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Where Are the Wild Things? A Cultural-Psychological Critique of a Political Theology of Climate Change Denial

Abstract:

One aim of this essay is to understand why white evangelical Christians, more than any other religious adherents in the United States, are deeply invested in denying the emergency of anthropogenic climate change and in obstructing action to address anthropogenic climate change. Michael S. Hogue, in his recent book, *American Immanence*, blames a religious imaginary he names the "redeemer symbolic." This symbolic complex inspires the devotion of the politically powerful white evangelical Christian and nationalist movement in the United States at the present time. A second aim of the essay is to analyze the redeemer symbolic. Through a reading of Maurice Sendak's much-loved illustrated children's book, *Where the Wild Things Are*, the essay suggests that U.S. white evangelical devotees of the redeemer symbolic share a kind of inability to come to terms with a vital and ineliminable wildness in persons and cultures; further, that this inability correlates with a political-theological failure, even refusal, to grasp the emergency of anthropogenic climate change. The essay first explicates the redeemer symbolic, with a particular focus on its implication in the legitimation of climate skepticism. Then, with the aid of key concepts from the psychoanalytic theory of D.W. Winnicott, it interprets the story of Max, the protagonist in *Where the Wild Things Are*, as a fable of healthy development of what Winnicott calls "transitional space" and a related "capacity to be alone." Unsuccessful development of those resources, it is suggested, contributes to an account of why adherents of the redeemer symbolic typically refuse wildness and thus may be prone to climate negligence. More importantly, though, recognizing the cultural-psychological importance of "wild things" (as by the "counter-fable" of Max) may help fire imaginative ways around the obstructiveness of the redeemer symbolic, to more effectively address climate change in particular, and human well-being in nature in general.

Keywords:
climate change, Michael S. Hogue, imagination, political theology, Maurice Sendak, wilderness, D.W. Winnicott, psychoanalysis

This essay begins with a summary and partial reconstruction of the recent argument made by Michael S. Hogue, that much of the religious history of the United States can be viewed as the recurrent reconfiguration of a religious, world-constructing imaginary that Hogue calls the "redeemer symbolic." I take the redeemer symbolic, or something very like it, to be politically prevalent, at least in the United States of America today. More particularly, I take the redeemer symbolic to be a lens that can clarify why white evangelical Christians, in proportions higher than any other religious adherents in the United States, are deeply invested in denying the emergency of anthropogenic climate change and in obstructing action to address it. In a second movement, the essay proposes a way to divest the redeemer symbolic of some of its cultural-psychological potency, and possibly thereby to also divest its devotees of some of their political potency. The second movement proceeds by way of a reading of the classic children's picture book, Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*. This reading, supported by key ideas of "transitional space" and the "capacity to be alone" supplied by the British psychoanalyst, D.W. Winnicott, is offered as a counter-fable to the redeemer symbolic. The redeemer symbolic, I propose, is not only a political-theological problem, as Hogue argues, but also a kind of cultural-psychological pathology; a complex that enshrines incapacity to be alone and inability to use objects transitionally, and which therefore generates refusal to inhabit space shared with really ("wildly," we might say) different others. In short, the redeemer symbolic feeds an impulse to domesticate, if not dominate, what it deems other. The redeemer symbolic has no place for "wild things." Hence the essay's title. Overall, then, this essay aims to give some concrete particularity to a general sense that the politically prevalent religious imaginary in the United States today unfits its participants for what I refer to as "living well-being" in the long emergency of ecological crisis that is upon us all.[1]

In describing the imaginary in question as "politically prevalent," I mean that, while it is perhaps not the subjective space in which a majority of U.S. Americans feel at home, it bears outsize influence in objectively determining political conditions there. Thus, the world it would construct preoccupies the subjective energies of many Americans, both those who believe it to be the home of their dreams and those who understand they would not be welcome there, and consequently resist it. In fact, that world is under (not uncontested) construction. Thus, it occupies a great deal of Americans' (not to mention others') time, space and energy for public life. This can be felt in qualities of the everyday, for example in aggressive, even cruel (some say life-affirming) restrictions of women's access to and authority over reproductive planning. It is displayed in more spectacular ways, too, as in the 2016 U.S. presidential election when some 81% of those evangelical Christians who think of themselves as white cast their vote for candidate Donald J. Trump in 2016.

I mean "religious imaginary" to denote a discursive cultural formation that entrains social actors: (1) to legitimate its formative discourse, on the basis of its apparent capacity to empower participants to distinguish sacred from profane, and moral from immoral, and (2) to exercise power, in the political field and elsewhere, in order to marginalize profanity and immorality – as defined by the discourse, naturally – in social life. Of course, there is much more to religion than this but I will hold to this reduced sense, at least initially, for the sake of focus in an already complicated interpretation.

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1)   As already evident, this essay attempts to weld a complex synthesis of diverse materials and approaches. To the extent it succeeds, it has been helped significantly by the comments of the two anonymous reviewers for *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture*. What unwieldiness persists is due, of course, to my own shortcomings.

The key to the interpretation is an analogy between personal, parental images entertained by the young boy Max, the central character of Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are*, and cultural, theological images that, by their presence or absence, arguably play a paradigmatic role for devotees of the redeemer imaginary. We might even say the latter set of images play a *creedal* role – for certain images, like creedal statements, may enunciate supposed *sine qua nons* of a faith; they determine dogmatic requirements of participants in the prevailing religious imaginary.

The two sets of images are fairly distant from each other in objective social space, where it might be difficult to demonstrate either potential or actual causal connections between them. Indeed, the analogy really emerges abductively from my own musing, I who am neither Max nor a devotee of that imaginary. So the interpretation presented here lays no claim to a methodical grounding in social or psychological science of an empiricist cast. I use D.W. Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory of transitional spaces and objects to explicate a basis for the proposed analogy so that rather than claiming to *explain* current political-religious expressions of U.S. white evangelicalism, I would try to persuade readers that such expressions might be better understood – not without poetic license – in light of the story of Max; especially the imagery of "wild things" and the attitudes Max takes toward them.

Some additional preliminary remarks on the intellectual context and character of this inquiry may be valuable. The definition of the religious as a discursive cultural formation, which I derive from scholars including Talal Asad[2] and Bruce Lincoln,[3] is resolute in its service to methodological agnosticism. That is, the definition is meant to support study of religious claims (legitimations and exercises of power, and not necessarily doctrinal beliefs) that is neutral with respect to the normative question whether those or any like claims constitute knowledge of a more-than-discursive, transcultural, even ultimately real order of things.[4] Maybe on account of such very claims religions function often in specific circumstances as glorified shell games played with no serious intent of fulfilling what they promise. They are louche to begin with, and they end up sordid. But to ignore normative philosophical and/or theological concern for the goodness or rightness of religious legitimations and exercises, relative to one another and to speculative ideals, must eventually distort the scholar's field of vision and discharge of duty.

Still, there are important insights to be gained by consciously reducing a view of religion to one kind of cultural formation among others. Yet, we do well not to suppress without notice our *existential* participation in religion, beyond particular formations, as plumbing the "deep well" of experience, whence generate (and whither decay) signposts and symbols of the formative power(s) of culture – the power(s) of being and being how we are.[5] That is to say, real religion is more than a political tool; normatively speaking, religion draws participants down into the deep wells of human meaning-making and in so doing becomes a medium of living well-being. So I, at least, am eventually interested in the present inquiry as it might contribute eventually to theological understanding of the matter. For here and now, though, I am rather more directly concerned with the politically supercharged minority religion of those abovementioned 81% of U.S. white evangelicals and their like, both in the US and elsewhere, whose negligence on climate change in service to their sacred and moral order will make future suffering greater in both extent and intensity.

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2) Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 199.

3) Lincoln, *Holy Terrors*.

4) The classic statement is Berger's, in the second appendix to *The Sacred Canopy*. He calls it "methodological atheism" although given his terms of inquiry I think it better called methodological agnosticism. However, for a variety of arguments that agnosticism is tantamount to atheism, see Gutiérrez' *radical orthodoxy*, and Neville's, *existential threats*.

5) Hart, *Unfinished Man and the Imagination*.

The "Redeemer Symbolic": No-Where for Wild Things

So, what gives climate negligence its near-dogmatic status among those actors? To answer this question requires a closer analysis of their religious imaginary. In his recent book, *American Immanence*, Michael S. Hogue analyzes the meaning structure of this predominant American imaginary as the (re)articulation of a "redeemer symbolic."[6] Over and over in the history of the United States, a crucial class of Americans have understood themselves and their nation as participants, indeed protagonists, in a redemptive political project. Precise identifications of roles in that project change as different crises arise, but, at least as far as Hogue examines historical precedent, the meaning structure remains remarkably steady through the changes. So again today, Hogue asserts the redeemer symbolic undergirds the self-understanding of a politically prevalent constituency, providing them with the basic contours of a political theology.

Within that theology, the paradigm for imagining the work their religion does is *redemption*. Redemption is also paradigmatic for imagining the work that they do *as* religious. Their activity in the day-to-day of life, they imagine, flows from and/or contributes to a redemptive national, international, and even global order; at least, such is the work they imagine they, and others, *ought to be* doing. These core, yet crucially vague meanings of the redeemer symbolic, and the equally broad sentiments they produce, play an important role in determining what activities in ordinary life can seem consistent with its devotees redemption. Thus, they inspire and inform certain kinds of actions. They can also, to be sure, be invoked in efforts to mask apparent inconsistencies between the activities of ordinary life and a "redeemed" life. Yet in either case, meanings of the redeemer symbolic provide legitimation.

To redeem is to take back or buy back something which has been misappropriated. According to Hogue, America's redeemer symbolic involves some axiological assumptions that are fateful in the day-to-day life of its devotees. In a nutshell, these Americans have supposed, and continue to suppose, that the drama of the divine work of redemption is contracted to the span of select individuals' lives, and consequently the work can be enacted by the political community they compose. Thus, for the community of the redeemed to perform their redemption, they need to enact for themselves the taking back of things that have been misappropriated, that is, things as yet "unredeemed." And from whom shall they take them? From their misappropriators, of course – "unredeemed" persons, peoples, and creatures. Between the redeemed and the unredeemed, definite political separations can and should be made, which cut through a more textured social and economic fabric. So, a political theology emerges to underwrite a politics that all but demands the expropriation of others deemed unredeemed (which is to say, "un-American"). Thereby the community of the redeemed may, over and over, reappropriate its redemption, which is to say, realize its righteous nationhood.

On the one hand, then, Hogue suggests the axiology embedded in the redeemer symbolic requires extracting value from whatever, or whomever, is unredeemed and crediting it to the redeemer. Failing that, the unredeemed must be radically devalued, even through destruction. How this is imagined, though, is that the others' misappropriation already effected the devaluation – in principle, at least, everything belongs to God – so whatever is somehow alienated from God is imagined worthless; thus, the work of redemption restores and repristinates the valuable order of things.

On the other hand, the axiology of the redeemer symbolic disposes its devotees to externalize the requisite costs of their redemption upon others than themselves. Hence, rather than a call to self-reformation or transfor-

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6)   Hogue, *American Immanence*. My discussion of this book (largely limited to its first chapter) falls somewhere between re-presentation and a reconstruction in light of my own concerns. I do not try to distinguish too carefully between Hogue's precise statements and the connections I draw.

mation, redemption is imagined a kind of "cheap grace," had by the redeemed at the expense of whomever they would cut out of the social-economic fabric of life. The archetypal act of their redemption is a supernatural *fait accompli*. Thus, the redeemer symbolic structures the religious imaginary for which God – and an American community imagined in God's stead[7] – gets to be absolutely unique; "exceptional" in the community of being or of nations, and that same religious imaginary for which the world, correlatively, is rightly God's – in God's stead, righteous America's – tributary, an object of condescending love and/or jealous wrath.

The "world" in this imagining is not only the other nations of the world. It does include the other nations of the world, inasmuch as they have not received, let alone been redeemed to, the supernatural calling of righteous America. It includes also, for that same reason, many American citizens. And it may extend to the wildernesses of the natural world altogether. Heidegger's view, that being modern involves learning to perceive nature as standing in reserve, apart from human projects yet meaningful only as it may be harnessed to them, does not go far enough. The redeemer symbolic; has potential imaginative space for the perception of nature as a self-willed world, has space even for perceiving human will as an expression of nature's willing, but then forms such perceptions in keeping with an understanding that they represent fallen, unredeemed willing. Being self-willed – being wild – is worthless, even wicked; if it is to have value, it must be through being subjugated to the redeeming will of the righteous.[8] In sum, Hogue writes:

> Through the logic of the redeemer symbolic, the dominant American theopolitical tradition sanctifies the externalization of its environmental, social, cultural, and economic costs, and throughout American history, and into the present, these costs have disproportionately impacted the most vulnerable, the religious outsiders, the racially exploited, the socially marginalized, other species, the land, and the atmosphere. By extracting the value of labor, land, and life from the most vulnerable people and places, the redeemer symbolic turns the externalization of cost into the unavoidable price of American exceptionalism.[9]

Hogue does not claim totality for his thesis, nor need he. Numerous factors besides those woven into this theopolitical imaginary function in the religious legitimation of climate negligence in the United States of America. However, Hogue's thesis does help to understand – and resist – how climate negligence has attained dogmatic status among many white U.S. evangelicals through, at least in part, a quasi-transcendental depreciation of wilderness effected by the redeemer symbolic.

On the one hand, what value they could find wilderness to hold has to be anthropocentric (indeed, America-centric or even more narrowly centered). Thus, their apprehension of the self-willing of wilderness has been dim and degraded. Wilderness appears to exist to be expropriated. Or, at least, their apprehension of the subjectivity of wild things has been weak enough to be repressed in the name of redemption.[10] On the other

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7) Hogue suggests that in the present discursive moment, "America" functions mainly as a metonym for *laissez faire* capitalism. See ibid., 49–50.

8) The link, etymological and arguably ontological, between being self-willed and being wild (in contrast to a sphere of domesticity wherein human will dominates) has a classic statement in Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, particularly 1–7.

9) Hogue, *American Immanence*, 72.

10) So, for example, McKibben's well-known trope of the "End of Nature" is inappropriate, because there never was a *beginning* of "Nature" in the sense he gives it: "Nature has always been domestic in relation to the deity. Climate, as just another feature of creation, lies under the sovereign control of God. Thus, climate change is no crisis because … because God has promised never to bring destruction upon the whole earth; or because … the earth is destined for destruction to make way for a new heaven and a new earth. Various mytho-logical reasons are adduced from scripture." See Saleha and Szasz, "Why Conservative Christians Don't Believe

hand, wilderness has appeared as an ever-empty receptacle of no intrinsic value into which the costs of being redeemed may be externalized without consequence. In this case, the style of life to which the community of the redeemed has grown accustomed may be said to be predicated on the misapprehension of undomesticated nature as a "magical land of Away": no-one really cares where "Away" is, or what it is like, just so long as their trash goes there.[11]

Thus, it may fairly be said that "Conservative Christians whatever 'official' denomination they belong to, constitute one of the core demographic foundations for climate skepticism—or, more properly, denialism—in the United States today."[12] Indeed, survey data from 2014 found that thirty nine percent of white evangelical Protestants in the Unites States are skeptical of climate change, making them the religious group most likely to be climate change skeptics. Moreover, Marisa Ronan in 2017 documents how American evangelicals have "increasingly become organized in their resistance to efforts to address climate change and... . found success in creating pathways to impact public policy."[13]

Admittedly, the two "hands" indicated above overly simplify matters. They do not distinguish between, for instance, official statements by institutional bodies representing evangelicals and declarations or petitions by lay individuals and groups. Moreover, there is debate among and about evangelicals in the United States; how representative any statement purportedly made on their behalf can be. More important still, a transformative shift seems to be underway within the general movement, led by young people, against climate negligence.[14]

Recognizing these complicating factors; it is important to recall that the present purpose is not to reach a disposition of some charge for or against U.S. white evangelicals *directly*. I do not pretend to refute their climate negligence. On the ground, especially, the "denialism" involved is not susceptible to refutation.[15] My aim, rather than to reach a formal judgment, is to resource ways of "getting around" the preoccupation of public space by the redeemer symbolic – least around its superempowerment of its devotees to block frank discussion and constructive action in response to climate change. The aim – to change the formation of discourse in public space, a space of both reasons and actions – is hopeful disruption: an effort to "capture speech" from discursive formation in the politically prevalent imaginary and to begin to articulate, at least *indirectly*, resources for a culture capable of intelligent, courageous response to the climate crisis without requiring (as climate "skeptics" often do) absolute proof not only of the problems but of proposed solutions, too.[16]

This is not nearly so bold and systematic an approach as Hogue's redirection of American political theology and theopolitics to its neglected immanental tradition. (Indeed, as the climate change emergency accelerates, one wonders whether it constitutes an "approach" at all, or is mere poeticizing.) However, I share Hogue's emphasis that the vulnerability of faith that does without a supernatural *fait accompli* taps another

in Climate Change," 25. Nicholls offers a first-person (ex-)evangelical's explanation of climate negligence in "What's Really behind Evangelicals' Climate Denial?," That the phenomenon does not appear exclusively in the United States is evidenced in "Far-right populists and climate policy: An attempt to move the goalposts." McKibben's contemporary classic is *The End of Nature*.

11) As memorably explained by Addleman, a former vice-president with the American company, Waste Management. See Kirkos, *Trashed*.

12) Saleha and Szasz, "Why Conservative Christians Don't Believe in Climate Change," 21 [19–30].

13) Ronan, "Religion and the Environment," 92.

14) Stover, "Evangelicals for climate action." Gander, Wilkinson and Veldman, "What Do Evangelical Christians Really Think About Climate Change?" See also a vigorous first-person evangelical voice is that of climate scientist, Hayhoe, for example "Caring About Climate Change Is the Christian Thing to Do."

15) This is, of course, implied in the claim to have excavated a structured imaginary that predisposes participants in respect of what they can perceive as valuable. Although, see Hayhoe, Bloom, and Webb, "Changing Evangelical Minds on Climate Change."

16) De Certeau, *The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings*. See also de Certeau's "The Revolution of the 'Believable'."

sort of power. With Hogue, I suppose that shared vulnerability is a wellspring of resilience, and that confidence – a reflective, mutual trust born of resilience – inspires an experimental or fallibilistic approach to the inevitable risk-taking required for living well-being.

Countering the Redeemer Symbolic: Where Are the Wild Things?

An account of resilience born of shared vulnerability is intimated also in psychoanalytic insights provided by D.W. Winnicott. Winnicott is celebrated for his investigations into the generation of what he named "transitional space" and the accompanying use of "transitional objects." These phenomena arise originally between the infant child and the good-enough mother, but with satisfactory development continue to give rise to the whole creative field of culture. The importance of transitional phenomena, as personal-cultural resources for "getting around" otherwise intractable obstacles to creative development, offers a way of linking Hogue's political theological critique of the redeemer symbolic and my cultural psychological critique with arguably less arbitrariness than the sheer abduction that there is some analogy between us allows.

I turn, then, to the illustrated children's story, *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak. I read it here, via Winnicottian psychoanalysis, as a counter-fable to the plot of redemption as contoured within the confines of the redeemer symbolic. I read it as a story that presents, even celebrates, images of ultimacy which devotees of the redeemer symbolic repress in (their imagination of) living well-being as they strive for decisive power over the cultural field.[17] Given the discursive formation of those devotees in, especially, U.S. evangelical Christianity, I will allude to repressed images of "God" in what follows. But the agenda item is really living well-being on the planet.

I confess, I love *Where the Wild Things Are*, and best of all reading it with my children when they were small. We had, and still have, a hardcover edition in heavy paper. How we liked to turn those big pages: the illustrations of Max making mischief of one kind and another, fraying his mother's last nerve until he is sent to bed without eating anything; the wonder of Max's room turning into a forest and the walls becoming the world all around; his voyage in and out of weeks and almost over a year. When Max arrives where the wild things are, we would roar our terrible roars and gnash our terrible teeth and roll our terrible eyes and show our terrible claws, too. We are right there among them. Then, in the end, like Max, we remember anew how good it is to be where someone loves us best of all. So we set sail, over a year and in and out of weeks and through a day, to come back home, where Max's supper is waiting for him, and it is still hot.

How does Max do these marvelous things? How do we share in them with him? How have we traveled, there, where the wild things are? Of course, we go in imagination – if, that is, we are sensitive to their touch *on* our imagination. Then Sendak's word- and picture-images can become vessels – like Max's little boat – by which we enter into another world. This other world has some unusual characteristics. For one, it is not a place in the world we share as a matter of fact. It is not some place where any of us could, and some of us might actually, happen to be – like Timbuktu or Tennessee. We cannot know where it is relative to the Equator, say, or to

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17) Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are*. Sendak was born in 1944 in Brooklyn, New York, the child of Polish Jewish refugees. He recalled his childhood self as afflicted by the death of many of his extended family in the Holocaust. The book won the Caldecott Medal in 1964 for most distinguished American picture book for children, notwithstanding concerns expressed by some psychologists and reviewers. An interesting discussion comes from Shafer, "Maurice Sendak's Thin Skin." A reviewer for *Eidos. A Journal for Philosophy of Culture* raised a question, what Sendak's Jewish identity has to do with the critique of American white evangelical Christianity, wondering whether perhaps his Judaism stands in antithesis to the redeemer symbolic? To address this good question would have involved working yet another strand of investigation into an already complicated essay. So, although the question deserves consideration, I have not tried to answer it here.

my kitchen. We do not and cannot know how things actually were, there where the wild things are, when Max had not yet arrived, or what they have been like actually since he left.

This is just to say that it does not make sense to take the story as an attempt to accurately recount events that take place without our imaginative participation. If that did make sense, then obviously, we would have to say that Sendak probably has the facts wrong. His story, we would have to say, seems pretty implausible. "Those wild things," we would say, "they just do not seem very *convincing*." We might suspect that, actually, the wild things are nothing at all. What a strange response, though! If we take the measure of the story to be its degree of faithfulness to "the facts" agreed upon by the public (or imposed by a politically superempowered faction), then it is not Sendak, but *we* who are mistaken.

Where the Wild Things Are calls into existence – calls *us* to coexist with – a world of its own. This world of the text, the world proposed *by* the text, enables us to take distance on our actual lives and imagine them otherwise, too. However, the world of the text is not a parallel universe. It is not another possible life, an escapist route away from the actualities of this life. It is not, let us say, a realm of *alternative facts* – to borrow a hot political term. The modality is different. Some years ago, Paul Ricoeur said it this way: "Through fiction and poetry, new possibilities of being-in-the-world are opened up within everyday reality. Fiction and poetry intend being, not under the modality of being-given, but under the modality of power-to-be."[18]

D.W. Winnicott's theory of transitional objects and transitional space attends with great sensitivity to power-to-be. The world of *Where the Wild Things Are*, that is, that world *where* the wild things are, instantiates space that emerges originally between good-enough mothers and their babies, as an "intermediate area of *experiencing* to which inner reality and external life both contribute."[19] This space is a mutual matrix of creation: "if all goes well," the phenomena taking place within it permit the infant the "use of illusion" which will afford it capacity to transition from infantile self-absorption to shared and shareable experience (PR, 14–15).

Further, though, Winnicott maintains that transitional phenomena are crucial to well-being over the whole human life course. He states that "the task of reality acceptance is never completed, … no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality." However, this strain is relieved by "an intermediate area of experience… which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.)," and which is "in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is 'lost' in play." Thus, transitional space "throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work" (PR, 18–19).

Thus, transitional space is identifiable as the "location of cultural experience"; indeed, in a paper with that title, Winnicott introduces the term "potential space" as a near-synonym for transitional space, to highlight its generative, cultivable quality. By this same quality, transitional space may be called "the place where we live" – and where we may truly come alive (PR, 128–139, 140–148). My stipulation above that "living well-being" is the salient referent of "God" aspires to condense these themes in Winnicott's theory.

Sendak's story of Max's unruly imaginative play is a story about transitional space; about power-to-be – about potential for living well-being.[20] At the beginning of the story, running amok in his wolf suit, Max is at that world's edge. Testing the prosaic limits of his mother's household, he plays brinksmanship with her until, exasperated by Max's mischief, she cries, "WILD THING!" Then Max is over the edge and goes all in: "I'LL EAT

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18) Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation," 142.

19) Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 3. Hereafter referred to with an in text citation as PR and the page number.

20) I am refraining from an analysis of my and my children's use of the story (indeed, the book – that is, our copy of it) as a transitional object. Again, I mean to concentrate on interpreting Max's journey to and from where the wild things are as a fable of contemporary theopolitical costs to life of the redeemer symbolic.

YOU UP!" he roars. Well, that does it. The peace of the household is broken. Max's mother lays down the law. She sends Max to bed, without anything to eat. Playtime is over; or so it might appear – except that Max is just getting started. It might seem that hard facts have defeated Max's fantasy; that his mother's decisive hand has repressed his uprising against strict parental rule. Max, though, takes up those constraints and turns them into an opportunity for adventure. He sets sail in his private boat into even more unruly imaginative territory: that very place where the wild things are.

We are being shown something special here, if we care to see. Max's adventure opens up a way for him to both defy parental punishment and accept it. On the one hand, Max refuses to be held captive against his will. This is the story of a great escape; a triumph of discontent over civilization. On the other hand, even in making his escape Max as much as admits the justice of his mother's accusation: he could go anywhere his imagination can take him – and he goes to join the wild things. Indeed, Max is crowned king of all wild things. Now his rule is fierce – he excites the wild things to collective, effervescent revelry; but his rule is also brief. When the frenzy wears off, Max discovers he has had enough of the wild things. Like his mother did him, he sends them off to bed without their supper. Then something new, revelatory even, happens: Max gains insight that was simply inaccessible to him through the disjuncture between external life and inner reality back home. He sees into how punishing him might feel to his mother. Paradoxically, in his empathy he feels lonely and wants to be where someone loves him best of all.

The quality or mood of Max's loneliness is ambiguous and ambivalent. In an important paper, Winnicott contrasts sheer aloneness with a developing "capacity to be alone"; to enjoy solitude, for which the basis is "experience of being alone while someone else is present."[21] Winnicott proposes that being alone bears different psychological-existential moods due, at least in part, to differing developmental achievement in individuals. He illustrates the claim with an analysis of the phrase, "I am alone." Mere "I" implies establishment of the individual over against an exterior; it is a "topographical statement" of the possibility of an internal world, but with as yet no reference to living. "I am" indicates that the individual "not only has shape but also life" under the protection of a maternal figure preoccupied with its ego-needs. The passage from "I am" to "I am alone" is fraught: "In the beginnings of 'I am' the individual is (so to speak) raw, is undefended, vulnerable, potentially paranoid." The further stage requires an "appreciation on the part of the infant of the mother's continued existence." This appreciation need not be conscious apprehension. However, the development of "I am alone" from "I am" depends upon the infant's "awareness of the continued existence of a reliable mother whose reliability makes it possible for the infant to be alone and to enjoy being alone, for a limited period." Thus, "the capacity to be alone is based on the experience of being alone in the presence of someone, and… . without a sufficiency of this experience the capacity to be alone cannot develop."[22]

Max's loneliness and longing should be understood, I suggest, to signify appreciation of, and desire for, solitude. They are the psychological-existential moods that color an exercise of his capacity to be alone. That the exercise becomes possible owes to his expedition into transitional space, albeit as an expedition which began much in the mood of a paranoid escapade.[23] At last, he is ready to give up being king of where the wild

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21) Winnicott, "The Capacity to Be Alone," 30.

22) Ibid., 33.

23) In discussing the oral presentation of an earlier version of this paper, Przemysław Bursztyka, of the University of Warsaw, wondered whether Max's is not rather more straightforwardly a case of paranoia than of Winnicottian transition. Max's abrupt sending of the wild things to bed without any supper seems like it could well support such a view, and thereby undermine the interpretation I am offering in appreciation of wildness. It must suffice here to say that, of course, the story on the page very much underdetermines my interpretation, which, to repeat, I offer in the mode of a fable by which to criticize a religious imaginary and the political theology its adherents have promoted.

things are, and to return home. So, despite the wails of the wild things, Max sails back, "over a year and in and out of weeks and through a day / and into the night of his very own room where he found his supper waiting for him / and it was still hot." This passage, and the final illustration that accompanies it, compose a touching image of the end of Max's exploring: to discover that he has been, and can again be, alone in the presence of his good-enough mother.

The stakes at risk in whether that discovery will be made are high. According to Winnicott, "It is only when alone (that is to say, in the presence of someone) that the infant can discover his own personal life. The pathological alternative is a false life built on reactions to external stimuli." At length, he continues:

> When alone in the sense that I am using the term, and only when alone, the infant is able to do the equivalent of what in an adult would be called relaxing. The infant is able to become unintegrated, to flounder, to be in a state in which there is no orientation, to be able to exist for a time without being either a reactor to an external impingement or an active person with a direction of interest or movement. The stage is set for an id experience. In the course of time there arrives a sensation or an impulse. In this setting the sensation or impulse will feel real and be truly a personal experience.
>
> It will now be seen why it is important that there is someone available, someone present, although present without making demands; the impulse having arrived, the id experience can be fruitful, and the object can be a part or the whole of the attendant person, namely the mother. It is only under these conditions that the infant can have an experience which feels real. A large number of such experiences form the basis for a life that has reality in it instead of futility.[24]

Fable and Counter-Fable

In lashing out on his voyage, Max both defies and accepts the justice of his mother's charge. In the end, transitional play gives him the power to, as it were, unlash and resecure the binding ties of underlying facts. It is true, Max *is* wild. So wild, in fact, that he fractures his relationship with his mother. What unruly imagination breaks, though, it can also repair. More than a fantasy of refusing or affirming the world as it is and must be, the place where the wild things are is also a world of reintegration, even re-creation. There, Max can run wild without repression, not sacrificing his wildness but playing it out. Home was too confining – too *domestic*, we should say – for Max to feel "at home." Now Max is ready – not just ready, but *readied* – to return home, and be at home, as he could not before. Now, Max can come home anew, understanding that the maternal love embraces even his wildness.

Sendak calls children – and older readers like me, pressed by routine and respectability – to come play. In this regard, his story reminds me of the one about Jesus of Nazareth chiding his disciples' stern discipline of the young ones brought to him for blessing and, instead, inviting all those around him to "let the little children come to me." (Matthew 19:13–14) The episode seems so candid, and the figure of Jesus so unusual in its sympathy and respect for children's experience. One can imagine this Jesus who welcomes the wild little ones, and teaches others to appreciate them, too, as a reflection of, and invitation to, living well-being in a world in which wildness is not merely irrepressible, but welcomed.

All too often, devotees of the politically prevalent religious imaginary in the US imagine living well-being only in ways that fit with the start of Sendak's story or its end. On the one hand, they imagine as God a stern

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24) Winnicott, "The Capacity to Be Alone," 34.

even persecutory parent, that says "NO!" when we get wild, and that will punish us harshly, sending us off to bed everlastingly without anything to eat forever, as it were. On the other hand, they all too often imagine as God a pathologically more-than-good-enough mother that serves to supply them with a hot supper and to sweep everything else under the rug – even if they *have* been making mischief of one kind and another. (Consider the durability of U.S. white evangelicals' support for Trump, despite all.) Of course, many assert that both images of God are correct, and that what makes the difference between experiencing God as one or the other is whether we have been good boys and girls or, instead, wild things.

In this case, what the redeemer symbolic drives out of imaginability is wildness in God and God in wildness. It makes nigh-impossible recognition of, let alone reverence for, intrinsic value to wild things – value which is without need of redemption, and which is desecrated when treated as a worthless receptacle for externalizing every cost of the way of life of the redeemed. I suggest, then, that Hogue's redeemer symbolic interprets a kind of shared cultural-psychological complex expressed in a political-theological paranoia. This complex is bred of a shared failure to learn how to be alone with really – which is to say, *wildly* – different others. Incapable of using unruly illusion to inhabit transitional space, with its creative potential for living well-being, devotees of the redeemer symbolic tend to experience a life that (to reverse Winnicott's formulation) has futility in it instead of reality.

Among the tragic flaws of the redeemer symbolic is that the biggest God it permits its devotees to imagine is one that conforms and constrains them to be smaller, tamer, more domesticated selves. The religion it shapes has no place for a God that can share in Max's wildest dreams, or in ours. The political theology it supports offers no place for our most daring imaginings of living well-being, nor of how the wider, wilder, self-willed world, makes them possible. All too often, this religion enshrines a politics that demands domestication of the entire body politic. Thus, its devotees cannot begin to conceive a community with all wild things. Perhaps their God, or they in God's stead, shall build a wall – to keep the spoils of redemption from the unredeemed and irredeemable. Certainly, this would facilitate the process by which, political scientist Waleed Aly observes, "once people [not to mention other-than-human others] are invisible, they become mythological beasts. Their lives, their attitudes, their aspirations all become figments of our imagination."[25]

Living Well-being

When it comes to this world (I ask the reader, look up from the page for a moment and look around you: *this* world), where we try to make sense of something like the stories of our lives, the situation is urgent. It is no secret that we live in a time of ecological emergency. And it is no secret, either, that we live beset by powers that continue to take whatever is wild – even what is untamed in us – and turn it for a short-term profit benefitting just a few – even if it ruins the world. Living in the middle of an accelerating emergency can be confusing. For, living well-being is not to be had strictly within a realm of "the facts," as if ready-made for redemption (as if withheld from the unredeemed). Living well-being is rather a reflection of the power(s) of our being. Then, if we can *live well-being* it will be in some penultimate and provisional way, by way of beings that let us be well – beings that are not just *there*, but not just *not there* either – beings analogous to (or precisely?) the kind of things Winnicott names transitional objects, in transitional space.

Whoever would live well-being must *imagine* how it is to live well-being, trusting to an image, or images, while also distrusting any to deliver a final word. All such images have a vagueness and an ambiguity with which we must deal. None will free us from the intellectual and moral burden of having to interpret what or who we

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25) Aly, "Thirty years after the Berlin Wall came down, new walls are rising up."

might be. Yet, the burden is a gift, since it means we are capable of taking – and sharing – responsibility for our images. That is, having to rely on images engages us responsibly with deep (normative) well-being. Sooner or later, and inevitably, we make decisions about how we understand, enact, and live well-being. Thus, our images do not cut us off from the depth of well-being (and, that is, from one another). They connect us. Our connections may be fallible interpretations rather than final knowledge. Nevertheless, they are real.

This essay has attempted to understand why U.S. Christian evangelicals who take themselves to be white, more than those of any other religious movement in the United States, are deeply invested in denying the emergency of anthropogenic climate change and in obstructing action to address anthropogenic climate change. Using the psychoanalytic theory of D.W. Winnicott, the essay developed an interpretation of Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* as a counter-fable to the plot of what Michael Hogue has called the "redeemer symbolic." The redeemer symbolic is a name for the world-constructing imaginary that forms the politically prevalent form of U.S. evangelicalism today. I have suggested that this formative discourse functions as a kind of shared cultural-psychological complex, which afflicts its adherents with an incapacity to imagine – and so to live – well-being within a world of wildly different others. Adherents externalize the costs of this incapacity, by imposing them upon the wildly different others, not least the wild, self-willed natural world exceeding human control. In our time of climate emergency, religion that discursively forms adherents in such practices must be checked. The diagnosis of the redeemer symbolic offered here may help to release devotees from its power (although I think this unlikely), but it at least affords space to "get around" it to those who would get on with effective action in response to climate change in particular, and for the sake of human well-being in nature in general.

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