Nonreligious Christianity sounds like an oxymoron. It also doesn’t sound like it has much of anything to do with literature. Yet, Gianni Vattimo and John D. Caputo’s theories of postmodern religion have a lot to say about morality and ethics. From the literary side, it is important for readers to consider the ethics of reading as they think about and try to learn from literature, especially fiction. So, the question of ethics provides a link between these seemingly unrelated subjects. This paper aims to investigate this connection between these religious philosophies and the ethics of reading, using stories from Christopher Rowe’s *Telling the Map* as case studies.

Vattimo and Caputo’s philosophies are about religion in name, but their theory of religion is much more about ethics than what most people would consider religion. Though using slightly different methods and having slightly different main focuses, both theorists view religion as a way to form social bonds—as an act, rather than an identity or a way to access forms of “truth.” The theories are founded on a rejection of metanarratives, meaning that there is no way to access objective truth. Reality is subjective, made up of every person’s individual interpretation. New forms of religion help form social bonds in a situation that could otherwise lead to radical individualism or societal fragmentation. In essence, the theories seek a way to interact with the
other without knowledge of that other.

The ethics of reading deals with the role of fiction in relation to reality. What can readers learn from fiction? Can fiction impart truth? How should readers interact with fictional content? What does fiction do? This question of knowledge is an important one, especially in relation to Vattimo’s and Caputo’s theories, which are founded on the idea that absolute knowledge does not exist and that one cannot truly know the other. Using Robyn R. Warhol’s theory that characters are narrative effects rather than fictional people and Ellie Anderson’s theory that attempting to know another person is a futile and possibly dangerous goal, this paper argues that fiction cannot offer objective truth or knowledge. Instead, fiction can prompt the reader to adopt a new perspective or think about their own life in a new way.

Taken together, these theories provide a framework for thinking about knowledge and relationships with others, whether in fiction or in real life. Ultimately, one can never have objective knowledge about another person. A person can only access their own experiences and their own perspectives. Reading fiction, therefore, cannot show what it is like to be another person. Instead, fiction offers a new viewpoint by prompting someone to imagine themself in a new situation. Just like in fiction, knowledge of the other is not available in real life. Therefore, social bonds must be formed by acknowledging the limitations and inherent conditionality of one’s own viewpoint and respecting the fact that every other person has a different viewpoint. Taking these ideas into account can prevent people from false knowledge and unstable social relationships, perhaps leading to a more tolerant society.
In his book *After Christianity* and his essay “Toward a Nonreligious Christianity,” philosopher Gianni Vattimo responds to the Nietzschean concept of the death of God and presents his own theory of a “nonreligious” form of religion. According to Vattimo, when philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche announced, “God is dead,” this did not mean that all religions were over, as the phrase might most obviously suggest. Instead, Vattimo claims that this phrase refers to the end of metaphysics, which he defines as “the violent imposition of an order that is declared objective and natural and therefore cannot be violated and is no longer an object of discussion” (Vattimo, “After Christianity” 93). In other words, the notion of an objective, literally existing, stable truth is what is dead, and along with this the idea that God is an all-powerful being who controls reality and is the source of all truth and morality.

Though God can no longer be seen as the source of objective truth, this does not mean that all religion is over. In fact, Vattimo claims that the end of metanarratives actually opens up a path back to religious belief. He says,

> The end of metaphysics and the death of the moral God have liquidated the philosophical basis of atheism. … God was denied either because his existence was not verifiable by scientific experiment or because he was a stage ineluctably overcome in the progressive enlightenment of reason. But the end of metaphysics has now discredited these metanarratives.”

(Vattimo, “After Christianity” 17)

There is no way for anyone to prove that God does not exist, because to do so would require making recourse to an objective structure that no longer exists or has validity. There may not be any positive reason to believe in God any longer, but along with that there is no reason not
to believe in God. Without these objective structures, reality is reformulated as the interaction of
many different interpretations, none of which are literally, objectively true. Religious belief is not
the ultimate truth, but just one valid interpretation or mode of belief among many other, equally
valid interpretations. The concept of interpretation and the death of metanarratives is
summarized in the term “weak thought,” coined by Vattimo to express the destabilization of
“strong” metanarratives of objectivity. Weakness, by contrast, refers to the relativity and plurality
of modern society.

Lest this lack of truth or objectivity lead some to despair of forming any kind of society
or structure, Vattimo argues that this new era requires a new method of relating to one another,
one that (at least in the West) should be based on the Christian values outlined in the Bible.
Vattimo views the history of the West as inextricably connected with Christianity, and says that
“We are fundamentally incapable of formulating ourselves … except by accepting certain
culturally conditioned premises” (Vattimo, “Toward a Nonreligious Christianity” 36). He says,
“If I were to strip myself of the biblical world of meaning and reference, I would strip myself of
meaning altogether” so therefore “we [Westerners] cannot even speak but from a Christian point
of view” (Vattimo, “Toward a Nonreligious Christianity” 36). Once again, this does not literally
mean that everyone in the West is a Christian, or must accept the Bible as the literal truth of how
the world works. Instead, he means that Western society is structured around the values of
individualism, commitment to freedom, charity, and love, all of which Vattimo claims are
integral to the Christian tradition. Now that society’s connection with organized religious
institutions has been severed, what remains are these concepts that are religious in origin but will
become nonreligious in practice.
This nonreligious practice is, for Vattimo, inevitable when one takes into account the specific implications of Christian ideals. Vattimo claims that Christianity was founded as a turn away from the Platonic “world of forms” (Vattimo, “Toward a Nonreligious Christianity” 31) to a focus on one’s inner self. In other words, Christianity invented the concept of subjectivity, in a sense. Furthermore, he states that Christianity is fundamentally about freedom from authority, and that includes freedom from the idea of objective truth, thus underscoring the importance of subjective experience in the practice of Christianity (Vattimo “Toward a Nonreligious Christianity” 37). This new practice of Christianity should focus on interpreting the scriptures spiritually rather than literally (Vattimo “Toward a Nonreligious Christianity” 41). According to Vattimo, the true message of the scriptures expresses the utmost importance of love, which he equates with charity. He states that in modern times we have replaced objective truth with charity, which is a kind of truth established through agreement with others rather than by reference to some overarching metanarrative or philosophical foundation (Vattimo “Toward a Nonreligious Christianity” 43). So, a nonreligulous Christianity is, in other words, a commitment to the principle of charity without an insistence on the superiority of institutions such as the Church. It is a rejection of all elements that seek to bind and control, most of which are based in the concept of objective or literal truth, in favor of a subjective and interpersonal charity-love.

This form of charity must come with the recognition that other interpretations and beliefs are equally valid, however. Vattimo points out that some forms of group-determined truth can lead not to wide acceptance but instead to strict fundamentalism. In this view, “there are only forms of belonging after the end of metanarratives, and the judgment of truth is based only on its correspondence with the paradigms upheld by one’s own specific community” (Vattimo, “After
Christianity” 89). In other words, in seeking some sort of community, some groups establish strict identitarian positions, whereby to be a member of the group requires the adoption of a certain set of beliefs. This is a form of the “dialogic consensus” put forward by Vattimo, but taken to an extreme that creates a marked separation between those in the group (who believe the same things) and those out of the group (who believe different things). In Vattimo’s view, instead of this model, society should adopt an attitude of Christian hospitality, which originated in its “missionary vocation” of converting others, but is now transformed into an interaction with other cultures that involves “acknowledging that the other might be right” and giving space to listen to others rather than dominating the conversation with one’s own beliefs (Vattimo, “After Christianity” 101). So, social bonds are not formed by strict in-group identification, but instead by the acknowledgment of a shared cultural conditioning, alongside respect for others and recognition of the validity of multiple viewpoints and interpretations.

A slight modification of this concept comes from philosopher John D. Caputo, who, like Vattimo, does much of his work on the concept of religion after the death of God. Caputo and Vattimo share many of their core ideas, including the identification of the death of God with the end of metaphysics and the concept of weak thought. However, Caputo’s philosophy or theology focuses on the concept of the event, which he describes as “not something present, but something seeking to make itself felt in what is present” (Caputo 48). An event is something that can never be fully realized or defined, but is always elusive; they “solicit us from afar, draw us on, draw us out into the future, calling us hither” (Caputo 48). For Caputo, the name of God harbors an event, something that is endlessly mysterious and unable to be known completely. Thus, “religion is the
covenant that has been made … between the event and us. … We are the people of the event, the ones called together by the event” (Caputo 52). This, then, is the foundation of social bonds for Caputo: the concept that all people are called onward and are searching for an event that is yet to come.

Notably, this theology is less focused on Christianity specifically, and in fact the privileging of Christianity in Vattimo is one of Caputo’s largest critiques. Caputo points out that the concept of neighborly love is also present in Levinas’ Jewish philosophy (Caputo 79) and that claiming that the values that structure society are wholly Christian does not always translate as a hospitable gesture on a more global stage (Caputo 78). Caputo explains that in Vattimo’s view, Christianity is the main foundational element of society, and history is a process beginning with the metanarrative of religion and ending with nonreligious Christianity. This view implicitly places the name of God in the past, when it should be “an open-ended and unforeseeable future” (Caputo and Robbins 150). For Caputo, the event is of utmost importance, and any theory that seeks to fix it in place, define it, or box it in, has missed the point, which is that the event can never be fully realized.

In Caputo’s theology of the event, social bonds are formed not through a recognition of a shared Christian (or even Judeo-Christian) heritage, but instead through the recognition that everyone is called by the event that we cannot know or define. This is not to say that culture has no effect, however. Caputo recognizes that culture is what passes down the name that harbors the event — the name of God that has been discussed, but also many other names for ineffable concepts. Culture is important because it is only through culture that we can access the event (Caputo and Robbins 156). So, Caputo does not stray as far towards individualism as Vattimo,
because, as he states, “communities preserve traditions and they pass on memories” (Caputo and Robbins 156). The key to avoiding fundamentalism hinges on the realization that beliefs are culturally conditioned ways of interpreting or connecting to the ineffable event. Different communities have different ways of conceptualizing the event, but the realization that each interpretation only partially captures the full concept is what forms the basis for social bonds. The event is bigger than any one word or mode of belief, and all humans search and await the same event but in different ways.

By combining the ideas of Vattimo and Caputo, one can construct a framework through which to envision how social bonds or community are formed after the destabilization of metanarratives. From Vattimo, we can adopt the notion of “weak thought” and assert that each person’s way of viewing the world is a singular interpretation, and that no interpretation can be called objectively real or true. Furthermore, we can utilize his concept of charity to assert the utmost importance of respect for others as others, with the acknowledgment that another person’s viewpoint is different than one’s own yet has an equal claim to the truth. From Caputo we can recognize the importance of community and culture in shaping one’s viewpoint and concepts, yet also recognize that these are only ways of thinking about the event, something that can never be fully defined. So, recognizing the other as other also means recognizing the other as similar to oneself insofar as they also inherit concepts and ideas through culture and search for the unrealized event. Yet we cannot know the other fully, just as we cannot know the event fully. A recognition of this “shared individualism” is the basis for social bonds; in other words, everyone
Christopher Rowe’s short story collection *Telling the Map* focuses primarily on issues of religion and technology in a version of the American South. Not every story in the collection inhabits this space—one story takes place on another planet entirely—but either through explicit reference or inference, many seem to. This landscape is truly an *alternate* America: many stories reference familiar places such as Kentucky, Ohio, California, and Tennessee (here reimagined as the Voluntary State of Tennessee, a dictatorship whose citizens are partly machine and partly human and whose ruler is the famous statue of Athena in Nashville, a formidable technologic intelligence controlling an army of various mechanical creatures). Using these familiar locations in incredibly strange ways allows the collection to speak more directly to the reality in which its readers live, while still remaining in the realm of fiction.

Technology in the collection feels organic, often mixing the biological with the mechanical. This ties the technological elements strictly to the world itself, adding to the sense of alterity rather than complete otherness from the real Earth. For example, in the first story, “The Contrary Gardener,” robots make up a large part of the population the fictional city presumed to be Louisville, Kentucky, yet one of their most common functions is as bus drivers—showing that there still exists a normal bus system. In “The Border State,” there are rivers poisoned by nanotechnology and hot air balloon houses containing “attenuated, drip-fed people … [who exist] to consume media” (172), yet the main plot of the story is of a bicycle race like any that could be seen on the real Earth. Most of the characters are working-class people living in the
plains and grasslands of middle America, and the technology reflects this simple, often gritty existence.

In addition to the altered technology, several stories present altered versions of religion, most often Christianity. The aforementioned state ruled by Athena Parthenos is one notable exception to this, though because the “Voluntary” state is actually created through mind control enabled by Athena’s technological powers, it is in many ways not a religion but an all-encompassing political ideology. The other versions of Christianity take different forms. “Another Word for Map is Faith” describes a Protestant society composed of isolated factions, each with their own Jesus. “Gather” seems to be a pre-Protestant society whose deity is said to inhabit a physical form. “The Border State” describes the children of an itinerant minister who can “clear water of impurities … because of the strength of their faith” (152). The impurities are the aforementioned nanotechnology controlled by Athena. All of these stories grapple with the strange and often unprecedented forms religion takes in modern society by making religion a significant structural element in each society. Because the stories are an alternate version of the U.S., they could encourage readers to think more seriously about the less-obvious role of Christianity and religion as a whole in their own lives and societies by comparison.

“Gather,” one of the stories from the collection, presents a version of a religious society similar to pre-Protestant Christianity. In the story, the titular character Gather and his friend Miss Charlie experience a religious event outside the paradigm of their semi-theocratic society. Their actions model one way to form social bonds and a new type of society after the destabilization of metanarratives similar to that theorized by Gianni Vattimo and John D. Caputo. In addition, the
The story incorporates a deity who inhabits a physical body as a literalization of religion’s inherent focus on humanity.

As mentioned before, “Gather” is one of the stories set in the alternate American South. The character Gather talks about the history of the settlement in which he lives, which was started by “the first people to come down onto Virginia, who were called Pilgrims and who had starved to death before they were born again for God” (84). The founding narrative of the society, then, is a religious resurrection story similar to that of Christianity in the real world.

Theology, then, has a central place in the organization of the society, because not only was it founded by people who followed a specific religion, but the founders themselves have been mythologized and made part of the religion. In other words, society and religion are difficult to separate, suggesting that the characters in the story likely see them as inextricably combined.

The religious origins of the society inform its social and geographical structures in obvious and strict ways. Physically, the society is divided between north and south as well as by a river that marks the edge of the human settlement. These divisions, as well as who can live where, are proscribed by bibles. The titular character Gather lives in the north section, also known as “up the river” because he is liveborn, as a merchant calls him, as opposed to what is called a “bad-batch man” (84). The story is not explicit about what bad-batch men are, but due to the fact that they are contrasted with “liveborn” people like Gather, as well as the word “batch” in their name, one can conclude that they are created through some sort of technological or “artificial” process. The bibles of the society assign the bad-batch men to the southern part of the territory: according to Gather, the bible says, “Only bad-batch men can be southerners” (84). The fact that the main religious text contains specific information about the geography and social
organization of the region underscores the religious basis of the society. The bible, and the religion as a whole, contains the ultimate truth, down to the correct placement of groups of people; in other words, it is a metanarrative that both literally and figuratively structures the society.

Along with the physical structuring, the religion — again through the bible — mandates fairly strict gender roles in terms of labor. As stated before, liveborn people seem to be forbidden from living permanently with bad-batch men. However, most women seem to be tasked with serving bad-batch men as wives. This system is not the same as a marriage, however — it seems to be organized and determined by societal leaders instead of by the women themselves. Gather describes how his sisters would leave “when it was their turn to go down the river to wife for the bad batch men” (83). However this does not seem to be a permanent arrangement, as Gather mentions soon after that “he had to stay up the river with the preachers and his sisters” (84). These strict gender roles are one element that makes the religion similar to a pre-Protestant society. Women have a specific place and specific roles, and those roles center around reproduction and kinship structures. Though these roles are not voluntary, they are religiously ordained, and their performance reinforces the society’s religious basis and structures.

In addition to strict gender roles, the social and class structure as a whole is rigidly stratified, in part on religious lines. Not every member of the society is religious — for example, Gather’s friend the scientist Miss Charlie is not a churchgoer (90) and she outranks him (89) though he “attended every Sunday service” (92). However, the priests certainly have a special role in society and are highly regarded. This regard even applies to their children. Gather explains this when he is asked to do something illegal by the daughter of one of the preachers.
He explains that the request was something that “was forbidden, but their leader, a little girl with green eyes, was PK—a preacher’s kid—which warranted a lot of deference” (85). Though the mayor controls the political activities of the town, even he is affiliated with religion, since he serves as the lay leader of the church and occasionally leads services (92). So, though not everyone is religious, because of religion’s large structural and political role, the society can be seen as semi-theocratic.

Preachers also have other privileges, such as being able to gather soil due to a “special dispensation from God and specific instructions on where to gather the soil from their bibles” (85). And what is more, they have a monopoly on this knowledge, since they are the only ones allowed to own or even open bibles (88). This society is based on a hierarchy of not just religious involvement but also knowledge itself. Those who are involved in the religious organization of the priesthood are the only ones who can read for themselves exactly what the bibles say — an important privilege considering that the bibles control many things including where people are allowed to live. Having a bible in this society is to have power, and those who are not priests depend on the preachers’s reports or interpretation, meaning that they are constantly in a state of subjection and dependence on the priests.

This monopoly on knowledge includes a monopoly on knowing God; the priests prevent the common people from having a personal relationship with God. In this society, this relationship is not merely metaphorical, however; for the society in “Gather,” God is a very real being with a physical body. This literality calls back once again to the more Catholic focus on physicality or materialism. The physicality of God is an important aspect of the culture’s interaction with and view of him. The god in this society inhabits a physical body that has
weight: Gather says, “Even should God want to cross, the river was too swift in the summer. The ice would not bear God’s weight in the winter” (90). And despite people not being allowed to visit him, it seems that everyone in the society knows exactly what he looks like. His image is present on coins, for example, and the details of his face are so familiar that Gather can even recognize the image of his eyes alone (83). So, due to God’s physical embodiment, it is theoretically possible for people to meet him, but the preachers forbid this absolutely. The only ones allowed to cross the river are the preachers, who have “special dispensation from God” to gather “the good kind of soil that things would grow in” from that side (85). And this edict is not merely enforced by custom but also by a watchtower guarded day and night (93–94). This once again reinforces the entanglement of religion with the state, including the criminal justice system.

Despite the strict religious control of the society, events in the story begin to undermine this system. The first instance occurs when a group of children, including the daughter of a preacher, whom Gather has to respect due to her high status, convinces Gather to take them across the river. All of them feel nervous both about being caught but also about possibly having contact with God, yet they go because they are curious. As they approach the bank, some snow falls off a tree branch and makes a noise, and Gather says, “‘Oh, Lord,’ because he thought that maybe God was coming down the bank” (86). After that point they all return home quickly. Later, Miss Charlie theorizes that hearing this noise may have made Gather a prophet because he heard a form of God’s speech. However Miss Charlie is uncertain about this after Gather points out that all the young girls who were with him would then be prophets as well. In response, Miss Charlie muses that “Maybe you have to hear and listen both” (94). Though Miss Charlie does not
elaborate on her meaning, she implies that listening involves some sort of understanding or interpretation that goes beyond mere hearing. Nevertheless, Gather and the children had what he believes to be a personal interaction with God, something forbidden by the religious authorities. The fundamental separation between God and humans has been breached with no negative results, indicating that the religious rules are perhaps not the absolute truth that they are presented as.

That incident pales in comparison to Gather’s and Miss Charlie’s image of God, however. In the middle of an experiment with some strange papers Gather had obtained, the papers form an image of God. Because the image of God is so recognizable, both Gather and Miss Charlie are able to identify it immediately. Yet it is unquestionably an unusual depiction — so much so that they label it heretical. Gather says,

There was God, all of God, not just a little bit like on a coin, not just told about like in a sermon. All of God was on the papers on Gather’s table, and more. Because, unheard of! Untellable! There was a man with his hand on God’s flank and a woman kneeling next to God’s ferocious mouth. God, with people. (91)

Since interaction with God is categorically forbidden by preachers, the image portrays something inconceivable to a common person in the society, especially a lower-class person like Gather and a non-churchgoer like Miss Charlie. Yet the image proves that there is an alternative to the religious narratives that are presented as truth. In other words, this version of events — the metanarrative — has been destabilized, and Gather and Miss Charlie are tasked with figuring out how to move on with such information.
As Gather and Miss Charlie attempt to understand the meaning of the drawing and why it appeared to them, a new understanding of God begins to emerge. Like the other members of the society, Miss Charlie and Gather believe that God is a physical being, but it seems that they also believe he is more than that at the same time. When Miss Charlie posits that God appeared to them because he needs to get back across the river, Gather theorizes that God needs to cross because “everybody will eat God all up” during the communion ritual during the church service (92). Gather clearly does not believe that they are literally engaging in cannibalism during the service, because he says, “[The preachers] would say, ‘This is my God, and this is his body, and this is his blood.’ And then everybody would eat the bread” (92). Instead, his worry about God being eaten seems to be a more metaphorical statement about the religious authorities and their control over the representation of God. By emphasizing the word “my,” Gather calls attention to the view that the preachers own God and the narratives surrounding him. The “heretic” drawing can then be seen as an alternate way of experiencing God, one that is lost or “eaten up” when the preachers control when, how, and to whom God can be revealed. Gather’s and Miss Charlie’s theorizing is their way of creating a new religious narrative, of asserting their own perspective in the absence of absolute guidelines that are able to tell them if they are correct or not. This new world and new religious practice depends on and gains its validity from only their own interpretation.

Following their interpretation, Gather and Miss Charlie take it upon themselves to deliver God back across the river. From the beginning of their journey, they reject the standards set by their community in regards to rank. Though Miss Charlie outranks Gather, she tells him that they are “equal partners” and that “it was an equal endeavor” (93). This secret exploration of a new
mode of religiosity corresponds with a new vision of interpersonal interaction, one not affected by hierarchical concepts of class or rank. Miss Charlie explains to Gather that she thinks their journey to the opposite bank is not merely an experiment with a set structure but instead an exploration (94). Her uncertainty is important here, because it shows that despite her scientific background and education, she is wandering into new territory just as Gather is. Instead of relying on the knowledge given to them by established authorities, they are going to make their own discoveries together. This is symbolized by the moment following: “Miss Charlie put her mitten around the bundle [containing the drawing of God] and pressed it against Gather’s palm, so they were holding God there, holding God up and between them” (95). They are both interacting with the version of God that appeared to them personally, yet also interacting with each other, thus creating a space where religion is not something taught by a higher power but an experience created through the interaction of equals. They both hold up God, creating their own religion.

Yet this is not the end of the story. Gather and Miss Charlie do not return to the society after that, signalling that they can no longer believe in the established “truths” of the authorities since they have been destabilized. Instead, they begin further exploration. Miss Charlie tells Gather, “I think [an exploration] means we keep going” and Gather agrees, adding that “there was some clarity in him” (95). The picture they deposited in the tree is just one representation of God; instead, their new method of religion is one of search. This bears a striking similarity to Caputo’s concept of the event. The physical God may exist or he may not, but it is the process of searching and awaiting that unites Gather and Miss Charlie. As theorized by Vattimo and Caputo, their religion does not involve institutionalized structures but instead a process of listening to
each other and a process of search for something that may never be found. They ventured
together into the realm of uncertainty, and they will continue on this new path, theorizing and
interpreting in their own way as they go. Religion for them is no longer static but radically new
and uncertain, created by and for themselves in each moment.

Also important in the search is the literal goal: that of meeting God, of realizing the
vision of God with people that appeared to them. On the level of metaphor, they are creating a
new type of religion, but the goal is to interact with God on more equal footing: human to human
rather than inaccessible deity to subject or some other imbalanced relationship. The attempt to
(re)discover the physical God points to the human nature of religion. At its core, religion is about
relations between humans, or at least beings on Earth; when this fundamental aspect is neglected,
vviolence and repression result.

The story “Another Word for Map Is Faith” showcases exactly the danger of abstracting
God in a post-metanarrative society. In After Christianity, Vattimo calls this “relativist
fundamentalism” or “communitarianism” and states that “According to this position, there are
only forms of belonging after the end of metanarratives, and the judgment of truth is based only
on its correspondence with the paradigms upheld by one’s own specific community.” Here,
relationships and belonging are not formed based on charity and an acknowledgement of
uncertainty but instead on an “ingroup-outgroup” dynamic. People may understand that there is
no universally applicable truth, but within specific insular communities, they decide upon a set of
practices and beliefs that are held as truth for that community. In order to belong to a community,
a person must subscribe totally to these beliefs, and if they do not, they are without a community.
In “Another Word for Map Is Faith,” a cartographer group’s dogmatic belief in their Christian doctrine leads to intolerance, dehumanization, and violence towards people outside of the group.

This sharp ingroup-outgroup dynamic is evident from the first page of the story, on which the aforementioned group of cartography students sets out on a trip. They are driven to their location by people they describe as “unchurched,” thereby setting up a harsh division between the religious cartographers and the nonreligious others. This separation extends even to the language they use: the cartographers are “[trying] to make sense of the delicate, coughing talk of the unchurched little drivers” (23). The unintelligibility of the language is not attributed to the location of the unchurched people but instead to their status as unchurched, implying that a difference in belief results in a literal inability to communicate between groups. In addition to a lack of communication, however, the cartographers seem to hold significant animosity toward the unchurched people, describing them as “little schemers” (23) and lunatics (24). The level of animosity seems proportional to the difference of their religion to the cartographers’s — the unchurched people are apparently “hedge shamans and survivalists” (24); in other words, they do not practice any sort of Christian religion and are therefore unintelligible, backwards, and inherently suspicious.

Churched and unchurched are by no means the only serious divisions, however. Though the cartographers are described as Christians, this does not mean the same thing in the world of the story as it does in the real world. In the world of “Another Word for Map Is Faith,” the word “Christianity” refers specifically to what is called Protestantism in reality, and Catholicism is a separate religion. This separation is nearly as serious as the separation between churched and unchurched, as evidenced by the cartography professor’s reaction to a student’s accidental
conflation of the two. Carmen Reyes, the student, remarks to Sandy, the professor, that the group has “traveled as far for a hot-water heater as is possible and still be within Christendom” (25). Already, this shows that the land in the story is divided based on religious boundaries instead of political or cultural ones, indicating the primacy of religion in determining social status and relationships. Sandy begins naming cities that may be farther from a hot water heater and lists Cape Canaveral. Carmen responds by calculating the distance between Cape Canaveral and Orlando and determining that it is shorter than the cartography group’s distance from Louisville (25). Sandy quickly corrects her, saying, “But Orlando, Señorita Reyes, is Catholic. And we were speaking of Christendom” (25). Carmen is “stricken” by this admonition, showing that this is not just a simple mistake but one with serious implications. Catholicism and Christianity are so distinct and opposed that even to insinuate that they are the same is a serious offense. Sandy advises Carmen, “Remember where you are. Remember who you are. Or who you’re trying to become” (25). Location and identity are tied together strictly in this world, so Carmen’s error in describing the features of one location indicates to Sandy that she may not hold the requisite belief or knowledge to embody her identity as a Christian. As the story has shown previously, exhibiting a difference in religion leads to social and physical ostracization, so it is imperative that Carmen retain her identity.

Even Christianity itself is not a unified set of beliefs, however. Though everyone living in Christendom is considered “churched,” separating them from the unchurched barbarians, and they all hold beliefs similar enough to each other to be a group opposed to the Catholics, Christianity itself is a factionalized and often contentious group of practices. The unifying factor among Christianity seems to be the worship of Jesus, but each group has their own version of
Jesus; in this world, he does not seem to have been a historical figure. And the multiple Jesuses do not seem to be viewed as separate aspects of one total character, but instead as right or wrong versions. The cartography group meets with a forestry student who helps them set up their camp, in the center of which they place a shrine depicting their Jesus. They invite the student to join them, but instead he asks if their Christ is the same as his, showing them a medallion he wears depicting his Jesus. Sandy responds, “‘What do you have there, Jesus in the Trees?’ … summoning all her professional courtesy to keep the amusement out of her voice. ‘No, that’s not the Christ we keep. We’ll see you in the morning.’” (26). The amusement in her voice indicates that she feels he is deluded or ridiculous for believing in a Jesus other than her own. She acknowledges its existence, and evidently their beliefs are similar enough that they can work together, but despite that she does not really respect it. And at the end, they spend the night in different places due to this difference, showing the fundamental lack of community between factions of Christianity.

Despite the lack of overall respect for the Jesuses of other factions, acknowledgment of another faction’s belief seems to be an important part of professional correspondence. Carmen and Sandy draft an official letter to the Dean of Agricultural at their college and end it with, “By my hand … I have caused these letters to be writ. Blessings on the Department of Agriculture and on you, Dean. Blessings on Jesus Sower, the Christ you serve” (28). Religious language and reference are part of every aspect of the theocratic society, and Sandy must speak respectfully about another person’s Jesus as a professional formality. However, to herself she remarks that she “had little patience for the formalities of academic correspondence, and less for the pretense at holiness the Agriculturalists made with their little fruiting Christ” (29). Here again is the same
derision toward a group with different beliefs, as slight as they might be. Each profession has their own version of religion, but instead of respecting and acknowledging the validity of the many Jesuses and many forms of worship, many people fundamentally disrespect or laugh at the beliefs of others, showing that the community is more illusory than members of Christianity might admit.

So, what the story has presented is a vision of a Christian society without any real community. Some groups are more aligned than others, but ultimately no group believes that another group has any real faith or true beliefs. This singular belief in specific communities leads to derision towards other groups and, eventually, violence. For the cartographers, the violence is a reaction to their observation that the physical land around them contradicts the description of the land found in one of their books that they describe as *writ*, meaning that it contains the word or intention of God. This is another marker of the singularity of the cartographers’s religion — their holy books consist of atlases and geographical surveys rather than traditional religious texts. The cartographers’s ultimate mission is not to correct the books to reflect the state of the land as it exists, but instead to correct the land so that it matches with the book. Thus, they live in a static and rigidly determined world, one that should not be changed by either nature or humanity. Yet other humans who do not believe the same things do change the land — for example, one group of unchurched people, whom the cartography group calls “Digging Marmots,” has dammed a river to create a large lake. Because the lake is new and does not appear on their maps, the cartographers must destroy the dam, even though it means destroying the entire town of unchurched people on the shores of the lake. Yet their unquestionable faith in their specific mission allows this violence. When one student expresses hesitation, Sandy says, “If you looked
in their little huts you wouldn’t find anything redemptive; there’s no cross hanging on the wall of the meeting house, no Jesus of the Digging Marmots” (35). The group of unchurched people is so unworthy of respect or consideration that the cartography group decides to destroy their town with little forethought and no remorse. At the end of the day, they are unable to be redeemed because they do not hold the same beliefs as the cartography group, so they are not granted basic human respect and instead are seen as mere obstacles to the fulfillment of God’s mission.

So, “Another Word for Map Is Faith” presents a religious society made up of insular factions with limited to no real community, even if there is a surface-level alliance based on some shared beliefs. As mentioned previously, this corresponds to Vattimo’s relativist fundamentalism. Unlike “Gather,” in which the society seemed to follow one religion and the dissenters had to flee in order to discover a new religion, in “Another Word for Map Is Faith,” the landscaped is divided geographically along religious lines, but even within one area there are many different versions of one religion. By description this seems similar to Vattimo’s vision of a return to religion but in a more personal way, guided by a spirit of charity and respect for others. However, there is one crucial detail missing: Vattimo’s postmodern religious society requires as part of charity an acknowledgment that another person might be right, or, explained another way by Caputo, a recognition that one’s own practices are culturally contingent and that everyone is searching for something that is fundamentally unknowable. This element of uncertainty is missing from the fundamentalist factions. They may allow other factions to exist and even work with them and respect them to an extent, but ultimately no faction believes that another faction can be truly correct or truly holy — all they can offer is a pretense. This certainty, then, is the metanarrative returned in another form. Perhaps the government of the society does not proscribe
one specific brand of religion or claim to have objective truth, but each faction does that itself. This, then, is what leads to the violence and intolerance toward others, showing that doubt is perhaps a vital part of ethical and healthy relationships and societies.

What has been shown so far is that both stories that have been discussed correspond in many ways to Vattimo and Caputo’s theories about postmodern religious philosophy. As each story describes different versions of negative religious societies and the problems and possible solutions to them, they make ethical claims about how societies should be structured and how people should interact with each other. Like Vattimo and Caputo, the stories do not argue that religion is an inherent evil and that everyone should be an atheist, but rather that some forms of religious belief are dangerous, specifically dogmatic beliefs based on metanarratives of objective truth. Furthermore, when a specific brand of religion is adopted by the government and forced upon the people, this often leads to intolerance and fundamentalism rather than freedom and tolerance. In making these claims, then, the stories also serve as kinds of morality tales, aiming not only to tell an engaging story or illustrate a concept but to make an argument about ethics, or to advance an ethical framework. Here, then, it is worth considering how literature imparts such concepts. Should readers expect fiction to impart truth? How and what can readers learn from literature? In trying to take away an ethical lesson from a work of fiction, it is important to keep in mind the ethics of reading that lie behind such a process, lest the reader end up with false expectations or beliefs about the role and benefit of fiction.

In the essay “How Narration Produces Gender: Femininity as Affect and Effect in Alice Walker’s The Color Purple” Robyn R. Warhol discusses one way texts make arguments, by
producing emotional effects in readers. Specifically, the article looks at the role of character and narrative structure in producing emotional effects in readers. Warhol claims that while narrative focalization does prompt readers to feel that they identify with characters, in reality reader response is more due to “the text’s technical arrangement of perspective” than personal identification with a character viewed as an individual (Warhol 2). In other words, characters are not individual people that are “just like” the readers, but instead are constructed by familiar discursive techniques that produce certain reactions in readers. So, by locating characters in certain narrative patterns, authors can encourage readers to sympathize with or criticize certain characters and therefore to receive the ultimate message the text tries to convey. This process is not dependent on discovering that a character or situation is exactly like real life, because to assume that would be to assume that the fictional narrative is saying something true about real life. Instead, the text provides a model of a situation that can be similar to real life in some ways, and readers can consider their reactions to the fictional situation and apply those lessons to instances in their own life.

As Warhol points out in her article, internal focalization is an important tool that authors use to engender sympathy from readers for a specific character. She defines “internal focalization” as “narrative discourse conveying the perceptions … not of the narrator but of a character, regardless of whether the discourse is in the narrator’s or the character’s voice” (Warhol 1). She goes on to point out that this focalization promotes sympathy because it “invites the reader to participate emotionally from the subject-position of the oppressed” (Warhol 1). The key word here is “invites” — though readers may feel as though they are experiencing the subject-position of the character, Warhol claims that something else is going on. Instead of
emotional response to a text being based on a reader identifying closely with a character or their situation, she suggests that emotional response is “a consequence of the text’s technical arrangement of perspective” (Warhol 2). This suggests, then, that readers imagine themselves in particular situations and react to that imagining instead of knowing another subjectivity in any detail.

Of course, internal focalization is an important element in developing reader response to literature, but it is by no means the only method, and other elements of the story can work against focalization to portray a character as unsympathetic in service of a larger argument. “Gather” is a good example of a story where internal focalization works alongside other elements of characterization to encourage readers to like a character. Though “Gather” is told through third-person narration, the focalization on Gather allows readers to access some of his thoughts, feelings, and intentions. Alongside that, though, are his demonstrated positive qualities: he is honest, inquisitive, loyal, and hardworking, all qualities that most people tend to value. In this way, the text uses this discourse of moral behavior to establish Gather as a positive character and one whom readers should like and root for.

“Another Word for Map Is Faith” similarly uses third-person narration focalized through the main character, Sandy, but the other elements in the story serve to establish her as a villain rather than a hero. As mentioned before, Sandy holds a great amount of disdain for those who do not share her religious beliefs, so she is shown to be intolerant in her thoughts and untruthful in her words, both negative qualities. The conversation she has with Carmen in which Carmen mistakenly lists a Catholic city as part of Christiendom was organized by Sandy to trick Carmen. Sandy says that Carmen “made the mistake Sandy had expected of her” (25), showing that she
had planned it beforehand. And due to the culture of religious intolerance, this is not merely a minor teachable moment, but a potentially dangerous slip, as evidenced by Carmen’s “stricken look” in response to her mistake (25). Sandy is also involved in a relationship with one of her students, undermining her professional integrity and once again calling her morals into question. This relationship is evidenced by the student “sulking from Sandy’s clear signal he wouldn’t be sharing her tent that night” (26), which implies that they had previously shared a tent. These negative qualities, combined with her actions to destroy large swaths of the landscape as well as homes and lives of people in the process, casts Sandy as evil even as her own thoughts and feelings make the opposite argument, since of course Sandy believes herself to be doing the right thing. If readers think that they completely understand Sandy and know what it is like to be in her position, then they have a much higher chance of sympathizing with her, possibly to the extent of excusing her actions in the name of relativism or religious freedom. This conclusion, however, ignores the other elements of the story that make the clear case for seeing Sandy and the students’s actions as immoral and violent.

So, fiction does not actually offer true information about subject positions and instead constructs characters and reader responses by playing into common tropes and discourses of morality. But the question remains: what is the significance of this? Does it really matter whether or not someone thinks they can fully know the experiences or subjectivity of another person, character or otherwise? In her article “The Other (Woman): Limits of Knowledge in Beauvoir’s Ethics of Reciprocity” Ellie Anderson gives an explanation of why this issue is important. Anderson analyzes the novel She Came to Stay (L’Invitée) by Simone de Beauvoir. The novel features a couple whose relationship is founded on “the fantasy of complete knowledge of the
other,” which Anderson calls “epistemic unity” (Anderson 382). The couple considers themselves to be so completely close that they understand one another completely and are fully unified because of that fact. They have an open relationship — facilitated by the complete trust engendered by the illusion of unity — and frequently engage in relationships with other partners. However, an issue arises when another woman, Xavière, begins a relationship with Pierre, the male partner. Françoise, the female partner, does not understand Pierre’s strong feelings for Xavière and feels threatened by their connection as well as its implications for her own relationship with Pierre. This leads Françoise to determine that she and Xavière cannot coexist, and so Françoise murders Xavière in order to maintain her own selfhood.

According to Anderson, it is Françoise’s illusion of complete knowledge of Pierre that led to this violent situation. She explains,

The desire to know everything about another person to the point at which one feels one has unmediated access to the other’s self-consciousness is in a sense the desire to kill the other—because it is the desire to kill the other as other. Desire for full knowledge is desire for the destruction of otherness. (Anderson 383)

In other words, this view of relations assumes that otherness is an inherently negative quality that leads to misunderstanding and division, and must be eliminated at all costs. This view also presupposes that this complete knowledge is possible and achievable though some sort of radical honesty or pure connection. Yet, this connection is not based on appreciation of another person for themself but instead on a desire to remove the one quality that makes them an individual
apart from oneself. The act of knowing another person completely is inherently a violent act, one of destruction instead of knowledge or trust.

In addition to the destruction of the other that is necessitated by this view, there is also the consequence depicted by the book: that of violence following a misunderstanding. Anderson explains that Françoise based her identity upon knowledge of Pierre, retaining no individuality for herself (Anderson 383). So, the introduction of a new character who proves that Françoise does not fully understand Pierre and that they do not have a unified consciousness not only threatens Françoise’s relationship but her very self, necessitating her destruction in Françoise’s mind. Because Françoise has based her identity and relationship on an illusion, she must protect that illusion in order to continue to exist, even if the cost of protecting the illusion is a human life. This, then, is an inherently unstable basis for any form of relationship, because there is always the possibility that a new situation will arise that threatens the unity of two minds. Of course, not every situation will lead to murder as in the novel, but there is a greater likelihood for some negative consequences, even if it merely results in the dissolution of the relationship. Because society depends on interpersonal relationships, it is important that they be founded on more stable grounds than the fantasy of epistemological unity.

In the final page of the article, Anderson lays out her theory of what an ethical relationship should look like, based on Beauvoir’s version of ethics. Instead of understanding the other, completely or otherwise, she suggests that one must recognize the other as other. Anderson states,

For Beauvoir, recognition is precisely not recognizing oneself in the other.

Insofar as I recognize the other as an independent self-consciousness with
equal claims on the world, I recognize that other as having something that I too have. However, recognition of an independent self-consciousness is the suspension of recognizing myself in that self-consciousness. It is recognizing the lack of myself in the other. (Anderson 386)

All humans share the similarity of having a subjectivity that is unique and exclusively their own, and it is recognition of that quality that forms a solid foundation of an ethical relationship. Any assumption of understanding another person’s subjectivity is unprovable and unstable, thus leading to destabilization and a breakdown of a relationship, if the relationship has been based on that assumption of similarity. Instead, if one is able to see the other as singular and unique in the same way that the self is, without claiming to know them, then stronger bonds can be formed. This concept, then, returns back to Vattimo and Caputo’s ethics, which call for acknowledgment of the validity of other viewpoints alongside an understanding that absolute truth does not exist. The independent self-consciousnesses can be likened to Caputo’s vision of a community of searchers, united in their quest to reveal the unrevealable event, yet not united in viewpoint or purpose. Unity arises, paradoxically, from disunity, yet this is the only type of relation that cannot be destabilized, because it is founded precisely on the assumption that stability is false.

Though at first glance very different, theories about postmodern religion do work together well with theories about the purpose and ethics of reading fiction. Ultimately, the connection lies in the recognition that objective knowledge is impossible, especially of another person. Fiction can offer a new perspective on a person’s own life, but it does not impart truth. Reading about a character cannot teach a person what it is like to be someone else, like Warhol
claims, just as one cannot know another person fully in the real world. As Anderson’s theory has shown, the delusion of knowledge can be a dangerous one, especially when important things such as social bonds are based upon it. In that case, the destabilization of these bonds can destabilize society itself, since social bonds are the very essence of any society.

Instead, bonds should be formed through charity, by acknowledging that everyone sees differently and that one person can never fully understand the viewpoint of another. For this reason, it is impossible to determine with certainty that one person is correct, so a model for a functioning society should be one of respect and acknowledgement of these limitations in knowledge. However, as Caputo argues, everyone desires or works toward something, and even though different people call it different things, the names cannot fully capture the event itself. This process of seeking and desiring is an important unifying factor, one that survives even in the absence of metanarratives or objective knowledge. Thus, in a non-obvious way, the destabilization of metanarratives, purported to be solid and unchanging structures, actually paves the way for a more stable and ethical society.
Works Cited


