Horror, Evil, and Interreligious Dialogue: A Theological Analysis of *Gideon Falls* (First Story Arc: Issues 1-6)

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This article examines theological themes (both theodicy and examples of interfaith dialogue) through my analysis of the comic book, *Gideon Falls*. In Ignatian Spirituality, there is a search and celebration of God in all things. As Michael Barnes writes: "Once that truth becomes rooted in the heart, as a foundational principle that grants entry into the many religious and cultural boundaries that criss-cross our fascinating, yet tortured world, everything begins to speak of the *possibility of grace*"[1]. From the perspective of Catholic sacramental theology, all of creation can be a sign and symbol of God as creator and redeemer[2]. Unfortunately, though, the problem of theodicy, even if one tries to distinguish between moral and natural evils, still lurks and undermines easy salvific claims[3]. However, the point here is not that the challenge to belief or the existence of God can seem totalizing, but that the religious turn claims that the presence of God is universal and

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1. M. Barnes, *Ignatian Spirituality & Interreligious Dialogue*, Messenger Publications, Dublin 2021, p. 16.

2. See Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, §9, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html. From a Christian Orthodox and ecotheology perspective, see J. Chryssavgis, *Creation as Sacrament Reflections on Ecology and Spirituality*, Bloomsbury, London 2019.

3. For my account of theodicy, see my *Amidst Mass Atrocity and the Rubble of Theology: Searching for a Viable Theodicy*, Cascade Books, Eugene, OR 2012. For an examination of how so-called natural evils are enmeshed in moral evils and the question of anthropodicy –where is humanity in the midst of evils?– see J. Sobrino, *Where Is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, and Hope*, transl. Marg. Wilde, Orbis, Maryknoll 2004.

that all of creation can serve as a springboard and microscope for moral and theological searching and embodiment. Moreover, just as religious texts, especially the Bible, are replete with various literary forms and genres, the fusion of literature and theology has a long, though at times agonistic history[4]. Therefore, even as the establishment of the academic discipline of literature was initially set-up as a counter, or separate space, to theology, more recent times have established and celebrated the inherent interdisciplinary and intersectional nature of theology, encouraging various academic combinations like theology and ethnology/anthropology[5] or for our purposes here, theology and comics studies. As Matthew Ichihasi Potts writes in his theological account of forgiveness through literary novels: "This is a book of theology, but it is also a book of literary interpretation. Another way of saying this is that I am writing theology in the margins of literary texts"[6]. Similarly, I am writing theology in the gutters, the space between panels on a comic page.

But why comics studies[7]? This is not the space to try to justify the established discipline of academic comics studies with its already recognized academic books, journals, journal articles, and conferences. Linked to but separate from film studies and video game studies, this increasingly popular discipline is richly interdisciplinary. As narrative, both visual and verbal, comics play particularly well to moral and theological readings (regardless of any explicit or implicit theological aims of its creators). Comics, like television shows, plays, or films, invite and reward theological readings and interpretations. Broadly speaking, comics

4. For a helpful text on the Bible as literature, see, for example, R. Alter and Fr. Kermode (eds.), *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1987; and for a seminal anthology on the combined academic fields of theology and literature, see A. W. Hass, D. Jasper, and El. Jay (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of English Literature and Theology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2009.

5. See, for example, T. Whitmore, *Imitating Christ in Magwi: An Anthropological Theology*, Bloomsbury, London 2019.

6. M. Ichihasi Potts, *Forgiveness: An Alternative Account*, Yale, New Haven 2022, 11.

7. See, for example, Ch. Hatfield and B. Beaty (eds.),*Comics Studies: A Guidebook*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick 2020; M. J. Smith, M. Brown, and R. Duncan (eds.), *More Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*, Routledge, New York 2020; and on religion and comics, see D. A. Lewis and Chr. Hoff Kraemer (eds.), *Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books & Graphic Novels*, Continuum, New York 2010.

studies examines the narrative combination of visual, sequential art, usually, but not always accompanied by written texts (some comics may tell their story solely with visual images and clues with no employment of dialogue or narration). From newspaper comic strips like *Peanuts* or *Calvin and Hobbes*, monthly comic books (typically today of about 20 pages not counting ads) or what came to be called graphic novels in the 1990s, the Global comics Book Market, especially including Japanese manga, are a multi-billion dollar industry[8] that suffuses all topics and themes, achieving popular, critical, and cult classic status. In Holocaust Studies, for example, think of the acclaim today of *Maus* or *New York Times* bestseller and critical hits like *Persepolis* or *Saga*.

While some comics are specifically produced for children, or all-ages, others are for adult-eyes only, and regardless of the category, comics at their best contain hard-edged, complicated, and morally ambiguous story lines and characters, told through and with visual and artistic acumen, that demand the same kind of attention and scholarly care as one would use to analyze a novel by Dickens or Dostoevsky. The main difference is while a Dickens' novel may have an accompanying illustration from Phiz (Hablot Knight Browne), the main focus is the printed word and some versions may have no illustrations at all. Comics, on the other hand, are a visual medium that also, as noted, but not always, include textual components. Not surprisingly, it has its own lexicon from terms like gutter or bleed[9] and involves a form of reading that is not only tactile (in holding the comic and turning the page) but involves eyes pouring over and interpreting visual texts with literary and narrative texts and dialogue, dependent upon awareness of differences in font sizes, styles, and colors (usually linked to character distinctions), page layout, art form or medium employed within the issue (again this can vary depending on the plot or thematic aims), and other factors[10].

8. See, for example, R Salkowitz, "2021 Comic Sales Were 'Up, Up And Away,' At A Record $2 Billion," Forbes.com, 22 July 2022, https://www.forbes.com/sites/robsalkowitz/2022/07/05/2021-comic-sales-were-up-up-and-away-at-a-record-2-billion/?sh=3bfcb2b47320.

9. On comics terminology, see Er. La Cour, S. Grennan, and R. Spanjers Key (eds.), *Terms in Comics Studies*, Springer, Cham 2022.

10. For insightful essays on comics studies from a number of different disciplines like

In this article, I examine theological themes in the first six issues of *Gideon Falls* (titled the "Black Barn")[11]. This will include the comics' presentation of Catholic themes and imagery, especially through one of its main characters, a Catholic priest named Wilfred "Fred" Quinn, as well as two examples of interfaith dialogue. Beyond showcasing an example of how rich such a theological reading can be of a popular comic book, I also want to show how theological literacy is an essential tool that is often overlooked despite religion's ubiquity across the humanities and other disciplines.

Gideon Falls: Background and Context

Gideon Falls, The Eisner Award comic series published by Image Comics and created by Jeff Lemire (writer) and illustrator Andrea Sorrentino, with colors by Dave Stewart and letters and designs by Steve Wands, ran for 27 issues from March 2018 to December 2020. Somewhat like the upside-down world in *Stranger Things*, *Gideon Falls* contains a mirror world, replete with mostly nefarious and dark forces, but also involves time travel and a multiverse with multiple selves – though its basic core involves a handful of flawed but searching characters trying to redeem past failures and loss or find some meaning in an otherwise desultory life.

Two of the main character arcs are especially intertwined. The first involves Father Wilfred "Fred" Quinn, a middle-aged Catholic priest with a troubled past (see Figure 1) who has been sent by his bishop[12] to

law, theology, philosophy, and semiotics, see Th. Giddens (ed.), *Critical Directions in Comics Studies*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson 2020.

11. The color of the barn in thoughts and visions in *Gideon Falls* will slip between black and red. Colors as symbols are fraught today especially when viewed through a social justice or racialized lens that rightly challenges notions of white as purity and black as sinful or evil, while red –a white slur against Native Americans– stands for blood or gore. This is obviously all cultural and subjective, but sadly, if it was labeled "white barn" the horror aspect might be questioned or signal a different idea.

12. The Bishop is actually a future/alternative version of Father Wilfred from a parallel universe but this article will keep things fairly straight forward so those unfamiliar with the comic can follow the main outline.

the troubled town of Gideon Falls (located somewhere in the middle of America)[13]. The bishop claims it will give him some kind of direction or purpose. Wilfred obeys reluctantly to become the new pastor at Gideon Falls' Catholic Church, located on the outskirts of the city amidst farm pastures. Only upon his arrival does he find out that Gideon Falls has suffered from a series of travesties that soon envelop and entangle him. Even worse, he is soon blamed for the murder of the Church's caretaker.

Norton Sinclair, meanwhile, is a man in his mid-twenties who is obsessed with collecting pieces of trash he finds throughout the city landscape of Gideon Falls. He believes these pieces are revealing some hidden, dark truth. He also has a mysterious and clouded past. Because of his apparent psychosis, he is under the care of Dr Angie Xu, an Asian American psychiatrist. She will eventually come to believe in his visions. As a Buddhist, though, she provides an interesting perspective to the otherwise dominant Catholic symbolism and ideology (as I'll note below). Sherriff Clara Miller, a white woman in her early thirties, is haunted and guilt-ridden by the disappearance of her then younger brother when he was eight (issue 5). She has also since become estranged with their Father, Doc Sutton, who has since devoted his life to a mysterious group called The Ploughmen (dedicated to combatting the horrors and evil they believe threaten their town). Clara thinks all these stories of The Black Barn, evil, and The Ploughmen –along with the Catholic Religion– are nonsense. Her early discussions with Fr Wilfred will be discussed further below.

Gideon Falls and Catholicism

Before touching on scenes of theodicy and of interreligious dialogue, I want to highlight the pervasive Catholic iconography, symbolism, and

13. Though its name is never touched on in the book, Gideon is a prophet, military leader and Judge in the Tanach whose story is recounted in *Judges* 6-8. As there are no waterfalls in the comic, "falls" could be seen as a verb implying Gideon's fall (perhaps from heroism or grace). For an account examining the various interpretations and changes regarding Gideon in biblical criticism and history, see K. J. Murphy, *Rewriting Masculinity: Gideon, Men, and Might*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2019.

language throughout the comic and town named Gideon Falls, especially through the time traveller hero but also flawed man, Father Wilfred[14]. As an example of this Catholic surface, consider the titles of the trade paperbacks that collected the comics every five or six issues: "The Black Barn", "Original Sins", "Stations of the Cross", "The Pentoculus", "Wicked Worlds", and "The End". If someone were only given those six phrases, some combination of Christian and horror would likely be surmised, with the enigmatic and banal final book, "The End," conjuring up not just the closure of the story but in Christian terms of the Apocalypse or, more positively, the Telos from which Christian believers assert is their end, namely God[15].

Issue 1 of *Gideon Falls* begins with a man wearing a disposable facemask (before Covid and so "strange" in the West back then!) shifting through the garbage in search of various pieces and splinters of wood and bent nails, which he then labels and bottles in an apartment with multiple locks and padlocks. The apartment is strewn with papers on the floor or taped to the wall. Clearly, these images do not point to a sane individual, and even hint at some kind of possible killer. After the man stares at all the bottles lining his large bookcase, he sits down on his bed. In a series of five panels on the next page, broken up by gutters, is an image of him praying the Our Father. Eerily, though, in the top panel, where one expects to see his face, there is instead a red scratchy blob obscuring it. The panels below show the traces of his hands as they clasp together in prayer and he utters: "Amen". Suffused in greys and blood-red, the

14. In the comic, we don't learn the names of the main characters immediately. Full names are mostly revealed in the second issue; for example, we learn Wilfred's last name (Quinn) when he is addressed by the sheriff as a "person of interest" in a possible crime. We learn Dr. Angie Xu's name from a panel with her name outside her office door and Norton Sinclair's full name because Angie's secretary calls him by his full name when he interrupts Dr Xu's meeting with another client. Norton had fled to Dr Xu after his apartment is ransacked. Of course, names in the comic are arbitrary as Norton Sinclair is really Daniel Sutton, the eight-year old son of Doc Sutton and brother of Sheriff Clara Miller/Sutton, who has since been missing (and apparently trapped in a parallel universe).

15. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.2.7.8, Second and Revised Edition, 1920. Literally transl. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, Online Edition, Copyright © 2017 by K. Knight, https://www.newadvent.org/summa/2001.htm#article7.

opening pages, ending with a Lord's Prayer to establish his kingdom on earth by a man sifting through garbage for pieces of detritus, does not forebode well.

After the comic's splash title page, the scene shifts and so do the colors, now mostly pale yellows and greens. We are again confronted with Christian images and a profusion of crosses, from a rosary wrapped around a rear-view mirror in a car, to crosses on a priest's necklace and crosses on a wall in what appears to be a seminary. Crosses also seem to be framed in images of a windmill and an opening panel shot of a car driving through a road bisecting a cornfield, but which seems to form the vertical board of a cross with the horizontal board as the outlying town on the horizon (see Figure 2). However, just as the opening of the book mixed images of trash and detritus with the Lord's prayer, here we see it is a priest driving the car but one who reaches into his pocket for a sip from a flask – again foreboding problems if not hinting a past and present affliction.

After the panels showing a car driving and a priest drinking from a flask, the next page goes back in time. Time and timelessness, the past and an unfolding future trying to change the present, will be more recurring themes of the book. The scene then reveals the conversation the priest, Father Wilfred, has with his (as yet unnamed and visually obscured) Bishop. In the opening arc, we never see the face of the Bishop whose body profile is either cut off before the neck, viewed from the back, or is only signalled by dialogue bubbles during a phone conversation with Wilfred. The lack of a face parallels the image of Norton discussed earlier – and while we could turn to analyze the role of "the face" in Emmanuel Levinas, especially as an ethical turn to the Other, practically, in this context, Lemire and Sorrentino wanted to conceal the fact that the Bishop is another version of Father Wilfred. It is still worth noting that for Levinas, the face is the imperative obligation to accept the prior ethical responsibility we have for another – and often perpetrators try to conceal, cover over, or diminish the sacredness of the face which for Levinas, reminds them both of the inviolability of the other and what he would call a movement unto God[16].

16. On Levinas, see for example, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, transl. S. Hand,

Regardless of who this Bishop is, he is sending Father Wilfred to Gideon Falls despite the priest's objections. The claimed reason is the town has recently lost its pastor of 30 years, but Father Wilfred says he needs to stay at the seminary and teach, to keep busy, acknowledging he came back to the seminary because he had lost his way (issue 1)[17]. The Bishop mysteriously tells Father Wilfred his way must be through Gideon Falls. Note that language of "the way", while common in many world religions and worldviews (like Taoism or Buddhism) is also particularly resonant in the Gospels. The way of discipleship in following Jesus is a prominent theme of Mark's Gospel, for example[18], and could confer passages of Jesus as "the way, the truth, and the life"[19].

Flashing back to the present, a panel reveals a bus driver leaning against his bus and lighting his cigarette. In the same panel, there's a cross from the rosary dangling from a car mirror. The next page shows Father Wilfred, having driven past the bus driver, looking at him in the rear-view mirror. The bus driver inhales deeply on his now lit cigarette and then smiles an eerie, sinister-type grin – a teethless grin. In the final panel on the page, Father Wilfred sighs and mutters, "Christ Almighty," more a curse than a prayer – but again situating the dominant, if not ambiguous Catholic setting of the book. The smile will also become a trope of the main evil presence in the book, The Laughing Man, and indeed the bus driver, Joe Reddy, will be, or at this point already is, one of The Laughing Man's vessels. According to Doc Sutton, Joe Reddy was a good man and had been one of the Ploughmen who devoted their life against such evils. "It was the barn that made him do it!" (issue 5) Doc Sutton will later say regarding Joe's fall. Regardless of what causes the evil these individuals do, their history points to perhaps once intrinsically good individuals who are helpless and abandoned in the face of evil, again raising questions of the potency or truth of God and goodness.

Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD 1990; and *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-Other*, transl. M. B. Smith, Continuum, New York 2006; *Otherwise Than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, transl. A. Lingis, Duquesne UP, Pittsburgh, PA 1999.

17. The comic is not paginated in the monthly issues or paperback collections.

18. See Ch. Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* Orbis, Maryknoll 2008.

19. *John* 14, 6.

This religious ambiguity continues in the next few pages as Fr Wilfred arrives at his parish Church, which is reminiscent of a country church in Tuscany, isolated amidst fields and farmland. He is soon greeted by an older woman who identifies herself as "Gene Tremblay, Head of the Catholic Woman's League and Co-Chair of the Parish Council" (issue 1). It's fitting of course that women here play such a prominent role in the daily life of Gideon Falls' Catholic Church, even as they are prevented at present from becoming deacons or priests. Lemire and Sorrentino show their awareness of Catholic life and symbols.

Gene seems friendly and welcoming. Noticeably, she has a prosthetic hook for her right hand and is wearing a purple hoodie with a cat image – seemingly benign details that will crop up more nefariously later. Gene tells Wilfred she had cleaned the church and rooms and she and other women made sure there were plenty of meals stocked in the freezer and fridge. Their exchange turns frosty when Gene mentions she had been the main caretaker and helper in the parish house, but Wilfred curtly makes it clear that he prefers to do his own things for himself. As the old woman is initially sent on her way, likely upset that she can't continue her role as the main helper of the priest, he calls her back to inquire how the previous pastor (Father Tom) had died. She again is visibly upset, mentioning Father Tom had been like a father to her, and says she'd rather not talk about it. Again, ambiguity, a tone of impending doom, and melancholy pervade the scene. She leaves saying she'll see him at mass. A panel then shows Father Wilfred looking out his kitchen door perhaps at the retreating old woman while the panel includes a dialogue bubble (in the shape of a square not the typical circle). This subtle change in form signals the phrase is spoken in a different narrative context. This square dialogue bubble imposed in the panel with Fr Wilfred has the words: "Do you believe in evil?"– something not technically said by Father Wilfred but a perennial question and concern of the book. Until readers look up at the next panel on the next page, they don't know who says the words or the context. But serving as a bridge, the phrase and the panel (like the Barn itself) could this be another connection between the world currently inhabited by Fr Wilfred and this parallel world with Norton and Dr Xu. In fact, it is Norton who asks this question to his psychiatrist.

God and Theodicy in a Manichaean World

Gideon Falls posits a Manichean world[20], where forces of underground evil unleash a power that on the surface seems insurmountable. Although it can seem as if the language and worldview of Catholicism is painted as dominant, dig deeper and the comic seems to show the emptiness of the viability of such faith (or that all we have is each other, not any Higher Power). But as I'll briefly discuss in the conclusion, this is open to interpretation. The presence of evil though is real.

In terms of theodicy, a topic I have written much about, including a book in 2012, and most recently while examining evil in the "Kraven the Last Hunter" arc in various Spider-Man books from 1987[21], it can be either the beginning or ending of religious relief. The extent of evil and suffering in our world, for many, overwhelms any possibility of viable faith. For others, theodicy itself –the attempt to justify the existence of evil and the omnipotence and omnibenevolence of God– is itself a perpetrator of evil, insensitive to some victims. In my version, theodicy is the attempt to argue for a still meaningful, but fractured faith, as I'll note again below.

Of course, theodicy has a long, and especially since the Shoah, mostly ignominious role, depending on what the theodist's aims, limits, and level of theological humility are – especially when performing and articulating such theology and theodicy in the context of what Irving Greenberg calls "the burning children"[22]. In such a context, which I

20. In the final volume of *Gideon Falls*, "The End," the creators include an extra section outlining and describing the world. In a text (with images) titled "The Inner Workings of Gideon Falls," written by Sorrentino, we read: "So, here's the structure of the Multiverse and how the Barn is supposed to move through it [...] there was a Center that was half good and half evil. When evil started to contaminate the good, the spectacular multiverse (the Gideonverse?) was born in a big explosion".

21. See P. Admirand, *Amidst Mass Atrocity and the Rubble of Theology: Searching for a Viable Theodicy,* Cascade Books, Eugene, OR 2012; and P. Admirand, "Tyger, Lamb, Spyder, Hunter: Kraven's Last Hunt and The Web of Theodicy". In: *Theology and Spiderman*, edited by G. Tsakiridis, chapter 2, Fortress Academic, Lexington, MD 2022.

22. Ir. Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity after the Holocaust". In: *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust*, ed. Ev. Fleischner, Ktav, New York 1977, pp. 7-55.

argue is not simply limited to the actual moment Elie Wiesel describes in his first moments of Auschwitz in his classic memoir, *Night*, the evil is a local, global, and individual reality for all of us. It encompasses the daily suffering experienced in the world which is always with us. You can't speak theologically as if such suffering has not and is not occurring. Even if ensconced in some supposedly safe, sterile space free from any suffering –perhaps like the young Buddha's early life in the palace– such is only a play and a hopeless attempt to keep death, aging, and suffering away. While I argue that the magnitude and depth of "useless suffering," to take Levinas' phrase[23], or "useless knowledge" accrued from such suffering, to take Shoah survivor Charlotte Delbo's phrase[24], limits and undermines much theodic aims and aspirations, I still believe it is possible to have some kind of viable theodicy. In my language, a fractured theological faith is built upon a fractured theodicy, one that is very much humbled, and necessarily interfaith –as the problem of evil and suffering clearly show the general failures of all institutional religions and ideologies, even as various individuals within those faiths and ideologies shine forth as moral exemplars, saints, generally good people[25].

Because it is relevant to the Catholic architecture within *Gideon Falls*, let me add a brief word on the Christian focus of Christ as the savior of the world, especially as these Gideon Fall Christians presumably also believe in Jesus as a counter to whatever evil force is lurking in this work and even as Christ is mostly invoked in the book through prayer/curses. Much depends on the kind of Christology promoted and how one envisions the cause and purpose of Christ's murder. Christ is traditionally deemed the innocent, sacrificial victim to end the grip of original sin, especially in Pauline and Augustinian readings, or was made incarnate as a human being to show us the way as in much

23. Em. Levinas, "Useless Suffering" (1982), in: *Entre Nous: Thinking of the Other*, transl. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav, Columbia University Press, New York 1998, pp. 91-101.

24. Ch. Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*, transl. R. C. Lamont, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT 1995.

25. For more on such humbling, see P. Admirand, *Humbling Faith: Brokenness, Doubt, Dialogue – What Unites Atheists, Theists, and Nontheists*, Cascade Books, Eugene, OR 2019.

Franciscan thought. For Christians, such a hope in Christ is manifest through a Christ-like life of moral goodness devoted to God, which since Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate*, could add that such a path was walked by earlier Jews living out Jesus' Jewish faith. Regardless, the Christ-figure is a common trope in comics and novels, and here both Wilfred and Norton, and others in the Ploughboys, can be seen as types of Christ figures, to some degree – certainly flawed, but committed disciples of Christ trying to combat suffering and evil. Here, the core Christian belief in redemption is maintained and signalled in the Christian notion of everlasting life, evidenced by Christ's resurrection that thus defeats the greatest evil of the world, death.

Returning to the problem of theodicy, there are many victims of horrendous evils. Recall Elie Wiesel, a devout Jew despite Auschwitz's sway until his death, who insisted that no justification for the evils of the Shoah will ever suffice at the level of humanity[26]. Think also of victims who remind us that no Job-like ending can alleviate the earlier suffering or that no voice, as was heard in the whirlwind in Job, was heard in the camps. And as Ivan Karamazov noted in *The Brothers Karamazov*, if someone thinks the perpetrator will suffer in hell, what good is such hell for the parent who had lost his child? The child will not return on account of such punishment of the perpetrator – and we also know anyway that many perpetrators are never tried[27].

In Gideon Falls, evil is a hidden but pervasive force, dominant in space-time and between worlds. If the analogy of Plato's cave was that we were only seeing false shadows of reality, in *Gideon Falls* the world around us is unreal unless we can see the dread and evil that are actually everywhere. As the problem of evil is particularly resonant in the Abrahamic faiths, it is interesting that its dominance in *Gideon Falls* is initially undercut through the first words spoken by Dr Angie Xu. As the scene detailed further above shifts from Wilfred in the rectory watching Gene walk away outside to the masked man from issue one's

26. See, for example, his Nobel Prize Lecture, December 11, 1986, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/1986/wiesel/lecture/.
27. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, transl. R. Pevear, and L. Volokhonsky, Vintage, London 2004, p. 245.

opening page[28], now sitting in a chair across from a woman, the man continues his question on evil – the one initially in a dialogue bubble in the panel with Wilfred but now confirmed coming from the sitting man–"Do you believe in evil?"– and the man then clarifies not just evil as abstract, but literal evil – "something or *someone* out there. Someone truly evil. And I feel like it's getting closer every day" (issue 1). Note that belief here is another early link between Wilfred and this masked man (Norton) but it's belief in the opposite of what they want to believe in; they are seeking God, but the presence of evil in their lives (or the perceived absence of God) is instead dominating their perceptions and fears.

Dr Xu asks the man, whom she addresses as Norton, if the question is linked with his obsession of searching through the trash. She reiterates that this is part of his "disease" that thinks it's something real now. He insists, however, that the "city's trash, it's really showing me things now…" (issue 1). As this troubled man had previously prayed the Our Father, and so we can presume he is Christian, what does it mean for him to say the city's trash is telling him something? Does he believe God is somehow communicating to him through trash – or is something more malignant doing so? And if God is speaking through rubbish and waste, what does this say of God? For liberation theologians, God is on the side of the poor and most marginalized – the so-called rubbish in some societal views – but Norton is talking about literal refuse. He explains he first thought he was just attracted sporadically to random pieces but as he collected and began systematizing them, he saw an order and so asks: "What if it's not God who is showing me these things? I'm worried it's the Devil" (issue 1). We then get our first instance of interfaith dialogue in the comic.

Interfaith Dialogue I: Buddhist-Christian Dialogue

It is at this point in the first issue that we get another perspective then these troubled and odd Catholic voices. Dr Xu interrupts and says:

28. Note the image of the man is upside down, the same structure used in the opening of issue 7 with young Daniel, an initial foreshadowing of their linked identity.

"I'm a Buddhist, Norton. I don't believe in the Devil" (issue 1). This basically cuts off any possible connection on the question and theme. For what seems a real possibility for Norton is simply not for Dr Xu[29]. As he stammers to interrupt her – "But" she insists on finishing her statement saying she had thought he had made sufficient progress warranting his release from the hospital, but now she is having doubts even as she insists she does not see him as a threat to himself or any other person. She then asks if he remembers "the exercises I gave you? The meditation techniques ?". While forms of meditation are common in many traditions, it is particularly resonant in Buddhist traditions, especially as promulgated in the Four Noble Truths and the eightfold path. If we think of Norton's disease as a craving – a thirst (dukka) for what does not exist, his recognition that such is ephemeral and passing is a first step in taking some kind of control on the reality around him and his own assessment and participation within that reality. As Dr Xu continues: "You can impose meaning on *anything* if you try hard enough, Norton. That doesn't make it *real*" (issue 1).

For Dr Xu, both as a Buddhist and a psychiatrist, the mind can impose any kind of narrative on events in life and then think it is a reality, so recognizing the impermanence of all things and identities, especially through an awareness of our interbeing-ness and connections, helps both to see the falseness around us while also encouraging us to take responsibility for what we see and how we see the world. For example, the Buddhist nun and professor, Ven. Karma Lekshe Tsomo asks her audience in one talk how many people want to be happy tomorrow or a year from now, and expecting the majority to answer yes, gently prods that how and whether we reach such a state of contentment is by a willed choice in how we choose to respond to the world around us, whether with joy, cynicism, anger, indifference, and so on[30]. Through meditation and training, Buddhists believe they can reach a state of

29. For a helpful essay on Buddhism and evil, see Ch. Wikramagamage, "Mara as Evil in Buddhism", in: *Evil and the Response of World Religion*, ed. W. Cenkner, Paragon House, St Paul, MN 1997, pp. 109-15.
30. Available as a Tedx talk here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xnLoToJVQH4.

inner equanimity and peace to enable them to respond with peace and nonviolence even to the chaos and roughness around us[31].

So Dr Xu tells Norton: "When these fantasies start you need to remember to ground yourself. Meditate, calm your mind and quiet your thoughts before they start to spiral. *You* are in control, Norton" (issue 1). Buddhist traditions recognize that the flutter of our restless mind is common – and some traditions stress concentration and focus to fight such wavering and others work with this restlessness to help envision these thoughts drifting away, breathing them out, to then help you find your center. Note Dr Xu's call and acceptance of being in control – perhaps the starkest difference here with the Catholicism painted to this point in the book – and perhaps in aspects of the religions themselves. Norton feels like he is a pawn in some bigger game of good and evil – but not sure which voice is calling him. He is praying for God to help him (as well as seeking help from Dr Xu). Likewise, Father Wilfred, evidently trying to find his way, and believing his way is in the Catholic Seminary where he is teaching, instead must apparently obey his bishop and become a pastor in a country parish – the opposite of what he wants. In Dr Xu's Buddhist framework, there is no God or Church or pope; we must take responsibility for our actions. We save ourselves as it were – even as the Buddha or sangha (community) may help us in our path – but ultimately it is our thoughts and actions that matter. Father Wilfred's choices seem more constrained.

Importantly, Norton is open to Dr Xu's advice –and yet despite his echoing of her words: "I am in control"– he cannot help himself from going back and picking up a nail that later catches his attention. This burden, this obsession, seems to be some kind of cross he is forced to carry, and an image of the nail in blood-red accentuates this sense of Christ nailed to the cross. The bent nail (like the bent Christ forced to carry the cross in Christian Stations of the Cross) also echoes in the next panel of a cityscape with a bent traffic light (showing red – or stop, naturally). But Norton can't seem to stop. Is this part of his obsession – being under the force of the Devil, or could the trash of the city be a

31. Dalai Lama, *How to be Compassionate: A Handbook for Creating Inner Peace and a Happier World*, edited and transl. Jeffrey Hopkins Rider, London 2011.

conduit for the voice of God somehow, a voice for good trying to show him the way (home)[32]?

As the intertwined narrative shifts back to Father Norton, panels are again suffused with crosses, from a cross on the village church to the cross-patterned windows and the cross-pattern shadow formed on the bedroom floor in the moonlight. Note also how the shadow of a beam of the cross flickers across a sleeping Father Wilfred in his single bed. Crosses again are everywhere, but no real rest or peace follows. He is awakened by a voice or apparition of an image of an older priest (presumably the previous –and supposedly dead– rector, Father Tom) in cleric garb bathed over in blood-red save for white pupil-less eyes. A half-naked Fr Wilfred stumbles out of bed, calling upon the presumed dead priest to say they can figure this out.

The next two pages, with alternating and connected panels, further elide the story of Fr Wilfred and Norton, with a panel of Fr Wilfred on top and an upside down panel of Norton below, their actions echoed even as their settings vary – the priest traipsing through a field late at night in search of some apparition of an apparently dead priest and Norton sitting at his desk, pouring over some artefacts he had found. Both are searching after apparently dead, discarded things. The panels are overladen with Norton's private journal entries stating he fears Dr Xu will make him go back to the hospital because she doesn't understand what he is doing and why he needs to do this – in his search for "the truth" (issue 1). While questions of the relevance of the Buddhist worldview depends on whether Norton is in fact sane or crazy in these images (so, too, as we'll see with Father Wilfred), interestingly Norton admits he wanted to tell her the full truth because she is the first person who really listened to her and was kind to her – traits not unique to Buddhism, but important to acknowledge in this interfaith context[33].

32. The barn is a doorway to his original world with his father and sister (though it also entails passing through levels of evil ruled by The Laughing Man).

33. On the types, themes, and kinds of interreligious or interfaith dialogue, see, for example, Catherine Cornille (ed.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-religious Dialogue*, John Wiley & Sons, Malden, MA 2013.

As the page again alternates in these mirroring panels between Fr Wilfred and Norton, Norton says he finally had a vision where he knows what it is he's seeking and trying to find, while Fr Wilfred looking up, sees what appears to be a black barn, the vision encased again in blood red. Below the panel showing Fr Wilfred staring at this barn, in an upside down panel, we see Norton's scrawled drawing of a red barn. While this juxtaposition and mirroring of the barn is a strange coincidence at best, what does this have to do with Norton's pervasive sense of gloom and the hinting of evil?

Such questions are immediately fanned and flamed when we see what Fr Wilfred had thought was a barn. Again anchoring the scene in Christianity, Fr Norton shields his face from seeing or smelling something foul, saying (again ironically in both meaning and in ambiguity as a curse or prayer) –"Sweet Jesus!" (Issue 1). Norton's diary entry continues to overlap the panels as he says he is not sure what his vision means but "knows it is bad". Norton says –and obviously his words now play out with what Fr Norton is currently seeing and likely thinking– he wanted to run away: "I spent the week cursing God. I just couldn't understand why he'd given me, of all people, this burden, this knowledge". As Father Wilfred is touching and surveying what appears to be blood on the grass and stalks, Norton, somewhere in his city landscape of Gideon Falls, then adds that he had another vision of the barn "but it was different. This time someone else was there with me. I couldn't see their face, but I felt them besides me" (issue 1). He then adds he's no longer scared, apparently comforted by not being alone. But who has been this other with him – God? The Devil? Dr Xu? And if the figure is Wilfred, then how to reconcile the peace Norton seemed to have with this other by his side and this apparently jaded, broken priest who has lost his way, and who now stands over the dead body of the Church caretaker, Gene.

Someone has killed her with her prosthetic hook, stabbing it into her chest, the image of the once pristine cat on her sweatshirt speckled with blood. Blood also trickles down her mouth as she lay supine. Interposed in the splash page showing her dead body, is another panel with Norton who ends his journal entry proclaiming: "There is no doubt that evil exists. I have seen it … But now I know that I don't have to face it alone" (issue 1).

Dr Xu had been adamant that there was no devil, but Norton feels surer than ever about the reality of evil, though he is not thinking about Gene's murder as at this point it isn't even clear the worlds connect. He has something else in mind, though for Father Wilfred, Gene's murdered body testifies to evil's power, even as the cause remains unknown. Could there be a possible connection between Fr Wilfred's rejection of Gene's warm welcome and her killing? Was his coldness towards her linked or involved in her killing? Would the woman not have lived if they had shared that offered cup of tea? Had not the priest failed the most basic act of hospitality both offered to and needed from him? Aside from Norton's claim that Dr Xu was kind to her –actions we haven't seen outside her professional courtesy towards him– where is God here, let alone any real hope?

Leaving aside the notion that Norton was never alone because some evil presence always hovered, soon enough Dr Xu also has a vision of the Reddish/Black Barn (in the middle of the city) as well as a vision of a smiling, bloody, bone-faced figure (issue 2, end) who she later describes to Norton as "the absence of light" and someone with "a terrible smile" (issue 3). In Christian terminology, Jesus is the light of the world[34]. Think also of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and hell as "darkness visible". Regardless, trying to find some meaning, Dr Xu seeks out Norton even as she is also sceptical of the veracity of what she supposedly saw. Wilfred, meanwhile, whose faith has been riddled by doubt and moral failure, checks himself willingly into the jail and then gets challenged by a female sheriff who is also an atheist.

Interfaith Dialogue II: Atheist-theist dialogue

What makes Fr Wilfred so appealing as a character is that he's a Catholic priest who is flawed, but is also heroic and admirable. In an age where priests in popular culture are often portrayed or linked to the child abuse scandal, or as examples of hypocrisy or close-minded zeal,

34. *John* 8, 12.

Wilfred stands apart. While readers initially don't know what demons lurk within, his mentioning of his struggles and the hints of his frequent turn to alcohol show something is not right. As mentioned, his less than hospitable greeting to Gene had ultimately destructive consequences, but throughout the comic, Wilfred seeks and wants to do what is right despite his moral struggles and doubts[35]. Again, as with Norton and Dr Xu, unexpected interfaith dialogue brings some clarity and healing – though not initially.

While Fr Wilfred may be struggling with his faith, Sheriff Clara is very clear she is a non-believer and critical of Christianity – or perhaps any religious-belief. In their first encounter –after Wilfred is arrested as a person of interest in light of the murder of Gene Trembley– Sheriff Clara calls Wilfred's story – of the Black Barn "full of bullshit" (issue 2)[36]. When Wilfred begins to tell his side of the story, mentioning some black barn, the Sherriff remarks she checked into his past which revealed he had a history of drinking problems with pervious run-ins with the police for disorderly conduct and even assault (issue 2). She asks if he had been drinking on the night of the supposed vision (and Gene's death). Fr Wilfred responds: "I-I made some mistakes. That's all behind me now. And that has *nothing* to do what happened tonight" (issue 2) – which is very questionable.

News of another murder interrupts the investigation, though Wilfred is initially left in jail and given little help by the Bishop as I'll note below. We next see Wilfred in Issue 3 where he is back in the rectory and apparently trying to write a homily. His notepad only has words scratched out, so he reaches for the whiskey when there's a knock on the door. It's the Sheriff. Clara tells Wilfred he is cleared of any wrongdoing and apologizes. He graciously says she was just doing her job, but she wants to know if she and the town can trust him – that the town had put their trust in the Church and in Fr Tom (issue 3). The

35. Cf., for example, his helping of the prostitute Molly in some future alternative and dystopian world in issue 23.

36. While Wilfred's mentioning of The Black Barn only triggers anger in the Sheriff, it also leads to contact from Deputy Officer Tony Ballard who suggests Wilfred meet Doc Sutton. Doc Sutton, we later learn, is the father of Sheriff Clara Miller –and it turns out later– Norton Sinclair who had gone missing at the age of nine or ten.

best Wilfred can say is: "There was a time when I couldn't trust myself anymore, Sherriff. My past is my past. I'm here now" (issue 3) – which also isn't too reassuring but the best he can do.

The police, though, find the now-deemed recently deceased body of the previous pastor, Father Tom, who had been missing and everyone thought long dead. This change (and Wilfred's witnessing of him) make Tom the main culprit in the death of the church caretaker, Gene. While this turn of events exonerates Wilfred, it also shines light on a priest as a possible murderer, especially one who had lived in the community for 30 years (issue 2). It's an issue Fr Wilfred feels he needs to address in his first homily in the town, which is also why he was struggling to find the right pastoral words.

When he asks the Sherriff if he'll see her in Church, she replies: "Not really my style, Father. Be seeing you, though" (issue 3). Later when she finds out that Fr Wilfred has met with her own father and that they discussed the mysterious group called "The Ploughmen," her disgust for the group and Catholicism in general is clear. Her bluntness may also be on account of her having a few drinks (she was off-duty): "I've heard enough of this haunted barn *bullshit* for one lifetime, Father" (issue 4). As he innocently tells of his conversation with the doctor, not knowing it is her biological father, she cuttingly replies: "Sometimes it's easier to believe a fairy tale than face the truth. *You* of all people should know that" (issue 4**).** When Father Wilfred asks what she means, she replies: "Let's just say I've never been much of a believer in the fairy tale *your team* sells either" (issue 4). He handles her bluntness with grace while she also apologizes for her rudeness. As Wilfred is about to leave, a call comes in about a third murder. As Clara heads to her car, she realizes she is in no shape to drive so asks Wilfred if he'll drive the car. A beginning of a friendship ensues (issue 4).

Clara is a non-believer but can still respect a certain kind of religious believer – obviously burdened by both her brother going missing and what then happened with her father. Interreligious dialogue thrives amidst honesty, forgiveness, and a certain bluntness. Even in their awkward and

tense beginnings, those traits provide stepping stones[37] for friendship and partnership.

God

While hints of the devil or the manifestation of some evil abounds, the whereabouts of God remains another mystery, especially in the midst of Gideon Falls' murders and scandals. Yet when Father Wilfred had called the Bishop from jail asking for help and ultimately a way out of the town, the Bishop basically says he is on his own, but he trusts he'll do the right thing (issue 2) – and more importantly, especially after the murder of Father Tom, "God's plan has been made abundantly clear. Gideon Falls needs you more than ever in the wake of these crimes" (issue 2).

Speaking to both the ambiguity at times of good and evil and of prayers and curses, when Wilfred is locked in jail, he mutters: "Goddamn wonderful" (issue 2). And even the atheist Sherriff when she sees the dead body of Fr Tom, mutters: "Jesus" (issue 2) –as the dead priest had apparently been clasping a bent nail– which connects to Jesus on the cross and also makes the reader think and wonder about Norton who of course had been collecting such detritus. Even Dr Xu utters "Jesus" in Issue 5 when Norton tells her about the first time he saw the black barn as a child (as does the prostitute Molly living in a future version of Gideon Falls –see issue 23– where the cathedral is now a "sex cathedral" and she figures Father Wilfred is wearing priest's garb as a costume because there are no priests in her city). Are these curses or pleas also unconscious cries for Jesus as Savior or just signs of his absence and marginalization – a curse word even Buddhists and atheists mutter?

In Father Wilfred's first sermon in Gideon Falls, which again had followed his being arrested as the possible murderer of Gene only for Father Tom to become the suspect, Wilfred never managed to write a prepared talk. Instead he speaks honestly and from the heart; "And

37. D. A. Lane, *Stepping Stones to Other Religions*: *A Christian Theology of Inter-Religious Dialogue*, Veritas, Dublin 2011.

when things like this happen, I know it's hard to make any kind of sense out of it. Why would God let this happen?" (issue 3) – which is the classic theodicy question. He admits he has no answers: "And I sure as hell don't know why God would *let* something like this happen"– (issue 3)– he is speaking candidly but also (perhaps to some) profanely as he asks question of freedom and God's role in the world. He falls back on the question of mystery, but more importantly challenges the people – "to turn towards one another now for comfort and support. Not turn against one another" (See Figure 3). This is a practical, almost secular humanist response – as if Dr Rieux, and not Father Paneloux were giving the first sermon in Camus' *The Plague*.

The above analysis is a selective reading of the first couple of issues in a story dealing with time travel and the multiverse and which continues to present or include theological or Christological images throughout its 27 issues, including examples both disturbing and ambiguous. For example, at the end of the first arc in issue 6, involving Fr Wilfred heroically risking his life on a number of occasions to save the Sherriff, he enters a portal to some in-between world, apparently ruled by the demonic force, revealing strands of Wilfred's past life, including a relationship he's had with a black woman named Rebecca. (We later learn Rebecca committed suicide, perhaps from guilt, but also because Wilfred was trying to end the relationship feeling it was a betrayal of what he was as a priest).[38]. In this in-between world and after a series of battles trying to save Clara who has been wounded, he wakes up to see a blurred image of a man on a cross who tells him (using a curse word) that he is in the black barn. He presents Wilfred with a choice, symbolized by a teddy bear[39] and a television depicting diagrams of the barn. Wilfred can either save "her" (presumably Clara but could it

38. Roman Catholic priests are supposed to be celibate. Note also that the image of Rebecca turns into a wounded Clara who he then saves from Joe Reddy, the bus driver from the beginning of issue 1 who has since become possessed, another example of a once good man demonized. Note also the biblical name of Wilfred's tragic lover, Rebecca. Clara, while not a biblical character (the Hebrew term means clear, bright, and famous), could be a reference to the Franciscan 13th century saint, Clare of Assisi.

39. As we later find out in issue 7, young Daniel used to be made of fun of for bringing his teddy bear to school on the bus (and Clara would defend him from the other boys).

also be Rebecca, his former lover?) or get "the answers to everything" (issue 6). "Everything" is very elastic and vague: the meaning of life? The existence of God? His own struggles – or just the mystery of what is going on with the barn? It's not clear.

When Wilfred asks the figure on the cross (who he may see as Jesus) "why he can't help him", the Jesus figure mocks Wilfred by saying: "Because you don't believe in me anymore. Without your faith, I'm nothing. It's up to you now". Wilfred reaches for the teddy bear only to be told it was the wrong answer. He now sees that what he thought was Jesus is only the latest incarnation of a diabolical force who had taken over the bus driver from issue 1.

In self-defense and to protect an already bleeding Clara, Wilfred fights back and ends up shooting the possessed man, killing him. He then carries Clara back to her father so he can tend to her and get her to the hospital.

While convalescing, Clara is now convinced her long-lost brother is alive; Norton, meanwhile thinks his job (with the help of Dr Xu) is to build the Black Barn, and Father Wilfred is told by his Bishop to "stay vigilant" – a common phrase in the Gospels that Jesus tells his disciples[40] and which echoes in other Christian Scriptures like *1 Peter*[41] and *Colossians*[42]. All three plots will converge in ongoing issues.

Conclusion: Theology in the Margins

Hopefully, this article has shown both the rich theological material in these opening issues of *Gideon Falls* and also how important it is for readings of comics and other texts to include a theological lens – a framework and language that are too often marginalized in the academy or even schools in general. In the United States, my original home, religion is more or less banned in most public schools, while in Ireland, my home for the last twenty years, there's a growing movement

40. *Matt*. 26, 41.
41. 5, 8-10.
42. 4, 2.

to privatize religion and remove it as a subject in primary and post-primary schools. As religion suffuses the humanities, and the dialogue of religion and science or religion and politics and human rights needs greater care and nuance –not outright dismissal, my argument is that we do not need less religion, but deeper, more interdisciplinary religious study of all faiths and none– something again evident in the text under discussion, which while primarily Christian, also had Buddhist and Secular Humanist strands.

In this chapter, I also touched on the problem of theodicy in the first few issues of the comic as well as examples of interfaith dialogue. Both aspects can be teased and drawn out further for spiritual, biblical, and homiletic purposes. Examining Christology or pneumatology in these chapters would also have been fruitful. Going back to the Ignatian sense of God in all things or the sacramental notion of all of creation as a sign and symbol of God's presence, the fusion of comic studies and theology is a worthwhile partnership in seminaries, classrooms, and pulpits – even if some readers might prefer another comic besides the one examined here. In truth, I am not a huge fan of the multiverse, time-travel and horror aspects of *Gideon Falls*, but these also challenge me to next apply theological language and insights to them, or at least inspire and encourage others to do so.

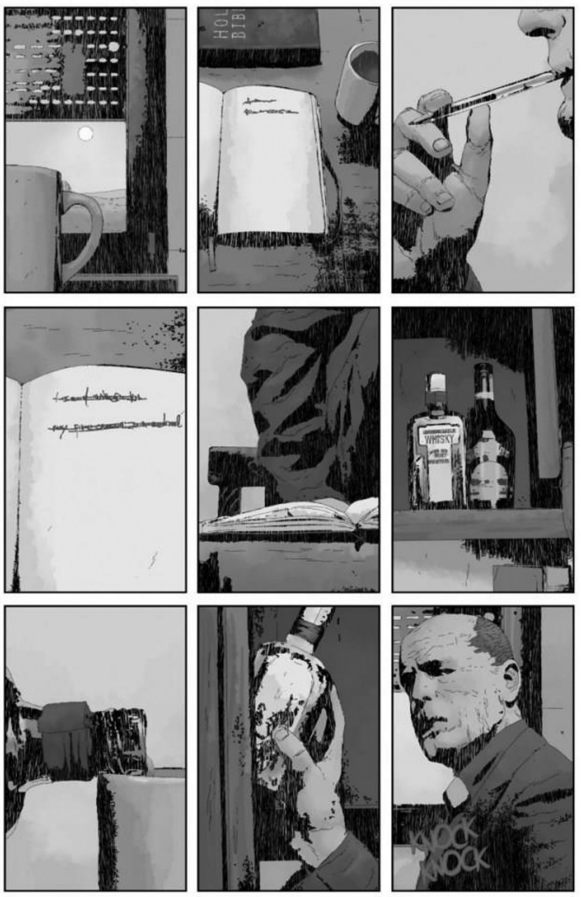

Fig. 1: From *Gideon Falls*, Issue 1, by Jeff Lemire and Andrea Sorrentino

Fig. 2: From *Gideon Falls*, Issue 1, by Jeff Lemire and Andrea Sorrentino

Fig. 3: From Issue 3 of *Gideon Falls 1*, Art by Sorrentino and Text by Lemire