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The Anonymous Theology of *Modern Family*

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Abstract

The popular television show *Modern Family* follows sitcom conventions and attempts to send a moral message about how relatives can live well together. An examination of the specific content of this message shows that it prioritizes self-giving love for the sake of forgiveness and reconciliation. This creates a recognizable parallel with the Christian conception of agape, and a discussion of this notion in the work of Karl Rahner in conjunction with his idea of the “anonymous Christian” allows for the identification of *Modern Family*’s moral vision as an anonymous theology of family ripe with theological significance and pedagogical potential.

Keywords

Modern Family, Karl Rahner, anonymous Christian, television, forgiveness, reconciliation, self-giving love, sitcom

In the United States, *Modern Family* remains one of the most popular shows on television, turning in a top-twenty performance for the third consecutive season (Gorman 2012; Bibel 2013; Deadline Team 2014). Remarkably, the show has won the acclaim of viewers and professional critics alike, augmenting its widespread appeal with five straight Primetime Emmys for Outstanding Comedy Series (IMDb

2014). One of the most consistent objects of praise is the show's ability to capture the authentic reality of contemporary family life with all its imperfections and idiosyncrasies (Havrilesky 2009; see also McNamara 2009 and Patterson 2012). In fact, the show's creators have admitted that "telling small, relatable stories of what it's like to be in a family" (quoted in Egner 2012, para. 11) is a key goal for the series. If they succeed in this aim—and the popularity of the show suggests that they do—then *Modern Family* offers a worthwhile resource on family life for scholars who are willing to embrace a little "academic realism" (Scott and Zuidema 2011). This is especially true for scholars of religion because a careful analysis demonstrates that *Modern Family* offers a vision of the family that resonates deeply with Christian theology in spite of the show's non-religious tenor—a fact that has significant implications for both the study of religion and popular culture in today's cultural milieu.

A Modern *Family* Vision for the Family

Modern Family is fundamentally about three nuclear families that all belong to one extended family network. As revealed in the first episode (Winer 2009b), Jay Pritchett is the aging patriarch recently married to Gloria, a far younger Colombian woman. Joining this new relationship is Manny, Gloria's adolescent son from her first marriage, who is primarily characterized by his romantic aspirations. Jay's grown children from a previous marriage along with their respective partners and children compose the remaining nuclear units. Mitchell, Jay's often-uptight son, lives with his partner, Cameron, and together they have just adopted a baby girl, Lily. Claire, Jay's perfectionist daughter, is married to Phil Dunphy, a realtor and goofball. They have three children: Haley, the older daughter, who prefers to get by on looks rather than smarts; Alex, the younger daughter and middle child, whose intelligence and academic focus stand in stark contrast to her sister's; and Luke, the youngest, whose naïveté typically manifests itself in harebrained schemes that attract his father's willful participation.

Given this cast of characters, the show places the individual escapades of each family unit within the larger world of their extended family network, ensuring that all the spheres cross over or collide by the end of each episode (Bianco 2009). These connections are quite easy to achieve because all the characters have their own peculiarities that constantly propel plotlines forward (Bianco 2010). At the same time, each interaction is available for careful parsing due to the show's "mockumentary" format, which is frequently used to explain the deeper dynamics between the characters (Feiler 2011). The ultimate result is a sense of "relevance" that is achieved by the combination of the individuals' imperfections and the open invitation of the pseudo-reality style, which makes every person and every incident on screen seem eminently more relatable, and immediately more laughable (Parker 2011).

Moral Message

At the same time that *Modern Family* seeks to elicit laughs, it also has a message to send. Some have suggested that the heart of this message is a promotion of a gay lifestyle, but the strongest criticisms of the Mitchell-Cameron-Lily triad have actually targeted the show for failing to normalize the gay family enough (Paskin 2012) and for building laughs on gay clichés (Rosenberg 2010). There is, as a result, little to support the claim that gay rights are at the forefront of *Modern Family*'s message.¹ This realization, though, points to what is at the heart of the show's intended vision, for if the creators are not interested in rocking the boat with their gay couple, they are in effect maintaining the status quo. In general, the critical commentary overwhelmingly supports this interpretation, as reviewers have

repeatedly echoed the refrain that *Modern Family* “is a conservative show, steeped in the conventions of sitcom history” (Rosman 2010, para. 4; see also Feiler 2011; Serwer 2012).

This tendency to support the current culture should be rather unsurprising, as Rosman suggests, for *Modern Family* is a sitcom after all and that particular genre has often been linked with a sense of social conservatism (Feuer 2001, 69). In part, this stems from basic television practices, whose expectations that all problems will come to neat conclusions within a thirty-minute timeslot greatly limit character development (Mintz 1985, 115; Bignell and Lacey 2005, 13). Although this willingness to identify the sitcom as a conservative form in general has recently been challenged,² there remains a recognition that family-centred sitcoms have a distinct proclivity for affirming the status quo (Linder 2005, 70–71). The creators of *Modern Family* have apparently resigned themselves to accepting this, with co-creator Christopher Lloyd noting that they make an intentional effort to avoid controversial issues “because they divide people” and that the writers resist “mak[ing] any kind of overt political statement, because those things tend to seem sanctimonious” (quoted in Egner 2012, para. 11, 12).

While there may be a certain degree of traditionalism in the moral message of *Modern Family*, there is more substance to the series than a nebulous affirmation of typical beliefs about the American family. Once again, the broader framework of the sitcom genre is at play. In addition to their conservatism, sitcoms have historically taken it upon themselves to teach a lesson about how to live well in the real world, often positing an Aesop-esque moral to pithily summarize their point (Mintz 1985, 119). *Modern Family* has certainly not departed from this trend, and each episode typically concludes with a tidy reflection on the true meaning of family, simultaneously profound and irreverent, that sentimentally connects all the dots and turns the show into “a Black Mass of teachable moments” (Parker 2011, para. 3). Herein lies the true heart of the show’s moral message, and when these musings are examined alongside the context of their respective episodes, a consistent theme emerges. The family, a viewer is told, can always come together and settle its internal differences because forgiveness is at the centre of what it means to live together as relatives. One of the show’s producers has captured this message in the following phrase: “Don’t be afraid of a hug, but make sure you earn it” (quoted in Feiler 2011, para. 21). This conviction unmistakably shines through in *Modern Family*, and the all-forgiving group hug appears consistently as a literal or figurative motif (Swanson 2009). Yet, to leave this credo at the level of an aphorism undervalues its significance. There is a deeper truth to this philosophy that constitutes a coherent vision for the family, creating valuable parallels with a Christian theology of the family as well.

A Coherent Vision

If the moral message of *Modern Family* revolves around embracing forgiveness in a hug as long as it is earned, the show’s substantive vision for the family can be found in the means of securing this reconciliation. Of course, this whole idea raises a potential objection to the establishment of a theological parallel, for there is a considerable emphasis in the Christian tradition on forgiving freely (Bash 2007, 79). At the same time, though, there is an awareness that forgiveness need not be a *carte blanche* for the offender; in fact, because Christian forgiveness ultimately seeks the restoration of relationships, it does not preclude working for the conversion of the wrongdoer and sometimes involves punishment (Jones 1995, 269).³ Thus, there is nothing discordant between *Modern Family*’s insistence that the hug be earned and the Christian understanding of forgiveness. Moreover, the way

in which the show's vision suggests that a reconciling hug ought to be earned, and repaid, corresponds nicely with Christian theology because both ultimately stress the importance of self-giving love.

Evidence for asserting that self-giving love is at the middle of *Modern Family's* vision for the family abounds throughout the series and can be found in each of the existing seasons. The priority of this message is clear from the beginning of the series as "Bicycle Thief" (Winer 2009a), the second episode to air, sets the tone with a storyline focusing on the efforts of Jay and Manny to adjust to their new relationship as stepfather and stepson. Although content to pursue their own separate lives, Gloria wants her son and her new husband to get along, so she puts them to work on the shared task of installing a ceiling fan in Manny's room. Manny, put off by Jay's gruff attitude and proud refusal to read the directions, turns the exercise into a paternal competition by constantly juxtaposing Jay's missteps with praise of his biological father, Javier, who happens to be coming to take Manny on a trip to Disneyland. Jay knows most of these stories are embellished legends and eventually moves from sarcastic rejoinders to agreeing with Manny when he observes, "You don't want me around." The exchange escalates until Manny proclaims, "I wish you'd never married my mom. I hate living here," and Jay caustically notes, "You think I like this arrangement? I have a two-seater parked in the driveway." At this point, Manny storms out to wait for his real dad, leaving Jay the clear loser of the fatherhood competition.

After finishing the installation alone, Jay seeks to recover his optimism by envisioning the trip he and Gloria will take to the wine country while Manny is with Javier. Such pleasantries are quickly interrupted by a phone call from Javier who informs Jay that he will not be able to take Manny for the weekend because he does not want to break his winning streak at the casino. Jay notes the irony that he is "the jerk" while Manny's "Superman" has turned down time with his son in order to gamble. He sets off to break the news to Manny and has the perfect opportunity to restore his standing by comparison. He concocts a story to soften the blow, but Manny's insecurities show through and the eleven-year-old becomes convinced Javier just did not want to spend time with him. Jay throws himself under the bus, insisting that the limousine arriving to take Jay and Gloria on their wine trip is actually a gift from Javier, who sent the car so that they could take Manny to Disneyland in his unfortunate absence. Manny's spirits are restored as he reminds Jay, "I told you he was an awesome dad," and Jay accepts the implicit indictment of his character. At the end of the episode, though, Manny is falling asleep on Jay's shoulder in the limo, the patriarch's willingness to sacrifice his own reputation having earned this reconciling hug.

This theme is hardly an isolated one, for it continually reappears throughout the rest of the series. To focus on some of the best examples, the season two episode "Halloween" (Spiller 2010) brings the whole gang to the Dunphy household to help run a haunted house for the neighbourhood. Unfortunately, between Gloria's sensitivity about her accent, Cameron's previous Halloween embarrassments, and Haley's battle to select a costume that will meet her mother's approval, each nuclear unit seems to have its own baggage on this particular holiday. As a result, no one in the family is invested as much as Claire would like, and the house of horrors she has planned does not meet her expectations. Claire exasperatedly informs everyone that while they each have their own holiday traditions to which the family has adapted, no one is willing to help with her Halloween vision. When she heads outside to vent, however, the family valiantly rises to the challenge. Haley and Alex put off

their plans for the night, Luke and Manny join in to take Claire's place, Jay and Gloria smooth over their differences to play their parts, and Mitchell and Cameron make a concerted effort genuinely to frighten the visitors. In the end, everyone makes some kind of sacrifice in order to give Claire the one thing she really wanted because they have finally come to understand how important Halloween is to her. Standing outside, she experiences the same view as the audience: an entire family giving of themselves for the benefit of one another.

The season three episode "Punkin Chunkin" (Spiller 2011) likewise involves multiple people finding ways to give of themselves for the rest of the family. The episode occurs on Thanksgiving and deals thematically with the ways in which different individuals embrace or undermine creativity. Those who are Pritchetts by birth (Jay, Mitchell, and Claire) all have a realist streak that tries to temper the enthusiasm of their partners and children whenever they embrace a wild idea. These distinct ways of thinking come to a head over a dispute about launching a pumpkin the length of a football field with a slingshot. Deciding to settle their disagreements with an experiment, the whole clan heads to the nearest field for a "dreamers versus Pritchetts" battle. As Jay, Mitchell, and Claire look on, the dreamers fail spectacularly, and the Pritchetts have their ultimate vindication. They quickly realize, however, that this victory is more bitter than sweet because the rest of their family is so disappointed. Rather than gloat, they swallow their own pride and give up their chance to be right. The Pritchetts suggest ways to perfect the pumpkin launching technique and head out to round up more pumpkins for subsequent attempts. The episode ends with a true team effort as the Pritchetts give of themselves for the sake of their relatives, and the dreamers welcome the reconciliation.

As with the first two seasons, there are other instances throughout season three in which such a willful gift of self serves to transform a relationship,⁴ but the punkin chunkin experience is suitably emblematic of this trend. Similarly, amid myriad examples in the fourth season, "My Hero" (Mancuso 2013) serves a representative role because it showcases multiple interactions where characters concern themselves with the needs of others in their family. In one minor plotline, Haley gives her time and energy to help build Alex's confidence, disregarding old sibling squabbles out of an authentic, selfless care for her younger sister. The crux of the episode, though, revolves around Cameron's encounter with Mitchell's ex-boyfriend Teddy.

At first free of jealousy, Cameron quickly becomes hurt when he realizes how close the whole family has remained with Teddy. Cameron finally admits his displeasure to Mitchell, suggesting that his tireless efforts to win over the Pritchetts and Dunphys have never made any inroads while Teddy seems to have maintained a natural rapport. Although Mitchell wishes to avoid making the situation any more awkward than it is, he ignores his discomfort and asks his family to seem a little less enamored with his ex-boyfriend. Despite finding Cameron's fears unfounded, Jay ultimately takes it upon himself to have a frank conversation with Cameron in which he explains how glad he is that Cameron makes Mitchell happy. The amount of self-giving involved in this exchange is quite evident in light of Jay's preference for avoiding all discussions of emotion, a common theme throughout the series.⁵ Fittingly, in an episode featuring Haley giving of herself for Alex, Mitchell sacrificing for Cameron, and Jay making a gift of self for both Cameron and Mitchell, "My Hero" concludes with Manny's confession that he identified his whole family as his hero for a school assignment.

These four episodes are certainly not the only ones to include selfless sacrifice for the sake of others, but they do represent a consistent theme in the television series. At various points in the four seasons of *Modern Family*, all the characters find themselves in situations that demand a choice between saving themselves from embarrassment or discomfort and giving of themselves for the sake of reconciliation. Repeatedly, and in a remarkable diversity of ways, they all come to recognize the value of renouncing their own self-interest in order to rebuild their relationships with their family members. In the process, they affirm the value of self-giving love over self-serving hubris. There is, as a consequence, little room to deny the importance of this idea in the teaching moments of this sitcom. Indeed, these instances all combine to create a truly coherent vision for the family as a web of loving relationships grounded in the free gift of self for the benefit of each other. Although this vision is not depicted in even a remotely religious fashion, the picture of a family *Modern Family* presents has real theological significance. In fact, the vision of a family bound together by self-giving love captures some of the most quintessential Christian truths and can arguably be considered an anonymous theology of family, as a comparison with Christian theology will make apparent.

A Theological Vision for the Family

The vision of self-giving love that suffuses *Modern Family* has ample parallels in the Christian tradition, where the sacrifice of oneself has been an essential counterweight to human sinfulness ever since Augustine identified prideful “love of self” as the source of the Fall in the Garden of Eden ([426] 2006, XIV.13).⁶ The centrality of this concept is well attested in the influential work of Swedish theologian Anders Nygren, whose study of love in Christian theology split a self-serving *eros* from a self-giving *agape* and affirmed the latter as the only true form of love in Christianity ([1932] 1969, 217–19). While this work has certainly had its critics, the importance of *agape* in Christian theology has not diminished. Pope Benedict, for example, granted that *agape* was the “typically Christian” form of love even as he worked to reconnect the term with *eros* (2005, 7). Likewise, Reinhold Niebuhr emphasized that proper Christian love “meets the needs of the other without concern for the self” ([1941] 1964, 295), reaffirming *agape* “as the highest possibility of human existence” ([1943] 1964, 71). Selfless love therefore provides a link between *Modern Family*’s vision for the family and Christian convictions about the nature of both God and the human person, yielding fruit for both the study of popular culture and the study of religion. Although this connection could be established and defended using the writings of a range of theologians, there is one in particular whose work is especially well suited to this task because his corpus accentuated self-giving love while also allowing room for otherwise secular experiences to have a religious, even Christian, importance.

Karl Rahner and Agapic Love

The German Jesuit Karl Rahner was indisputably one of the most influential Catholic theologians of the twentieth century, and his impact was felt far beyond his own denomination. His work attempted to bring basic Christian convictions into conversation with the modern world, and in this process he focused heavily on the idea of transcendence (Rahner 1978, 5–6, 11–12). Specifically, Rahner developed a theological anthropology describing the human person as inherently capable of transcendence in knowledge and freedom. Setting aside Rahner’s reliance on metacognition, the idea of transcendence in knowledge can be understood in the simple fact that every time one learns something, one also becomes aware of much more that is left unknown. Each act of knowledge

therefore requires one to move beyond the boundaries of what was previously unknown, an infinitely repeatable process. As a result, the capacity to know is transcendent precisely because the knower possesses the potential to break each new limit whenever he or she encounters one (17–20, 31–34).

While knowledge is thus illustrative, Rahner primarily identified freedom as the true locus of human transcendence. Like knowledge, freedom exemplifies transcendence because it has no limits, something Rahner emphasized by defining freedom as fundamentally the ability to make a choice about oneself (38). While one can always make a new decision in this sphere, Rahner insisted that the ultimate expression of transcendence in freedom is “the capacity to do something final and definitive” (96). This final decision, he argued, is really a decision about God, understood as the ultimate source of existence (100–101). At the same time, this choice is also necessarily conditioned by God, who offers the freedom in the first place. Thus, Rahner deemed a “no” to God inherently contradictory, for it would require using one’s freedom to deny the very source of that freedom (102). The true use of one’s freedom in self-actualization then, is the affirmation of one’s existence as a being created and sustained by God (402–3).

The content of this affirmation, or the “yes” to God in freedom, is quite significant, and it paves the way for a comparison with *Modern Family*’s emphasis on sacrifice. From Rahner’s perspective, the authentic use of freedom to respond affirmatively to God is intricately bound to the notion of grace. He described grace as fundamentally God’s self-communication, or quite literal gift of self, to the human person (116–17). This gift inheres not only in the capacity to make a decision toward God but also in every act that uses this capacity to say “yes” to God (118). God is therefore “the innermost constitutive element” of the human person by virtue of “a free, unmerited and forgiving, and absolute self-communication” (116). The proper use of one’s freedom in affirmation of this gratuitous gift of God’s very essence is a profound appreciation that can only be manifest in love (1969c, 187). Of course, this love is directed to God, but for Rahner, love of God could never be separated from love of neighbour (1969b, 234). As a result, Rahner’s theological anthropology asserted that every human being has the capacity and responsibility to love God and neighbour and that each person achieves ultimate fulfillment only in doing so.

The emphasis on loving others, and the suggestion that this would be the source of true human actualization, has a certain internal logic to it. Rahner identified the self-communication of God’s being as a “formal causality,” meaning that the divine essence enables human actions (1978, 121). Since the recipient experiences the divine essence as self-gift, one would expect the corresponding action resulting from this formal cause to be the recipient’s own free gift of self. In fact, this is precisely what Rahner established elsewhere when he argued that every action which allows an individual to move beyond a concern for herself or himself to a concern for others constituted an experience of grace (1965, 89). Thus, the human person is true to himself or herself only when giving freely to another, meaning that *agapic* love is the most authentic human action in Rahner’s estimation.⁷

This understanding, naturally, has significance for the interpretation of *Modern Family*’s vision of the family. Using Rahner’s theological anthropology, it is possible to assert that the self-gift for the sake of reconciliation prioritized in the television show is really an authentic use of freedom and the highest calling of the human person. There is a way to say that God is active in each one of these instances because the self-communication of the divine is the capacity and (formal) causality behind every gift of

self. The examples already identified, and others found throughout the series, can therefore serve as ready-made illustrations of the Christian definition of full human flourishing. This is significant for scholars of religion because studies show that adults already learn from popular culture, especially television (Wright and Sandlin 2009, 131), so using a show like *Modern Family* to demonstrate the Christian notion of *agape* in action creates a readily relatable example that has a greater likelihood of both comprehension and retention.

Of course, the caring interactions between *Modern Family*'s characters display more than just a generic form of *agape*; they are also, and especially, manifestations of *agapic* love between relatives. Hence the moral message of the show is not just about how people should live well together but about how a family should live well together. To truly understand the theological significance of this vision, then, the theological value of the family itself must be addressed. Once again, Rahner is a valuable source.

A Rahnerian Theology of Family

Admittedly, Rahner does not have an explicit theology of family, but it is still possible to develop a Rahnerian account of the theological value of the family using broader themes in his writing. The work of theologian Florence Caffrey Bourg, in part, represents an attempt to do exactly this. Writing on the metaphor of the family as a "domestic church," she has endeavoured to extrapolate a theology of the family on the basis of two key themes in Rahner's writings: the religious possibilities of ordinary experiences and his unique understanding of sacraments (2004, 95). Noting that Rahner's theology envisioned the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church as public affirmations of God's grace already present in the world (rather than as the sole means of accessing God's grace in an otherwise profane world) (98), Bourg identifies Rahner's "liturgy of the world" as the conviction that "there is no ordinary experience that cannot serve as an instrument of grace" (100). This leads to the conclusion that the family serves an important purpose by providing a glimpse of God in the way the members love their kin (106). Bourg argues that whenever this process entails an "explicit recognition of Christ's presence in the world," then families have embodied Rahner's theological vision for the family (108).

While Bourg's description of the family as domestic church in these terms largely coheres with Rahner's theological anthropology and his understanding of grace as outlined above, the emphasis on *explicit* recognition raises a problem, especially if a Rahnerian theology of family is going to produce useful parallels with *Modern Family*. Fortunately, this is not the only interpretation. An analysis of Rahner's more explicit statements on marriage, on which Bourg bases her interpretation of the family (97), reveals that the manifestations of Christ's presence need not be so explicit.

To begin, Rahner's sacramental understanding of marriage certainly was based upon the ability of married couples to experience and demonstrate the presence of Christ in the world. Rahner clearly argued that the love between spouses gives concrete expression to the love Christ has for the entire church. "Matrimony," he wrote, "objectively represents this love of God in Christ for the Church" (1963, 107), and therefore serves as a "Church in miniature" (112). Since Rahner taught that the church is the "persisting presence of the incarnate Word in space and time" (1966, 240), this identification of the married couple as a tiny but true version of the church logically means that marriage makes Christ present as well. Thus, Bourg's general claims about the nature and purpose of the family find resonance in Rahner's theology. At the same time, Rahner's understanding of the means by which a

married couple effectively symbolizes the presence of Christ undermines Bourg's more specific assertion that this experience requires an explicitly Christian identification.

In searching for the means by which a married couple embodies Christ, one quickly comes to self-giving love. This is quite unsurprising given Rahner's view of God as the one who freely gives the divine essence in self-communication. Reaffirming that "love of God and love of neighbor *mutually* condition one another," Rahner noted that whenever two individuals love each other in their marriage they experience the love of God and therefore literally bring God who is love into the world (1973, 203–5). While this vision for marriage is certainly consistent with Christian theology, Rahner emphatically refused to limit this capacity to Christians. Instead, he maintained that as long as love existed between the couple then their marriage could be said to make God present (1973, 214; 1977, 70).⁸ The ability of marital love to embody the divine, he explained, "can take place even before this love encounters the message of the gospel proclaimed and made known as such in explicit words" (1973, 205). Expressed succinctly, a married couple—and by extension, a family—can make God present by virtue of their self-giving love even when they do not openly identify this presence as God.

It is this less explicit Rahnerian theology of family that *Modern Family* demonstrates in action. Jay's willingness to sacrifice his reputation for the sake of Manny's happiness, the whole family's decision to set aside their squabbles and support Claire on Halloween, the readiness of the Pritchetts to help the dreamers "chunk" a pumpkin, and the interlaced expressions of concern for one another in "My Hero" all embody the self-giving love that allows a family to become a witness to the presence of God in the world. Those who have a more explicit understanding of the theological potential of self-gift (e.g., Christians) can readily identify the fullness of *agapic* love, and thus the literal presence of God, in these caring actions. As a result, *Modern Family* corroborates the claim that families can achieve their theological ideal even when they are not explicitly doing so. In the process, the show offers what can be called—in an analogical application of another Rahnerian concept—an anonymous theology of family.

An Anonymous Theology of Family

One of Rahner's most famous contributions to post-Vatican II theology in the Catholic Church was his discussion of the so-called "anonymous Christian." Although he did not invent the term, he was one of the idea's staunchest defenders, using the phrase to reaffirm that "there really is no salvation outside the Church" without having to conclude that the vast majority of humanity is "condemned to eternal meaninglessness" (1969a, 391). Essentially, Rahner envisioned the label creating an additional gradation in Church membership so that those individuals who would not self-identify as Christians might still be included within the saved Body of Christ (391–92). This space was wide enough to accommodate even atheists, provided they did not actively deny God on the transcendental level (1972, 156).⁹ To label such individuals anonymous Christians, Rahner noted, would essentially deny their freedom by precluding the possibility of rejecting God (1969a, 394–95). All others, though, could be anonymous Christians, and not just by default. All anonymous Christians, Rahner argued, can be deemed such because they have done something to affirm their "implicit Christianity" (1972, 146). The obvious question is, naturally, what constitutes that something.

With regards to the means by which one becomes an anonymous Christian, Rahner was (relatively) straightforward. As with explicit Christianity, grace is at the heart of anonymous Christianity, but in this

case it is not received sacramentally (1976, 292). Instead, because this grace is fundamentally God's self-communication, an individual can affirm it "when he freely accepts himself in his own unlimited transcendence" even though she or he might not call this transcendence "God" (1979, 55). Recalling Rahner's anthropology, this transcendence is best experienced and affirmed in the use of one's freedom, which is precisely the point he made in defining anonymous Christianity (1976, 288). Thus, whenever an individual uses his or her freedom for the sake of self-actualization and "really accepts *himself completely*," then he or she affirms God's gift of divine self-communication and can be considered an anonymous Christian (1969a, 394). While accepting oneself completely may sound overly abstract, it actually has particular content in Rahner's theology, for he noted that the *agapic* love of one's neighbour is "the all-embracing act" of the human person whereby "he possess himself completely, meets himself completely and falls into the ultimate abyss of his nature" (1969b, 241, 242). Coming full circle, this means that self-giving love is collectively the actualization of human nature, the vocation of the family, and the hallmark of anonymous Christianity.

This notion of anonymous Christianity explains how the moral message of *Modern Family* can have theological significance without explicit reference to religious beliefs. By teaching that the family is fundamentally about forgiveness and reconciliation forged in self-giving love, *Modern Family* sends the same message about the family that the anonymous Christian sends about his or her humanity: God is present herein. Obviously, the show does not relate this message in religious terms, but that is why it is best understood as an anonymous theology of family because—like anonymous Christianity—this concept has the ability to affirm that one experience can be paradoxically both secular and sacred at the same time. The distinction is ultimately one of perspective, as some will be able to see God in a given situation and have the resources to specify the divine as such, while others might note only the fullness of the human experience in an example of selfless love. Those in the former group have a unique opportunity to give explicit definition to otherwise anonymous illustrations of grace. Arguably, they also have a responsibility to do so, for just as Rahner argued that anonymous Christianity would always seek its perfection in explicit Christianity (1969a, 395),¹⁰ so too there is something incomplete in a vision for the family that has deep theological significance but no theological vocabulary. To this end, one can and should say that God is at the very heart of *Modern Family's* vision for the family and that the divine is truly present in all those situations where one of the show's characters gives freely of herself or himself for the sake of another.

To add an important nuance, though, one should also be cautious to ensure that this identification of the anonymous theology of *Modern Family* does not imply an exclusivist moral vision. Rahner emphatically noted that "marriage is not the act in which two individuals come together to form a 'we,' a relationship in which they set themselves apart from the 'all'... Rather it is the act in which a 'we' is constituted which opens itself lovingly precisely to all" (1973, 207). It is therefore appropriate to insist that the anonymous theology of *Modern Family* allows for the identification of God's presence in the self-giving love of family members for one another while expecting that this love cannot be contained solely within the kinship group.

Conclusion: Why Bother with the Anonymous Theology of *Modern Family*?

While the link with Rahner and the development of an anonymous theology of family creates the possibility of giving explicit theological content to *Modern Family's* vision for the family, one might still

object that the value of this enterprise is far from self-evident. In truth, though, this discussion has fruitful implications for the study of popular culture, the field of theology, and the future of organized religion.

First, with regard to the study of popular culture, the identification of an anonymous theology in *Modern Family* represents a contribution to the ongoing conversation about the conservative nature of the sitcom genre. Typically, this component of the sitcom has been connected to the genre's traditional tendency to gloss over social change by using static characters and ordinary situations to assure audiences that not everything in their lives is in a constant state of flux (Edgerton 2007, 130–31). Thus, when a sitcom like *Modern Family* begins to acknowledge social changes like the rise of the gay rights movement and the growing acceptance of adoption by gay couples, it might seem like the conservatism of the genre is a thing of the past. The idea of an anonymous theology, though, offers an alternative way of diagnosing social conservatism in sitcoms. In particular, this category enables one to argue that a sitcom is preserving genre conventions whenever it espouses and promotes what could be considered traditional religious values, regardless of whether it does this in a religious fashion and irrespective of any other challenges it might present to the social status quo. So, for example, the anonymous theology of *Modern Family* indicates that, as critics have frequently maintained, the show is at home in the conservative sitcom genre because, despite its “modern” take on the family,¹¹ it nevertheless commends a vision of the family that largely coheres with traditional Christian values. Other sitcoms could conceivably be evaluated in a similar fashion, supplying new resources for genre discussions in the study of popular culture.

Second, just as it does for the study of popular culture, the anonymous theology of *Modern Family* also adds to contemporary conversations in the field of theology. Specifically, the nature of *Modern Family*'s illustrations of *agapic* love challenges assumptions about the situations in which self-giving love can manifest the presence of God. Rahner's emphasis on *agape* has been critiqued for its tendency to focus on love as a self-gift between two people, creating an exclusive “*égoïsme à deux*” that ignores “the multitude of interacting relations within which we are immersed” (Pope 1991, 261). This danger is perhaps most apparent in some aspects of recent Roman Catholic theology, where Pope John Paul II's “theology of the body” has placed such a high emphasis on the unique value of self-gift in the marital relationship (Grabowski 2009, 75) that other forms of *agapic* love often seem neither as complete nor as meaningful (see McCarthy 2004, 23–25; Curran 2009, 104). In the face of these concerns, the ability to identify the theological value in interactions between a father and his stepson (Jay and Manny), an adult brother and his grown sister (Mitchell and Claire), and even a father-in-law and his son's boyfriend (Jay and Cameron) serves as a worthy reminder that the presence of God is not limited to spousal expressions of self-giving love. Moreover, because *Modern Family* often offers examples of self-giving love between multiple family members at the same time (e.g., the “Halloween” and “Punkin Chunkin” episodes), it also responds to the overemphasis on “existential dyads” to which Catholic interpretations of Rahner are susceptible (Pope 1991, 257). Although this familial vision must still be augmented with an *ad extra* social concern if it is to capture the true potential of self-giving love beyond strictly interpersonal pairs, the anonymous theology of family contained in *Modern Family* at least points this conversation in the right direction.

Third, recognizing the anonymous theology implicit in *Modern Family* has implications for the current prognostications about organized religion in the United States. Generally speaking, the conventional wisdom now suggests that organized religion is on the decline. A highly cited report from the Pew Research Center noted that for the first time ever roughly one in five adults in the US defines himself or herself as unaffiliated with any religion (2010, 9). More importantly, the report also revealed that the growth of these so-called “nones” is fastest among younger adults, with one in three people below the age of thirty identifying himself or herself as unaffiliated (9). While it does not challenge these statistics directly, the anonymous theology of *Modern Family* does imply that the “rise of the nones” will not lead to as dark a future as some religious leaders seem to fear. For one thing, since *Modern Family* promotes a moral message about the family that (at the very least) does not contradict religious moral assertions, there should be no more fears that increases in the unaffiliated portend the end of morality. In addition, Christians in particular should also be reassured by the popularity of a show that prominently illustrates much of what they believe about the nature and purpose of the family. In fact, the whole idea of an anonymous theology in popular culture should offer organized religions (again, especially Christianity) hope that they will still be able to find support for their core convictions in a world of nones. If the anonymous Christianity of Rahner is any indication, these anonymous forms of religious expression could even become the basis of the sorts of reflections and conversations that lead to more explicit articulations of what is often “spiritual but not religious.”

Highlighting the anonymous theology of *Modern Family*, then, has the capacity to advance current discussions about sitcom genre conventions, the boundaries of Christian interpretations of love, and the future of religion. That this project would have the possibility of impacting such disparate fields is indicative of the fact that at its heart, the anonymous theology of *Modern Family* is connected to bigger truths in the broader human search for meaning. The priority of self-sacrifice for the sake of forgiveness and reconciliation is, ultimately, a widely shared humanistic value that is essential to family life. In the end, this might just be the most valuable contribution of the anonymous theology of *Modern Family*, for it provides clear testimony to the fact that the same qualities that make a family truly Christian also make it truly human.

Notes

1. Indeed, instead of turning Cameron and Mitchell into gay rights activists, the writers had them wait to get married until the actual law in California (where the fictional characters live) changed to permit gay marriage (again).
2. Jason Mittell (2004), for example, has argued that all genres, the sitcom included, are constantly in flux and are better understood as “discursive clusters” that have an historically situated meaning. He has also noted that hybridity and parody have recently contributed to much of this change in the sitcom genre (17, 153–60).
3. Ensuring that forgiveness does not devolve into complete license has been a particular concern among feminist theologians, who have struggled to ensure that a call to forgiveness does not prevent women from leaving abusive relationships (See Boss 1997).
4. The interaction between Jay and Gloria in “Disneyland” (Bagdonas 2012) certainly comes to mind.

5. Jay's unwillingness to engage his own emotions is a prominent plotline in another season four episode (McCarthy-Miller 2012), and his hesitation to express affection for Cameron in particular appeared during the first season (Hudlin 2009).
6. To say nothing, of course, of the salvific nature of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.
7. Jennifer Erin Beste (2007) provides additional detail on Rahner's understanding of the human person and the centrality of self-gift in his theological anthropology.
8. For additional information, Michael J. Himes (1990) offers a thorough recounting of Rahner's affirmation of the sacramentality of all marriages.
9. To defend this point, Rahner made a distinction between transcendental awareness of God and categorical awareness of God. The former involves experience of the divine primarily in one's own capacity for transcendence while the latter involves an explicit recognition that this transcendent horizon is "God." In Rahner's view, it would be possible for an individual to deny God on a categorical level (i.e., to refuse to call this experience "God") without denying the actual existence of God on a more abstract level. In this case, an atheist could still be saved as an anonymous Christian. Only an outright denial of God on the most abstract, transcendental level could lead to an atheism that closes one off from salvation (Rahner 1972, 155–58).
10. This idea is further explored in "Anonymous Christianity and the Missionary Task of the Church" (Rahner 1974, esp. 163–64).
11. The "modern" take is apparent in the combination of a traditional nuclear family, a gay couple and their adopted daughter, and a divorced and remarried patriarch with his much younger wife and a stepson in the same grade as his grandson. It is worth noting, however, that when it comes to gendered divisions of labor, *Modern Family* is not that modern after all (see LaVecchia 2011).

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