of meaning, something Vonnegut would encourage, he does so without considering a moral end. His personal narrative does not aid in creating a better world, thus, even though the power and dignity of science are affirmed in his life, it is an insufficient counter-religion.

The Demigods of Science-Mythology

Hoenniker and Breed both see the atomic bomb, despite its disastrous consequences, as a success for all of humanity because it satisfies the demands of their mythology. Science is responsible for the creation of the world, so it must be honored through sacrifice. In that way, science becomes a kind of religion in the novel, a counter both to Christianity and Bokononism. Like religion, science demands service, and those who practice science as religion see it as sacred. The pursuit of knowledge must persevere regardless of the cost because science demands it. Of course, such a philosophy is easily practiced when the scientists are safely removed from the violence. They are some of the few who can create power at that level, and so they are

elevated. Additionally, Hoenniker, in his creation of ice-nine, tries to manipulate nature, laws of physics and chemistry that are deeply embedded in life on earth. Mud, to everyone else, is mud. It is inconvenient and unideal and very much a part of life. Hoenikker wants to break the rules of chemistry, rather than utilize them. He wants to master his mythology, rule it, be its god. No one can oppose him when science is sacred and he is a god.

While the argument of “playing God” is made by skeptics consistently with each major scientific development, especially biological developments, Hoenikker is especially guilty of the charge. His inventions lack control, as well as beneficial application. They are pure *poa wer*, power that cannot be controlled nor directed to serve anyone. He can only use his inventions to threaten and control others. Koenigswald is similarly guilty of trying to control others. As a physician working under the Nazi regime, he has the power to give and take away life. When he repents and moves to San Lorenzo, he tries to redeem himself through service. He relents his power in favor of morality. He is an example of rewriting a mythology to support a humanist end, and he does so through his service to other people. Castle refers to Koenigswald’s work as a physician as his penance, an acknowledgement that redemption cannot take place without correlated action. Service, it seems, is the primary means of redemption for scientists. Their work is only valuable when it is practiced in humility rather than self-servitude. The only one who is worthy of being served on such a grand scale, of possessing unrivaled power, Bokononists especially would argue, is God Almighty.

Bokononism and Hiding from War

The skeptical approach to science and science fiction in *Cat’s Cradle* is due primarily to its commentary on World War II. The novel was published less than two decades after the war’s end, a war in which Kurt Vonnegut fought. Following the World Wars, the collective attitude

toward technology, especially in the US, largely deteriorated. New technologies led to weapons of mass destruction, much like the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima. This new pessimism and fear caused by the World Wars, which still exist in Vonnegut's fictional universe, left many in search of hope or comfort, something religion provides.

Bokononism, then, is a microcosm of a larger movement towards creating hope and meaning. However, Vonnegut scholar Neil Easterbrook notes that Bokononism also serves to remedy a problem more specific to San Lorenzo. The religion offers an escape from the constant troubles caused by the island's failing political systems and economics. (75). War is still responsible for many of the problems with San Lorenzo, but those problems are perpetuated by the island's precarious political situation and its economic failure. San Lorenzo's instability is due largely to its constant change in leadership. The island is repeatedly conquered and then surrendered after the conquerors realize that "God, in his infinite wisdom, had made the island worthless" (125). The cycle begins in 1519, and there seems to be no hope of its breaking. Since the islanders cannot escape practically, Bokononism makes their apparently inevitable fate bearable. Castle tells John, "When it became evident that no governmental or economic reform was going to make people much less miserable, the religion became the one real instrument of hope" (172). The islanders looked first to hope for improvement. They waited for change every time San Lorenzo fell under new control. They tried initially to be practical, to seek reform. After generations of disappointment, there was no choice but to surrender to the inevitable and make the most of their situation, even if that meant turning to lies.

Religion, in many ways, is a solace in the novel. Bokonon creates his religion to serve its participants, an aim that, again, Vonnegut believes all mythologies should have. Consequently, God Almighty must serve Bokononists, rather than the other way around. However, Bokononism

and religion in general are still problematic in many ways. In *The Cambridge Companion to American Novelists*, Todd Davis considers the novel's representation of religion to be satirical, much like in Vonnegut's other works. Vonnegut plays with the ideas of both the innate longing people have for religion in their societies and the fear of war and destruction (244). Religion is a solace, but it is also a vice. Religion is a comfort that substitutes resolution, so the people of San Lorenzo start to become complacent. San Lorenzo is an example of how religions of all kinds, especially Christianity, can lead to a similar problem. In their article on social constructs and meta religion in the novel, authors Abdolrazagh Babaei and Wan Roselezam claim that by imitating many of the basic tenets of Christianity, Bokononism fulfills "the main duty of religion, satisfaction" (234). Faith can encourage and comfort, but faith is not tangible. Religion, practiced and communal faith, allows for people or peoples to act. Religion is an avenue for people to actively work toward change without the risk or disappointment of encountering a problem directly. If one uses religion – prayer, fasting, or in the case of the Bokononists, *boko-maru* – to address conflict, then failure to resolve that conflict is no longer a personal failure. Instead, one can have confidence in the knowledge that they consulted the highest power available. This positive understanding of religion is arguably a stark contrast to the previous chapter. However, I would argue that this kind of religion is not in opposition to Vonnegut's hope for mythology, as these practices are in service to the followers, not the deity. Religious practice in the case of Bokononism simply offers a means of agency in an otherwise hopeless situation. Practitioners can abide by certain steps to feel closer to one another and reaffirm their confidence that everything will work out for God's will. If God Almighty chooses not to intervene, or to act contrary to one's desired resolution, then the result has been supernaturally ordained. Everything is permissible—everything is satisfactory—if it is the will of God Almighty.

What sets Bokononism apart from Christianity, however, is the fact that Bokononism willingly forfeits all individual aspirations in favor of God's will. Christianity emphasizes vocation, community, and the unique creation of every individual. While there are overarching principles that remain consistent, Christianity grants extensive liberties and allows for multiple avenues for people to serve a godly purpose. Bokononists reject individual "callings" or communities, as these still demand a degree of human responsibility. Instead, humans are united by *karasses*, groups of individuals who enter each other's lives seemingly at random, often as antagonists, and fulfill God Almighty's will without the knowledge of anyone in the *karass*. As John observes, "...*karass* ignores national, institutional, occupational, familial, and class boundaries" (2). While Christianity has explicit guidelines for how one should operate in one's country, community, job, family, and society, Bokononism argues these roles are insignificant, even imagined. These human-promoted roles assume that God values human desire, that goodness is a direct result of God's favor. Bokononists see human desire as arbitrary and contentedly view their lives as essentially meaningless, only preconceived steps in a larger plan.

Bokononists can and do make light of their suffering. Because Bokononists believe all people are inherently and entirely equal, an individual's suffering is no more tragic than anyone else's. Jerome Klinkowitz argues, "The joking in Bokononism is not a palliative; instead, it is a fundamental reordering of human values, solving the problem that has made people uncomfortable being the center of the universe, so ill at ease that they claim God's purposes for their own" (67). When people believe they are called by God to some kind of service, mission, or greater purpose which can only be accomplished through their obedience, there is immense pressure to perform, to succeed regardless of the cost. Even more intimidating, there is pressure to discover what one's role of service is. Klinkowitz later asserts that Bokononism relieves mankind

of the pressure of actuality. In exchange for this freedom, life is suddenly inane, and everything is permissible, even and especially death, to which the Bokononists eventually submit (67). God's will is still a dominant force in Bokononism, as it is in other religions. However, Bokononists do not need to do try to act according to God's will. They cannot help but act according to God's will. Everything is ordained, controlled, and intentional, even tragedy – even death. Therefore, there is nothing to fear. That is, though Christians have a sense of freedom in how they will pursue God's will, they are responsible for assessing their choices to ensure they align with the will and nature of God. Bokononists, however, believe it is impossible to escape God Almighty's will, so they are free to live as they please. Again, God Almighty gives man the space they need to discover meaning and happiness.

The Resulting Tenets of Bokononism

Evidently, Bokononism is tailored to accommodate the cultural and political trials that plague San Lorenzo. The religion helps its followers to escape the fear and hopelessness of war, but the benefits of the religion go much further. In order to fully grasp the epistemological consequences of the Bokononist religion, one must first understand the basic tenets of the religion and how they are practiced. The ideology which guides Bokononism, which emphasizes the seeming randomness and meaninglessness of life, is breathed to life by the experience of its founder, Bokonon, whose real name is Lionel Boyd Johnson. Weiner traces the source of Bokonon's fascination with God Almighty's will back to the moment he first arrives on San Lorenzo: "Bokonon is the sole survivor of a shipwreck, swims ashore 'naked on an unfamiliar island,' and develops the conviction that god or fate was responsible for his accidental peregrinations and frustrated homecoming" (122). The language here is important. Where Christians tend to give God credit for hardship only after the realization of some unforeseen

reward, Bokonon sees the unusual, though unfortunate events of his life still somehow necessary. Discomfort is not the result of sin but an integral part of God Almighty's plan for humanity. Of course, the shipwreck is not evidence of this truth, only inspiration for a story. Bokonon does not believe his own epiphany. Religious scholar Peter A Scholl contends that this disbelief is what makes Bokononism so effective. Bokononism is the only religion that openly claims it is false. Other religions, which Vonnegut believes are no truer than Bokononism, adhere to the strict belief that they are both completely and exclusively truth. Under the veil of this unearned confidence, these religions, specifically, the Catholic church, plagued San Lorenzo by forcing its people into slavery and poverty with the help of Castle Sugar, Inc. (8). When life is meaningless and religion is fiction, there is no justification for cruelty. Because Catholicism holds to the belief that it is completely true, it cannot be opposed. The power the Church holds is used as evidence for God's support, and that power can then be justifiably wielded against the people of San Lorenzo, much like how Hoenniker sees the success of science as evidence of its validity. Because Bokononists do not value social power or individual success, nor do they claim their religion is superior to others, they will never try to use the same justification.

Bokonon embodies the idea of social equality in his rewriting of Christian scripture: "[p]ay no attention to Caesar. Caesar doesn't have the slightest idea what's really going on" (100). The original verse reads "...So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (*New International Version*, Matt. 22:21). During the time Matthew records in this verse, Caesar was the ruler in Rome. He is a stand-in for government power. The original verse suggests a responsibility to give the government what it is owed. Christians are expected to honor God in the same way, respecting his divine power and authority. The Bokononist version is skeptical of government power, and it questions the entitlement of rulers to govern others with

absolute power. Bokonon both encourages his followers to deny the pressures of social power and criticizes the flawed logic of organized religion. Additionally, Bokonon completely removes God's name from the verse, separating religion and state entirely. God Almighty is removed from power in the same way governmental or social institutions are. What is left behind, then, is the individual. A poem from *The Books of Bokonon* boldly claims "[t]hat a really good religion / Is a form of treason" (173). While Bokonon is officially outlawed on San Lorenzo, the saying runs deeper. Bokononism violates not just laws against religion, but for religion. The willingness of Bokononists to ignore a deeply engrained social and religious scale is what makes the religion treason. Though the verse distinguishes between what is owed to the government and what is owed to God, the verse can still be misapplied to benefit the oppressor.

The religious treason Bokonon suggests is not just against the state, but against all human institutions. Rejecting government or large industry is more palatable than the full extent of Bokononist treason, which willingly rejects the idea of class, community, and even family. Again, a *karass* is not defined by any societal boundary. John describes the members of a *karass* as a team (1). A team does not need to have anything in common except movement toward the same goal. However, in the case of a *karass*, no member will ever know for certain what that goal is or even if a person is certainly a member of one's *karass*. People are welcome to try to identify their *karass*, and Bokonon welcomes this pursuit, but he also claims it is futile (4). Because one can never fully know if another person belongs to one's *karass*, it is impossible to favor one person over another. Similarly, because one can never discover one's place in a *karass* or in creation in general, one cannot claim superiority over another. When Bokononists eliminate God Almighty's favor and disassociate from any radical affiliations, what remains is an unequivocal belief in human equality. Bokononism is treason to the instilled beliefs that a family

is bond is stronger than friendship, that a political party deserves one's loyalty, or that allegiance to one leader, or even one nation, can justify the intolerance of another people. John discusses this phenomenon with Frank: "'What is sacred to Bokononists?' I asked after a while. 'Not even God, as near as I can tell.' 'Nothin?' 'Just one thing.' I made some guesses. 'The ocean? The sun?' 'Man,' said Frank. 'That's all. Just man'" (210-211). This quote is the clearest evidence of Vonnegut's desire for a humanist resolution. Bokononists honor, even love, all people equally. Guided by this principle, they can never steal from, exploit, or oppress another. This principle is the only true creed of the Bokononist religion: man is sacred. Though God Almighty still closely dictates human affairs, his nature allows mankind to emphasize one another. Bokononists are free to live how they please because they do not fear misinterpreting God's will, and the religion prevents using that freedom selfishly because its followers also believe in the sacredness of man.

The Contradictions

Despite the apparent success of Bokononism in San Lorenzo, the religion is still remarkably imperfect. The religion's unconventional founding and its treasonous beliefs result in several unreconcilable contradictions. These contradictions begin with the very first line of the Bokononist holy text: "The first sentence in *The Books of Bokonon* is this: 'All the things I am about to tell you are shameless lies'" (5). Bokononism boasts of being the only religion to openly admit that it is untrue, despite the fact that all religions are equally untrue. The problem is this ideology is not practiced consistently. Susan Farrell, in her chapter on Vonnegut and post-modernism, claims, "Bokonon does not necessarily expect his followers to believe the lies he tells but only to act as if these lies are true" ("Nation of two" 90). Bokonon's request for action without belief is a guise, as he still demands an unrelenting application. He does not blatantly ask for belief because he knows he does not need it to spread his religion. Whether or not his

followers internalize his religion is irrelevant, as they will still inevitably do his will, even to the point of death. More importantly, by asking for action rather than belief, Bokonon removes the responsibility of moral leadership from his own shoulders. According to Farrell, The Bokononist followers are trusted to determine their own beliefs, so when they commit suicide at the end of the novel, Bokonon cannot be accused of manipulating them. After all, they chose to believe even despite his warnings (“Nation of two” 90). Still, this final act of submission is just a larger scale of the kind of obedience Bokonon had always demanded. Until this point, action was all he required, and the people of San Lorenzo saw a change in themselves and their island by acting according to the religion. Even if they do not believe in God Almighty, they believe in Bokonon, and he uses this belief to finally accomplish his extremist ends. He forgets the sacredness of man and prioritizes his own power. His story is no longer a personal narrative, as he inflicts it on others.

Discovering the bodies of the Bokononists at the end of the novel is a turning point for John, a recent convert to Bokononism. According to Farrell, John is made aware of the Bokononist paradox. While one cannot successfully create a new reality, it is still necessary to try. Bokonon is able to comfort his followers by offering a meaning for life’s cruelty through God Almighty’s will, but he simultaneously devalues God. He also argues for the absolute sacredness of human life, then supports a mass suicide (“Nation of two” 90). Bokonon could very well have had good intentions, but his need to always have an answer for human suffering unavoidably leads to contradictions. Bokonon liberates the people of San Lorenzo in many ways, but he does so according to his standards and his rules. Therefore, in her article on Vonnegut and Christianity, Farrell asks, “Are we meant to reject Bokonon as a charlatan, a false prophet who cruelly and blithely leads human beings to commit mass suicide at the end of the novel? Or are

we to see him as a kindly and wise spiritual leader who provides people with the hope they need to survive their harsh and unforgiving lives” (“Daydreaming about God” 156). Likely, the answer is both. If Bokonon could have allowed his religion to truly be “shameless lies,” he might have been able to offer his followers the simple comforts of Bokononism. But he violates his own request; he believes in his own religion; he believes in himself. When he relies on his own wisdom to guide his people, he fails.

Bokonon’s Three Gods

While God Almighty is a creation of Bokonon to further his plan for Bokononism, God Almighty is still very much a dominant character in *Cat’s Cradle*. Just as Vonnegut uses his created characters as stand-ins for real human beings, Bokonon’s God Almighty still behaves in the same way as other characters, and his actions are still representative of important ideas. Yes, God Almighty is a fabrication even within the novel, but every character, in fact even the entire fictional world is a fabrication of the author’s mind. Easterbrook sees this knowledge as inconsequential in terms of the overall consumption of the work: “[W]e pretend that in the game of fiction these characters and events are real, that ice-nine is possible, even though we know, in advance, that the novel is a fiction: in reality, there’s no damn cat and no damn cradle” (76).

Vonnegut asks his audience to act like his story is true, much like Bokonon asks his followers to act like Bokononist theology is true. The extent of belief does not matter, only the action.

However, the extra layer of fiction, the fact of God Almighty’s being a fabrication of a fabrication, does change the reading slightly. First, the character of God Almighty will accordingly reflect Bokonon’s perspective. To then analyze what God Almighty reflects about Vonnegut’s beliefs requires another level of interpretation. Second, filtering God Almighty’s actions through the lens of Bokonon’s agenda removes a great deal of authorial responsibility for

the quality of God Almighty as a character. Again, according to Bokonon, not even God is sacred (210-11). The Bokononist depiction of God Almighty is not concerned with honoring God or accurately representing his character. Bokonon uses God Almighty as a tool for his religious agenda, so God Almighty's character changes and conforms according to Bokonon's needs. This process results in three different and often conflicting kinds of Gods: The Intervening God, who serves the Bokononists, the Apathetic God, who allows a man-centered universe, and the cruel God, who is both a parody of the Christian God and an embodiment of the fatalistic side of Bokononism.

The Affirming God Almighty

Though God Almighty is not sacred to Bokononists, they still believe firmly in the validity and power of his will. The assumption of God's will being enacted in the lives of every individual is responsible even for the religion's founding, as Bokonon is brought to San Lorenzo after surviving a shipwreck. This occurrence is mirrored by the arrival of Frank Hoenikker: "Gentle seas nuzzled Frank's pleasure craft to the rocky shores of San Lorenzo, as though God wanted him to go there" (83). Frank is received on the island as though he is the embodiment of God's will since he is the son of Felix Hoenikker. The impact of his arrival would not be understood until much later, when the ice-nine he carries with him is released and the island is destroyed. These events, according to Bokonon, are not "as it happened," but "as it was *supposed* to happen" (84). Bokononists refer to all events in the same manner. Everything is the will of God Almighty; everything is intentional. John, describing his own experience as a Bokononist, says that his entire life is controlled by God in order to fulfill an ordained task or tasks (202). All human responsibility is eliminated, and every mistake is reduced to a necessary part of enacting

God's will. Believing God Almighty controls all human action allows human life to be the center of the universe without the accountability that necessitates.

Human will is not entirely eliminated, however. The affirming God favors persuasion over ultimate control. Bokononists believe, for instance, that “[p]eculiar travel suggestions are dancing lessons from God” (63). That is, sudden and unexplainable occurrences or experiences are most often the hand of God. Bokononists, then, would honor impulse, as they understand that the reward of risk is the realization of God's will. Strange and sudden callings, also called *vin-dits* by the Bokononists are also responsible for new converts. These are aggressive and individualized seductions towards Bokononism. John describes his *vin-dit* as pushing him “in the direction of believing that God Almighty knew all about me, after all, that God Almighty had some pretty elaborate plans for me” (69). This idea, of course, is the major appeal of Bokononism. The complications or apparent failures of one's life suddenly have meaning and importance. One can shed guilt and regret knowing that they are vital to the realization of God's will. In addition to healing the past, one can also have confidence in the future, since no matter what happens, it will be just as it is supposed to happen.

Though the Bokononist God is in control of human affairs, he is not in that way comparable to the Christian God. The Christian God makes his will known, and that will is dictated by an uncompromising nature. Bokonon offers a parable of a woman in Newport who believed she could understand and predict God's will perfectly. He then argues that a God whose plans are so simple is either simplifying them for the sake of his followers or is not complex enough to be useful or trusted (4). The Christian God wants his people to understand his nature and seek out his will on their own. Christians, then, put great stock in studying the Word of God and trying to act according to their interpretation of it. This pursuit gives Christians a sense of

confidence in their own interpretation, which allows them to relate any of their actions to God's will. Bokonon continues, "She was a fool, and so am I, and so is anyone who thinks he sees what God is Doing" (5). Though Bokononists may recognize that a movement, an experience, or a consequence is the will of God, they do not know where those events will lead. They do not pretend to understand the person of God Almighty, so they cannot pretend that anything they do aids or hinders God's plans for the world.

The Apathetic God Almighty

Despite the forceful hand that God Almighty seems to have in man's affairs, the origins of man as recorded by Bokonon suggest that man has complete and total agency. In the creation story recorded in *The Books of Bokonon*, a parody of the Genesis creation story, God creates and animates mud (man) out of loneliness. The mud acknowledges God as a powerful creator, leaving it unworthy by comparison. Upon death, the mud discovers the details of its *karass* and *wampeter* (an object that determines the direction of a *karass*) (220). A lot can be understood about the character of God Almighty from this origin. First, as man is created out of loneliness, his purpose is simply to be. The creation of human beings is an experiment at best. Man is a plaything, an arts and crafts project. Likely, then, God Almighty's plan for mankind is no more significant than his motivations for man's creation. When man asks God what the purpose of creation is, God responds, "Everything must have a purpose?" (265). When man demands that everything must, God commissions man to discover that purpose for himself. This response can be read one of two ways. God Almighty either has a plan for man that he knows will not be satisfactory to man's perception of purpose, or God Almighty's plan is already satisfied by the initial creation of man. Farrell notes, "The very notion of man having a meaningful purpose in life, according to Bokonon, is invented by man, not by God" ("Daydreaming about God" 157).

Still, God Almighty allows man to believe in a real purpose, and he sits back and reigns over the world indifferently as they helplessly search for meaning. God Almighty allows man both the sense of superiority and the anxiety that comes with being the center of the universe, all while God continues to operate according to the knowledge that man is only mud.

The Cruel God Almighty

A God who understands that man is mud – meaningless, formless, and worthless – can justify any level of inaction or cruelty. Cruelty is a right of power, as those in power are assumed to possess knowledge and worth that allows them to define what is righteous. This concept is displayed on a micro level when Frank adopts the hobby of placing bugs in a jar and shaking them. He earns the title, “The Great God Jehovah and Beezlebub of bugs in Mason jars” (79). To Frank, this practice is an experiment, much like God Almighty’s creation of man. It satisfies Frank’s boredom and allows him to test his power on lesser creatures. Because he is so much greater than the bugs in his jar, he cannot be held accountable nor even judged for his actions. To the bugs, the jar’s shaking is an inevitable system that governs life. It cannot be prevented, and therefore cannot be questioned. The same is assumed on Earth, such as in San Lorenzo when it is decided that “God, in his infinite wisdom, had made the island worthless” (125). It cannot be considered cruelty, as God possesses knowledge that transcends man, and it is a natural assumption that God would not allow man’s suffering except for the greater good. This assumption derives from the Christian tradition that Miss Faust embraces, which considers “God is love” as an absolute truth (54). Hoenikker combats this assumption by asking for a definition of both God and love. He sees how the human understanding of love can limit God. If God loves human beings according to the human understanding of love, then he will not allow suffering that does not bring about greater joy in the future. However, if, like Bokonon’s God Almighty,

the will of God takes priority over the happiness of man, then God will certainly allow suffering without a guarantee of relief or justification.

Bokononists have a word to describe apparently senseless suffering. *Pool-pah* means either shit storm or wrath of God (244). One definition suggests randomness, chaos, and inevitability. The other suggests intentionality and calculated purpose. Bokononists do not differentiate. They do not understand God's plan for their lives, and they do not try to impose any assumptions onto those plans. Instead, they stand in the middle of the storm and do not care whether it is randomness or wrath. Either way, God's will be done. Bokononists stand by this belief to the very end, as is recorded in a poem from *The Books of Bokonon*:

Someday, someday, this crazy world will have to end,

And our God will take things back that He to us did lend.

And if, on that sad day, you want to scold your God,

Why go write ahead and scold Him. He'll just smile and nod. (269-70)

A long time ago, mud was given the opportunity to stand up, look around, and create purpose. In the process, many people developed self-importance, but God Almighty will not hesitate to remind man that he is and always has been mud. Bokonon initiates this revelation. After the release of ice-nine, he tells his followers that God Almighty had fulfilled his purpose for mankind, and now sought to kill them. Bokonon asks that his followers "have the good manners to die" (272). So, remembering that they are nothing before the creator and orchestrator of their lives, they commit mass suicide. Still, none of this could be labeled cruelty, as God does not owe kindness to a jar of bugs.

Religion: Hindrance or Comfort?

Religion has many faces in San Lorenzo. Catholicism is a partner in the island's poverty and social destruction, while Bokononism gives emotional liberation to the island's people, then later it causes the mass suicide of most of the island's inhabitants. Before the sudden and radical intervention of Bokonon, who violates his religion's main tenet about the sacredness of human life, Bokononism provides a vital service to San Lorenzo. Farrell argues that the practices of the religion offer the people comfort amid devastation and allow them to feel connected to one another ("Nation of Two" 87). These practices emphasize a shared intimacy with all other members of the religion, and they prioritize human beings and the equal value of human life above all else. While these practices hinge on the belief in a fabricated deity, the result is not compromised by that belief. According to Radford, belief is not the antagonist in the novel: "While Vonnegut harshly critiques religion within *Cat's Cradle*, he does so while still expressing the opinion that both morality and belief can be ultimately beneficial for humanity" (*Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade* 9-10). According to this critique, the primary failures of religion are shame, exclusivity, and incongruity of power. Bokononism avoids these shortcomings in its primary doctrine. Bokononism, because it is founded on lies, does not negate any opposing religion, nor does it belittle anyone who does not abide by Bokononist doctrine. The knowledge that Bokononism is falsified by its founder allows for total humility. However, Bokonon concedes this humility at the end of the novel, when he announces to a scared and confused congregation that God wants them all dead. He then shamelessly encourages the Bokononists to consume ice-nine and thus end their lives. Davis blames absolutism, the internalized conviction that one certainly knows what is righteous, for the novel's grim end (*Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade* 63). Bokonon convinces himself, and thus his following, that he knows and can interpret the will of

God. This belief is something Bokonon himself warns against in *The Books of Bokonon*.

Assuming God's will, Vonnegut seems to warn, risks not faith in God, but unfounded faith in oneself.

Vonnegut's analysis of religion, then, is that religion is both useful for providing comfort and recklessly dangerous when mistreated. His solution to this danger is to modify religion according to nonreligious morality. Bokononism is successful so long as the prioritization of mankind modifies the religious doctrine, rather than the other way around. According to Klinkowitz, Vonnegut utilizes this method on a smaller scale by using *The Books of Bokonon* as a modification of the New Testament. The changes he makes, such as simplifying the language, are impactful, though not drastic. Klinkowitz argues that this rewriting does not negate Christianity, but reforms it to emphasize human progress. Therefore, calling Vonnegut anti-religion would be inaccurate, especially considering that Bokonon lifts some passages, like Psalm 23, directly from the original text, an action that mirrors Vonnegut's personal respect for the Sermon on the Mount ("Coming to Terms" 63-64). Vonnegut does not hate religion. He sees great value in how it can uplift people and encourage morality. However, those in religious power can become too convinced that their belief is absolute truth. When prioritizing religion means letting go of ethics and the sacredness or even the celebration of humanity, such as at the end of *Cat's Cradle*, Vonnegut would argue that religion has gone too far. Religions and mythologies can be comforts, they should be created with the good of humanity in mind.

Sifting Through the Contradictions

The varying depictions of both God Almighty and organized religion seem to muddy any clear interpretation, but the conflicting representation of God Almighty is consistent with Vonnegut's method as an author, as Farrell acknowledges: "Vonnegut is not an author to offer

easy answers to big questions about the meaning of life, about the relationship between art and fiction, about the constructed nature of identity. His worlds are always complex and paradoxical” (“Nation of two” 89). This approach could be, in part, a display of humility. After all, there are no “easy answers” to questions about a higher power or human purpose, even for those who abide by a specific religion. Believing in clear, black and white, or universal answers to all questions about human purpose means applying sacredness to one’s mythology. Again, Vonnegut warns against any myth that considers itself infallible, so he is not compelled to write objectively. The hesitation to offer a concrete resolution could also be a demand of Vonnegut’s style. Davis understands *Cat’s Cradle* to be a satire of religion and its function in larger society (Davis 244). Offering a simple moral to the novel would take away from its proper enjoyment. Still, a great deal can be understood from the humorous inconsistencies of Vonnegut’s work, including his views on religion, his storytelling, and art.

Religion as Story

Bokonon’s mistake is letting go of his original claim that his religion is founded on lies. Before he takes over as dictator and encourages suicide, Bokonon embraces an approach to religion that seems to be approved throughout the novel. Farrell claims, “While the human quest for understanding might be futile, while the universe might ultimately be meaningless, what Bokonon understands is that humans can nevertheless supply meaning through pretense—through their own created fictions” (“Nation of Two” 88). Bokonon’s God, unlike the Christian God, does not claim to be a savior. Bokonon does not promise his people relief from the island’s socioeconomic devastation, nor that God Almighty will be with them through their struggles. Instead, Bokonon offers a sense of meaning to San Lorenzo, so their suffering is not entirely for

nothing. Though they may never benefit from it, at least the islanders' distress helps bring about the will of God Almighty.

By stating that his religion is a lie, he simply asks that San Lorenzo engages with Bokononism as though it were a story – that the people of San Lorenzo pretend together. Davis compares this fictional system to Robert Redfield's ideas on folktales, arguing that Vonnegut seems to suggest that the values of folk societies can satisfy a people's emotional and physical need for community and connection (*Kurt Vonnegut's Crusade* 11). Storytelling establishes a common myth, which helps unite communities and standardize cultural morality. The most important common myth is an origin story, as it offers a sense of societal hierarchy, suggests human purpose, and determines a relationship between man and a higher power. The power of these stories cannot be understated, which is why, in his commencement speech at Bennington College in 1970, Vonnegut encourages the graduating class to reject absolute truth and embrace "harmless balderdash" (Wampeters qtd. by Farrell "Nation of Two" 87). Farrell continues that by rejecting what is commonly understood as truth, students can create and preserve a sense of optimism. To do this, Vonnegut also pleads for them to maintain that human beings are the center of the universe, be that in agreement or antagonism to God Almighty's plans ("Nation of two" 87). Essentially, Vonnegut asks that young people create whatever fiction is necessary to make them value mankind above all else. He rejects absolute truth but welcomes consistency in morality, something that organized religion seems to lack. While defining one's mythology could be interpreted as a violation of social or cultural heritage, that concern only reinforces Bokonon's claim that any good religion is treason. Vonnegut presents an opportunity for healthy skepticism, as his approach to mythology requires careful consideration rather than the quiet acceptance of tradition.

The Rebellion of Art

Art is not compelled by any universal standard to abide by a prescribed sense of truth or accuracy, which is what makes it so powerful. Art, through its expressiveness and creative license, creates its own sense of truth. Like Bokkonon, the treason of art and story is what Vonnegut admires the most. Farrell agrees that no story can truly manipulate human beings into a utopia, but Vonnegut nonetheless urges people to try. Creating art that seeks to reform humanity, even though it is bound to fail, is a very human way of rejecting the pressures of an assumed higher power, and “though it might not save us from death and destruction in the end, at least the black humor will cause us to go out ‘grinning horribly’” (“Nation of two” 91). Art may only have the power to comfort, but that is enough to give meaning and value to life on Earth. Art is not a religion; it does not guarantee or offer one consistent purpose. Instead, art is a celebration of the already completeness of humankind that must be discovered in the individual. According to Farrell, celebrating humanity is not limited to what one can create. “*Cat’s Cradle* can be read to suggest that human beings have the ability to turn their lives into works of art in order to supply the meaning that is not inherent to human existence” (“Nation of Two” 87). Living according to one’s desired purpose introduces that purpose into one’s life. People must only decide what they believe and then live as though it is truth. At the same time, they must allow others to do the same. That is Bokkonon’s mistake. He stops believing his story is art, is fictional, and he makes everyone else responsible for entertaining his story. When everyone is permitted to live by their personal beliefs, to make their lives works of art, (so long as that art supports a clear morality) all that remains is unapologetic and finally peaceful humanity. Art is

often nonsensical and riddled with contradictions, and even Vonnegut is guilty of continuity errors in his work. He invites these contradictions and liberties. Such is the risk of story.

Chapter 3

Slaughterhouse-Five's Wrathful God

Slaughterhouse-Five, Vonnegut's most well-known novel, is an exceptional display of the author's talent for complexity. The story's nonlinear narrative, its use of both fact and fiction, and its unconventional protagonist offer a unique approach to some of Vonnegut's most common themes, such as politics, war, religion, and human purpose. This novel emphasizes story as an act of creation and escapism while also challenging religious and social conventions that typically dictate personal narrative. This novel is also one of Vonnegut's most revealing works, as the main character is largely representative of Vonnegut himself, Vonnegut enters the story as a character and narrator, and the story takes place during the height of World War II, which Vonnegut experienced firsthand. Morse connects Vonnegut to the content in that the author speaks for survivors of war and is thus a representative of that generation. He explores the trauma of war and the events around it, as well as the personal lives of those who endure it (196). *Slaughterhouse-Five* subverts assumptions about sanity and truth, defying common understanding about what is real, what is imperative, and what defines an individual. Most importantly, the novel interrogates God Almighty, Christianity, and religious orthodoxy and gives a rigorous assessment of war and trauma. God Almighty is put on trial, and Vonnegut holds him responsible for some of humanity's greatest struggles. Vonnegut once again asks his audience to supplement God Almighty in favor of a personal narrative, even one that seems entirely contrary to one's active reality.

The problem Vonnegut addresses in the novel is specifically that of World War II, and this time, Vonnegut filters his analysis through one protagonist, Billy Pilgrim. Billy suffers from PTSD, and Vonnegut imagines a way to end Billy's suffering rather than war itself. Though

Vonnegut does offer solutions to religion's perpetuation of war through the religious parodies of Kilgore Trout, the novel is primarily focused on escapism and reconciling personal peace with a violent world. Vonnegut does not create a new God Almighty in the novel's main plot, Kilgore Trout's novels excluded. Instead, Vonnegut dethrones God Almighty as savior and instead offers the Tralfamadorians. Tralfamadorians are in direct opposition to Christian doctrine and even favor Charles Darwin as a religious figurehead. God Almighty, then, serves as an antagonist in the novel. He is villainized and discredited in order to make room for Tralfamadorianism or any other personal narrative that allows escape from trauma. Billy serves as an example of individual power over one's personal narrative, and he finds peace without the help of God Almighty.

The Levels of Fiction and Detachment

This masterpiece draws its strength its unique use of biographical truth and history alongside fiction and speculation. The narrator/ author states in the first chapter, "All this happened, more or less. The war parts, anyway, are pretty much true" (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 3). In terms of its exploration of World War 2, the story's plot is heavily inspired by true events. For example, the most significant incident in the work, the firebombing at Dresden, is a major historical event, and its retelling attempts to capture the extent of its destruction in a way that still aligns with other reports.

These recollections of the war, however, come about only periodically, and they are filtered through the fictional life of the story's protagonist, Billy Pilgrim. Billy is entirely fictional, and the story consistently shifts from Bill's present life and his childhood, which are entirely created, to his experience during the war, which is based on historical fact and some biographical detail. The story transitions between both casually. Messent remarks that the novel's form, which relies on short paragraphs that can stand alone, helps make this movement

effective (111). The short paragraphs help give the novel its distinct feeling of time travel, as moments in both the past and present come and go so quickly. Hootie and Omrani see this unique form as identifiably postmodern: “This novel does not follow the realistic or modernist trends and defies the conventional forms of plot. As a postmodernist novel it is created in fragmented forms” (817). The difference between their interpretation of form and Messent’s is important, as Messent argues that the paragraphs can stand alone, while Hootie and Omrani regard these short entries as fragments. Both interpretations are correct. A new chapter, paragraph, or moment that reflects a change in time does not rely on the prior moment to determine its content. Each offers a clear and complete image. However, the compilation of all of these images creates a complex and intriguing story, a sort of mosaic. The mosaic form imitates that of Tralfamadorian literature, which requires the story be read all at once, without a clear beginning or end. This method violates the typical beginning-middle-end form, and the difference can make the pace seem disjointed or rushed. The fast pace of the novel sometimes makes it difficult to distinguish whether the current moment is set in the past or present, and this confusion perpetuates the ambiguity of the novel.

Ambiguity is what makes the novel’s reading so complex, and it dominates many areas of the story’s form and content. Firstly, unlike *Sirens of Titan* and *Cat’s Cradle*, the science-fictional elements in *Slaughterhouse-Five* are not indisputably plot. Instead, as science-fiction scholar, Bényei Tamás notes, the inclusion of aliens and time travel cannot be dismissed as a symptom of Billy Pilgrim’s illness, and therefore it serves as a potential commentary on mental health or trauma (441). However, the scientific elements are not totally dismissed as truth either. The Tralfamadorians could be hallucinations created by Billy’s war-battered mind, or they could be real characters. In *Sirens of Titan*, the Tralfamadorians are real. Therefore, it would not be

unfounded to assume they are real in *Slaughterhouse-Five* as well. However, in *Sirens of Titan*, multiple people meet the Tralfamadorians and confirm their presence in the story. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy is the only character who claims to have met the aliens, and his testimony is disregarded by those around him. The story never clarifies whether the readers should believe Billy and read with the understanding that time travel and Tralfamadorians are active participants in the plot or whether the readers should read under the assumption that both are creations of Billy's mind. Though the difference in interpretation is slight, it could still be considered a weakness of the novel. However, the questions left unanswered offer freedom of interpretation—an opportunity for the readers to, in a Vonnegut fashion, shape the story to their desires and presuppositions. Ambiguity challenges the sacred, and therefore it also challenges God Almighty.

Slaughterhouse-Five, then, balances delicately between fiction and truth, unity and incoherence, and plot and symbol. The readers ultimately decide what is truth or what is necessary. The question that naturally arises is how these different levels of interpretation are arranged in a hierarchy. It remains unclear if Billy's experiences in war, some of which are witnessed by the narrator, are more important to the story than his life post-war, which is corrupted by PTSD, anxiety, and trauma. Similarly, the readers must decide if the words of the Tralfamadorians are less significant to the story than those of characters who certainly exist within the plot's boundaries. Lastly, one cannot determine for certain if the books of Kilgore Trout, which are described at length, are also subject to interpretation, as the narrator never comments on the validity of the stories within the story. Depending on which interpretation by which one abides, the story offers unique and complex perspectives on war, human purpose, religion, and God Almighty.

Hidden Hands

Because of *Slaughterhouse-Five*'s practical complexity, understanding what the novel suggests about God Almighty, religion, and myth requires a more careful reading than the other two novels. The primary problem, especially when it comes to understanding the character of God Almighty, is that God Almighty is not nearly as active in the story as he is in *Sirens of Titan* or *Cat's Cradle*. In the other novels, there is extensive detail about what the created version of God values, how he acts, and how he engages with mankind. This discrepancy is due primarily to the absence of a counter religion, like that of The Church of God the Utterly Indifferent or Bokononism. At first, the absence of a counter religion seems to break from Vonnegut's habit of using a fictional religion to critique Christianity, which makes it more difficult to assess what the story suggests about the Christian God. Scholl, however, finds a solution by turning to the Tralfamadorians: "In *Slaughterhouse-Five* or *The Children's Crusade* (1969) there is no counter-religion per se, but the elaboration of the Tralfamadorian world-view provides a reasonable facsimile for an invented faith" (5). Though not called a religion, the Tralfamadorian philosophy – for the sake of argument, Tralfamadorianism – offers a unique outlook on Tralfamadorian and human purpose, death, and tragedy. Tralfamadorianism can also be adopted both on a philosophical level and by practice. That is, like a religion, the belief aligns with ritual.

Tralfamadorianism earns its role as counter-religion as it is adopted by Billy Pilgrim, who serves as the mouthpiece for the entire story. In Charles B. Harris's reading of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, he gives Billy priority as a spokesperson for Vonnegut, remarking that the story belongs to both Billy and the narrator, as both share many specific and nearly identical experiences during war (231). Billy, then, is representative to some degree of Vonnegut's perspective on World War 2. The similarities do not continue beyond shared trauma. Billy is repeatedly edified in the novel,

and he is employed to both warrant the readers' sympathy and compel the reevaluation of common beliefs. Billy's alleged illness does not subtract from his importance to the novel's moral, and despite his trauma, Billy is still to be trusted.

As discussed, whether or not the Tralfamadarians are "real" is irrelevant because they are real to Billy. Similarly, Kilgore Trout's books gain validity as a result of Billy's favoritism. Scholl notes that Trout's *The Gospel from Outer Space* is especially important to the story, as it offers a significant rewriting of the New Testament (5). Regarding Trout's works as contributors to the main plot and the story's moral helps to supplement the lack of commentary on God Almighty in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. These books appear in *Slaughterhouse-Five* many times for a reason. Trout is portrayed as a disreputable, much like Billy is distrusted as an eyewitness. Therefore, God Almighty's nature and motivations are not to easily interpreted. He fades into the background and allows the story to follow Billy Pilgrim more closely. He, that is, man, becomes the story's focus. Still, both Trout and Billy offer a unique point of view that adds to the story's complex mosaic. *Slaughterhouse-Five* would not be complete without every element, which suggests there is no hierarchy of arrangement.

The final and most significant layer of fiction/reality is that of the author/ narrator. Vonnegut uses Billy to mirror his own experiences, but he also steps into the story himself. Harris identifies Vonnegut as a true character in chapter one and highlights Vonnegut's movement to the narrator in later chapters, a movement that obscures Billy's position as the protagonist (231). In chapter one, Vonnegut's character has both dialogue and regular use of personal pronouns, and the story appears to center on him and his novel. As the story progresses, Vonnegut's character appears only as an observer, though he continues throughout the novel to act as narrator. Vonnegut's underlying position as narrator, author, and character complicates

Billy's position as the protagonist, as Billy's story is now a novel within a novel. Though Billy occupies the majority of the novel's content, his story cannot be only his own. Even when Vonnegut's character is not present in the narrative, his relationship to the content remains unbroken and maintains significant influence. The story cannot be separated from its author/narrator, even while he is physically absent. *Slaughterhouse-Five* is, on a small scale, Vonnegut's own personal narrative. As author, narrator, and character, he takes on responsibility for the events of the novel, regardless of whether or not his connection to those events is explicit.

In the same way, God Almighty operates primarily from the background, though his effect is still felt throughout the narrative. In *Sirens of Titan* and *Cat's Cradle*, God Almighty's personality, perspective, and motivations are clearly articulated through the established counter-religions in the novels. However, because Tralfamadorianism is not directly nor intentionally anti-Christianity, nor do they center their philosophy around a higher being, the Tralfamadorians do not effort to offer a reformed God. Similarly, Billy's conversion from Christianity to Tralfamadorianism is not spiteful nor blatantly defiant. He does not openly oppose Christianity or endorse his gods to a congregation as substitutes, like Rumfoord or Bokonon. To discover God Almighty, then, one must look carefully at the consequences of his influence, which are evident in the narrative's collective attitude toward the Christian God, the tenets of Tralfamadorianism, Billy's eventual conversion, and most importantly, how God Almighty may serve a warring world in ways Yahweh cannot.

War as Framework

Though Tralfamadorianism serves as a counter-religion for the purpose of understanding the novel's opposition to God, war is another overwhelmingly important framework for interpreting what Vonnegut suggests about God, man's purpose, and the value of human life.

Vonnegut addresses the problem of war in the novel, and he seeks to find a way for man to find happiness and fulfillment despite the problems of war. Despite its religious commentary and its depictions of mental illness, *Slaughterhouse-Five* is first and foremost an antiwar novel. Susan Farrell argues, “Vonnegut does write an antiwar novel. After all, he warns his sons not to take part in massacres, not to allow news of massacres of enemies to fill them with glee, and not to work for companies that make massacre machinery” (“Nation of Two” 103). War, according to this logic, is not fundamentally wrong in action, but also in attitude and association. If even the propagation of war-like mentality is morally wrong, then the true culprits are pride and greed, problems in which one can participate without ever holding a weapon. Scholar Donna Foran does not believe that *Slaughterhouse-Five* is an antiwar novel, only that it exposes the cruelty of those who believe they are fighting for a righteous cause (184). The distinction is slight, as fighting for a righteous cause aligns with the issue of pride, which Vonnegut condemns. Foran only suggests what I already have, that war is a problem that extends far beyond the battlefield. That is the problem Vonnegut tries to imagine solved in his story.

The actual novel that *Slaughterhouse-Five* becomes is nothing like a typical war novel, a deviation for which the readers can thank Mary O’Hare. Farrell maintains that Mary persuades Vonnegut to use his famously exaggerated style as well as comic and science-fictional elements in order to resist the usual masculine romanticization of war. (“A Nation of Two” 95). Even novels that depict the gruesomeness and tragedy of war can unintentionally (or intentionally) capitalize on the valor and splendor associated with the masculine war narrative.

Slaughterhouse-Five and the philosophies it espouses, including its depiction of God, are evidently antiwar. However, antiwar sentiment also permeates the novel’s literary form. Davis identifies black humor as the foremost contributor to anti-war form. Davis recounts Vonnegut’s

description of black humor: “He describes this form of humor as the predicament of ‘intelligent people in hopeless situations’ and acknowledges that he has ‘customarily written about powerless people who felt there wasn’t much they could do about their situations’” (David “Kurt Vonnegut” 245). This attitude is easily applied to both innocents and servicemen in the context of war. The decision to begin or end wars is not made by those who typically die but by those in power, those who have access to security. Innocents who are killed in crossfire and the young enlistees who are pressured to fight die needlessly and at the call of those who will never see battle. Davis continues to quote Vonnegut: “As he says to his editor, Sam Lawrence, ‘There is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre. Everybody is supposed to be dead, to never say anything or want anything’” (“Kurt Vonnegut” 245). Vonnegut critiques war novels that act as unintentional propaganda by glorifying war from the perspective of the serviceman. The gruesome scenes make him seem resilient; the victories make him seem valiant; the losses make him a martyr. By using black humor, Vonnegut mocks these tropes and shows what little hope war allows. His main avenue for delivering this humor is by subverting the assumption of a valiant war hero.

Billy Pilgrim is emblematic of a black humorist protagonist. While he takes his own delusions seriously, the readers distrust him. Billy goes through the trauma of war, but he does not emerge as the hardened, heroic image of a veteran that is typical of war novels. This comic representation, however, is what Vonnegut would consider more accurate to the true war experience. Vanderwerken argues, “Despondent, passive, traumatized, and suicidal Billy Pilgrim could serve as the poster child for our combat and returning fighting forces” (52). Despite his familiarity with tragedy, though, Billy is not painted as romantic or pitiable in the usual sense. Vonnegut does not allow Billy to adopt an identity founded on his tragedy. Instead, Billy is

naturally associated with his connection to the Tralfamadorians. Billy is degraded by those around him, including his family. The result of his experience in war does not risk righteous pity, and instead, onlookers are uncomfortable, unstable in how they might approach his ramblings. Billy is ultimately and uniquely broken, and his brokenness is presented through comedy and absurdity. Billy cannot be praised for his perseverance and bravery, nor honored for his sacrifice. At best, one may use his trauma to defend his nonsensical behavior. Again, “There is nothing intelligent to say about massacre.” Vonnegut lets his protagonist and his story reflect the absurdity of war, and the novel’s primary mythology does the same.

Tralfamadorian Religion: Opposing God

The Tralfamadorians are the biggest deviation from the masculine war narrative, Billy’s most controversial solace, and the most apparent counter religion in the novel. Understanding the tenets of Tralfamadorianism is pivotal in understanding what *Slaughterhouse-Five* suggests war, trauma, and religion and how God Almighty, the Tralfamadorians’ foil, relates to those issues necessarily. The Tralfamadorians give Billy the necessary knowledge to allow him to travel through time, so long as he continues to occupy his own body in that respective moment. He cannot change those moments, only experience them over again. Tralfamadorians believe that those moments exist simultaneously: “The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance” (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 28). Each peak is a moment in time, but they all belong to one range. From a distance, meaning through the Tralfamadorian perspective, one can see each peak at once. The fact that the range exists in its completed form regardless of which moment a person is experiencing is why Tralfamadorians believe “that every creature and plant in the Universe is a machine” (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 158). All living things can only operate according to a pre-established

timeline, each person's personal mountain range. This unique predestination resembles a program or code that dictates how human beings behave. Vanderwerken points out that, like an omniscient God, Tralfamadorian ideology "nullif[ies] human intentions, commitment, and responsibility" (50). If humans are machines and all human action is predetermined, then no one is truly responsible for anything. This same logic is used by Christians, at least those proclaiming Christians who claim that everything aligns with the will of God.

Because death is just a final moment in a long and unchangeable timeline, Tralfamadorians are neither surprised nor moved by death. On Tralfamador, the proper sentiment to acknowledge one's death is "so it goes" (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 29). This phrase embodies the naturalness of death and the fact that death is entirely unavoidable, no matter at what age or under what circumstances one dies. Though this attitude seems robotic, it can be a great comfort, especially to someone like Billy, who is constantly surrounded by seemingly purposeless death. For this reason, Tralfamadorians celebrate Charles Darwin, whose theory of natural selection places enormous value on death (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 215). Death is always logical and never truly tragic, especially considering that even someone who dies could always revisit previous moments from his or her life. The freedom to move between moments improves not only death but all instances of suffering. Because all moments are accessible, the Tralfamadorians "advise Billy to concentrate on the happy moments in life, and ignore the unhappy ones" (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 199). Billy goes back to his experience in war often, but when the moment becomes too intense or unpleasant, he travels backwards or forwards to more comfortable moments in other parts of his life. Therefore, every moment, even his own death, is bearable. Foran believes that, because people are not machines, they cannot ignore bad times as the Tralfamadorians do. It is not realistic (186). This critique is true on both a literal and

metaphorical level. First, of course, humans are literally not machines, not able, like Billy and the Tralfamadorians, to escape a moment of pain and occupy a moment of pleasure.

Additionally, it would be inhuman to entirely reject pain, to reject mourning and essentially erase trauma in favor of security. The acknowledgment of tragedy is the result of empathy, of recognizing injustice. This acknowledgment is what unifies humankind and inspires people to try to be good. While treating all death as natural and unpreventable can be a comforting story, it also encourages complacency. People are less likely to fight to prevent injustice when they believe it is preordained.

God Almighty as Antagonist

The war framework of the novel colors the narrative with a strong pessimism, one that is directed largely at God Almighty. It is important to note that, unlike in *Sirens of Titan* and *Cat's Cradle*, God Almighty cannot be used to describe an entirely new entity that exists in opposition to the Christian God. While those Gods had unique origins and purposes, God Almighty in *Slaughterhouse-Five* is simply the Christian God who has been tainted by the pessimism of war. His motivations are inspired the God in scripture, but the perspective offered in the novel is not influenced by Christian tradition in the same way the Church's perspective might be. This God Almighty is meticulously scrutinized and interrogated for answers about how and why war persists. Vanderwerken claims that Vonnegut blames faith in God for both the acceptance of war and its perpetuation, which is justified by the human idea that one's actions are the realization of God's will (49). Though this justification is made by man, not God Almighty, Vonnegut is pointing to the fallacies in scripture that allow this attitude to endure. Predominately, the understanding that God is an infinite and omniscient being allows for the rationalization of "holy wars." Vanderwerken continues, "Vonnegut directs his rage in *Slaughterhouse-Five* at a

murderous supernatural Christianity that creates Children's Crusades, that allows humankind to rationalize butchery in the name of God, or Allah, that absolves people from guilt. Since for Vonnegut, all wars are, finally, "holy," "jihadic," he urges us to rid ourselves of a supernatural concept of God" (Vanderwerken 49). An all-powerful being cannot be questioned, cannot be opposed, and his followers are granted the same privilege. In one of Trout's novels, his main character asks, "why Christians found it so easy to be cruel" (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 111-112). The answer is, Christians find it easy to be cruel because their cruelty is neither opposed nor corrected by their figurehead. Trout's novel responds to the observation that God Almighty is apparently idle during war, even war that is initiated by Christians. God Almighty is dangerous because he does not intervene when his servants wield violence for selfish means. Whether or not war is God's will or the result of human selfishness is irrelevant, as nothing prevents people from claiming God's will as their own.

God's only crime is not, however, his inaction. In the few instances God Almighty is mentioned in the novel, he is portrayed as vengeful, violent, and apathetic as he takes human life. Billy, looking back at his time in war, remembers vividly a moment of batter: "The gun made a ripping sound like the opening of the zipper on the fly of God Almighty" (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 36). To call falling bullets the vengeful hand of God or the sounds of gunfire the booming of his voice would be a display of power and brutality. Vonnegut exacerbates this image of violence by making it comical, by portraying God as entirely unconcerned, as though man is not worthy of his directed rage. Man is not even offered the dignity of wrath, that is, wrath motivated by passion, even anger. Man is too small, to inconsequential to compel any powerful emotion in God Almighty. Later, Trout tells Maggie, Billy's assistant, "God is listening, too. And on Judgement Day he's going to tell you all the things you said and did. If it turns out they're bad

things instead of good things, that's too bad for you, because you'll burn forever and ever. The burning never stops hurting" (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 176). Trout gives an oversimplified summary of the Christian idea of judgment, and the way he speaks to Maggie, who is regarded as dull, is similar to how one speaks to a child. The phrase "that's too bad for you" suggests an unapologetic hopelessness. There is no room for mercy or redemption once someone arrives at judgment day, nor is there any hope for solace once the burning begins. The matter-of-factness Trout delivers resembles Vonnegut's own view of God's wrath, which he shares with Charlie Reilly: "I think what will finally kill *us* will be God. God will kill us by the millions quite soon. I think – by starvation, with flu, through war, in any number of ways. He is killing us by the millions right now on the growing margins of the Sahara Desert and in places like Bangla Desh" ("Two Conversations" 14). This claim, however, is made by a self-proclaimed atheist. He did not believe that any real and active God is responsible for these tragedies. Instead, he asks those who do believe to evaluate their own faith. He implies that, if one believes in a loving God, then they must explain how war, disease, and famine can continue. Are these problems more powerful than God? Is not everything God's will? If Christians do not believe that God is love, like Miss Faust from *Cat's Cradle*, then how can they justify their own willingness to serve a God who actively watches the slaughter of his people?

Jesus and Morality

Vonnegut, despite his harsh critique of God Almighty, does not want to entirely do away with Christian belief. Instead, Vonnegut sifts through Christianity for the elements that are consistent with his humanist ideals. What he arrives at, and what he explores through the sub novels of Kilgore Trout, is the idea of a human Christ. In Trout's retelling of the New Testament, Jesus is deprived of his divinity. What is left behind is a son of a lowly carpenter, who is

crucified on false charges. God intervenes in Jesus' execution, granting this "nobody" the honorary title of God's Son (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 95). In this version, Jesus is not granted resurrection or divine rights because he himself is divine. For once, God Almighty actively intervenes in the face of injustice, siding with someone who is not in power, which is an inversion of the power struggle that perpetuates war. Seeing Christ as an ordinary man does not just affect God Almighty's behavior, however. According to Vanderwerken, "What Vonnegut suggests here is that Christ's divinity stands in the way of charity. If the "bum" is Everyman, then we are all adopted children of God; we are all Christs and should treat each other accordingly" (Vanderwerken 50). If the idea that some people are righteous while others are not or that some are granted God's favor while others are subject to his wrath is a war-like mindset, then to revere one another according to the belief that each person is a "Christ" would help to prevent war. Additionally, the idea of a humanistic Christ confronts Vonnegut's main critique New Testament, which he discloses to Reilly in their interview: "The Christ story is marvelous, but it's not really about people like us" ("Two Conversations" 20). A Christ that is fully man, without the rights of divinity, shares a closeness with humankind that the Christ of the Bible cannot. The gap formed by Christ's perfection is closed by his humanness. As Vanderwerken assesses, "If Jesus is human, then He is imperfect and must necessarily be involved in direct or indirect evil. This Jesus participates fully in the human condition" (50). Christians already try to use Christ's time on Earth to relate him to themselves, to make him a liaison for mankind. However, sin and imperfection are too deeply embedded in the human experience to be excluded. So long as Jesus is perfect, he will always be distant, always unreachable, and always more deserving of God's attention than man. To make Jesus humanist-friendly, Vonnegut eliminates Jesus' greatest flaw: his proximity to God Almighty.

Slaughterhouse-Five's new human-Christ offers the solace that Billy Pilgrim seeks in Christianity and later in Tralfamadorianism. Early in the narrative, before Billy ever discovers the Tralfamadorians Billy possesses "a meek faith in a loving Jesus which most soldiers found putrid" (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 33). Billy's faith early in the narrative is partially inspired by church tradition, which dilutes Christ's radicalism to make him palatable and affirming. However, Billy's early image of Christ is likely also the result of his own self-image. In his attempt to make the Christ story for someone like him, as Vonnegut does by establishing his human-Christ, Billy creates a Christ that resembles himself. Scholl claims that Vonnegut's Christ, were he realized, would resemble Billy, who himself is a "nobody." Scholars draw attention to comparisons between Billy and a meek depiction of Christ, such as how Billy resembles "the little Lord Jesus" from the Christmas carol, "Away in a Manger," in the way he masks his weeping or the way he predicts his death and resurrection yet marches toward them without reservation, all while trying to save humanity by sharing Tralfamadorianism (Scholl 11; Vanderwerken 49). For Billy, the infant Christ is a much more appealing representation than the death-conquering son of God. Billy feels persecuted, socially low, and helpless to defend himself, as the infant Christ was hunted in Bethlehem. It is a comfort to imagine that a Christ who shares these troubles would still be honored and protected by God. Billy, like Trout and Vonnegut, takes from Christianity what is necessary and makes religion serve him, rather than the other way around.

Creating a Personal Religion

Based on the changes Vonnegut makes to his fictional religion, organized religion fails to serve the individual as it tries to apply rigid guidelines to the masses, rules that everyone must abide by without exception. Individuals have different struggles, priorities, and emotional needs,

and no single religion can, according to Vonnegut, satisfy all of those needs simultaneously. The solution, then, is to imitate either Kilgore Trout or Billy Pilgrim. Trout creates his fictional religion by using Christianity as a base and then modifying its doctrine to fit his needs.

According to School, Vonnegut essentially attempts to do the same: “Vonnegut does not believe in the divinity of Christ, yet he seems determined to assert many traditional Christian values. He cannot stand the theology of Christianity but would have its ethics (11). Trout actually goes as far as to write his changes into existence, to make himself a gospel that answers for the problems he sees with Christianity. The changes he makes are not intended to change the goal of Christian doctrine, but to make its tenets more achievable and more relevant to the gospel’s audience. For instance, Trout’s retellings ask that Christians respect rather than love one another. Farrell claims that respect is a “more attainable and less idealized goal” (“Nation of Two” 97). Biblical love, which is portrayed through Christ, is unconditional, is all-forgiving, and is carried out to the point of death. This kind of attitude, at least in terms of preventing war, is unnecessary and generally unattainable. Respect, though less intense, is sufficient. Additionally, many Christians see conversion as an act of love, and atrocities like the Crusades and colonialism are often committed according to the justification of conversion. Respect, instead, is more universal. Respect allows people to exist as they are without pressure to change or even conquer them in the name of the Lord.

Before Billy converts to Tralfamadorianism, he also attempts to take pre-established religion and modify it to serve him. In addition to adopting a meek Jesus, Billy borrows a prayer, which he hangs on his office wall: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom always to tell the difference” (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 63). Really, this prayer is a mantra used by Alcoholics Anonymous.

Though AA has a religious foundation, the content is intended to be more personal. The prayer is meant to bring awareness to feelings of hopelessness, and it draws on the idea of determinism, which Billy later discovers in Tralfamadorianism. In his interview with Abádi-Nagy, Vonnegut also argues that Billy's prayer advises constraint and acceptance in a cultural climate that, in the aftermath of World War 2, values impulsion (23). For Billy, who learns to time travel after his visit to Tralfamador, that which he cannot change is not just what happened in the past, but also what will happen in the future, as every event in his life is already determined. All that is left for him to change, then, is his attitude, which is why the prayer suits him so well. The ability to adapt the inherently Christian prayer that was later applied to addiction and apply it to his personal religion is one of the benefits of rejecting sanctify and canon.

Eventually, Billy is able to do away with Christianity altogether and instead convert entirely to Tralfamadorianism. Because Billy is convinced that his abduction is real and he truly can travel in time, it would seem inevitable that he would also accept Tralfamadorian philosophy as true. However, even if Billy could deny the validity of Tralfamadorianism, he could not disregard the appeal. Tamás claims that Tralfamadorian is perfect for Billy, as its view of time devalues moments that would otherwise seem pivotal, like the bombing of Dresden or even death itself. This new perspective offers a "detraumatization of traumatic time" (Tamás 443-444). Under the assumption of Tralfamadorianism, Dresden did not ruin nor even change Billy's life. He can look back on the event with the same ease and indifference as any other. Vanderwerken notes that this freedom from responsibility would still be possible through Christian determinism, the belief that everything is controlled by the will of God (Vanderwerken 47). The fact that Billy rejects Christianity as an option is evidence that Billy wants more than just justification for human cruelty. He also wants an explanation for suffering that does not imply a cruel God.

Through the lens of Christian determinism, though man is relieved of any blame, it is who God wills the bombing of Dresden. Through the lens of Tralfamadorianism, no one is ultimately responsible.

Vonnegut and Story

Slaughterhouse-Five is especially illustrative of Vonnegut's desire for each individual to create a self-encompassing story. First, because Vonnegut serves as a character in his own novel, which is based in both fact and fiction, Davis argues, "Vonnegut suggests that the boundaries between nonfiction and fiction are slippery at best. All acts of creation for Vonnegut are in a sense "fictional" ("Kurt Vonnegut" 245). No matter how accurate one tries to be in the retelling or depiction of true events, art will always be subject to the influence of fiction. Writers are inclined by emotion or morals, and the same story could communicate something entirely different based on how it is told. Therefore, describing the events of Dresden through a fictional character and with the aid of science-fictional elements is no more fictionalized than a biographical or historical retelling by the same author.

In the first chapter of *Slaughterhouse-Five*, however, Vonnegut acknowledges that he originally tried to write a more historically accurate novel about the bombing of Dresden. In the end, he realized that his unconventional style is more effective. According to Farrell, "Since he was an eyewitness to the events that occurred in Dresden, he thought it would be easy to simply report what he had seen. Yet Vonnegut's experience working as a police reporter for the Chicago City News Bureau teaches him that plain reporting might not be enough when describing tragedy" ("A Nation of Two" 93). Taking creative liberties with narrative is not only permissible, but it can make the impact of the retelling closer to that of the actual event. No matter how large the number of lives lost or how harrowing the statistics, fact does not connect with an audience

in the same way as fiction. Farrell believes that Vonnegut blends real events with science fiction to confuse history, autobiography, and fiction. This intentionally suspends the illusion of a novel and reminds the readers that they are engaging with a story (“A Nation of Two” 95). This method accomplishes a few different feats. First, the confusion between history and fiction suggests that the real numbers, dates, and details are unimportant. The impression of the violence, the tragedy of war, and the cultural problems that allow such tragedies are the focus of the novel, and those points can be communicated without pinpoint historical accuracy. Also, by reminding the readers that they are engaging with a story, not actually living the events (an illusion that many writers actively aim to create), Vonnegut eliminates the temptation to use the novel for a cathartic experience only. The readers are not so inclined to experience the emotion of the novel and then move on to the safety of their own reality. For many, war novels offer either catharsis or make suffering a spectacle for entertainment. This occurrence is exactly what Vonnegut tries to avoid, and Mary encourages him in the same direction. Farrell observes that “Mary links war to an empty kind of masculinity that destroys children and families—the domestic realm—in its elevation of a heroic, warrior-like, mythologized version of manhood. It is from Mary as well that the narrator Vonnegut learns the importance of storytelling. The stories we tell shape the world we live in. If we do not want war, we cannot tell glamorous stories about war”(“A Nation of Two” 92). From this place of caution, Vonnegut creates his meek, awkward, and damaged protagonist. Through Billy’s struggle, Vonnegut finally finds an outlet for recalling the bombing of Dresden without the glorification of violence. Such caution is necessary, as Vonnegut understands the significance and impact of storytelling, both for the audience and for the author.

Storytelling applies to much more than just the iteration of events or the creation of a fictional world. Again, Vonnegut believes that every act of creation is fiction. These acts of creation extend well beyond art, however. Vonnegut says, ““But as far as improving the human condition goes, our minds are certainly up to that. That’s what they were designed to do. And we do have the freedom to make up comforting lies. But we don’t do enough of it”” (qtd. by Davis “Kurt Vonnegut” 245). Billy creates for himself an image of Christ in which he can see himself, and then he creates the Tralfamadorians, (or at least adopts their philosophy), and finally, Billy imagines he watches a war film backwards, thus creating for a moment a world in which planes fly backwards, lift bombs from the ground, and restore injured men to health (77). Billy does not actually believe this world exists, but imagining its creation relieves pain and allows him a form of escape. Similarly, even if the Tralfamadorians are not real, they still give Billy comfort and help him adapt to his life post-war. That is why, when Harrison Starr asks Vonnegut in chapter 1, ““why don’t you write a glacier book instead?”” (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 5-6), Vonnegut is not discouraged. Starr tries to suggest that no anti-war novel will ever bring about the end of war. However, Vonnegut praised the effort of creating art, religions, or philosophies in which better realities may exist. So, Vonnegut writes himself a world where Jesus is just a man, God Almighty is not sacred, religion cannot justify war, and maybe just for fun, aliens are real. He exemplifies the choice every human being has, the choice to create for oneself a world that is bearable. More importantly, people have the choice to act as though their fictional worlds are real, to live contently and authentically.

Conclusion

The stories Vonnegut tells draw attention to reality through a unique, jarring, and distinctly Vonnegut juxtaposition. The real and the fictional blend together to create new worlds which both resemble and challenge the actual. Though these new worlds entertain extraordinary technologies, time travel, and alien life, the problems they confront thematically are inarguably human. In Vonnegut's novels, Shields identifies the author's exploration of "whether there [is] a God, what the good life [consist] of, whether we should expect a reward for moral behavior" (36). These are the questions that Vonnegut values. Though he examines these questions through unusual lenses, they are indisputably the focus of his writing. As Vonnegut claims in his interview with Zoltán Abádi-Nagy, *The Sirens of Titan* tries to discover what the world would look like if a higher power (in the novel's case, the Tralfamadorians) was in total control of the events on Earth. He argues, "Of course, that's a premise of religion: that there is such a creature, who needs serving way up there" (27). The substitution of Tralfamadorians as the higher power rather than God Almighty is used to show the absurdity of a belief in an all-powerful being. Vonnegut reframes and defamiliarizes human struggles to offer a new perspective. This perspective, of course, hinges on the destruction of organized religions and the devaluing of God Almighty.

In the three novels I examine, Vonnegut offers a counter religion or counter deity to reframe the respective fictional world in opposition to God Almighty. Similarly, Vonnegut's parodical version of God is nearly unrecognizable when compared to the God of Christian doctrine, which offers a loving and attentive God. David L. Vanderwerken explores Vonnegut's belief that an attentive God is responsible for both the complacent reception of war and the belief that individuals can know and carry out God's will effectively (49). If God is truly in control, or even has to power to

take control, then he is responsible for the whole of human history. Either he intentionally perpetuates war as a part of his will, or he stands by as people claim his will as their own while murdering and persecuting. In either case, Vonnegut cannot entertain the notion that God is all-loving. In an interview with Charlie Reilly, Vonnegut contemplates the idea of an active and thus intentionally malicious God: "I think what will finally kill *us* will be God. God will kill us by the millions quite soon. I think – by starvation, with flu, through war, in any number of ways. He is killing us by the millions right now on the growing margins of the Sahara Desert and in places like Bangla Desh" (14). Here, Vonnegut observes both natural and man-made disasters as equals, as the Christian God would have equal power over either, assuming his omnipotence. In order to reconcile these apparent truths, Vonnegut's God Almighty either concedes power, rejects the label of all-loving, or entirely accepts the role of antagonism. Vonnegut frames his narratives in order to create a world that can facilitate a new God, one who is not held responsible for the inconsistencies he sees in the Christian God. In these worlds, man must take on the responsibility God Almighty relinquishes.

In *Sirens of Titan*, God Almighty forfeits his control and allows luck to be the primary dictator of human affairs. God is entirely separate, and luck is, according to the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, "not the hand of God" (182). God Almighty may still exist in this novel, but he does not exercise his power to intentionally control mankind. Thus, man cannot claim God's favor, nor does God direct the course of their lives. His absence suggests apathy, which is why Redwine says that God does not care what happens to people. He would not effort to protect someone, nor does care enough to kill anyone (229). God is neither wrathful nor loving. He simply exists apart from humans, letting them live as they please. Though many would be disappointed by God's indifference, Radford argues, "Those who submit to the Church of God

the Utterly Indifferent would consider themselves as having acquired freedom” (16). With that freedom comes responsibility, but the Church sees that responsibility as the cure for human suffering. The Church’s motto is “Take care of the people, and God Almighty Will Take Care of Himself” (182). Because man is no longer concerned with waiting for God’s intervention, they can then take action to secure a better world. The Church, though it is fabricated by Rumfoord, gives its followers the motivation to care for those around them. Even though the religion is false, it inspires action.

Cat’s Cradle reconciles the idea that ““Science has now known sin”” (17). That is, the novel is framed around the invention of the atomic bomb and the weapon’s implications for the direction of humanity. The underbelly of human cruelty is exposed, and Vonnegut’s God Almighty is adapted to that reality. Unlike in *Sirens of Titan*, God Almighty takes on full responsibility for human affairs. Bokononism is a victim’s religion, meant to comfort those who are persecuted without clear reason. Bokononism argues that God Almighty has a clear and defined plan for people’s lives, that everyone has a *karass* through which they can find fellowship, and everything eventually works out to satisfy God’s will. Therefore, seemingly meaningless suffering is suddenly valuable. Vonnegut uses this novel to explore the role of religion as a comforter amid fear of war and destruction (Davis *Cambridge Companion* 244). The religion is highly performative and offers a detailed origin story and defined doctrine. Followers can engage with these practices and stories every day. Bokononism is a distraction that gives some meaning to suffering. Babaei and Roselezam argue, then, that Bokononism offers “the main duty of religion, satisfaction” (234). Of course, Bokononism accomplishes this goal while maintaining that it is comprised of ““shameless lies”” (5). Bokonon proclaims the religion’s falsity, knowing that his stories do not need to be true in order to offer comfort. Farrell

argues that, at least at first, “Bokonon does not necessarily expect his followers to believe the lies he tells but only to act as if these lies are true” (“Nation of two” 90). Bokonon fails when he believes his own lies and sacrifices human life to see those lies performed as truth. Before Bokonon falls into that temptation, Bokononists hold nothing sacred but people. According to Bokonon, not even God is sacred (210-211). God Almighty is fundamental to the religion, but he is too unattainable to be held sacred. Everyone is involved in fulfilling God’s will. However, since no one will ever know that will, no one can claim God’s favor. Therefore, man’s only clear responsibility is to love one another unbiasedly.

Slaughterhouse-Five is particularly concerned with the condition of humanity during and post-World War II. Morse claims that Vonnegut explores the trauma of war and the events around it as well as the personal lives of those who endure it (196). God Almighty is a strict antagonist in this novel. His actions do not suggest a new world in which humanity takes precedence, as is the case in the other two novels. Instead, God is criticized for his role in perpetuating war. The exception being that Jesus is reimagined as purely human. Therefore, he serves as an advocate for every person, regardless of power or status, and he serves as an example of how every person should be revered as a Christ figure. In *Slaughterhouse-five*, Scholl argues, the Tralfamadorians serve as the novel’s counter-religion, as they offer a new faith for the protagonist, Billy (5). Billy Pilgrim believes he is granted the knowledge necessary to freely travel through time, revisiting or jumping ahead to any event in his life whenever he pleases. He chooses which events he wants to focus on, and thus he can escape from the trauma of war whenever he pleases. Whether the Tralfamadorians are real or not, Billy is free to take whatever moments he prefers and alter his life to be whatever he desires. He takes control of his narrative and takes responsibility for his happiness, even if that means lying to himself.

In all three novels, the end result is the same. The responsibility is moved away from God Almighty and given instead to man. Sieber notes that, in *Sirens of Titan*, “As man slowly realizes that a god cannot offer fulfilment, they begin to search for meaning among themselves” (127). Similarly, in *Cat’s Cradle*, the Bokononist texts reveal that God Almighty, who never intended for man’s life to have a purpose, commissions mankind to find that purpose for themselves (265). Finally, Billy discovers Tralfamadorianis, which Tamás claims offers a “detraumatization of traumatic time” (443-444). Billy escapes the bounds of a linear narrative and shapes his life according to his needs, defying his previous hope in God to fulfil him. Though the approach is different in each case, Vonnegut consistently finds a way to bring about a world in which people have total control over their lives. Man is the one thing that Vonnegut seems to find sacred, which seems to be a contradiction given his obvious criticism of universality. However, Vonnegut gives man the same treatment as he does God Almighty. That is, he puts them both to the test, and he demands modification when a system seems to fail.

Vonnegut sets out to see his ideal world realized in his novels. According to Foran, Vonnegut favors only that which is valued for its contributions to humankind and the human experience (183). Therefore, his novels critique religions or systems that do not aid in that goal. Davis argues that Vonnegut’s primary hope for humanity is realized by Malachi Constant, who says, “It took us that long to realize that a purpose of human life, no matter who is controlling it, is to love whoever is around to be loved” (qtd. in “Kurt Vonnegut” 11-12). This is the end result to which Vonnegut wants all of his imagined religions and philosophies to lead. He does not care how man goes about coming to this realization, be it through a new religion, an extraterrestrial experience, or a simple story. Vonnegut writes whatever story is necessary to see his ideal world come to fruition, and he invites others to do the same: ““But as far as improving the human

condition goes, our minds are certainly up to that. That's what they were designed to do. And we do have the freedom to make up comforting lies. But we don't do enough of it'" (qtd. by Davis in "Kurt Vonnegut" 245). Stories – lies – have the power to change people's perspectives. Imagining a new world offers comfort, and it helps people to see how badly the world needs reform.

Just as Vonnegut violates reality and uses fiction to create a better world, Billy is happy to fully believe whatever is necessary to bring about a world in which he can exist in peace. It is irrelevant whether or not the Tralfamadorians are "real" because they are real to Billy. Tralfamadorianism gives him the power to escape the horrors of war, even if it is just through his imagination. Billy's most significant act of creation takes place when he is home from war, watching a war film:

It was a movie about American bombers in the Second World War and the gallant men who flew them. Seen backwards by Billy, the story went like this:

American planes, full of holes and wounded men and corpses took off backwards from an airfield in England. Over France, a few German fighter planes flew at them backwards, sucked bullets and shell fragments from some of the planes and crewmen.

They did the same for the wrecked American bombers on the ground, and those planes flew backwards to join the formation. (77)

Billy sees corpses reanimated and destruction restored. The film originally glorified the men who fought in war, but Billy sees them as safe and whole. This backwards, impossible world is one in which Billy can discover peace. He retells the film's story to accommodate his need for human goodness. By allowing himself to exist in this retelling, this lie, he is content, and he can imagine that humanity is worth his emotional investment, that people can be kind. Though others believe he is

insane, Vonnegut presents Billy as rational. Vonnegut implores his readers to embrace whatever stories they need to tell themselves in order to make life worth living, to make humanity worth protecting.

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