Jesus' Action in the Temple vis-à-vis the Church's Involvement in Social Transformation

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Abstract: Jesus' action in the temple (Mk 11:15-19 // Mt 21:10-17 // Lk 19:45-48// Jn 2:13-23) features his radical words and actions against the corrupt temple system, suggesting that rage is permissible to stress moral truth and fight anti-poor measures. However, Christian teaching advocates nonviolence in responding to communal conflicts (cf. Pope Francis' Message for the 50th World Day of Peace, 2017). Given this dilemma, this paper explores the four Gospel episodes of Jesus' action in the temple through Narrative Criticism (cf. Culpepper 1983; Ska 1990; Powell 1990, 2020), examining the evangelists' central messages in their purported common story instead of investigating their contexts with a purely historical-critical approach. It argues that the narrative focus is not on Jesus' vehement activity, but on the hostile response of the Jewish authorities that led to his arrest and crucifixion (cf. *NJBC* 1990: 954; Freyne 2004:163). Subsequently, it examines the repercussions of the constructed dichotomy of the sacred and the profane in political theology, which is the discussion point for the current Church involvement in social transformation. It draws insights from modern thinkers like William Cavanaugh (2024) and Pope Francis (2025) in seeking the narrative's relevance to today's societal issues.

Keywords: Action in the Temple, Narrative Criticism, Church Involvement, Sacred and Profane, Nonviolence, Political Theology, Temple Commerce

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Introduction: Understanding Jesus' Action in the Temple

The Gospel episode of Jesus' action in the temple (Mk 11:15-19 // Mt 21:10-17 // Lk 19:45-48 // Jn 2:13-23)[1] features Jesus' fury in the temple. At first glance, this detail can suggest that aggression may be tolerable in expressing frustration against a socio-religious system, as he employed it against the temple merchants of Jerusalem. In a survey of biblical commentators on this episode, John Donahue and Daniel Harrington observe that "[t]he most common interpretations are that Jesus' temple action was *a political-revolutionary action*, an attack on the holiness of the Temple, an attack on the Jewish sacrificial system, a symbol of the imminent building of God's eschatological temple to replace the Second Temple."[2] For them, the narrative infers that Jesus' radical action in the temple might have been politically motivated to enforce societal transformation. This inference triggers modern scholars to question whether Jesus truly used violence in advocating reform.[3]

Appropriately, Alicia Myers, in her study of John's rendition, observes that "[f]ocusing on the violence of Jesus's 'righteous anger,' some interpreters have used John 2:13-22 *to justify violence* in God's name throughout history. Others push back against such readings by mitigating or ignoring the violence of Jesus's actions."[4] She actually admits that Jesus used violence to reveal his identity as the Holy One of God, but was not altogether violent in his behavior.[5] On his part, N. Clayton Croy identifies Jesus' use of whip as the source of the controversy here, to a point that "[s]ome modern readers of the account have exploited the image of the whip-cracking Jesus as justification for various kinds of violent force."[6] He also cites in his discussion the same observations made by Jean Lasserre, John Howard Yoder, Donald Senior, C. G.

[1] Many biblical scholars refer to this episode as Jesus' Purification or Cleansing of the Temple; see, for example, Kurt Aland, ed., *Synopsis of the Four Gospels: Greek English Edition of the Synopsis Quattuor Evangeliorum*, 4th and 5th eds. (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1980, 1982), 238, who entitles the section as "The Cleansing of the Temple." Since such a qualification preempts the motive of Jesus in the story, other scholars prefer a more neutral title, such as Action in the Temple, as employed by Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina Series 4 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998), 76.

[2] John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, Sacra Pagina Series 2 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2002), 332; my italics for emphasis.

[3] Recent studies that inquire this question include, among many, M.E. Boismard, "Did Jesus Use Violence to Expel the Money Changers from the Temple?," *Revue biblique* 110, no. 1 (2003): 33-37; Alexander J. M. Wedderburn, "Jesus' Action in the Temple: A Key or a Puzzle?," *ZNW* 97 (2006): 1-22; N. Clayton Croy, "The Messianic Whippersnapper: Did Jesus Use a Whip on People in the Temple (John 2:15)?," *JBL* 128, no. 3 (2009): 555-568; Andy Alexi-Baker, "Violence, Nonviolence and the Temple Incident in John 2:13-15," *BibInt* 20 (2012): 73-96; Alicia D. Myers, "Revelation through Violence? Jesus in the Temple in John 2:13-22," *R&E* 120, nos. 1-2 (2023): 46-59.

[4] Ibid., 46; my italics for emphasis.

[5] Ibid., 59.

[6] Croy, "The Messianic Whippersnapper," 557.

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F. Brandon, and Martin Hengel that violence was employed (and partially justified) by Jesus in John's narrative.[7]

This line of thinking is difficult to accept, given that the biblical tradition promotes nonviolence, which is based on Jesus' teachings of loving one's enemies (cf. Mt 5:43-48) and non-retaliation during his arrest at Gethsemane (cf. Mk 14:43-52). Consequently, many attempts to mitigate the episode's negative impact on readers arose, which can be summarized into three basic arguments. First, Jesus' use of force may be viewed as a person's natural frustration against an offensive matter, but not necessarily on persons. He overthrew the tables and hurled the animals sold, but nobody was hurt in the scene he had created.[8] He might have uttered strong words that disturbed the flow of business, but such is not catastrophic enough to badly affect people. Marcus Borg comments that instigating a sustained commotion at the temple is unrealistic during that time, since "[i]f Jesus did mount an operation designed to secure complete even if temporary control of such a large area, the nonintervention of the Roman troops and the Temple police is incomprehensible."[9] The reality that this incident did not disturb the Romans implies that Jesus' action is a small-scale confrontation of the temple authorities without disrupting the public order.

Second, Jesus' action can be perceived as a normal prophetic activity within the Israelite tradition, which features several purification activities initiated by renowned prophets or leaders.[10] In 1 Kings 18:1-40, the prophet Elijah killed all the prophets of Baal to purge Israel of all false prophets. In 2 Kings 22–23 and 2 Chronicles 34–35, King Josiah ordered a nationwide reform, destroying all altars that were not dedicated to Yhwh.[11] In Neh 12:44–13:31, Nehemiah reinforced Ezra's rededication of the people to the Law, enforcing its letters strictly and demanding everyone's undivided commitment to Yhwh.[12] In 1 Mac 4:1-61, the Hasmoneans recaptured the temple and eliminated all Greek Gentiles who had harmed the people of Israel.[13] Along these lines, Jesus—a celebrated prophet in Israel during

[7] See ibid., 557-558.

[8] See ibid., 567-568.

[9] Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1984, 1998), 182.

[10] The act of overthrowing—expressed by the Greek verb ἐκβάλλω—is associated with Jesus' exorcism and driving out of evil spirits (e.g., Lk 9:40, 49); see Johnson, *The Gospel of John*, 299.

[11] R. K. Harrison, *Old Testament Times* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2001), 242, summarizes Josiah's concrete activities in his reform: "Josiah destroyed the high places of Canaanite religion, and centralized worship at Jerusalem. The astral worship of Manasseh and Amon was prohibited, and the Moloch fire rituals in the valley of Hinnom were terminated. The Passover had long fallen into disuse, and on the instructions of Josiah it was reintroduced with all the traditional ceremony."

[12] Harrison, ibid., 281, elaborates Ezra's disposition: "When he arrived in Jerusalem, Ezra was distressed to see the way in which the Jews had intermarried with their heathen neighbors.... Relying on his authority as a royal commissioner, he then proposed drastic measures, which involved the dissolution of the mixed marriages that had already been contracted."

[13] Harrison, ibid., 320-322, describes the initial effects of the Maccabean Revolt to renewed

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that time—had every right to perform the same radical cleansing, especially in a Roman era that was not particular about Jewish worship.[14]

Third, Jesus' show of anger is nothing in comparison to the criticisms, antagonisms, and persecutions he had already received from the Jewish leaders. They publicly shamed or discredited him, forbade the crowd from listening to him, and even attempted to kill him by either stoning him to death (cf. Jn 8:59; 10:31) or hurling him down the ravine (cf. Lk 4:28-30). These events occurred while Jesus was at the height of his popularity. The Jewish crowd was generally not against him. Rather, it was the Jewish leaders who machinated a public opposition against him that led to his fateful death on the cross. This point is corroborated well in the Lucan account of this episode, as Luke Timothy Johnson comments: "As Jesus teaches in the Temple, Luke shows not a uniformly hostile, but a divided people. Indeed, 'the whole people' clung to him, listening."[15] Thus, Jesus' reaction in the temple might be read as his resistance to the grand scheme of eliminating him.

Meanwhile, despite all attempts to justify Jesus' alleged use of violence, nobody denies that he performed a furious action there, at least based on how the evangelists portrayed this event. For Christian communities that use the Bible as a guide to daily living, this narrative information may be wrongly perceived as giving license to disgruntled individuals and collectives to stage violent protests against leaders and institutions. Taken out of context, the biblical text may indirectly contribute to societal chaos, anarchy, public disobedience, subversion, and even rebellion. It is worth noting that biblical scholars have a moral duty to interpret the Scriptures in a manner that promotes peace and harmony in society.[16]

The problem is that relying only on Historical-Grammatical Approach[17] in exegesis can lead to whitewashing or downplaying Jesus' act of aggression; it cannot

Judaism: "Judas Maccabaeus took advantage of the opportunity to reconsecrate the polluted sanctuary at Jerusalem and restore the daily sacrifice. For the next two years Judas was in virtual control of Judea, he began to regroup and strengthen his forces in anticipation of a further Syrian invasion."

[14] See discussion in Nicholas Perrin, *Jesus the Temple* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 83-88, on Jesus' attempt to follow the reforms introduced by the OT prophets, particularly quoting Isa 56:7 and Jer 7:11.

[15] Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina Series 3 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991), 302.

[16] See Fernando F. Segovia, "Biblical Criticism and Postcolonial Studies: Toward a Postcolonial Optic," in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader*, ed. R.S. Sugirtharajah (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 33-44.

[17] Judith Odor, "Historical-Grammatical Approach," in *Social and Historical Approaches to the Bible*, ed. Douglas Mangum and Amy Balogh, Lexham Methods Series 3 (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2017), 21-54, at 49-50, enumerates the limitations of the Historical-Grammatical Approach: 1) "a failure to appreciate the polysemous potentiality of language itself," 2) "may lead to confusion as students seek to understand the hermeneutics and intertextuality they see at work in the Bible," and 3) "may miss out on new hermeneutical insights due to a conviction that 'secular' truths should not be incorporated into an interpretation of the text." See also Donald A. Hagner, *The New Testament: A Historical and Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 7-10.

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totally negate it because it is explicitly described in all Gospels. Even other biblical critical approaches[18] cannot hide the fact that Jesus was enraged for a time. To provide a fresh perspective and a richer understanding of the episode, this paper will conduct a Narrative Critical reading of its parallel texts, focusing on how the story is recounted by the evangelists.[19] It does not ignore the value of other methodologies, but it merely appreciates Narrative Criticism's unexplored contribution to the discussion. Edward Adams lays down the advantage of venturing this path:

> 'Narrative criticism,' as it is has come to be known, arose partly as a corrective to the tendency of historical criticism to concentrate on the process of formation rather than the Gospel texts in their finished form. Whereas form and source criticism focus on individual units of tradition and separate literary sources underlying a Gospel, and redaction criticism is interested in the points in the text where the evangelist's editorial activity is most apparent, narrative criticism deals with the Gospels as whole texts.... Narrative criticism is not, therefore, in conflict with historical criticism. Narrative analysis can complement historical-critical approaches and traditional exegesis.[20]

Accordingly, this paper aims to achieve is to examine the narrative texts of the given episode to unveil possible meanings that can be related to understanding better Jesus' alleged violent action in the temple.

The Episode from the Perspectives of the Four Evangelists

To begin with a narrative analysis of the given episode, it would be beneficial to first lay down the parallel texts of the four evangelists,[21] not primarily to determine each one's uniqueness, but to establish where they agree in their storytelling. This methodology of juxtaposing the four gospels is not something new. It has been long done by the Fathers of the Church, most especially Eusebius of Caesarea (4th cent. CE), as Francis Watson elaborates:

[18] Other biblical approaches may include Source Criticism, Form Criticism, Tradition-Historical Criticism, Redaction Criticism, and Social-Scientific Criticism; see ibid., 22-218.

[19] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: BasicBooks, 1981), 19, appreciates the value of a narrative analysis in explaining the meaning of biblical tales, reasoning as follows: "Rather than viewing the literary character of the Bible as one of several 'purposes' or 'tendencies', I would prefer to insist on a complete interfusion of literary art with theological, moral, or historiosophical vision...." Petri Merenlahti, *Poetics for the Gospels? Rethinking Narrative Criticism* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2002), 144, adds that poetic analysis is necessary, given that "[w]e contrive synthetic totalities and proceed to operate with them, rather than with the chaotic abyss to which the world would regress without them. Obviously, such visions of wholeness are also necessary so that texts can be produced, read, and understood."

[20] Edward Adams, *Parallel Lives of Jesus: Four Gospels, One Story* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox; London: SPCK, 2011), 25-26.

[21] See Aland, *Synopsis of the Four Gospels*, nos. 271-273, at 237-239; Orville E. Daniel, *A Harmony of the Four Gospels: The New International Version*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 1996), nos. 31 and 136, at 36, 153-154.

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> Some four-gospel codices were already in circulation during the third century, but Eusebius was responsible for the first four-gospel *edition*. In the same way, over a century earlier, Irenæus was the first to define a four-gospel *collection*. If the one and only gospel exists in a fourfold form, then it makes sense to incorporate all four versions of the gospel within a single book…. Eusebius's canons bring to light new possibilities for a canonical reading of the four-fold gospel, one that highlights not only its diversity but also its coherence.[22]

What Eusebius did are ten so-called "canon tables"[23], which serve as tools in extracting a constructed single story underlying within the various Gospel narratives. In his Canon I—episodes that are parallel to all four Gospels—he included Jesus' action in the temple as reflecting the same story.[24] Eusebius operated with the principle that "Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John can and must be seen as complementary, their differences enhancing and enriching the truth of the message rather than undermining it."[25] It is because, for him, "the apparent chaos of the four different tellings of the same story can be reduced to rational and harmonious order."[26] Adams corroborated this point, reasoning that "the four Gospels in their canonical form nonetheless exhibit the phenomenon of *one basic story* multiply rendered."[27] In short, what some scholars adhere to is the hypothetical existence of a common story, from which all evangelists built their narratives.

Recovering, of course, the exact base story is impossible to achieve even with scientific exegetical rigors. But recognizing the potentials of this approach in comprehending better the episode, this paper will attempt to capture the gist of its base story by inspecting the commonalities in the narratives of the four evangelists before establishing their common storyline.

Mark 11:15-19. The Markan text features Jesus' entry into Jerusalem from his Galilean journey.[28] He entered the temple at the start of the Passover week (v. 15a) and found it teeming with merchants and money changers. He went berserk, overthrowing (ἤρξατο ἐκβαλλειν) those selling and buying (v. 15b) and turning over (κατέστρεψεν)

[22] Francis Watson, *The Fourfold Gospel: A Theological Reading of the New Testament Portraits of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 123.

[23] Barbara and Kurt Aland, Johannes Karavidopoulos, Carlo M. Martini, and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece,* based on the Work of Eberhard and Erwin Nestle, 28th rev. ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2013), i.e., *NA28*, includes in its Introduction Eusebius' canons, titled "Eusebii epistula ad Carpianum et canones I-X," which is described as "useful even today. It is used in many manuscripts as a very practical means of organizing the continuous text."

[24] In Eusebius' Canon I, the episode is identified as present in line 211 of Matthew, lines 121-122 in Mark, lines 238-239 in Luke, and lines 20-21 in John (see ibid., particularly in the inner margin apparatuses of each gospel).

[25] Watson, *The Fourfold Gospel*, 105.

[26] Ibid., 115.

[27] Adams, *Parallel Lives of Jesus*, 27.

[28] See Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 326-333.

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the tables of money changers and sellers of doves (v. 15c). He complained that his house, which is supposedly a house of prayer (οἶκος προσευχῆς; v. 17; cf. Isa 56:7) for all nations, had been turned into "a den of robbers" (σπήλαιον λῃστῶν; v. 17, cf. Jer 7:11).[29] As a result, the Jewish leaders (οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ γραμματεῖς) planned to kill him (αὐτὸν ἀπολέσωσιν; v. 18). The Synoptics share this general outline in their renditions of the episode. Unique, however, in Mark are the instances when Jesus became enraged and demanded that nobody should carry anything in the temple (οὐκ ἤφιεν ἵνα τις διενέγκῃ σκεῦος; v. 16) and the consideration of the Gentiles as welcome in the temple institution (πᾶσιν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν; v. 17). What can be inferred from Mark's presentation is that it narrates the radical opposition Jesus faced, resulting from his radical action in the temple.[30] The narrative concludes with Jesus leaving the city (ἔξω τῆς πόλεως; v. 19), underscoring the degree of suffering he endured, which aligns well with the Markan motif of theology of the cross.[31]

Matthew 21:10-17. The Matthean account generally follows the Markan outline[32] except that Jesus was not only there at the temple to cleanse it (v. 12); there were also the blind and the lame (τυφλοί καὶ χωλοί) who were healed by Jesus (v. 14). In his accompanying remarks, he surprisingly reasoned that the temple should be a "house of prayer" without specifying that it is open to Gentiles (v. 13)—omitting this detail from Mk 11:17, as done too by Luke. Different, too, is the ensuing information that the Jewish authorities did not plot outright Jesus' death after witnessing this course of events. Instead, they were merely angry or indignant at him (ἠγανάκτησαν; Mt 21:15), but such is enough reason for Jesus to leave the city and proceed to Bethany (v. 17). Matthew's rendition notably centers on Jesus' display of authority at the temple,[33] where he performs miracles. This scene is quite true to the Matthean motif of presenting Jesus as a respectable authority and a wonder-worker in line with the great prophets of Jewish history.[34]

[29] Borg, *Conflict Holiness and Politics*, 185-186, proposes to translate σπήλαιον λῃστῶν not as "a den of robbers" but "a den of violent ones" in keeping with the understanding of the term *lestai* in the 1st century CE, as corroborated in the writings of Flavius Josephus. For Sean Freyne, *Jesus, A Jewish Galilean: A New Reading of the Jesus-Story* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 163, the evangelist's use of Jeremiah's words associates Jesus to the same temple advocacy the prophet did in the Old Testament times.

[30] This Jewish opposition is particularly exaggerated by the Markan episode's structural bracketing in between the fig tree stories in 11:12-14 and 11:20-26, which analogically confronted the Jewish leaders for their non-effectivity; see Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992), 249-250.

[31] See Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, and Roland Murphy, eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Simon & Schuster, 1990; London: Burns & Oates, 1995).

[32] See Daniel Harrington, *The Gospel of John*, Sacra Pagina Series 1 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991), 292-296.

[33] Malina and Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary*, 129, 393, refer to the given episode in the Synoptics by using the title: "Jesus' Opposition to the Temple System." In relation, this corroborates the assumption that Matthew presents Jesus as someone having authority over the temple institution.

[34] See Benedict Viviano, "The Gospel According to Matthew," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 630-634.

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Luke 19:45-48. The Lucan account is faithful to the Markan outline, except that it is concise and economical in providing details and explanations of Jesus' action.[35] Here, after entering the temple (v. 45a), Jesus immediately overthrew the sellers (ἤρξατο ἐκβάλλειν τοὺς πωλοῦντας; v. 45b). His antagonists increased in Luke, with the leaders of the people (οἱ πρῶτοι τοῦ λαοῦ) joining the chief priests and scribes (v. 47) in their opposition to him. They all plotted to destroy him but their resolve was quickly suppressed since the people at the temple were still listening intently at him (ἐξεκρέματο αὐτοῦ ἀκούων; v. 48). The noteworthy thing in Luke's unfolding is the repeated mention of the term "people" (λαός), which occurs two times in this episode (19:47, 48). This detail matches the general Lucan motif of presenting Jesus as one with the people,[36] showcasing the communitarian spirit of the Jesus Movement that would be later emphasized in Luke's sequel, the Acts of the Apostles (e.g., Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-34).[37]

John 2:13-23. The Fourth Gospel also includes a narrative of Jesus' action in the temple.[38] Its most apparent difference from the Synoptics is its placement of the episode at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. In the Synoptics, the episode is situated in Jesus' final week leading to his crucifixion and resurrection. While narrating essentially the same incident, John's rendition appended several elements that are absent in the Synoptics: Jesus took notice (εὗρεν) of the animals and money changers in the temple (v. 14), made a whip of cords (φραγέλλιον ἐκ σχοινίων; v. 15a), poured out (ἐξέχεεν; v. 15b) the money changers, and addressed specifically the dove-sellers (τὰς περιστερὰς πωλοῦσιν; v. 16a), scolding them for making his father's house a marketplace (τὸν οἶκον τοῦ πατρός μου οἶκον ἐμπορίου v. 16b).

Missing in the Johannine account is the resolve of the temple authorities to kill him. Using instead the overarching term οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι to refer to these Jewish leaders, the evangelist presents them as simply making further inquiries on why Jesus performed violence in the temple (ἀπεκρίθησαν καὶ εἶπαν; vv. 18, cf. v. 20). Appended in John's rendition, too, is a scene where Jesus and the Jews argued about the former's claim that the temple would be destroyed but would be restored in three days (v. 19)—the word ναός is notably introduced here as an alternate word for the Synoptics' ἱερός. The narrator proleptically points to Jesus' death and resurrection as the idea being conveyed here (v. 21). At the end of the episode, Jesus remained in Jerusalem for at least one more day (cf. 4:3). The Johannine presentation differs a lot from the Synoptics since it focuses not so much on telling what happened but revealing salient truths about Jesus, viz., the temple as the father's house (v. 16b), Jesus' body as a

[35] See Johnson, *The Gospel of John*, 295-302.

[36] See Robert J. Karris, "The Gospel According to Luke," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 675-678.

[37] See Hagner, *The New Testament*, 243-245.

[38] See Moloney, *John*, 75-84.

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temple too (v. 21), and Jesus' performance of more signs in Jerusalem (v. 23).[39] These manifestations stand true to the general Johannine motif that introduces Jesus as the Son of the Father sent into the world to reveal about God's glory.[40]

Juxtaposition of the Four Gospel Accounts. As seen above, the four evangelists may rhetorically and theologically advance their respective agendas in their narrative accounts. Nevertheless, all narratives include Jesus' action in the temple as a significant episode in presenting his radical behavior during his public ministry, implying that this episode also circulated among the early followers of Jesus[41] and having truly occurred from the perspective of the first readers.[42] Observably, the crucial narrative details in the episode are all expressed in these accounts, utilizing similar words in their narrations, viz., Jerusalem (Ἱεροσόλυμα), temple (ἱερός), chief priests (οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς), scribes (οἱ γραμματεῖς), house (οἶκος), overthrow (ἐκβάλλω), sellers (πωλοῦντες), doves (περιστεραί), and city (πόλις).

Moreover, all feature the Markan narrative outline, sharing this similar storyline among them: Jesus entered the Jerusalem temple, where he discovered several improprieties, particularly the sale of animals intended for worship; he demonstrated his radical discontent by an act of aggression, overthrowing related commercial items; he reprimanded its merchants for defiling this sacred house and for their economic opportunism; in retaliation, the Jewish temple authorities took his words and deeds badly and challenged his authority; subsequently, the event endangered Jesus' safety in Jerusalem. With this unified constructed story based on the commonalities among the four Gospel narratives,[43] this paper will investigate the meaning of its narrative elements.

[39] Borg, *Conflict Holiness and Politics*, 184, observes that this Johannine presentation is a "symbolic act" meant to be understood as a prophetic act that matches "the rabbinic milieu contemporary to Jesus, commonly expressed in a three-part form consisting of 'odd gesture – question – pronouncement'. A mystifying action generated a question leading to an explanation of significance. Appropriately, such gestures had their setting in a circle of disciples surrounding a master."

[40] Hagner, *The New Testament*, 243-245, enumerates some important themes of John's theology: 1) life salvation, 2) Christology, 3) cross and atonement, 4) dualism, 5) witness, 6) Anti-Judaism, and 7) realized eschatology. For further discussion of the Johannine motif and theology, see, among many, Raymond Brown, *The Gospel and the Epistles of John: A Concise Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1988); Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, rev. ed., NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995); Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, BNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005); and Ruth B. Edwards, *Discovering John: Content, Interpretation, Reception*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 2014).

[41] One of these proclamations in the NT is Paul's sermon before Cornelius in Acts 10:34-43.

[42] Borg, *Conflict Holiness*, 183, indicates that there are some commentators who treat the episode as "nonhistorical, or that it is so shrouded in obscurity that even the evangelists could only guess at its significance." See also Perrin, *Jesus the Temple*, 82-83, in his section titled, "Question of Historicity: Was There a Temple Action?"

[43] The feasibility of constructing a unified text or presentation of gospel writers is debatable; see Merenlahti, *Poetics for the Gospel*, 17-34, in his chapter titled, "Are the Gospels Unified Narratives?" But, since this current paper embraces the narrative critical approach in reading the episodes in question, it moves to the direction of recreating a unified narrative storyline, at least.

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Narrative Critical Analysis of Jesus' Action in the Temple

Narrative Criticism has been formally utilized in biblical studies for almost a half-century both in the OT[44] and in the NT.[45] Appropriately, Adams indicates that by "[u]sing the categories of narrative analysis, we can see how the same story recounted in all four Gospels is developed and presented in many ways."[46] For him, the main benefit of this undertaking is that "[t]he common story can nevertheless be taken as a fixed point of orientation for reading the Gospels in terms of their unity, and the categories of narrative analysis are extremely convenient for bringing out the individuality and traits of each Gospel."[47]

This paper adheres to this methodology in its reading of the NT episode of Jesus' action in the temple. It commences by examining the hypothetical unified story of Jesus' action in the temple, as constructed above, and analyzing its narrative features and development.

Plot. An episode is typically delimited by a change of action or place in the story. The shift occurred when Jesus entered the Jerusalem temple. This event marks the beginning of the narrative plot that explicitly mentions Jerusalem (Ἱεροσόλυμα; Mk 11:15 // Mt 21:10 // Jn 2:13; but πόλις ["city"] in Lk 19:41) coupled by a direct mention of the temple (ἱερός; Mk 11:15 // Mt 19:12 // Lk 19:45 // Jn 2:14). The end of the plot gives reference once again to the same site, with a specific mention of the city (Mk 11:19 // Mt 21:17), the temple (Lk 19:47) or Jerusalem (Jn 2:23). With this framing based on the changes of action and place, the limits of the plot are categorically established.[48] The plot of the story, then, is clearly framed in the following chapters and verses: Mk 11:15-19 // Mt 21:10-17 // Lk 19:45-48 // Jn 2:13-23.

Exposition. Given the brevity of the discourse, the *exposition* of the plot is intermixed with other elements, such as the *rising action*, *inciting moment*,

[44] See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: BasicBooks, 1981); Jean Louis Ska, *"Our Fathers Have Told Us": Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives*, Subsidia Biblica 13 (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2000).

[45] See Mark Allan Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, GBS (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1990); David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1982); R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1983); James L. Resseguie, *Narrative Criticism of the New Testament: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

[46] Adams, *Parallel Lives of Jesus*, 34.

[47] Ibid., 36.

[48] Some would regard the plot as a part of a larger narrative; take, for example, Mark's structural framing of the episode within Jesus' cursing of the fig tree, employing the so-called Markan Sandwich literary technique (cf. Mk 11:12-14; 20-24). However, even if these discourses can be considered a part of a larger narrative, Jesus' actions in the temple are delineated well in the four Gospel renditions, with explicit words that point to either the city of Jerusalem or the temple.

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and *complication*.[49] Such is conveyed in the plot by Jesus' violent reaction to what he had seen inside the temple. All evangelists used the lexeme ἐκβάλλω ("to overthrow") to describe Jesus' main action (Mk 11:15 // Mt 21:12 // Lk 19:45 // Jn 2:15). What he overthrew differed among the four evangelists—in the Fourth Gospel it was directed instead at animals (πρόβατα καὶ τοὺς βόας)—but they all concerned the commerce conducted by the temple sellers (πωλοῦντες). Another significant action in the plot is Jesus' turning over of the tables of money changers, albeit unspecified in the Lucan account. Despite differences in some details, the general picture in all Gospel accounts is that Jesus performed the violent act of overthrowing things that he believed had no place inside the temple. He coupled his actions with strong words that denounce the profanity or impropriety being committed by the temple merchants. Accordingly, he declared that the temple is a sacred house that should not be turned into a "den of thieves" (Mk 11:17 // Mt 21:13 // Lk 19:46) or a "marketplace" (Jn 2:16).[50]

Resolution. The solution to the problem unveiled in the *exposition* is also a part of the *climax* and/or *turning point* of the plot, marking the beginning of the *falling action* of the narrative tension.[51] As mentioned above, the reaction of the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem serves as the *resolution* of the narrative plot.[52] The details of the *resolution* vary, however, between the Synoptic accounts and the Fourth Gospel. In the former, the antagonists of Jesus were presented as violently opposing his activity in the temple. They either plotted to kill him (Mk 11:18 // Lk 19:47) or became heavily indignant at him (Mt 21:15). In the latter, they questioned his authority to wreak havoc in the temple, asking him further to perform more signs as added proof (Jn 2:18) and arguing with him about the 46-year construction of the temple (v. 20).

Despite these differences, the four evangelists present a similar solution to the problem raised in the plot, i.e., Jesus' antagonists in Jerusalem were severely affected and reacted negatively on his action in the temple. Technically, it is referred to as the *peripeteia* in the plot, which is defined as "the change at some part of the action from one state of affairs to its exact opposite."[53] Meanwhile, the Synoptic renditions

[49] Ska, *"Our Fathers Have Told Us,"* 21-27.

[50] The narrative text does not explicitly say that Jesus aimed at the ritual purification of the temple per se. Instead, he was indignant about the abuses wantonly committed there, especially against ordinary worshippers who journeyed like him to this sacred space in Jerusalem.

[51] Ibid., 27-31.

[52] These leaders, however, differ in the Fourth Gospel as they are identified by the catchword οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι ("the Jews"). Nevertheless, it is still convenient to suppose that this lexeme refers to the same Jewish authorities referred to in the Synoptics, rather than to the general Jewish populace. See Urban von Wahlde's view on the referent of the οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι in the Fourth Gospel in Urban von Wahlde, "The Johannine 'Jews': A Critical Problem," *New Testament Studies* 28, no. 1 (1982): 33-60; see also Rex Fortes, "'The Judeans' for *οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι*? Contested Ethnicity in the Fourth Gospel," *Neotestamentica* 55, no. 2 (2021): 365-387, at https://newtestament.org.za/neotestamentica/.

[53] Ska, "*Our Fathers Have Told Us*," 27. Incidentally, the episode can also be considered a *plot of*

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of the plot differ slightly from the Johannine discourse; the latter is situated at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry (cf. John 2), rather than occurring at the onset of Passover week, as seen in the Synoptics. Nevertheless, it would not be long in the Johannine plot before the Jewish authorities' aggressive opposition would lead to their categorical decision to arrest and kill Jesus (cf. Jn 5:18; 11:53).

Conclusion. The *conclusion* of the narrative coincides with the *denouement* in the plot, i.e., "the precipitating final scene … [by which] the action or intrigue ends in success or failure for the protagonist, the mystery is solved, or the misunderstanding cleared away."[54] The plot, however, concludes differently between the Markan and Matthean accounts on the one hand, and the Lucan and Johannine accounts on the other hand. In the former, Jesus was indirectly forced to leave the city of Jerusalem (Mk 11:19 // Mt 21:17), likely due to significant opposition from the Jerusalemite leaders. In the latter, despite receiving also opposition from them, Jesus remained in the city for some time still (Lk 19:47; Jn 2:23) as a result of the temple worshippers' appreciation of Jesus (Lk 19:48; Jn 2:23). Even if there are two varying *denouements* in the plot, the final scene compels Jesus not to stay longer in the temple precincts because of the growing hostility he received from the Jewish authorities.[55]

Narration. The episode is narrated by all the evangelists, employing a so-called *external narrator* who tells the story from the outside, i.e., not as one of the characters in the narrative. Furthermore, the evangelists use this narrator to recount an event that happened in the past in a so-called *anaplesis* or *flashback*.[56] Interestingly, the Synoptic and Johannine accounts differ in their narrative perspectives. In the former, the point of view is *from without* or *from the reader's perspective*, which is also

revelation, in addition to being a *plot of action*, since an insightful realization is also unveiled by the texts. It is technically referred to as the plot's *anagnorisis*, which is "the transition from ignorance to knowledge experienced by the protagonist" (ibid., 27). In the given episode, the *anagnorisis* occurs when Jesus indirectly realizes that the Jewish authorities would never accept him or change their hostile attitude toward him. This revelation is also discernible in the Synoptics since the final scene inaugurates the Jewish leaders' intense anger at Jesus and their determination to arrest and execute him.

[54] Ibid., 28.

[55] Even in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus would need to leave Judea and return to Galilee via Samaria relatively quickly after realizing that the Pharisaic leaders were unhappy with his growing popularity in the Judean region (Jn 4:1). See Rex Fortes, "The Unsettled Ethnic Conflict between the *Ἰουδαῖοι* and the *Σαμαρῖται* in John 4:4-42," *The Living Word* 129, nos. 1-2 (January – June 2023): 34-53; and "A Samaritan Jew? Hybridization in the Jewish and Samaritan Identification of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel," *Hapag: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Theological Research* 17, nos. 1-2 (2020): 43-66, at https://www.svst.edu.ph/hapag/issues/article/a-samaritan-jew-hybridization-in-the-jewish-and-samaritan-identification-of-jesus-in-the-fourth-gospel-187.

[56] Ska, "*Our Fathers Have Told Us*," 23. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 182-183, indicates that in biblical tales, the narrator is often presented as omniscient, arguing that "[t]he sweep of the biblical narrator's authoritative knowledge extends from the very beginnings of things, which he can report down to the precise language and order of the divine utterance that brought the world into being, to the characters' hidden thoughts and feelings, which he may summarize for us or render in detail as interior speech."

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referred to as *external focalization*. In the latter, the point of view is wider, as it is *from behind* or *from the narrator's point of view*, which is also referred to as *zero focalization*.[57]

Assessment of the Juxtaposed Story. Usually, in a typical discourse, the trajectory of the plot can be illustrated by a pyramid that "begins with a rising action, reaches a climax, and ends with a falling action … [which] corresponds to Aristotle's three parts of a drama (beginning, middle, and end, or complication, climax and unraveling)."[58] Some commentators expound the moments of a plot into several *moments*, viz., "exposition, inciting moment, complication, climax, turning point, falling action, resolution, last delay, denouement (conclusion)."[59] The terminologies may vary here, but it appears that what is common among them is an agreement on the pyramidal narrative flow, where the *turning point* leads to the highest peak of action in the plot. At most times, this *turning point* is central to the main message of a narrative because it provides a solution to the problem raised at the onset of the discourse.

If applied to the aforementioned episode, its most crucial part is the reaction of the Jewish authorities to Jesus' action in the temple. In the narrative, this detail becomes crucial to the story's conclusion. If these leaders had acted differently (e.g., they apologized to Jesus for allowing excessive commercial activities in the temple), the *denouement* would have been more positive for the protagonist: Jesus would have stayed and taught in the temple more often, and the officials would not have planned for his death. However, since they acted vehemently against Jesus' actions and words, his safety in Jerusalem was compromised, and the subsequent events led to his arrest and crucifixion. Meanwhile, Jesus' fury in the temple is merely a narrative *moment* that introduces the problem and creates the tension to be addressed in the story. In this line of thinking, Nicholas Perrin explains that "[s]ince none of the objections to the cleansing of the temple's authenticity are compelling, and since (as should soon be clear) it becomes tough to explain Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion without at least something like the temple action occurring, it must be allowed to stand."[60] For Perrin, Jesus' aggression is narrated to trigger the Jewish officials' decision to arrest him, making more sense of the ensuing Passion Narrative of Jesus in all four gospel accounts.

Given that the most vital *moment* in the plot is the reaction of the Jewish temple authorities, it would be improper to focus much attention on Jesus' radical

[57] See Ska's discussion on his chapter on "Point of View," ibid., 65-81. The difference in point of view between the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel means that the Johannine narrator has a broader perspective of the story, even including his own comprehension. It then becomes understandable why, in the Johannine narrative, the technique of *prolepsis*, *anticipation*, or *foreshadowing* (ibid., 48) is also employed. In particular, Jesus' rising from the dead after three days is alluded to in the narrative (Jn 2:19-21), denoting that the narrator has some degree of knowledge of the future.

[58] Ska, "*Our Fathers Have Told Us*," 20.

[59] Ibid., 20-21.

[60] See Perrin, *Jesus the Temple*, 83.

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actions and words therein, as they were only mentioned in the service of the plot's progress. This paper, therefore, argues that the pivotal *moment* in the plot is the increasing animosity of the Jewish temple officials toward Jesus, as revealed through a Narrative Critical Analysis of the episode.

The Church's Radical Involvement in Social Transformation

The Jesus presented in the Gospels was deeply involved in the political arena and advocated for radical social transformation. Accordingly, the episode of Jesus' action in the temple features his furious protest and reprimand of the marginalizing system of worship in the temple. However, as demonstrated above, Jesus' radicality is not accentuated in the narrative; it is merely a secondary detail in the plot that is centered instead on the response of the Jewish authorities to Jesus. However, would this softened regard of the unified text suit well the Church's prophetic responsibility to be critical of the evil, abuses, and injustices in society, especially when the majority of them are state-sponsored? How, then, can the Church capitalize on its nonviolent response to increase the likelihood of social transformation? In response, this paper will clarify the relationships between the Church and the State, as well as between the religious and political entities, before attempting to understand the objective behind their purported symbiosis.

The Church versus the State?

For a long period in human history, the Church has been closely tied to the State. It began with the rise of Christendom after the Christians were liberated by Constantine the Great from centuries of persecution, which suddenly gave them the upper hand in the political spectrum. Over time, various attempts were made to separate the two, aiming to curtail the allegedly incompetent Church leaders' involvement in political affairs. It even reached a point where the State persecuted the Church to regain its control over society, as seen, for example, in the French Revolution. After many global conflicts on this issue, the phrase "separation of the Church and State"[61] was coined to denote that the Church should not interfere with the State's authority and, in turn, the State should grant religious freedom to its constituents to worship and practice their spiritual beliefs openly. This arrangement, however, is a modern solution to the problem brought about by the rise of nationhood[62]—a mental construct created to impose order among competing

[61] This phrase is often associated to the principle of social contract of John Locke (1689), the renowned father of modernism. But its foundational appearance in history might have commenced as early as Augustine, who wrote about two cities, viz., "earthly city" and "city of God" (cf. Augustine of Hippo, *Civitas Dei*, Book XIX, chapter 17).

[62] For a thorough reading on the rise of nations, see, among many, Anthony Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991); John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith, eds., *Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Montserrat Guibernau and John Hutchinson,

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political entities. Accordingly, Benedict Anderson calls the nation "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."[63]

Indeed, it is beyond doubt that nationhood is a modern concept. Social thinkers vary in their identification of its formal inception: some say that it sprang forth from the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), the Partition of Poland (1775), the American Revolution and Independence (1776), the French Revolution (1789), Fichte's Address (1807), the Acts of Spain (1812)[64] or, simply, the Industrial Revolution.[65] Regardless of its temporal beginning, political groups were parochial before these historical events. They operated within a feudal system, in which all would ally themselves to a feudal lord, whose religion was adopted wholesale by his constituents. In this political order, the religious and political affairs were clearly intermixed with each other. However, the necessary adjustments to the fast-paced economic developments catapulted the emergence of nation-states (or, simply, nations) to ensure that everyone could keep up with the rising demands for material production.[66] Capitalist leaders created more laws to remove the Church's overarching control over feudal lands, institutions, and wealth. The State would soon have greater power over its constituents, binding them into rules and regulations that even restrict their religious activities for more economic profit.

This change points to the fluidity of the relationship between the Church and the State. It also conveys that the binary between what is religious and what is secular/political is only introduced at a given point in response to prevailing circumstances.[67] However, this setup was constructed by the latter, which relegated the Church to transcendental concerns and prevented it from meddling in its mundane businesses. In today's democratic context, where one's public representation should be respected, isn't it proper that the Church freely determines its nature and limits? Isn't it ideal

eds., *Understanding Nationalism* (Cambridge: Polity; Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001); Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives*, 3rd ed. (New York: Pluto, 2010); and Anthony Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History*, 2nd rev. ed. (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity, 2010).

[63] Benedict Anderson, "The Nation and the Origin of National Consciousness," in *The Ethnicity Reader: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Migration*, ed. Montserrat Guibernau and John Rex, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Polity, 2010), 56-63, at 57.

[64] See Hutchinson and Smith, *Nationalism*, 5; Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 125-129.

[65] Ernest Gellner, "Nationalism as a Product of Industrial Society," in *The Ethnicity Reader: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Migration*, ed. Montserrat Guibernau and John Rex, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Polity, 2010), 67-69, at 70.

[66] Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 123.

[67] In his analysis of the concepts of "religion" and "secularization," Azizur Rahman Patel, "Does 'Religion' Deserve to be Privileged in Relation to the 'Secular'?," *Research on Islam and Muslims in Africa Occasional Papers* 1, no. 23 (Oct 2023), at https://muslimsinafrica.wordpress.com/2013/10/18/does-religion-deserve-to-be-privileged-in-relation-to-the-secular-azizur-rahman-patel/, comments that today's misunderstanding "happens when religious and secular are strictly defined in terms of 'a two-tiered view of reality: empirical-supraempirical, natural-supernatural, or human-superhuman.' This type of simplistic 'two-tiered view of reality,' was essentially invented in the West."

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that the Church and the State cooperate for the greater good? Isn't it mandatory that the Church confronts the State regarding its self-determination in the public sphere?

The Religious versus the Political?

Many thinkers have taken notice of the modern dichotomy between religion and politics (e.g., Max Weber and Charles Taylor[68]), which is rooted in the binary between what the renowned father of sociology, Émile Durkheim, termed "the sacred" and "the profane."[69] For him, the former are the restricted activities that propagate a religious system of beliefs and bind a congregation together behind a symbol or a cult, while the latter are the ordinary daily activities outside them.[70] Accordingly, he defines religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them."[71]

This simplification paves the way for the categorical separation of religious and political concerns that have been typically assigned to the Church and the State, respectively. However, in his 2009 book *The Myth of Religious Violence,*[72] political theologian William Cavanaugh speaks out against this binary. For him, it is not that "the holy was separated from politics for the sake of peace; in reality, the emerging state appropriated the holy to become itself a new kind of religion."[73] His point is that economic and political players have adopted the very idea of religion to their identities in such a way that people begin to put more value on their advancement than on the God of religion. In his recent book *The Uses of Idolatry,*[74] Cavanaugh calls this modern phenomenon idolatry,[75] as it enslaves humanity as "false gods," i.e., a human-created system in which "the target of worship has changed, from the explicit worship of God to the implicit worship of things."[76] Indeed, the global economy prompts everyone to regard secular concerns as false gods that compete with traditional religious life and

[68] William T. Cavanaugh commences his argumentation in his book titled, *The Uses of Idolatry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024),15-58, 59-102, with the failure of "Max Weber's Polytheism" and "Charles Taylor's Naïveté," respectively, to explain the true relationship of religion and the secular.

[69] See Émile Dukheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* originally published in French in 1912 as *Les Formes élémentaires se la vie religieuse: Le système totémique en Australie,* ed. Mark Cladis, trans. Carol Cosman, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 34; See also W.S.F. Pickering, *Durkheim on Religion: A Selection of Readings with Bibliographies and Introductory Remarks,* JSTOR (Lutterworth: Clarke, 1975).

[70] See Dukheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 34-39.

[71] See ibid., 44.

[72] See William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[73] Ibid., 11.

[74] See William T. Cavanaugh, *The Uses of Idolatry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

[75] Cavanaugh argues this way in his book, thinking that "idolatry critique transcends the religious/secular distinction––because the worship of anything, not only gods, can be idolatry––then an analysis must extend beyond religious studies and theology and be fully interdisciplinary" (ibid., 3-4).

[76] Ibid., back cover.

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worship in pursuit of greater production in a consumeristic and political world. For Cavanaugh, it is an idolatry because:

> Consumer culture both encourages investing divinity in human creations and has structural features which allow those creations to subject us to their rule. Consumer culture also promotes a type of unsplendid idolatry, a narcissism that does not encourage self-sacrifice for others but rather encourages the sacrifice of others for our own desires.... Those whose loves are not referred to the true God are in fact guilty of self-love, which is not a true care for the person that God loves but a self- and other-destructive isolation from the common good.[77]

This overemphasis on the divination of the secular undermines the role of traditional religion, making it irrelevant to the daily struggle for capitalistic and political survival. This view also leads the faithful to regard their religion as something that should not interfere with political matters but should be merely relegated to the promotion of private devotions and cultic practices.[78] Meanwhile, Cavanaugh's proposal to fight the idolatrous seduction of the modern world is a so-called *re-enchantment* of the Church. In ecclesial language, it refers to the *sacramentalization* of the faithful through the strengthening of the sacraments in general, and the Eucharist in particular.[79] Doing so is believed to impede the political sector from stealing the people's sense of the divine that is encapsulated in traditional religious practices. Such a reclamation of worship aligns with Jesus' remarks to the temple merchants, instructing them to keep the temple as God's house. This pronouncement implies that the sense of the divine should be recovered by respecting the temple's sanctity and the offerings sacrificed therein. Cavanaugh sums up the power of the Eucharist:

> The eschatological dimension of the Eucharist, on the other hand, opens temporal horizons in both directions and connects them with the present. In the Eucharist the church keeps alive the subversive memory of Christ's past confrontation with, and triumph over, worldly power. At the same

[77] Ibid., 330.

[78] In his related analysis of the tension between Islamists and secularists among the Muslims in Egypt and Northern Africa, Patel, "Does 'Religion' Deserve to be Privileged?," argues against creating a binary since, for him, "[t]he religious and the secular have never been two ultimately distinct conceptual categories. As has been demonstrated, where suitable, 'religious' groups have the tendency to 'sacralise' the 'secular,' just as the 'secular' rulers tend to justify their 'secular' objectives, by manipulating 'religious' symbols and discourses... The difficulty comes about when either sphere, be it religious or secular, absolutizes its positions, and renders them eternal, and hence immutable."

[79] William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), 234-235, underscores to the importance of the Eucharist, arguing as follows: "If the church is to resist disappearance, then it must be publicly visible as the body of Christ in the present time, not secreted away in the souls of believers or relegated to the distant historical past or future. It becomes visible through its disciplined practices, but the church's discipline can only be realized as a Eucharistic discipline, and it must therefore assume a conformity to Christ, and therefore an assimilation to Christ's self-sacrifice. Christ in the Eucharist actively disciplines the church. The church does not simply perform the Eucharist; the Eucharist performs the church."

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> time, the Eucharist anticipates the future realization of a new society, the Kingdom of God, which will shatter the obdurate monuments of the mighty… The light of hope is thereby sustained in even the darkest hours of totalitarian power.[80]

This line of action, though, is only one side of the spectrum. While the Church can begin reclaiming its authentic identity by enhancing its liturgical life, how will it, then, relate to the State? Will it simply allow the latter to continue its secularization of the world as well as undermining the traditional locus of the divine? Will it just mind its own business, disengaged from political issues and confrontation of the State?

Church's Negotiation with the State

The theological analysis of the growing binary between the religious and the political has influenced the majority of the population to believe that the Church and the State are in constant conflict with each other. Religious and political affairs should not be viewed as opposing polarized camps, as explained above. Instead, their identities and relationships should be represented adequately. In this negotiation, especially when one entity is marginalized, the other party should be confronted non-violently to examine itself and recognize the rights it has trespassed and the values it has undermined.

In this line of thinking, the Church needs to do two things. First is a self-confrontation of its deficiencies, as Pope Francis highlights the need for collective humility.[81] This humility includes accepting one's limitations and imperfections while shunning all violent tendencies and activities that are disguised to maintain peace and ensure a better world. The pope adds that "[h]umility is the source of peace in the world and in the church… Where there is no humility, there is war, there is discord, there is division."[82] In the spiritual sense, such a humility may also relate to what Cavanaugh coins as the *re-enchantment* of the Church, aimed at regaining its sense of the divine.[83] For the theologian, this step addresses what he sees as the real problem at hand, which is the *mis-enchantment* brought about by the "idolatries" of the modern generation. In practical terms, it reclaims humanity's relationship with God, enhancing its ability to imagine and wonder, thereby distancing itself from worldly

[80] Ibid., 280.

[81] See Pope Francis' General Audience on May 22, 2024, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-05/pope-at-audience-humility-essential-for-christian-life.html (accessed on July 1, 2025).

[82] Ibid.

[83] The position of Cavanaugh, *The Uses of Idolatry*, 58, is premised on his observation that the categories on enchantment and disenchantment of modernity "are unstable and prescriptive, not merely descriptive… Belief in the gods breeds rationalization, which sends the gods to their graves; the ingenuity of human reason clamps humans into the iron cage, while the old gods are set free from their icy tombs."

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concerns. The performance of the sacraments enables the faithful to determine the essence of religion and recapture the sense of the divine that has been lost.[84]

Second is the Church's ongoing negotiation with the State, not only to put an end to its marginalizing economic and hegemonic measures but also to invite it to rethink its very identity.[85] The State should be particularly confronted for turning the capitalistic and political agenda into "false gods," pushing the majority of its population to prioritize material production over godly principles, values, and virtues.[86] It should be emphasized, however, that this confrontation is never carried out through violent means. Nonviolence is at the heart of the Christian teaching on loving one's neighbors.[87] During his pontificate, Pope Francis has even radically shifted away from considering "just war" as a possible response to human oppression brought about by disputing leaders of nation-states and global communities.[88] For him, correction should be done fraternally by respecting human dignity and people's innate capacity to improve. This step confronts the State to change its outlook on itself, along with its dehumanizing governance and policies. However, it lacks an operable framework that appreciates the religious dimension without suppressing or undermining its traditional expressions. The biblical narrative of Jesus' action in the temple can be employed as a valuable aid for this healthy confrontation, as it will be expounded below.

The Narrative of Jesus' Action in the Temple in Social Transformation

From the discussion above, a narrative critical reading of Jesus' action in the temple reveals that the crux of the narrative lies in the reaction of the Jewish authorities to Jesus. There are three repercussions to this mindset in relation to the much-needed

[84] Cavanaugh advocates the importance of incarnation and sacrament in addressing the "idolatries" of today's world, reasoning, "From the point of view of the Bible, Augustine, and the Christian tradition more generally, the solution is not anthropocentrism but theocentrism, the restoration of harmonious relationships between and among Creator and creatures" (ibid., 333).

[85] Worth mentioning here is the view of William T. Cavanaugh, "Church," in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), 393-405, at 405, that pedestals the merit of the Church's involvement in societal transformation, stating: "Without seeking to rule, the church has more to contribute precisely because it is the bearer of God's politics, and because it is catholic, transnational, transcending the parochial borders of the nation-state."

[86] Cavanaugh, *The Uses of Idolatry*, 278, identifies the idolatry created by nationalism as a form of divinizing ourselves, explaining, "Modern nationalism, nevertheless, is often not content with a modest coordination of different communal identities; it pushes some nation-states toward becoming both a substitute church and a substitute god, the narcissistic church that worships itself."

[87] See André Trocmé, *Jesus and the Nonviolent Revolution*, trans. Michael H. Shank and Marlin E. Miller (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1973); Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 1984, 1998); Scotty McLennan, *Jesus Was a Liberal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

[88] See Recorded Video Interview with Pope Francis on June 20, 2022, https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/251691/pope-francis-i-believe-it-is-time-to-rethink-the-concept-of-a-just-war (accessed on July 1, 2025).

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social transformation. The first is that Jesus' overthrow of commercial materials in the temple is only incidental to the story's main plot. This narrative moment creates the *inciting moment*, thereby pursuing drama and evoking interest in the story. The evangelists were not putting much weight on this detail. Instead, they incorporated it into their narratives to add *complication* to the plot. It helps establish *conflict*, setting the stage for an upward trajectory in the storyline. With this premise, biblical interpreters must refrain from highlighting this detail indiscriminately, making it the central point. Emphasizing it overlooks the literary value and unity of the episode. Moreover, using it as a norm today would misuse it, given the social responsibility of biblical scholars to promote the Gospel values to global communities. In practical terms, violence as a primary response to structural sins has no place in society, much more in Christian groups that put a premium on Jesus' message of love, harmony, and peace.[89]

The second repercussion is that since the focus of the episode lies on the reaction of the Jewish authorities, the challenge for good governance is exponentially magnified. Sectoral leaders should be accountable for their reactions, decisions, and programs that determine the fate of their constituents. In the biblical episode, Jesus' fate was sealed by the reaction of the temple officials, who either undermined his authority over them (i.e., questioning Jesus in Jn 2:18 and becoming indignant at him in Mt 21:15-16) or plotted his death (i.e., deciding his immediate arrest in Mk 11:18 and Lk 19:47). The narrative ending would have been different if they were more understanding and receptive of Jesus.[90] However, as the evangelists used this information to produce the peak of the plot, it becomes indispensable to the storyline, ushering the readers to its *climax* and ensuing *denouement* or resolution. In today's society, it means that the State should be conscientious about protecting human rights and ensuring the common good at all times. However, since nation-states mostly advance their parochial needs and the maintenance of the *status quo*, the religious sector ought to confront them, reminding them their sworn duties to humanity and society, including the protection of religious freedom.

The third repercussion is that, since the religious and political dimensions are not necessarily separate from or in severe conflict with each other, there is the ideal objective of forging a cooperation between them. In the episode, Jesus' actions

[89] Sean Freyne, *Jesus, A Jewish Galilean*, 169, mentions that the Gospels indeed present Jesus as confronting the Jewish authorities nonviolently: "It is this strand of non-violent resistance with its critique of both religious and political imperialism that would appear best to characterize the particular aspects of the Jesus-movement that we can discern behind the different versions of the gospels' narratives in both their Galilean and Jerusalem situations."

[90] Freyne, ibid., 167, opines that the Jewish authorities and aristocracy directly brought about Jesus' fateful death, explaining: "The probability must be that they also collaborated in having Jesus removed…. For Jewish elites and Roman provincials alike, Galileans who were deemed to be troublesome were utterly expendable (Lk. 13.1f.)."

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and words in the temple were narratively specified to countercheck the Jewish leaders' management of temple pilgrimages and worship. He was challenging them to revive the sanctity of the temple as God's house, along with the proper dignity given to those who come to worship in Jerusalem, rather than commercially taking advantage of them. The Jewish officials should have taken this criticism as a valid concern to improve the system. However, the latter took Jesus' activity as a direct attack against them, instantly shutting down a supposed healthy dialogue and mutual assistance between them. Similarly, in today's world, this check-and-balance should not be impeded but strongly promoted. Doing so ensures a brighter future for today's generation, not through wanton use of violence but through unbiased negotiations, clarifying particularly the religious and political identities and the associated responsibilities of each entity.

Conclusion

The narrative of Jesus' action in the temple can be ordinarily viewed as a proof text that violence as a form of protest is scripturally justified. All four Gospels include it, explicitly mentioning that Jesus radically criticized the temple merchants' opportunistic activities, especially against the poor worshippers. However, this reading may directly contradict the Church's default nonviolent stance against social abuse since Jesus is consistently presented in the NT as a perennial advocate of nonviolence, allowing himself to be arrested and crucified without any resistance. This contradiction creates a dilemma for Bible readers on how to interpret this episode meaningfully.

Meanwhile, a narrative analysis of the episode demonstrates that Jesus' display of aggression is not the primary focus of the narrative. Instead, it is the hostile response of the Jewish officials since it is the moment in the plot that critically leads the story into its resolution, i.e., their collective decision to arrest and put Jesus to death. This view challenges Bible readers not to use this episode as a possible justification for violence as a legitimate response to societal evil.

In a practical sense, the basis of this misreading is the excessive focus given on the binary between the sacred and the profane, which restricts the Church to mere sacramental and spiritual activities. However, the Church has a social responsibility to correct the State when it performs evil deeds and practices, albeit in a nonviolent manner. On the side of the State, it needs to listen to feedback and commit to eliminating any marginalizing system in its governance. This symbiosis undermines the polarization of the sacred and the profane but encourages greater cooperation between the two entities for the betterment of society. Thus, the episode of Jesus' action in the temple can be narratively read as an attempt to establish a healthy

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confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish authorities, and, by analogy, between the Church and the State today.PS

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