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## **“Fear the Old Blood.” *Bloodborne*, Christian Concepts of Communion, and Theological Reflections**

Ed Watson

### **Abstract**

What might it mean to read video games as a source for critical theological reflection? This project explores the extent to which FromSoftware’s 2015 classic *Bloodborne* can be read in just this way for at least two reasons. Firstly, the game makes visible foundational but often taken-for-granted Christian themes, as well as their internal paradoxes. Secondly, *Bloodborne*’s gameplay is structured through these themes in ways that invite the player to take on a mode of theological reflection which allows them to think creatively beyond the conditions giving rise to these paradoxes.

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### **IASGAR PhD Day Report: Introduction by Gregory Price Grieve**

The 2nd Annual Summer Graduate Workshop hosted by UNCG’s Network for Cultural Study of Video Gaming and the International Academy for Study of Gaming and Religion, titled *Videogaming and Cultural Values*, was held on 27 and 28 July 2023. Tailored for early-stage researchers and doctoral students, the workshop focused on media-centered approaches, perspectives from game developers and publishers, and insights from gamers. Participants engaged in discussions and debates on theoretical frameworks for exploring the intersection of religion, culture, and video gaming. Due to their outstanding quality, select presentations from the workshop have been chosen for publication in this issue as *Emerging Voices in the Field*.

## Introduction

What might it mean to read video games as a source for critical theological reflection? This project explores the extent to which FromSoftware's 2015 classic *Bloodborne* (2015) can be read in just this way for at least two reasons. Firstly, the game makes visible foundational but often taken-for-granted Christian themes, as well as their internal paradoxes. Secondly, *Bloodborne*'s gameplay is structured through these themes in ways that invite the player to take on a mode of theological reflection which allows them to think creatively beyond the conditions giving rise to these paradoxes. Though motivated by independent interest, this paper will comprise part of my ongoing work in Christian systematic theology to investigate whether and how theological concepts can be deployed to transform the conditions of possibility for our wider worlds of meaning, whether in religious or secular contexts.

### **Framing: *Bloodborne* and Christian Concepts of Blood**

This exploration will be framed by reading *Bloodborne* alongside Caroline Walker Bynum's *Wonderful Blood* (2007) and Gil Anidjar's *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (2014). Walker Bynum shows how the blood of Christ came to be understood as the predominant corporeal medium for mystical union with God as it became an object of intense devotion in late Middle Ages Europe. Anidjar (2014) argues that this and similar innovations in Christian spirituality have given rise to now taken-for-granted understandings of blood as the elemental stuff of societal relations, especially in terms of kinship, nationhood, and economic capital. Both texts illuminate aspects of *Bloodborne* which suggest that, beyond just using Christian imagery in its world-building, the game should be understood as critically allegorizing Christian conceptions of communion – and that understood this way, the game invites distinctive forms of reflection on paradoxical tensions internal to these conceptions.

*Bloodborne's* opening cutscene casts the player – the Hunter – as having arrived at Yharnam in search of paleblood. After the first few hours of gameplay, the Hunter can piece together that Yharnam is the home of the Healing Church, founded by Lawrence, the First Vicar after it was discovered that the blood of the Great Ones could be used to cure disease and infirmity through a process called blood ministration. The Church eventually discovered, however, that blood ministration turned many of its recipients into beasts who sought to consume the blood of humans. The Church commissioned Hunters to hide the cause of beasthood and cull those affected, but the hunt in turn had a similar effect on its participants, with Hunters eventually becoming beasts themselves. Over the course of the game as a whole, the Hunter witnesses the ultimate collapse of the Healing Church through its climactic efforts to attain communion with the Great Ones, as well as uncovering the hellish fates and crimes of the Church's most revered figures in the DLC area The Hunter's Nightmare.

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*Bloodborne* juxtaposes a British Victorian setting with "extensive uses of Shinto and Buddhist ideas" (Zaiden, Pilbeam and Carstensdottir 2019). Along with other FromSoftware games, *Bloodborne* is thus notable amongst relatively mainstream stories in Western markets for situating Western Christian themes within a non-Western Christian worldview – a fact which enables it to *make strange* several themes typically treated as axiomatic within Western Christianity.

This is most evidently the case with the notion of blood as a medium for both creaturely-divine and intra-creaturely communion. As Walker Bynum's historical work makes clear, the idea of blood as a primary means for forging communion with God in European Christian thought did not come about automatically. It emerged through a variety of popular cults that formed around miraculous blood-related events, as

well as intense experiences of healing and spiritual ecstasy recorded by predominantly female mystics. As such, it became at once a site of popular devotion and Church discipline: the institutional Church sought both to capitalize on and to control the groundswell of public devotion produced by blood.<sup>i</sup> Reading *Bloodborne* in light of Walker Bynum’s work highlights how the game makes strange the language of blood, and in doing so draws out its ambivalence as at once the source of and a fundamental challenge to the Healing Church’s power.

Creatively developing Walker Bynum’s account, Anidjar likewise draws attention to the wide-ranging effects of treating blood as an element of divine–creaturely relation. As he notes, the blood of God in medieval Christian thought eventually comes to frame the character of relation itself to the point that blood in general becomes the substance of the community of Christian selves. This in turn leads to the generation of collective distinctions between those of pure and those of inferior blood – distinctions through which social bodies come to be conceptualized in terms of blood purity. *Bloodborne* similarly highlights the striking oddness of policing blood as a ground of community, most especially in its presentation of the vilebloods.

Within these specific themes, my analysis in this paper will be framed by the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1978), Pierre Bourdieu (1991), and Hortense Spillers (2003), as well as Kathryn Tanner’s (1997) theological analyses of culture. Wittgenstein (1978), Bourdieu (1991), and Spillers (2003) collectively frame an account of how the logic internal to paradigmatic concepts can inflect the structural conditions for both individual and societal action, not least in terms of how the grammar of these concepts is woven through both political and literary phenomena. All three writers also, however, offer modes of critical reflection through which communities can work to recursively transform these structural conditions.<sup>ii</sup> Tanner (1997) meanwhile offers

a way of thinking both the formation and transformation of structures of meaning in specifically theological terms, and so of refusing to treat the specifically *theological* valence of certain concepts as accidental to their social efficacy. Though Tanner is primarily read by theologians, her work in this regard has significance – alongside the historiographical writings of Michel de Certeau (especially 1992) – for academics seeking to investigate the role that first-person religious discourses play in shaping human societies.

### **Illuminations: Theological Paradoxes in Yharnam and their Resolution**

Illuminating how *Bloodborne's* world-building intersects with Walker Bynum (2007) and Anidjar's (2014) arguments then helps to clarify the particular force of how the game deploys Christian imagery. In the particular ways that it illustrates the *strangeness* of blood, *Bloodborne* illustrates these arguments' political consequences by pointedly drawing out the ways in which both desire for communion with divinity and desire to police the forms of this communion are characterized by paradoxical ambivalence. Within the game's universe, the desire to transcend creaturely limitation catalyzes bestial transformation: desire for divine communion effects a collapse in humanity. The words of Provost Willem, head of the academic institute Byrgenwerth from which the Healing Church arose, that "we are born of the blood, made men by the blood, undone by the blood," (*Bloodborne* 2015) apply to the *desire* for a god's blood, as well as to the mere substance of blood itself. This is true, moreover, for those who govern the Church *and* for those who come to Yharnam seeking blood ministrations. The ambivalence is not just one of authority and control, that is – it is internal to desires for transformative union with God, desires which can be shared across boundaries of class and power.



The most heightened violence in *Bloodborne* then revolves around policing religious communities according to notions of sanctified corporeal substance. The desire to transcend creaturely limitations is compounded by an ecclesial desire to regulate the material consequences of this transcendence's failure. Culling those who turn into beasts, lest the Healing Church be undermined, eventually turns both hunters and clerics into far worse creatures, as shown by the early transformations of Father Gascoigne and Vicar Amelia. Similar arguments can be made regarding the College of Byrgenwerth and Micolash. As the area of Old Yharnam makes clear, moreover, the bloodlust of the hunters far exceeds the bloodlust of the beasts, who are quite content and peaceful apart from human contact.

*Bloodborne* thus expresses two paradoxes internal to Christian desire for divine communion which can be drawn out in light of Walker Bynum's (2007) and Anidjar's (2014) writing. On the one hand, it casts the desire to transcend creaturely finitude as leading to a destructive intensification of that finitude. On the other, it casts the institutional desire to suppress and regulate this initial intensification as producing a violent intensification of the Healing Church's own creatureliness – an intensification which expresses a desire for power over death, over and above a desire for the source of life. In both cases, the desire to transcend conditions of creaturely existence more deeply enmeshes creatures in what they seek to transcend.

*Bloodborne* goes further than both Walker Bynum's (2007) and Anidjar's (2014) texts can, however, by immersing its players in its gameplay in ways that invite a reconfiguration of these paradoxes' theological grounds. *Bloodborne's* gameplay is simultaneously structured around a desire for transcendence and an acceptance of finitude.

Regarding transcendence, at each stage the player is faced with seemingly insurmountable challenges. In order to overcome these challenges, they must devote time and care to learning both overall game mechanics and specific enemy movesets, in a fashion analogous to both Western and non-Western forms of monastic devotional practice. There is thus an empowering aspect to mastering the game, one interwoven with overcoming meaningful difficulties.

Regarding acceptance, transcending in-game challenges is ultimately oriented toward *inhabiting* rather than dissolving the in-game limits of creatureliness. This is perhaps most pointedly illustrated after the Hunter defeats the Orphan of Kos. The Orphan's defeat is followed by a cutscene narration gently saying, "ah, sweet child of Kos, returning to the ocean. A bottomless curse, a bottomless sea. Accepting of all that there is and can be." A Great One itself, the Orphan's soul thus finds peace by dissolving into a place of acceptance. But inhabiting finitude is also written into the game's overarching narrative. No matter how significant the individual challenges they overcome are, the Hunter can never transform Yharnam's conditions of possibility. In stark contrast to many heroic narratives, there is no saving this world; there is no transcendent communion without destructive consequence. Either the Hunter is enslaved to the cycle of violence, becomes a Great One at the cost of their humanity, or awakens from the dream to leave its concerns behind entirely. Every increase in power ultimately reveals the player's relative powerlessness.

At an initial level, then, *Bloodborne* connects with the player's own desire for transcendence, not necessarily oriented towards communion with divinity, perhaps, but oriented towards overcoming obstacles through discipline and skill. It then situates this desire in the context of an inescapable finitude, such that evidence of one's lack of in-game power increases in correlation with their skill.

Crucially, this formational gameplay design then also grounds both a fundamental critique and a fundamental reconfiguration of religious practice – over and above making *visible* the paradox-generating ambivalences of desire for communion with God, *Bloodborne* offers a way of critically rethinking the orientation and outworking of this desire. At a general level, it invites thinking desire for transcendence as oriented towards accepting creatureliness without complacency. In a more specific sense, it invites thinking through the symbols and practices through which communities of religious desire are articulated so as to motivate against these symbols becoming uncritically accepted justifications for violence. Insofar as the player is being invited to think transcendence as oriented toward accepting finitude, that is, the game invites them to reflect on what it means to form a *religious* community apart from negating or policing creaturely finitude.

*Bloodborne* is certainly not unique in this regard. As much recent interreligious scholarship has shown, Christian and Buddhist thinkers alike have attempted to articulate desire for transcendence in ways oriented toward acceptance of creaturely finitude. Significant threads in both traditions have likewise attempted to frame practices that form creaturely desires for transcendence in ways that affirm, rather than negating, the fullness of creaturely existence. What marks *Bloodborne* as *distinctive* are the ways in which it can illuminate the paradoxical ambivalence of Christian themes of communion at the same time as its gameplay potentially forms the player in ways that invite them to critically rethink the desires expressed within these themes.

It should also be noted that this work of theological formation is not automatic, as it were. Though the theological symbolism of the game is overt, most players will not approach the game with scholarly accounts of how Christian accounts of blood have



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<sup>i</sup> This was not always a case of an evil Church thwarting an innocent populace – blood devotion motivated popular riots against local Jewish populations, for example, which the institutional Church sometimes tried to prevent as part of its general intolerance of fanaticism.

<sup>ii</sup> I have developed accounts of this recursive work in relation to Tanner's (1997) and Wittgenstein's (1978) account of concept formation, as well as Spillers' account of myth, see Watson (2021, 2022).