

BRITE DIVINITY SCHOOL
TEXAS CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY
FORT WORTH, TEXAS

LOVED IN THE IMAGE OF GOD:
COUNTERING LEGALISM
AND MAKING THE CHURCH A PLACE OF HEALING

M. T. S. FINAL EXERCISE

CHTH 71973

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INTRODUCTION

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats' feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar

Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

Those who have crossed
With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom
Remember us—if at all—not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As the hollow men
The stuffed men.¹

The opening stanza of T. S. Eliot's 1925 work "The Hollow Men," like the entirety of the poem, is haunting. He gives his readers a world devoid of meaning and preoccupied with death. Eliot's closing words—"This is the way the world ends / Not with a bang but a whimper"²—have become some of the most famous in English-language poetry.

Eliot, an American and a Briton, wrote these words during a period of tenuous peace in the West, and one could argue that he had the Great War in mind. But poet-

¹T. S. Eliot, "The hollow men," in *The complete poems and plays: 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962), 56.

²Eliot, 59.

ry is a living medium: Its true meaning lies not with the author but with the audience. The author's context and original intent are less important than the interpretations readers develop based on their own experiences.

I see Eliot's world as one in which Meursault, the antagonist in French existentialist Albert Camus' 1942 masterpiece, *L'étranger*, would feel at home. (So too would Anthony Swofford, Jake Gyllenhaal's character in the 2005 film *Jarhead*, if the reader would like a more modern-day example.) Meursault is a reactionary creature who lives in a perpetual state of ennui,³ of listless dissatisfaction, of hollowness, as it were. The main theme of *L'étranger* is Meursault's attitude that life is ultimately meaningless. At the end of the novel, Meursault resigns himself to his murder conviction and imminent decapitation, clinging to a vain hope that the spectators greet him "avec des cris de haine."⁴ In *Jarhead*, Swofford sees the full absurdity of war after training for weeks, serving for months and never firing one meaningful round. Their worlds, like the one of Eliot's hollow men, end without significance. There was no grand scheme after all.

The characters described above are alive and well and living in the 21st century. The United States has just experienced two decades of the greatest economic growth in its history. But suicide rates, advertisements for mood-enhancement products and the ever-expanding self-help sections of our local Barnes & Nobles tell us that hope is still elusive for many. What's the answer to all this hopelessness, this ennui? Popular

³ Le Robert's fourth definition of "ennui" is "[m]élancolie vague, lassitude morale qui fait qu'on ne prend d'intérêt, de plaisir à rien." It is in that sense that I use the word. *Le Robert pour tous* (1994), s.v. "ennui."

⁴ Albert Camus, *L'étranger* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1957), 179.

billboards and bumper stickers tell us that these people just need Jesus. After all, John 10 says Jesus came so we “may have life, and have it abundantly.”⁵ Surely a firm grasp of the gospel could give some hope to those who see nothing but pain and meaninglessness.

Jesus can’t be the answer, however, if he’s the problem. Too often, Christians portray God as vengeful, and they add rules and criteria to God’s love. The message of a legalistic God does nothing to help the hollow ones and the Meursaults among us. It replaces meaninglessness with condemnation, trading despair for despair. It promotes a false God (and, consequently, a false Christ) who serves as an oppressor instead of the true God who grants freedom in love.

Theologian Andrew Sung Park has dedicated his career to exploring the impact of oppression on victims, and I believe he is immensely helpful in our discussion. In the 1990s, Park introduced the Korean concept of “han” to Western theology. (I will discuss this topic more in depth later, but allow me to introduce it here, in brief.) Han, Park says, “is the pain of a victim internalized in depth.” It “is a chronic sense of helplessness and resignation” in the face of an individual or group’s inescapable situation. “Sin causes *han* and *han* produces sin. Sin is of oppressors; *han* is of the oppressed.”⁶ In our case, the sin is the communication of a false, legalistic God.

⁵Jn 10:10. All Bible quotations come from the New Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

⁶ Andrew Sung Park, “Sin and han: the pain of a victim,” *The Living Pulpit* (October–December 1999): 22–23.