

# How *Not* to Become God: What *Watchmen* Can Teach Christians about Living in a Godless World

Benjamin Leeper

## Introduction

“WHO WATCHES THE WATCHMEN?”—the slogan is emblazoned in graffiti that contrasts the burnt orange sky, iris orchid skyline, and long shadows of a city that seems to be in constant twilight (Figure 1). Nearby, a man with bright orange hair carries a sign that reads, “THE END IS NIGH.” In Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ graphic novel *Watchman*, this sidewalk prophet is treated as an amusing oddity—a reminder of a bygone era when the end was not so imminent that its significance could be addressed seriously. The world of *Watchman* has a history like our own, except for two seemingly minor points of divergence. In 1938, an unknown man wearing a black hood and a rope tied in a noose around his neck violently attacked a gang of men assaulting a young man and a woman. Then in 1959, a man named Jon Osterman forgot his girlfriend’s watch in an intrinsic field experiment test chamber. These two events rippled out into the world, bringing forth an age of vigilante crime fighters, a vastly different

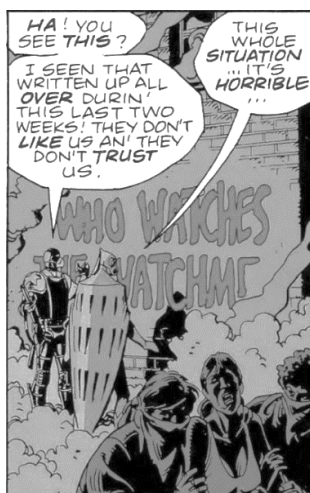


Fig. 1. Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen*, New Edition (Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2014), 2:18.

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Vietnam war, and an American society that is more nihilistic, more chaotic, and less hopeful than the one we inhabit. Yet what makes Moore and Gibbons' masterpiece *Watchmen* so compelling is how it portrays a group of rudderless "heroes" navigating a hyper-realistic world not too dissimilar to our own. *Watchmen* presents an almost prophetic alternate history, one that disrupted the graphic novel medium in ways still felt today. While its infamous tagline, "Who Watches the Watchmen?" may have referred originally to the governmental oversight of masked crime fighters, it also represents a larger theological point of the work. The implicit answer to the question is clear: no one watches the watchmen. No God looks down from above, approving or disapproving of our actions, except the gods we make. And if we make the gods, then who will watch over them? Who will protect us from them? Who will protect us from ourselves? These questions are part of the *gestalt* of the world of *Watchmen*. Every person who inhabits this world is shaped and formed by these questions, even if she never asks them explicitly. Indeed, there is no need to ask. Everyone already knows the answer.

The empirical and existential experience of this world as both lacking God and yet retaining unfairness, incoherence, purposeless, and suffering, creates the conditions by which God is almost entirely implausible.<sup>1</sup> The theological name for this experience is *Deus absconditus*, or *the God who is hidden*. Whether He is hidden from the sight of man or truly absent, the imminent reality is the same: God is not here.<sup>2</sup> This cultural moment seems particularly characterized by a society-wide experience of the apparent absence of God, which raises questions about the effect this will have on our culture and how Christians can respond to an apparently godless world.

Moore and Gibbons' *Watchmen* provides the perfect playground to explore these questions, because it puts three of its central characters—Rorschach, Dr. Manhattan, and Veidt—through varied experiences of the absence of God, allowing the reader to examine the effects. A character analysis of these three individuals from *Watchmen* reveals that experiences of God's absence—or more provocatively, of God's death—necessarily cause them to undergo a process of self-deification, in which they become solely responsible for providing meaning and morality for themselves and for their world, thus filling the role normally attributed to God.

The reexamined philosophies of Fredrich Nietzsche and Albert Camus provide the framework for this analysis, raising legitimate questions to which a Lutheran theology of the cross, as explained by Deitrich Bonhoeffer, responds. This has great implications for the Church and her mission, as it provides a way for Christians to engage honestly with a culture that seems to want nothing to do with God by offering a strange yet essential lesson: how *not* to become God.

## **A Philosophical Prolegomenon**

Understanding the philosophical underpinning that informs much of the world of *Watchmen*—and of our own—is essential. At a certain point, philosophy ceases to be an object of theoretical study and instead drifts into a matter of cultural analysis as it

enters the public imagination. This is precisely what has happened with nihilism and existential philosophy. The process of self-deification that Rorschach, Dr. Manhattan, and Veidt undergo is laid out plainly in Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*. The infamous madman remarks, "God is dead and he remains dead! And we have killed him!"<sup>3</sup> As has been long recognized, the death of God is not the killing of an actual deity, but rather the release of absolute values and objectivity that come from an assumed faith in an all-powerful God, which in the West refers specifically to the God of the Bible. Decades would elapse before others would truly understand the nihilistic lack of coherence that accompanies the disillusionment of the hypothesis of God.

Notably, this experience is not confined to those who identify as atheists, although Nietzsche was certainly addressing that crowd. It also includes Christians and other theists who, while professing to believe, live and think as if God does not exist. Thus, the death of God may not include the death of religion or religious rites at all. As Philip Rieff predicted in 1967, "people will continue to genuflect and read the Bible, which has long achieved the status of great literature; but no prophet will denounce the rich attire or stop the dancing. There will be more theatre, not less, and no Puritan will denounce the stage or draw its curtains."<sup>4</sup> Religious man remains after the death of God. The primary difference is who the "god" is. When an individual experiences this "death," Nietzsche argues that he then *must* become god himself: "How then shall we console ourselves, the most murderous of all murders? . . . is not the magnitude of this deed too great for us? Shall we not ourselves have to become Gods, merely to seem worthy of it?"<sup>5</sup> Those who kill God must now take on the responsibility of creating meaning, morality, and value themselves. This self-deification is not ontological but rather *vocational*.<sup>6</sup> It pertains not to one's essence, but rather to one's role in the world.

The existentialist tradition of the twentieth century generally agrees with Nietzsche's imperative for deification, although existentialists differ in their assessment of the positivity of this development. Jean-Paul Sartre made a "sweeping, exceptionless claim that the fundamental project of *all* humans is to strive to become in-itself-for-itself, or God."<sup>7</sup> But for Sartre, this desire was also in bad faith—a self-deception rooted in humanity's inability to actually become what they set out to be. Martin Heidegger did not speak in terms of deification, but his concept of the *Dasein* contains the responsibility of humans for meaning making, which amounts to divinity in the vocational sense. Albert Camus provides the clearest explanation—and criticism—of existential self-deification. Speaking of Dostoevsky's character Kirilov from *The Possessed*, he writes, "To become god is merely to be free on this earth, not to serve an immortal being. Above all, of course, it is drawing all the inferences from that painful independence. If God exists, all depends on him and we can do nothing against his will. If he does not exist, everything depends on us. For Kirilov, as for Nietzsche, to kill God is to become god oneself."<sup>8</sup> The independence of becoming god is painful—even crushing. It certainly kills Kirilov. Camus devotes major portions of *The Myth of Sisyphus* to the question of suicide precisely because self-deification is so dangerous for mere mortals.

Even though other existentialists like Sartre ultimately criticize self-deification, they often try to maintain and embrace the meaning-making role of humanity, necessarily promoting humanity to the role of gods. Camus attacks this attitude by

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establishing the true weight of the absurd. Speaking of existentialists who acknowledge the absurd but promote escapism, Camus writes, “they deify what crushes them and find reason to hope in what impoverishes them. That forced hope is religious in all of them.”<sup>9</sup> For Camus, the absurd is the crushing tension between the human heart’s desire for meaning and God’s (or the world’s) apparent disinterest in providing an answer. But between the two of them, Camus is clear that the problem lies with the former, not the latter. As he asserts, “The worm is in man’s heart. That is where it must be sought.”<sup>10</sup> It is not existence that is absurd, for by what standard can that be judged but by man? No, absurdity is a *personal* existential experience. Camus finds a strange comrade in Martin Luther, who agreed four hundred years prior in his commentary on Ecclesiastes. In a statement that was radical at the time, he wrote,

What is being condemned in this book, therefore, is not the [creation] but the depraved affection and desire of us men, who are not content with the [creation] of God that we have and with their use but are always anxious and concerned to accumulate riches, honor, glory, and fame, as though we were going to live here forever: and meanwhile we become bored with the things that are present and continually yearn for other things, and then still others.<sup>11</sup>

Luther’s point is that the issue is not with God’s creation—everything under the sun—which he upholds as good, but with man’s heart. Vanity, or absurdity, is a label that can belong only to mankind.<sup>12</sup>

Despite his reluctance with the attitude other existentialist philosophers have toward the absurd, Camus ultimately embraces absurdity not because the absurd provides the answer, but rather because its acknowledgment allows honesty, which he hopes can counter suicide and the meaninglessness of death. Sisyphus, ever futilely and powerlessly pushing his rock up a hill, only for it to fall back down, becomes Camus’s absurd hero by his ability to find joy through his embrace of that which is fated and that which he fates. Sisyphus is the perfect archetype for a society that finds itself caught between meaninglessness and the need to create one’s own meaning. Many are willing to “imagine Sisyphus happy,” but they have missed that for Camus absurdity is always a crushing tension—we *must* imagine Sisyphus happy, for we have no other choice.<sup>13</sup> The popularity of the “death of God” philosophy in the present is matched only by an ignorance of the true and necessary effects of the absurd. In this respect, *Watchmen* becomes an invaluable resource by imagining three absurd heroes and the consequences of their self-deification.

### **Three Case Studies from *Watchmen***

While *Watchmen* can be read as a critique of the God of the Bible, as some scholars do, *Watchmen* is more focused on critiquing man-become god.<sup>14</sup> Chapter 3, “Judge of all the Earth,” is a reference to Genesis 18:25, in which Abraham pleads with God for mercy upon Sodom and Gomorrah. In his intercession to God, Abraham says “Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous far as the wicked, far be it from you.” This intercession is necessary within the Scriptural narrative because it is not immediately clear that God himself is bound to the same moral code as Abraham. Yet this reference serves to critique Dr. Manhattan, not God

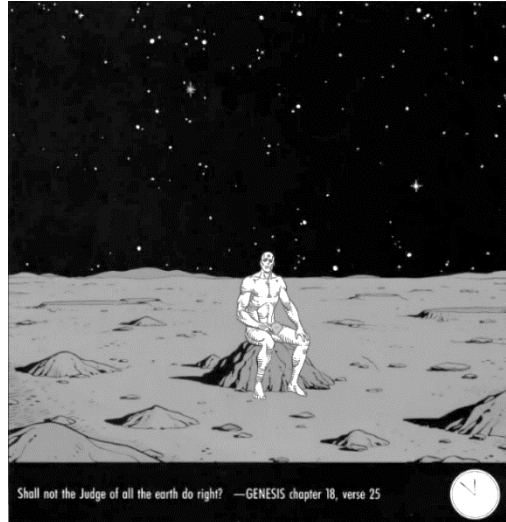


Fig. 2. Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 3:28

(Figure 2). Dr. Manhattan occupies the role of the “judge of all the earth,” because world peace is quite literally balanced on his big blue shoulders. But he ignores this responsibility and flees to Mars. Moore and Gibbons’ point is that Dr. Manhattan is the indifferent “watchmaker” god. The accusation sticks because the God of the Bible is already perceived to be deistically absent. The “theology” of *Watchmen* is more anthropological than theological. The critical focus is thus more appropriately aimed at three characters: Rorschach, Dr. Manhattan, and Veidt. An almost religious awe accompanies these characters as they experience a compulsory self-deification, taking on the role the Christian God once served in individual and societal life in the West. Rorschach, Dr. Manhattan, and Veidt follow to a T this process of self-deification laid out by Nietzsche and Camus, allowing the reader to join them on their journey to godhood and beyond. Each provides a window into the diverse ways in which God’s absence can be felt, as well as the type of gods one becomes as a result.

### **Rorschach**

Dr. Manhattan so clearly functions as a fill-in for God in *Watchmen* that he has blinded critics analyzing how other characters interact with divinity. Terry Ray Clark, author of “The ‘Comic and Tragic Vision’ of Apocalyptic Rhetoric in Kingdom Come and *Watchmen*” remarked that “If nothing else, [Dr. Manhattan] is the closest thing to God in the graphic novel. No other truly god-like figure makes an appearance.”<sup>15</sup> But Clark is mistaken. God-like figures abound in *Watchmen*: they are just not all quasi-omnipotent blue beings. While *Watchmen* is a world where God is dead, it is not a world lacking gods. One such “god” is Rorschach, also known as Walter Joseph Kovacs. The aspect of godhood that Rorschach assumes is primarily that of arbitrator

of morality. This is because Rorschach experiences God's absence as *injustice*. His survey of the world has revealed a host of wicked people who, instead of receiving punishment, flourish. For Rorschach, this truth is unacceptable, and it clearly causes him a great deal of angst because he believes that a coherent world requires retributive justice. The lack of coherence and the presence of injustice has killed God for Rorschach. As he says to his psychotherapist:

Looked at sky through smoke heavy with human fat and God was not there. The cold, suffocating dark goes on forever, and we are alone. Live our lives, lacking anything better to do. Devise reason later. Born from oblivion; bear children, hellbound as ourselves; go into oblivion. There is nothing else. Existence is random. Has no pattern save what we imagine after staring at it for too long. No meaning save what we choose to impose. This rudderless world is not steered by vague, metaphysical forces. It is not God who kills the children. Not fate that butchers them or destiny that feeds them to the dogs. It's us. Only us.<sup>16</sup>

The incoherence of existence—a lack of patterns, randomness of events, ambiguity origin and purpose—leads to a lack of meaning, except that which is self-made. God's absence is inferred from this, which in turn places humanity in the hot seat. Rorschach is brutal and merciless, often beating other people indiscriminately, exacting a collective punishment upon humanity that Rorschach brings down to the personal level. His lack of restraint demonstrates that he believes that all of humanity is responsible for this injustice, and thus all of humanity deserves his punishment and wrath.

Kathryn Imray remarks that, “whereas classically, God judges through the prophet and punishes through external agents, without God, Rorschach appoints himself to both roles. Without God, anything is permissible, including Rorschach's monstrous, black-and-white, neo-fascist retributive justice.”<sup>17</sup> It is not only that Rorschach's actions are permissible. For him, they are required. He says so himself: “We do not do this thing [vigilantism] because it is permitted. We do it because we have to. We do it because we are compelled.”<sup>18</sup> If the point were not clear enough, this quote is framed with a shot of the phrase, “WHO WATCHES THE WATCHMEN,” to drive home the point that the absence of God is the force that compels Rorschach. Without God to enact justice, whether in the present or in a hoped-for future, Rorschach *must* take on divine retributive justice himself. This is Rorschach's self-deification, derived directly from the death of God. Rorschach does not see himself as part of humanity, but as something beyond and above it. This is clear from the very first page of the book. Rorschach opens the novel with “the accumulated filth and all their sex and murder will foam up about their waists and all the whores and politicians will look up and shout ‘save us!’ . . . and I'll look down and whisper ‘no.’”<sup>19</sup> Rorschach positions himself in the place of God, enacting his own version of divine wrath upon the world.

Yet Rorschach's deification could by no means be called a success. Rorschach fails to reckon with his own participation in the system of justice. He is not actually

capable of ascending beyond humanity, and his psych report makes it clear that his politically far-right view of justice stems from the childhood trauma associated with his father's abandonment. He lacks objectivity, he lacks mercy, and he lacks the ability to discern right from wrong in situations of moral ambiguity. When he discovers Veidt's plot, he insists on telling the world, even though this will bring about considerable suffering, potentially cause World War III, and make meaningless the death of three million people. Rorschach shows no understanding of the morally gray, instead finding his will completely bound to a pre-determined binary that exists only in the abstract, even when it causes more harm. Rorschach has no choice in the matter, because "there is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished. Even in the face of Armageddon I shall not compromise in this."<sup>20</sup> Rorschach's vocational role as god ultimately leads to his death at the hands of Dr. Manhattan, without having punished or prevented any of the great evils he identified.

### ***Dr. Manhattan***

Dr. Manhattan is the clearest god-like figure in the entire novel. Unlike the other characters for whom deification is only vocational, Jon Osterman, as he was known before he became Dr. Manhattan, experiences an ontological change that places him closer to godhood. He is repeatedly called a god by those around him, and many of Gibbons' illustrations, such as Dr. Manhattan walking on water or creating matter, are reminiscent of biblical imagery. As one of his colleagues once remarked, "God exists and he's an American"<sup>21</sup> Yet it is not Dr. Manhattan's ontological deification that matters most, but his vocational one. Despite Dr. Manhattan's power, he has not transcended the true ontological barrier of Godhood maintained by Christian theologians. He is still a creature, made by a creator. That line cannot be crossed, and even if he does have the ability to create *ex nihilo*, he was not the one who created this universe, and so is not properly "God"—only god-like. His god-likeness is achieved ultimately not by an intrinsic field generator, but by the experience of the death of God, just like Rorschach.

Unlike Rorschach, Dr. Manhattan does not experience the death of God as injustice, but as *meaninglessness*. Human injustice is barely a concern to him, as it matters little whether red ants or black ants are crushed under his boot. As he says to Laurie, "Don't you see the futility of asking me to save a world that I no longer have any stake in?"<sup>22</sup> He struggles to see life and death as meaningful, remarking that a dead body and an alive one have the same number of atoms. Yet he seems to want to be convinced of humanity's meaningfulness. His entire conversation with Laurie in Chapter 9 is an effort to allow her to convince him of that very fact. While seemingly she does succeed, it can only be called a half-success.

Dr. Manhattan does return, too late to stop Veidt. Having learned that humanity is meaningful because they are thermodynamic miracles, he nevertheless expresses no interest in continuing to help them at the end of the novel but decides to go out and try to create his own human life. He is not able to find meaning: he must create it. He must be god. Of course, Manhattan denies this. "I don't think there is a God, Janey. If there is, I'm not him."<sup>23</sup> But his denial of his own godhood does not change the facts. As

Alan Moore stated in an interview, “To have the concept of ‘god’ you have to be a human being in that when you are a god, the word ‘god’ vanishes.”<sup>24</sup> This is likely why so few others notice the deification that has happened to them. As one moves from the role of human creature to meaning creator, the word “god” loses its meaning.

Dr. Manhattan becomes a god because he experiences the world as meaningless. As he says in his conversation with Laurie on Mars, “I was asking the point of all that struggling; the purpose of this endless labor; accomplishing nothing, leaving people empty and disillusioned. Leaving people broken.”<sup>25</sup> His words are very similar to the laments of Qoheleth in Ecclesiastes, which the Jewish Jon Osterman may have read: “Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun” (Eccl 2:11). The burden of endless and meaningless labor is a constant theme in Ecclesiastes and is one of the telltale signs of a vain and absurd world. Qoheleth laments how others ultimately benefit from one’s labor, and that envy drives one further and further into toil for no one’s sake. Yet Dr. Manhattan is unable to embrace the only suggestion Qoheleth offers to those experiencing meaninglessness: live in the present. Man is not to envy the future or to pine after the past, but “eat and drink and find enjoyment in all his toil” (Eccl 3:13). This is not a hedonistic approach to life, which Qoheleth tried to no avail in Chapter 2 of Ecclesiastes, but rather one which sees the present as a present from God: “This is God’s gift to man” (Eccl 3:13).

Manhattan lacks the faith to embrace toil as both meaningless and gift, and thus resolves the tension the only way he is able to. Dr. Manhattan’s superpowers seem to prevent him from accepting this gift, as he is almost always focused on any moment but the current one. His experience of all personal time simultaneously is exactly what tears apart his romantic relationships, what prevents him from processing his own emotions, and what robs him of free will, because he must stay on a course set by someone else. As Dr. Manhattan himself says, “We’re all puppets, Laurie. I’m just a puppet who can see the strings.”<sup>26</sup> Dr. Manhattan deconstructs Camus’s Sisyphus by revealing his fatal flaw: he is no longer bound by destiny, but he is still a victim of fate. Becoming god-like—of both the vocational and ontological varieties—has not brought freedom, but only ever more meaninglessness.

Here Moore and Gibbons illustrate one of Nietzsche’s lesser-known points in his book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Nietzsche’s concept of the death of God and its relation to the “Übermensch,” or superman, are well-known. Some even aspire to be an Übermensch, seeing this as the positive fulfillment of the self-deification that is necessary after experiencing of the death of God. The concept is an appealing one. Zarathustra is Nietzsche’s prophet, announcing this new goal for humanity to ascend, displacing nihilism with the self-made values, enforced by the will to power.

Thus Zarathustra’s parable, like Nietzsche’s parable of the madman, teaches that the only worthy response to the death of God and the collapse of traditional morality is to seize the powers that were previously thought to be the special prerogative of God. But whereas Nietzsche’s madman does not go beyond declaring the



imperative to self-deification, his Zarathustra actually seeks to provide an account of the discipline by which one may become God.<sup>27</sup>

The *Übermensch* is by no means a dictator, but a benevolent gift to humanity that enables humans to live with concrete values and certainty, even if God is dead. There is just one problem: Nietzsche does not think it is possible to actually become a true *Übermensch*. Peter Berkowitz documented this limit in Nietzsche's work, arguing that "A contest between a peculiar combination of convictions compels Nietzsche to identify self-deification as a human being's supreme perfection. A close study of a range of Nietzsche's books, however, indicates that for human beings such perfection is not attainable."<sup>28</sup>

By part 2 of the book, Zarathustra is no longer liberated by the death of God but crushed by it. As Berkowitz restates, "owing to the huge gap, everywhere apparent, between what men are and what the ethics of self-deification requires them to become, life among men is for Zarathustra a living Hell, a waking nightmare."<sup>29</sup> Zarathustra discovers that it is *not humanly possible* to become an *Übermensch*—to experience true deification. For the task to be done without complete disaster requires perfection and power unknown to humankind. But what if one were not human? What if one possessed god-like powers and perspective? Could one then experience self-deification? Moore and Gibbons answer this question in the negative through the character Dr. Manhattan.

Dr. Manhattan never even tries to become an *Übermensch* because he is cut off at the knees almost immediately. Dr. Manhattan never thinks that he is God because he experiences powerlessness in the midst of almost limitless power. Godhood is empty for him. He ponders, "A world grows up around me. Am I shaping it, or do its predetermined contours guide my hand?"<sup>30</sup> He lacks determination and free will, and thus morality and meaning ultimately escape him. This demonstrates that power is not enough to overcome Zarathustra's goal of self-deification. Even if one had god-like abilities, he would still be a creature, never able to cross the necessary line to become true God.

### *Veidt*

Veidt experiences this process in a markedly different way than the other two. He portrays none of the telltale signs of experiencing the death of God which leads to self-deification. This is because Veidt arrives at the same destination by an inverse route. He experiences first the desire to be like God, which leads to an experience of the death of God. From an early age, Veidt's hubris put him in a category all his own. He monologues, "My intellect set me apart. Faced with difficult choices, I knew nobody whose advice might prove useful. Nobody living."<sup>31</sup> He does not experience meaningless or injustice, but rather a kind of self-centered boredom. He ultimately finds crimefighting hollow because he knows himself to be capable of so much more. He believes that he could be humanity's savior,<sup>32</sup> associating himself with one of Egypt's greatest pharaohs, Ozymandias, who like many pharaohs was viewed as

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divine by his people. The death of God comes not with a bang, but with a whimper, as Veidt's view of himself never made much room for God in the first place.

This reverse process is known to Nietzsche. He even explains exactly how it could happen through Zarathustra:

“But let me reveal my heart to you entirely, my friends: *if* there were gods, how could I endure not to be a god! Hence there are no gods.” . . . note the structure of Zarathustra's argument: Whereas Nietzsche's madman argued from the death of God to the imperative to become God, Zarathustra argues from his own desire to become a god to the death or nonexistence of God and gods. Drawn by conclusions and lured by drives, Zarathustra is compelled by his own tyrannical need for absolute mastery to utter his rejection of God and gods.<sup>33</sup>

J. Keeping argues that Veidt “most closely resembles Nietzsche's *Übermensch*” out of all of Moore and Gibbons' characters.<sup>34</sup> It does not matter that Veidt does not expressly confess the death of God because he does enact a tyrannical attempt to become an *Übermensch*.<sup>35</sup> This is clear from language he uses in the “Veidt Method,” a self-betterment program he is selling to the masses:

“If followed correctly, [these exercises] can turn YOU into a superhuman, fully in charge of your own destiny. All that is required is the desire for perfection and the will to achieve it. . . . When you yourself are strong and healthy in mind and body, you will want to react in a healthy and positive way to the world around you, changing it for the better if you are able, and improving the lot of both yourself and your fellow man.”<sup>36</sup>

As the interviewer of NOVA EXPRESS magazine says concerning Veidt, “I have to g-ddamned<sup>37</sup> admit that he looks like a g-ddamned god!”<sup>38</sup>

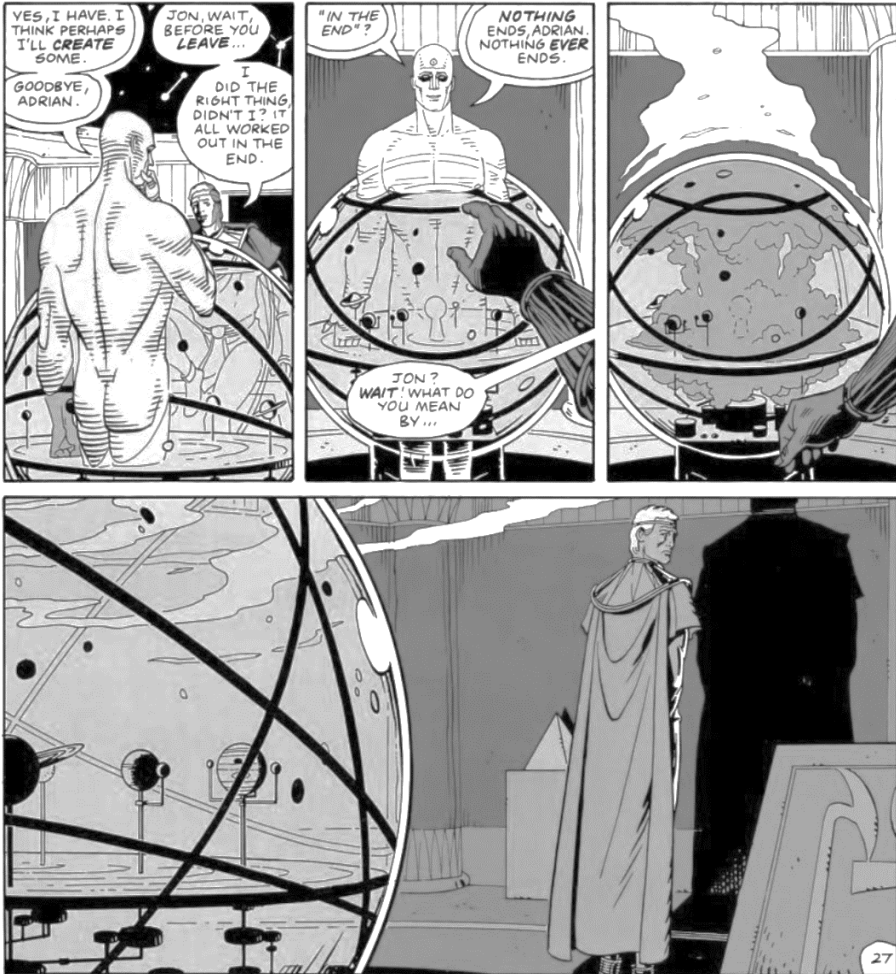


Fig. 3. Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 12:27

Veidt is an almost perfect *Übermensch*, possessing the power (wealth and intellect), the will, and even the benevolence required for the role. But this must be reckoned in accordance with the end of the novel, when Veidt drops a psychic squid on New York City, killing three million people. He is a utilitarian, arguing that this action is required for the greater good because it prevents nuclear Armageddon. His actions may seem ironic for the modern reader, who knows that the Cold War ended without either nuclear holocaust or psychic squids. Were Veidt's actions even necessary? The whole reason that Russian and USA tensions are high by the end of the novel is because Dr. Manhattan has removed himself from the situation—or rather, Veidt has removed Dr. Manhattan. Veidt, having become a superman, commits mass genocide, seemingly to appease his own ego. Even if one accepts his benevolent motives at face value, Veidt is not redeemed.

Veidt embodies Nietzsche's famous phrase: "Whatever is done out of love takes place beyond good and evil."<sup>39</sup> Veidt is beyond good and evil—and not in a good way—because he believes that he acts out of "love" of the world.<sup>40</sup> Moore and Gibbons make this point rather clearly through the "The Tale of the Black Freighter," an in-universe comic book that reflects both the attitude of the times as well as acts as a vicarious mouthpiece for Veidt in the later chapters. In *Watchmen* 11:9, the main character shouts, "How had I reached this appalling position, with love, only love, as my guide?" When confronted with the immorality of his actions, and called to acknowledge the evil he has wrought, Veidt replies simply, "Confession implies penitence. I merely regret [the Comedian's] accidental involvement."<sup>41</sup>

Veidt's actions are not moral, but he does put everyone else in moral checkmate by appealing to the issue of meaning in a meaningless world. The reason that his plan cannot be exposed by those who become aware of it after the fact is that it will make those three million deaths meaningless, while his killing of them has given them meaning by allowing them to participate in the prevention of World War III. This moral checkmate is possible only in a world without God, as only in this world are their deaths rendered meaningless without Veidt's "higher plan." This is why his reasoning works so well on Dr. Manhattan, who is almost immediately pacified. If God were not dead, their lives could be assumed to have meaning regardless of whether an egomaniac uses them as part of a homicidal plot to save the world. But since he is dead for all those present, the checkmate holds.<sup>42</sup> As Nite Owl II says, "How can humans make decisions like this? We're damned if we stay quiet, Earth's damned if we don't."<sup>43</sup>

Veidt succeeds at the self-deification project where the others failed. Yet even his success is ultimately a failure. In Chapter 12, Dr. Manhattan pays a visit to Veidt, who



Fig. 4. Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 2:9

is meditating in his room. Veidt seems morally disturbed—a marked change from his almost absolute confidence earlier. He makes a passing comment about a dream in which he is swimming toward a ship, clearly a reference to the ship of the damned, the Black Freighter. For the first time in his recorded history, he turns not to himself for moral justification, but to someone else: Dr. Manhattan. He asks cautiously, “I did the right thing, didn’t I?” Then, in a more characteristic moment, he answers his own question: “it all worked out in the end.”<sup>44</sup> Dr. Manhattan offers his chilling and now infamous reply: “In the end? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends.”<sup>45</sup> Some have taken this to be a cosmological statement, similar to others Dr. Manhattan made in previous chapters. That may very well be Dr. Manhattan’s intention. But Veidt’s distressed reply and unsettled face (Figure 3) show that is not how he hears Dr. Manhattan’s words. In one tiny sentence, Dr. Manhattan has crushed Veidt’s self-deification and his attempt at justification. Veidt was motivated throughout the work by consequentialist ethics, believing that the ends justify the means, as long as the ends are glorious enough to outweigh the suffering. In fact, it is his envisioned utopian society that he believes gives meaning to all those deaths. But Manhattan points out that there is no end.

There is no “all working out” because there is never a point where humans have the objectivity required to look back upon the totality of an action and judge its morality. Everything is still unfolding. Perhaps WWII will still happen, despite Veidt’s efforts. Perhaps his intricately laid out plan will be undone by an inflexible racist conspiracy theorist, who just happened to submit his journal to a far-right newspaper before his death, which just so happened to fall into the hands of an intern

with nothing better to print.<sup>46</sup> More importantly, the fact that nothing ends means that Veidt can *never be justified*. Dr. Manhattan's response is an ethical one, in which he undoes Veidt's ability to appeal to a *telos* by removing the very ability to consider a *telos* at all. Without God, Veidt has no objective standard nor end, and thus must lie in the bed he has made, forced to admit that his own self-righteous actions can never be called anything but meaningless. Veidt is brought back to earth, and Job 14:1–2, which was previously quoted over his face, sums up his situation well (Figure 4).<sup>47</sup> Veidt's godhood is limited by his humanity, even as his humanity is undermined by his godhood.

### **Living as a Christian in the World of *Watchmen***

The idea of a Christian living in the world of *Watchmen* is almost laughable. The few Christians who do exist within the universe are not treated with any seriousness. Every character seems doomed to experience the death of God at some point, with the result that one's faith will be pushed out to make room for self-deification. In a world in which God's absence is commonly felt, the Christian has three options. One popular route is to deny the reality of the abyss, proclaiming that the coherence of existence is readily apparent. The problem with this view is that it tends to make creation itself a kind of God, as it is creation that provides stability and security, with God merely propping it up through will or essence. God is a God of power, but not much else. This view is also unlikely to be persuasive to those who have experienced God's absence through suffering, meaninglessness, or the illusion of self-importance.

Another option is to withdraw from the world, essentially abandoning it to burn while saving oneself. Here, the absurdity of existence is acknowledged, but unaddressed beyond one's conclave. Such people might as well admit their implicit nihilism disguised as faithfulness and join those who try to imagine Sisyphus happy.

However, another option may be found by following in the footsteps of the great German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Often just as misunderstood as the existentialists, Bonhoeffer is unique in that he used the Lutheran tradition as a means of addressing and ministering to a world in which God appeared absent, as was certainly the case during the reign of the Nazis during World War II. Bonhoeffer demonstrates that not only is it possible for Christians to live in a world in which God's absence or hiddenness is painfully clear, but it is even imaginable for them to thrive and witness to Christ in such a world if they root themselves in His cross.

While Bonhoeffer was a theologian who was adept at reading his time, he also believed that a proper cultural diagnosis required turning to the scriptural narrative, especially the origin account. The reason that humankind has lost their story is because they have "lost the beginning. Now it finds itself in the middle, knowing neither the end nor the beginning, and yet knowing that it is in the middle."<sup>48</sup> The modern struggle for meaning and morality in the middle goes all the way back to this lost beginning, which Bonhoeffer carefully unpacks.

In dialogue with Nietzsche's work, especially *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Bonhoeffer casts the fall in Genesis 3 as an event in which man becomes god. The

promise of the serpent is that Adam and Eve would become *sicut deus*—like God. In a twist fit for a Greek tragedy, Bonhoeffer argues that they receive exactly what was promised:

Humankind is now *sicut deus*. It now lives out of its own resources, creates its own life, is its own creator; it no longer needs the Creator, it has itself become creator, inasmuch as it creates its own life. Thereby its creatureliness is eliminated, destroyed. Adam is no longer a creature. Adam has torn himself away from his creatureliness. Adam is *sicut deus*, and this “is” is meant with complete seriousness—not that Adam feels this, but that Adam is this.<sup>49</sup>

At the moment of the fall, Adam is transformed from a human creature, limited and in perfect relationship to his creator, into a being who *must* now create for himself. Adam stole the vocation of God, and by doing so, set humanity on the path we are on today.

Just as this self-deification was deadly and disastrous to Rorschach, Dr. Manhattan, and Veidt, so it is for Adam and for all of us. Adam creates the absurd—the worm in the heart of man. Following Luther, Bonhoeffer places the fault of skepticism upon humanity, not on God. For Luther, “The conclusion that life has no meaning or that nothing can be known reflects badly neither on the Creator nor on his creation as though it were inadequate. Rather it identifies one part of creation, mankind, as having exceeded its capacity.”<sup>50</sup> By exceeding the capacity of creatureliness, humanity began to bring about the Nietzschean death of God. By encroaching on God’s role in the world, Adam began the process of pushing God out of it.

Lutherans have long had another word to describe this kind of self-deification: idolatry. In his explanation of the First Commandment in the Large Catechism, Luther writes, “Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God.”<sup>51</sup> While the most common idol in the Bible is Mammon—money and property—the most deadly and ultimate idol is the self. The Christian views idolatry as a self-deception—lying to ourselves about who God is and who we are. When Luther describes this greatest idolatry in his Large Catechism, he writes, “What is this but to have made God into an idol—indeed, an ‘apple-god’<sup>52</sup>—and to have set ourselves up as God?”<sup>53</sup> The struggle of scripture is God against gods, as God tries to save humanity. The original sin is the desire to be *sicut deus*, and the First Commandment given on Mount Sinai reflects this. When humans set themselves up as gods, they deny both God’s place and their own place in the world. The disaster that follows is vocational, as God’s role is wrested from Him and put on shoulders unable to bear the load. This is a consistent theme in *Watchmen*, and the overlap in the narrative with the Christian idea of idolatry is remarkable.

If the problem is idolatry of the self, then the solution to this issue is found in its opposite: the theology of the cross.<sup>54</sup> Drawing from Luther’s *theologica crucis* [the theology of the cross] defended at Heidelberg in 1518, Bonhoeffer centers his theology on God’s revelation through the suffering and death of His Son. What this means is

that if God is to be known, it will not be by trying to find coherence in the world, or by looking inward, but only to Christ crucified. Elsewhere, God is mysteriously hidden, as he operates in ways beyond human understanding or knowledge. But the Christian finds God uncovered in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. In His Son, Jesus, God reveals himself in a way that can actually be known by humanity. Here, God is imminent, limited according to the human nature of Christ, empirically knowable, and revealed. God chooses to address His own absence in a remarkable way: by becoming one of us. Through this, God undoes the cycle of self-deification by being God-become-man, for the sake of us men-become-gods. In Christ, humanity finds its restoration, as Christ is both fully God and as fully human as God intended humanity to be.

Tom Gregg summarizes this in a pithy manner, writing, “For Bonhoeffer, salvation is by *anthroposis* not theosis.”<sup>55</sup> Christ’s work is not about making humans divine, but about making humans fully human. Christ’s incarnation and atonement on the Cross do not elevate humanity to divinity, but instead allow humans to discover a renewed humanity in Christ. It is Christ’s work of redemption that reorients the system from God against gods to God for humanity, giving humanity a new *telos* and saving them from their greatest idol.

While in Prison at Tegel near the end of his life, Bonhoeffer wrote, “The Bible directs people toward the powerlessness and suffering of God; only the suffering God can help. To this extent, one may say the death of God frees us to see the God of Bible who gains ground and power in the world by being powerless.”<sup>56</sup> This may seem a strange statement, especially considering the consequences of the death of God. But Bonhoeffer made a profound discovery: when our God is the God whose Son died on the cross, we become immune to the deifying effects of the “death of God.” This is because the God who “died” is not the true God, the God of the Bible, revealed in His Son, Jesus Christ who suffered and died on the cross. No, the implausible god whose death Nietzsche’s madman proclaimed is the *deus ex machina*: the god of power, the metaphysical god, the god who answers all our questions, removes all tensions, and frees us from the absurdity of existence. To worship this god is to be a theologian of glory—an idolater.

According to the Heidelberg Disputation, “That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who perceives the invisible things of God as understandable on the basis of those things which have been made [Rom. 1:20].”<sup>57</sup> True, God is all-powerful, acting in the world through providence to accomplish all that humanity attributes to itself. But Bonhoeffer correctly flees from the hidden God of power and “calls a thing what it actually is,” the central defining characteristic of a theologian of the cross.<sup>58</sup> Honesty before God and before the world is paramount to Luther and Bonhoeffer. The theologian of the cross must acknowledge the experience of the absurd in the same breath in which he acknowledges God.

According to Bonhoeffer,

we cannot be honest unless we recognize that we have to live in the world—  
‘*etsi deus non daretur*’ [As if God were not given/did not exist]. And this is



precisely what we do recognize—before God! God himself compels us to recognize it. Thus, our coming of age leads us to a truer recognition of our situation before God. God would have us know that we must live as those who manage their lives without God.<sup>59</sup>

Bonhoeffer believed the world's historical development into a godless world was the work of God himself, as the death of the god of power makes room for the true God—the suffering God. It was God who was pushing himself out of the world. It was God who had created a world that appears to function without direct reference to Himself. We therefore live in the world “‘before God’ yet ‘without God.’”<sup>60</sup> Bonhoeffer views our *etsi deus non daretur* situation as a blessing from God—and it certainly can be.

Bonhoeffer is optimistic that the death of God clears the slate for the weak God to encounter the world in all its power. He writes, “God consents to be pushed out of the world and onto the cross; God is weak and powerless in the world and in precisely this way, and only so, is at our side and helps us.”<sup>61</sup> Only the weak and powerless God can help, because only in Him do we find ourselves vicariously represented by His actions. By abandoning omnipotence and the other attributes of God as a starting point, God works a power that is capable of claiming our entire lives—our entire world even—all without denying the reality of the “godless world.” The need for theodicy fades away not because the Christian denies God's power and omnipotence but because he recognizes that God is both *hidden* and *revealed*. But God can be known in the world only through the means in which He has revealed Himself, and any attempt of my humanity to pull back God's veil is futile and unfaithful. Thus Christ alone, the God-made-man, is the Christian's anchor in the “godless world.”

The Christian lives in the world of *Watchmen* by fleeing the hidden God who is absent and clinging to God revealed in Christ. Through Him, they reclaim their humanity. This allows the Christian to *experience the absence of God without becoming compelled to become God*. The Christian can experience injustice and call it what it is. The Christian can experience meaninglessness and stare into the void without this causing the death of their God. Christians are able to remain human through these experiences by understanding that God is God and they are not, and that while God appears to be absent, He is ever-present in Christ through His Word, Sacraments, and the Church. The theologian of the cross lives in tension, capable of feeling the absence of God honestly while remaining a person of faith.

How might this type of faith have impacted the three self-deified *Watchmen* characters? Perhaps Rorschach would not have felt the need to right injustice himself. Dr. Manhattan may have been able to hold onto his humanity and find meaning in that humanity and in the humanity of others. Veidt would have never tried to be the world's savior and could have applied his resources and intellect toward the common good without committing mass murder. The weak and suffering God is not impotent at all; he is truly capable of saving humanity from themselves.

Theologians of the cross are people who can stare into the void, facing the absurdity of existence—in life and death—without flinching. They do not raid heaven, neither condemning nor defending their God, but trusting and fearing Him. They cling

always to the cross, finding God in His promises and in the places He reveals himself to them. They hope for the next world but live in this one, enjoying the gift of the present. They acknowledge the pain and suffering of the world without needing to carry it themselves. This honest faith is a much-needed antidote to the compulsion so many feel to take on the role of God themselves.

## Conclusion

The world of *Watchmen* is very similar to our own. Our society is almost as godless as the one Moore and Gibbons envisioned. Millions of people experience the absence of God through injustice, meaninglessness, and suffering; and for many, this experience leads to the death of God. But this is not the only way. The Lutheran theology of the cross provides a way that acknowledges this existential experience without leading to tragic self-deification. Christ offers us our own lost humanity, allowing us to take our place before God in a world seemingly without God. He gifts us with the present, allowing us to enjoy food, drink, and work without the responsibility to become our own gods.

*Watchmen* is a classical tragedy, portraying the pitfalls of all who walk the path of self-deification. Neither power, intellect, nor self-made morals will allow one to traverse the road to self-godhood unscathed. Even success often spells disaster for others. *Watchmen* provides a compelling narrative within which the theories of the existentialists are tried, tested, and found wanting. Moore and Gibbons do not offer Christianity as an alternative in the least, but they help clear the field for the God who reveals Himself in weakness to work.

Christians who desire to effectively inhabit the type of world *Watchmen* portrays would do well to embody the honesty of the theology of the cross, acknowledging existential and theological realities, even when they are in tension. By living in this manner, Christians can offer another way of living honestly and faithfully in the world in light of the hiddenness of God. This is the key to faithful witness in a seemingly godless world. For those in search of meaning, those for whom the “god of power” has died, the Christian Church can point them toward the true God who is found not in power, but in weakness among the rubble. What the Church has to offer the world right now is the strange lesson she must always relearn: how *not* to become God.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This language recalls discussion of plausibility structures in Charles Taylor’s infamous work, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Sartre observes as much in *Being and Nothingness*. He prefers the term “absence” of God to “non-existence” of God in that the former can be known through experience, while the latter is functionally unknowable.

<sup>3</sup> H. J. Blackham, *Reality, Man and Existence: Essential Works of Existentialism* (New York: Bantam Books, 1971), 66.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1966), 26.

<sup>5</sup> Blackham, *Reality, Man and Existence*, 66.

<sup>6</sup> By this term, I mean that it concerns the role, office, and function of godhood. Being a god is not a proper human calling in Christianity, nor would it be appropriate to call God's role as God a vocation, as vocations are given by God. Nevertheless, the term captures the idea of the *munus dei et hominis*.

<sup>7</sup> David Detmer, *Sartre Explained: From Bad Faith to Authenticity* (Chicago: Open Court, 2009), 134.

<sup>8</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O'Brien (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1955), 79–80.

<sup>9</sup> Camus, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Camus, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Luther, *Notes on Ecclesiastes, Lectures on the Song of Solomon, Treatise on the Last Words of David*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Hilton C. Oswald, vol. 15, Luther's Works (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing, 1972), 8.

<sup>12</sup> In the Lutheran tradition, the issue is not merely consciousness. The experience of vanity is not a result of humanity's solitary ability to think abstractly. Rather, it is because of the disharmony of humanity, caused by the fall (Gen 3), which disrupts humanity's relationship with God, the world, their fellow humans, and even their own humanity itself (Formula of Concord, Article I). Even Existentialists like Sartre admit that the issue is not humanity's ability to ponder the meaning of the universe, but rather with her insatiable desire for an answer.

<sup>13</sup> Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 91.

<sup>14</sup> Kathryn Imray, "Shall Not the Judge of All the Earth Do Right? Theodicies in *Watchmen*," *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 29, no. 2 (July 2017): 119–31. Imray's extraordinary essay tracks the ways in which these three characters offer and deconstruct theodicies, or defenses of God. Rorschach proposes an anthropocentric view of evil, Dr. Manhattan portrays the consequences of a deistic "watchmaker" God, and Veidt demonstrates that suffering can have a higher utilitarian purpose. While Imray is correct that all three attempts result in tragedy, atrocity, and disaster, she missed the fact that *Watchmen* assumes God's absence and injustice *a priori*.

<sup>15</sup> Clark, quoted in Imray, "Shall Not the Judge."

<sup>16</sup> Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen*, New Edition (Burbank, CA: DC Comics, 2014). 6:26. All citations are given in Chapter:Page so as to be consistent between editions. All editions contain the same page numbers directly drawn onto a panel on the page.

<sup>17</sup> Imray, "Shall Not the Judge," 125.

<sup>18</sup> Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 6:15.

<sup>19</sup> Moore and Gibbons, 1:1.

<sup>20</sup> Moore and Gibbons, 1:24.

<sup>21</sup> Moore and Gibbons, 4:2.

<sup>22</sup> Moore and Gibbons, 9:8.

<sup>23</sup> Moore and Gibbons, 4:11.

<sup>24</sup> Alan Moore, "Alan Moore Interview, 1988," interview by Vincent Eno and El Csawza, *feuilleton*, February 20, 2006, <https://www.johncoulthart.com/feuilleton/2006/02/20/alan-moore-interview-1988/?msclkid=6405f22fcf4311ec940cb54dbe66e4c0>. Originally published in *Strange Things Are Happening* 1, no. 2 (May/June 1988).

<sup>25</sup> Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 9:17.

<sup>26</sup> Moore and Gibbons, 9:5.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Berkowitz, *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 157.

<sup>28</sup> Berkowitz, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Berkowitz, 191.

<sup>30</sup> Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 4:27.

<sup>31</sup> Moore and Gibbons, 11:8.

<sup>32</sup> When he is at the Comedian's funeral, Moore and Gibbons zoom in on Veidt's face while the priest says the line "O lord most mighty O holy and most merciful savior, deliver us not into the bitter pains of eternal death" (*Watchmen*, 2:12). This foreshadows both Veidt's savior complex and the death he will deliver unto three million people.

<sup>33</sup> Berkowitz, *Nietzsche*, 184.

<sup>34</sup> J. Keeping, "Superheroes and Supermen: Finding Nietzsche's *Übermensch* in *Watchmen*," in *Watchmen and Philosophy: A Rorschach Test*, ed. Mark D. White, Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009), 58.

<sup>35</sup> While he does not confess it directly, Veidt's journey is connected to the protagonist of "Tales from the Black Freighter" on *Watchmen* 12:27, and that character certainly does express it.

<sup>36</sup> Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, Chapter 10.

<sup>37</sup> I have retained the use of the Lord's name in vain because it is truly used in vain. Laurie also frequently abuses the name of God and Jesus, and this language only further drives home that in the world of *Watchmen*, the name of God is vain—empty, absurd, meaningless.

<sup>38</sup> Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 8.

<sup>39</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 70.

<sup>40</sup> Moore and Gibbons make this point rather clearly through the "The Tale of the Black Freighter." In *Watchmen* 11:9, he shouts, "How had I reached this appalling position, with love, only love, as my guide?"

<sup>41</sup> Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 11:24.

<sup>42</sup> This is not to say that a Christian could not conceivably stay quiet in this situation, weighing that the harm caused by enacting justice would cause more injustice (as the Just War Tradition holds). But that is not fundamentally the argument at play here. Rorschach's retributive justice is no more Christian than those who concede to Veidt. Rorschach's justice is no justice at all—merely an attempt at coherence through the punishing of the wicked. His binary morality is completely self-centered.

<sup>43</sup> Moore and Gibbons, *Watchmen*, 12:20.

<sup>44</sup> Moore and Gibbons, 12:27.

<sup>45</sup> Moore and Gibbons, 12:27.

<sup>46</sup> *Watchmen*'s final panel is a shot of Rorschach's journal being picked up, threatening to undo everything Veidt has done.

<sup>47</sup> The first two panels are the KJV quotation of Job 14:1–2. The last panel is from the *Book of Common Prayer*, in the Order for the Burial of the Dead, which is used in the Anglican Church.

<sup>48</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, ed. John W. De Gruchy and Douglas S. Bax, vol. 3, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 28.

<sup>49</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, 107.

<sup>50</sup> Robert Rosin, *Reformers, the Preacher, and Skepticism: Luther, Brenz, Melancthon, and Ecclesiastes* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1997), 148.

<sup>51</sup> Robert Kolb, Timothy J. Wengert, and Charles P. Arand, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 386.

<sup>52</sup> Likely meaning “sham God”

<sup>53</sup> Kolb, Wengert, and Arand, *The Book of Concord*, 389.

<sup>54</sup> Michael A. Lockwood has persuasively argued that for most of Luther’s career he suggested that the opposite of a theologian of the cross is not a theologian of glory, but an idolater. Indeed, the two are one and the same, but it seems that Luther much preferred the use of idolatry over glory after Heidelberg, likely because of its clarity. See *The Unholy Trinity: Martin Luther against the Idol of Me, Myself, and I* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2016), 240.

<sup>55</sup> Tom Greggs, “Bearing Sin in the Church: Ecclesial Hamartiology of Bonhoeffer,” in *Christ, Church and World: New Studies in Bonhoeffer’s Theology and Ethics*, ed. Michael Mawson and Philip G. Ziegler (London; New York; Oxford; New Delhi; Sydney: T&T Clark, 2018), 87. Emphasis in original. Theosis is a key component to Eastern Orthodoxy and is a common theme in ancient church fathers like Athanasius of Alexandria. Theosis is not about ontological or vocational deification but is usually spoken of in terms of praxis, or the action of God (i.e., becoming Christ-like in one’s life and behavior). Theosis should not be completely discounted as a metaphor for God’s work with humanity, but it should never be divorced from anthroposis, which should always be the primary *telos* of humanity in Christ. A further discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this essay.

<sup>56</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. John W. De Gruchy, trans. Isabel Best et al., vol. 8, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works (Minneapolis, Minn: Fortress Press, 2010), 479.

<sup>57</sup> Dennis Bielfeldt, “Heidelberg Disputation,” in *The Roots of Reform*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand, Kirsi I. Stjerna, and Timothy J. Wengert, vol. 1, The Annotated Luther (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2015), 83.

<sup>58</sup> Bielfeldt, 83.

<sup>59</sup> Bielfeldt, 478.

<sup>60</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers*, 25.

<sup>61</sup> Bonhoeffer, 25.