

“There is no order in which God calls us”

The Depiction of Christianity and Christians in the Netflix Series SQUID GAME

Abstract

The highly successful and also somewhat controversial Netflix series SQUID GAME takes a very critical stance on the – supposed – intimate relationship between specific layers of South Korean Christian traditions and capitalism, especially regarding what is known as the “prosperity gospel”. The series features some explicitly Christian characters who do not act according to what they preach, that is, they behave egoistically instead of altruistically. The series even seems to suggest that “true” Christian compassion and self-sacrifice are to be found outside the boundaries of institutionalized Christianity rather than among nominal Christians. This article explains in more detail this twofold criticism that the series provides regarding (South Korean) Christianity by carefully examining key scenes and figures.

Keywords

Squid Game, Netflix, Prosperity Gospel, Capitalism, Criticism of Religion

Biography

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“The only one who can save us now is the Lord.” Player 244 stops praying for a second or two to preach to his fellow game contestants. He and his team are about to embark on a bizarre version of tug-of-war in which the losing team will be drawn into falling to their untimely deaths. His devotion to God does not yield very much attention from the other contestants until later – when his team miraculously wins the deadly game. Ji-yeong, another contestant, mocks Player 244’s faith in God, since he and his team have

just practically murdered their adversaries: “Heavenly Father, we worked together as a team today to send many people to your side. Please, help us send more people to your side from now on.”

These two scenes are taken from Season One’s Episodes 2 (“Stick to the team”) and 4 (“A fair world”) of the popular South Korean Netflix series *OJING-EO GEIM* (*SQUID GAME*, Hwang Dong-hyuk, KR 2021). The series, created by Korean writer Hwang Dong-hyuk, has taken the world by storm.¹ Most people are very enthusiastic about the series, praising its criticism of modern capitalism by way of a sequence of life-or-death games performed by society’s financial outcasts in front of an audience of international multi-billionaires, who are so utterly bored that only the spilling of real human blood can revive them.² Others are more critical, pointing to the fact that minors will imitate the dangerous versions of the series’ children’s games.³ In the meantime, adults also seem to be interested in re-enacting the series’ games, although probably with a less lethal outcome.⁴

A less discussed but nevertheless very interesting topic that the series touches upon is Christianity. The series is rather critical of the way Christianity functions within South Korean society, as the two scenes quoted above have already illustrated.⁵ The focus of this religion criticism is the – supposed – intimate relationship between South Korean Christianity, especially in its Protestant forms espousing what is known as the “prosperity gospel”, and capitalism.⁶ “Prosperity gospel” is a term given to the religious belief of certain Protestant Christians who strongly associate financial and physical well-being with God’s blessing and was especially popularized by North American evangelists from the second half of the 20th century onwards, although its origins can be traced further back in history.⁷

In this article, I wish to explore *SQUID GAME*’s criticism of religion in general and of South Korean Christianity more specifically. To do so, I will utilize a communication-oriented analysis (COA) of the series (see fig. 1).⁸ The COA distinguishes strongly between the text-immanent communication of

1 Venable 2021.

2 Mahdawi 2021.

3 Power 2021.

4 Hirwani 2021.

5 Forst 2021; O’Hare 2021.

6 Hazzan 2016.

7 Bowler 2013.

8 Wieringen 2020.

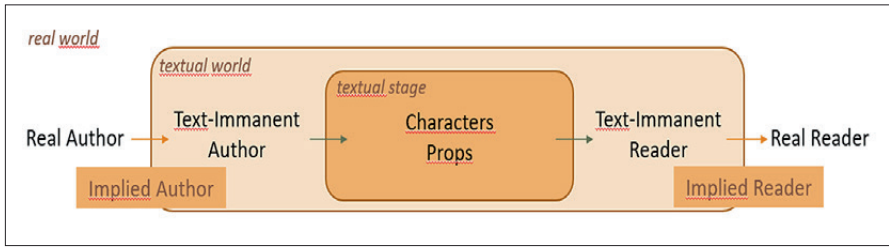


Fig. 1: Schematic overview of the basic structure of the communication-oriented analysis methodology.

the textual world (text-immanent author to text-immanent reader) and the text-external communication in the real world (real author to real reader).⁹ Within the text, there is a textual stage (containing characters and props) on which the characters interact under the control of the text-immanent author for the benefit of the text-immanent reader. Negotiating the communication between the textual world of the text and the real world outside the text are the implied author and implied reader, who create and guarantee the socio-historical paradigm shared by real author, text-immanent author, text-immanent reader, and possibly, but certainly not necessarily, individual real readers.

In the case of *SQUID GAME*, the real author of the series is the aforementioned Hwang Dong-hyuk, a writer of flesh and blood, living in the real world. The real readers of *SQUID GAME* are all those individual viewers of the series including their normative judgement of it, either positive or negative. Within the text itself an implicit and unspecified text-immanent author, in the form of an all-knowing narrator, tells the story of the series to an equally unidentified immanent reader. The implied author and reader provide the possibility-conditions for the communication between the text and the outside world, including knowledge of both the English and the Korean language and a basic understanding of contemporary South Korean society, including the position of Christianity within it.

In this article, I want to focus on the text-immanent reader's understanding of the series as provided by the immanent author. This disregards the perspective of the real author and his original intentions, as well as the perspective of any particular real readers, including their normative judgements of the series' content. The question I want to address in this article

⁹ Bosman/Wieringen, forthcoming.

is, technically formulated, How does the text-immanent author of SQUID GAME portray the Christian characters in this series to the immanent reader through the implied author/reader?

To come to an answer, I will introduce the series itself, providing a short but complete overview of the series' narrative and relative characters (section 1). Next, I will sketch the context of Christianity in contemporary South Korean society (section 2). This is followed by a more detailed presentation and discussion of SQUID GAME's explicit and implicit Christian characters, both major and minor roles (section 3). This examination leads to the conclusion that SQUID GAME criticizes (South Korean) Christianity for its liaison with (neo)capitalism and suggests that truly "Christian" behaviour is to be found outside the boundaries of Christianity rather than among its vocal adherents (section 4).

In this article, I will base myself on the English translation of the series provided by Netflix, and exclusively on Season One (since it is not certain at the time of writing if there will be a second season). For the romanization of the Korean names, I use those found on the Internet Movie Database.¹⁰

SQUID GAME, the Series

The premise of SQUID GAME is not an unfamiliar one: people forced to compete with one another to the death for the pleasure of others. Films like THE HUNGER GAMES trilogy (Gary Ross / Francis Lawrence, US 2012–2015), GAMER (Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor, US 2009), and READY PLAYER ONE (Steven Spielberg, US 2018) paved the way. But SQUID GAME distinguishes itself from its predecessors by the effort it makes to explain why the contestants sign up for a series of lethal games more or less voluntarily. For convenience's sake, in figure 2 all relevant roles are listed for reference.

Staged in contemporary South Korean society, the series follows the struggles of Seong Gi-hun (Lee Jung-jae), a divorced chauffeur and gambling addict. Seong is burdened by many character flaws and an unbearable number of debts owed to both the bank and some criminal loan sharks, who force him to sign away some of his organs as payment. At a subway station, Seong meets a businessman who challenges him to a game of Ddakji (see fig. 3 for details of all games). After many losses, for which he has to pay by

¹⁰ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10919420>.

Character	Number	Role
Main Roles		
Seong Gi-hun	456	Contestant and the series' protagonist.
Cho Swang-woo	218	Contestant, manipulative, and Seong's youth friend.
Kang Sae-byeok	067	Contestant, self-reliant, and North Korean refugee.
Oh Il-nam	001	Oldest contestant, secretly 'the Host'.
Abdul Ali	199	Contestant, very strong, labour immigrant from Pakistan.
Ji-yeong	240	Contestant, murdered her abusive father.
Minor Roles		
"Player 244"	244	Contestant, devout Christian.
"Businessman"	...	The recruiter of the game.
"Religious Sister"	...	Works at the orphanage where Ji-yeong's brother lives.
"Street Preacher"	...	Warns about the end of times.
"Compassionate Man"	...	Warns the police about a homeless man dying in the streets.

Fig. 2: Overview of relevant characters from SQUID GAME.

Round	Players	Name and Description
Preliminary	1 vs 1	Ddakji: the goal is to flip the opponent's tile with your own one.
Round #1	1 vs all	Red Light, Green Light: the group of contestants may only move when the "tagger" is not looking at them.
Round #2	Individual	Honeycomb: the goal is to stamp out shapes pressed in honeycomb candy without breaking it.
Round #3	8 vs 8	Tug-of-War: two teams tug a rope between them, until one team has pulled the other one over a line.
Round #4	1 vs 1	Marbles: one contestant has to win all his opponent's marbles.
Round #5	Individual	Glass Stepping Stones: players cross a bridge with glass stepping stones; every successive contestant has to decide which tile is safe to stand on.
Final (#6)	1 vs 1	Squid Game: one player must reach the squid's head (drawn on the ground), while the other player tries to prevent this.

Fig. 3: Overview of games from SQUID GAME.

being struck in the face by the businessman, he wins a considerable amount of money and a telephone number to call if he wants to play more.

Seong initially refuses, but when he learns that his daughter will be emigrating to the United States with her mother and stepfather, he calls the phone number and is picked up by a black van, only to be immediately brought into a deep gas-induced sleep. After some time, Seong finds himself



Fig. 4: Five of the main characters of the series. From left to right: Oh Il-nam, Seong Gi-hun, Ji-yeong, Cho Swang-woo, and Abdul Ali. Screenshot SQUID GAME, Episode 4, 00:33:08.

to be one of 456 equally financially desperate players housed in a closed facility on a remote island. The players, guarded by heavily armed masked personnel, are brought into a sort of arena, where they play a deadly version of Red Light, Green Light (see fig. 3). More than half of the players are shot dead during the game, to the great dismay of many of the surviving players. They demand to be permitted to leave the facility by majority vote, which is granted to them, but not before the dazzling amount of prize money already accumulated as a result of the deaths of so many contestants is presented to them in bearer bonds.

Nevertheless, they vote – with the tiniest margin possible – to get out. And even though they are indeed released into the world, the vast majority of players return in a couple of days to play the games again. Their financial situation is so dire and their desperation so extreme that they freely opt to partake in a game everyone knows will have only one winner, leaving the rest dead. They include Seong, whose mother is in serious need of (very expensive) surgery that neither she nor Seong can afford.

Back in the games, Seong befriends – sometimes very reluctantly – players: his old friend the failed banker Cho Swang-woo (Park Hae-soo), Pakistani migrant worker Ali Abdul (Anupam Tripathi), North Korean refugee Kang Sae-byeok (Jung Hyeon), Oh Il-nam (O Yeong-su), a senior citizen with a deadly brain tumour, and Ji-yeong (Lee Yoo-mi), who murdered her abusive father (see fig. 4, excluding Kang). They all need the money very

badly, just as Seong does. Cho needs money to flee the police, Abdul hasn't been paid in months while his wife and baby are starving, and Kang wants to pay smugglers to retrieve her mother from North Korea and rescue her little brother from the orphanage. Why Oh partakes in the games remains unexplained (until very late in the series). And Ji-yeong does not have anyone left in the world and has joined presumably out of boredom or general lack of direction in life.

Together they try to stay alive, both inside and outside the games, where they are attacked by more powerful players. Cho Swang-woo plays a morally dubious role: on at least three occasions he betrays his comrades for his own survival, even though he will eventually take his own life in order for Seong to win the games. The games themselves are overseen by a secretive Front Man (Lee Byung-hun), who maintains strict order among both contestants and security personnel. He lives according to the letter of the rules of the games, giving the whole operation a hint of legitimacy and order. He insists that the deadly games are morally defensible since all players have agreed – twice even – that they wanted to participate even though they knew (the second time) what losing would mean.

Eventually, Seong wins the games, but he is mentally so broken that he cannot put himself to the task of kickstarting his life, especially when he learns – after being released again into the real world – that his mother has died from her disease. He roams the streets like a beggar, even though he has been given an incredible amount of prize money. On 24 December, he is invited – by means of a now familiar business card – to come to the 7th floor of a certain building in town. There he meets Oh Il-nam again, the old man who was thought to have been killed in the aftermath of a game of marbles in which Seong cheated to win.

The old man, who is dying of a brain tumour, reveals himself to be the “Host”, the leader of the games and the Front Man's supervisor. Oh explains that he and several other multibillionaires were so existentially bored that they devised the lethal games to entertain themselves (by watching live and gambling on the outcomes). In a subtle form of anti-colonial criticism, all the multibillionaires are white, English-speaking men, except for the Host. Oh himself chose to enter the competition as a player incognito, since he wanted to relive his childhood games one more time and because participating was even more thrilling than just watching.

After the old man dies, on Christmas Eve, Seong finds the strength to get his life organised. He finances Cho Swang-woo, who unknowingly lost her son

to the games, and connects her to Kang Sae-byeok's younger brother, who has lost his mother, presumably in North Korea. When Seong understands, however, that the next round of the games is starting, in spite of Oh Il-nam having died, he swears to destroy them. The first season of SQUID GAME thus ends with a major cliffhanger, reaching ahead to a (possible) second season.

South Korea and the Prosperity Gospel

Christianity was brought to Korea by missionaries as early as the 16th century, although in the form of the forced baptism of children by Japanese invaders, encouraged to do so by a Spanish Jesuit.¹¹ Since then, after decades of officially sanctioned persecution of Christians throughout the peninsula, things have changed dramatically in the South (Christians in the North are still heavily persecuted). According to a 2015 survey, 56 per cent of South Koreans do not identify themselves as religious. The remaining 44 per cent who identify as religious are divided across Christianity 27.6 per cent (Protestantism 19.7 per cent and Catholicism 7.9 per cent), Buddhism (15.5 per cent) and others including Confucianism, Won Buddhism, and Islam (0.8 per cent).¹² Where Christians made up less than 1 per cent of the Korean population at the beginning of the 20th century, they now have become the single largest religious group in South Korea.

The unusual success of Christianity, especially in its Protestant form, has puzzled scholars for a long time.¹³ Some have argued that Korean “folk religion” was very compatible with Christianity, others point to the role of Protestantism in Korean social and political activism, and yet others suggest that missionaries in Korea applied better evangelisation strategies than those in China or Japan. Most scholars agree, however, that the emergence of Japanese imperialism and colonialism, and the “Christian” West’s political reaction, helped forge a positive association between Christianity, Korean nationalism, and Western capitalism.¹⁴

The quantitative success of Christianity in Korea is visible especially through the emergence of megachurches. “In Korea size is important”, the

11 Kim/Kim 2014, chap. 2.

12 Quinn 2019.

13 Kane/Park 2009.

14 Park 2003.

theologian Sebastian Kim explains. This means that “influence and significance are measured largely in terms of the number of members and the size of church buildings”.¹⁵ The largest church building in the world is Korean and belongs to the Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul. It has clear Evangelical and Pentecostal characteristics, including baptism in the Holy Spirit, glossolalia, and faith healing.¹⁶ The evangelisation practices of several Protestant churches are radical and “loud”, as Dave Hazzan explains:

From miniscule, storefront chapels to the biggest church in the world, the skyline of every major city is ablaze with neon crosses. Evangelical Christians proselyte house to house, distribute pamphlets and church-emblazoned tissue packets on street corners, and cycle through town blaring sermons and homilies through bullhorns, urging you to either accept Jesus, or be prepared for the Devil’s wrath below. It is very rare to spend more than a few days in Korea without being preached to.¹⁷

The position and practices of the Protestant churches in South Korea have produced their own criticism. In 2008, a survey was conducted by the Christian Ethics Movement of Korea. Among self-identifying Protestant respondents, 48.3 per cent answered that they (strongly) distrust “their own” churches. If widened to non-Protestants, 57.24 per cent voiced (strong) distrust.¹⁸ The most important criticisms were the “discontinuity between words and deeds”, between “sermons and lifestyles of ministers”, and between “the message and operation of churches”. Christians, according to the survey, do not act according to what they preach; they act hypocritically.

Another characteristic – and a source of potential criticism – is the adherence of many Korean Protestant churches to the prosperity gospel.¹⁹ Many megachurch leaders connect the rise of free-market capitalism in South Korea with a (supposed) theological causality between, on the one hand, the extent of individual piety, faith, prayer, church attendance, and donations and, on the other, physical, mental, and financial blessings.²⁰ The “problem”,

15 Kim 2015, 93.

16 Cartledge/Dunlop/Buckingham/Bremner 2019, 63–64.

17 Hazzan 2016.

18 Kim 2015.

19 Poling/Kim 2012, chap. 4.

20 Hong 2018.

Explicit Christian + Discontinuity Preaching vs Praxis	
	Player 244.
	The businessman (allegedly).
	Ji-yeong's father (only indirectly).
	The street preacher.
Explicit Christian + Continuity Preaching vs Praxis	
	The religious sister towards orphans, including Kangs Sae-byeok's brother.
Non-Christian + Praxis Without Preaching	
	Ji-yeong towards Kang Sae-byeok by letting her win the 4 th game.
	Cho Swang-woo towards Seong Gi-hun by committing suicide in the 6 th game.
	Seong Gi-hun towards Kang Sae-byeok's brother and Cho Swang-woo's mother.
	The "Samaritan" towards the homeless man on Christmas Eve.

Fig. 5: Overview of Christian and non-Christian characters from SQUID GAME.

so to speak, with the concept of the prosperity gospel is that it works two ways: if one is rich and healthy, one is blessed by God, but if one is poor and sick, one is not blessed by God. If you find yourself at the bottom of society, as the contestants of SQUID GAME do, you have two black marks against you: you are poor and – apparently – also lacking in faith.

Both criticisms of Korean Christianity are found in SQUID GAME: the perceived discontinuity between Christian words and deeds, and the problematic notion of the prosperity gospel.

SQUID GAME's "Christian" Characters

When we turn our attention to the Christian characters of SQUID GAME, and thus to the characterisation of Christianity in the series, we can distinguish between three categories (see fig. 5). The first one consists of characters depicted explicitly as Christian who suffer from the aforementioned discontinuity between words and deeds. The second category consists of characters depicted explicitly as Christian, but this time their words and deeds align. The third and somewhat problematic category, as I have already indicated above, consists of non-Christians who nonetheless possess those qualities lacking in the first category.



Fig. 6: A nameless preacher calls upon the world to redeem itself before the end of times. Screen shot SQUID GAME, Episode 9, 00:39:42.

Player 244 and the Three Preachers

The first category – (self-)identifying Christians suffering from discontinuity between their preaching and praxis – consists of four characters, three of them (supposedly) Protestant preachers. In the first episode (“Red Light Green Light”), Seong meets the nameless recruiter of the games, dressed as a common businessman. When the man asks Seong if he could have a minute of his time, Seong replies, “I don’t believe in Jesus” and shifts away from the man. When the man insists, Seong points a (fake) gun at his face and says, “I come from a Buddhist household so stop bothering me and get lost.” Even though this is clearly a case of false identification, the scene illustrates prejudice against and loathing of the praxis of street evangelisation, a practice common in South Korean society.

The same sentiment is found in the ninth and last episode (“One Lucky Day”). When Seong is brought back from the games, he is thrown out of the car into the pouring rain, blindfolded and tied up. A street preacher witnesses the scene (fig. 6). He evangelizes loudly:

Believe in Jesus or go to hell! You foolish people who deny the Lord! Repent! Judgement day is upon us! Believe in Jesus or go to Hell! Only the fiery pits of hell await you! Kneel down before the Lord! Believe in Jesus or go to Hell!

When he sees Seong, he loosens his blindfold and says again, “Believe in Jesus.” Instead of helping out Seong, who is clearly in some sort of predicament, he remains occupied with his religious undertaking. Trying to blatantly convert people who are traumatized, hurt, and in need of help is not usually the most successful method, nor one people tend to sympathize with. Even if probing on the vulnerable produces missionary goals in the short term, this usually backfires in the long run: as soon as people realise their vulnerability has been abused for missionary reasons, their initial gratitude is swapped for disgust towards the religious organisation that helped them for the wrong reasons.

The third “preacher” is not shown, only talked about in Episode 6 (“Gganbu”). The North Korean refugee Kang and the South Korean Ji-yeong have volunteered to team up for the next game, which – to their horror – positions them as direct adversaries: only one of them can leave the game alive. Conscious that they will not speak to each other after this game has ended, the two young women open up to one another. And Ji-yeong explains why she was imprisoned before entering the games: she tells Kang about a certain day she returned home from school.

The first [dead body] I saw was my mom. One day I came home after school, and found her dead on the floor. Next to her was my so-called dad with a knife in his hand. The next person I saw dead was my dad. And the one standing next to him with a knife was me. He was a pastor. Whenever he beat my mom and did the unthinkable to me, he always prayed for our sins to be forgiven. But he didn’t pray the day he killed my mom. Maybe he knew he couldn’t be forgiven.

The fourth and last character of this category is the one most discussed on the Internet regarding the theme of Christianity in *SQUID GAME*, the nameless player 244 (Kim Si-hyun). We do not know why he signed up for the games. Neither do we know anything of his faith prior to the games, but he has the largest, if not very positive, role of all Christian characters in the series, as indicated at the beginning of this article.

Player 244’s role starts in Episode 4 (“Stick to the Team”) when he begins to pray, waiting for his team to enter the Tug-of-War (round #3), while the numbers of defeated members of another team are announced. Eventually, Player 244 ascends in the elevator together with all other significant contestants, including Seong, Cho, Ji-yeong, Kang, and Oh-Il nam. When the old man ex-



Fig. 7: Player 244 prays on the floor of the elevator (on his knees on the right), while Ji-yeong scorns him (the middle woman on the left), after the Tug-of-War. Screenshot SQUID GAME, Episode 5, 00:49:36.

plains to the rest of the team that only teamwork and strategy can help them win, Player 244 interrupts: “The only one who can save us now is the Lord.”

In the next episode (“A Fair World”), after the team has been victorious – due indeed to teamwork and strategy – Player 244 is kneeling on the floor of the elevator, his hands folded and his eyes closed (fig. 7). Ji-yeong, who is critical of religion – a fact of which the viewer of the series is not yet aware – mocks him:

He! Who are you praying to right now? To God? Do you think you’re alive thanks to God? You’re still breathing and moving that tongue of yours thanks to that old man and that guy over there who pulled out that awesome trick last-minute. So if you’re going to thank anyone thank them.

Player 244 replies angrily to her,

You poor lost lamb. Can’t you hear the cries of those who were nailed to the cross today? We lived to see another day thanks to their blood and sacrifice. On behalf of all us sinners, I am thanking the Lord for his decision and their sacrifice, and saying a prayer.

Theologically, much is happening in these sentences. Player 244 identifies his now dead adversaries as being “nailed to the cross” in a clear reference

to Christ's death. Even more, Player 244 holds God responsible for who gets to live and who dies, diminishing his own responsibility in light of his involvement in the death of eight fellow contestants. He even goes so far as to speak of their killing as a "sacrifice", projecting agency in their deaths from him onto the victims themselves.

Ji-yeong scolds him: "Bullshit. You killed them yourself." When Player 244 continues his silent prayer, she mocks him again by closing her eyes and folding her hands:

So we all get to go to heaven if we mumble a few prayers? Shit, then I have to pray too. Heavenly Father, we worked together as a team today to send many people to your side. Please, help us send more people to your side from now on.

Player 244's hypocritical behaviour emerges a couple of times again in the series. First, in the same episode as the "poor lamb" speech, he suggests to his team that they carry out a pre-emptive strike against their remaining competitors by killing them in their sleep. Again Ji-yeong scolds him, "The Lord's servant is the vicious one here." Player 244 replies, in a sudden act of self-judgement, "We're all sinners already. Our hands are drenched in blood."

In round #5, the remaining contestants must choose a number between 1 and 16, while unaware of the consequences of their choice (Episode 7, "VIPS"). Player 244 chooses number 6, arguing, "God created man on the sixth day. I'm going back to that day God created the sinless and innocent man." Again, the player shows his hypocritical nature: he chooses the number six because of its association with the biblical paradise and its innocence before the Fall of Humankind even as his hands are "drenched in blood", as he earlier said.

Genesis seems to be Player 244's favourite biblical text: one episode earlier ("Gganbu"), he makes a reference to God creating Eve from Adam's rib, arguing, "God has given men and women different roles and uses." To which Ji-yeong replies, "Idiots. This isn't the Garden of Eden."

The players find out they have to cross a high bridge with glass stepping stones ("VIPS"), unable to tell which tiles are strong enough to hold them and which are not. The number they have chosen earlier marks the sequence in which they have to try to cross: the higher the number the higher the chance of getting across, and vice versa, the lower the number, the



Fig. 8: Player 151 (left) is appalled by Player 244's praying while kneeling on a glass tile. Screenshot SQUID GAME, Episode 7, 00:24:38.

higher the chance of dying, so the next contender can safely proceed a little farther. When it is Player 244's turn to jump to the next tile, he collapses and starts to pray the Lord's Prayer on his knees, to the anger of all other players, especially Player 151, who is just behind him (fig. 8).

As Player 244 prays the line "and lead us not into temptation", he is interrupted again by Player 151, who shouts, "Just go! Or we'll all die!" This provokes Player 244 to answer angrily, "There is no order in which God calls us." And when looking up, "Judgement Day is upon us. All of us will end up in hell anyway." Significantly, the last line of the Lord's Prayer, "and deliver us from evil", is rather aptly absent here. Player 151 jumps to Player 244's tile to make him jump forward, but in the ensuing struggle it is the former who falls forward through the glass panel to his death. When Player 244 successfully jumps to the next panel, apparently with tempered glass, he thanks God, "Thank you, Lord." But as soon as the prayer has left his lips, he is pushed through the next panel by yet another player trying to avoid getting pushed by others. Now player 244 also falls to his death.

The Sister at the Orphanage

The second category – (self-) identified Christian without suffering a discontinuity between preaching and praxis – is occupied by one character only: a Roman Catholic sister who is taking care of the orphanage where Kang's



Fig. 9: Ji-yeong with her brother in the orphanage, while in the background the nameless religious take care of the orphans. Screenshot SQUID GAME, Episode 2, 00:32:09.

little brother lives, awaiting the realisation of his sister’s promise to take him out from there to be reunited with their mother. This nameless sister stars in Episode 2 (“Hell”). She is dressed in grey clothes and a white veil and is probably supposed to be a Salesian sister, whose religious order runs orphanages all over the world.

First, while Kang and her brother are sitting aside talking to one another, she invites the children playing on the playground to “come and have some ice cream”. When the siblings hug each other – for the last time, as it will turn out to be – the sister is seen watering the plants around the playground as the children resume their peaceful children’s games (fig. 9), which are sharply distinct from the “adult” ones featured in the majority of the series’ episodes.

The Salesian sister remains nameless, but her character forms a threefold exception to the rule of the rest of SQUID GAME: she is the only female Christian character and the only explicitly Roman Catholic one – the other Christian characters supposedly belong to Protestant denominations – and she is also the only Christian character whose preaching and praxis align. She is actually helping the poor and the homeless, as her Salesian Order preaches. She is the opposite of the multibillionaires who fund and appreciate the “adult” games. They are mostly white males and come down on the poor, while she is clearly of Asian origin and is devoting her life to those who are prone to becoming the Host’s new contestants.

The “Christian” non-Christians

The third and last category is the trickiest one: it comprises those who are not explicitly or implicitly (self-)identified as Christians but nevertheless are presented by the series as the “real” Christians in terms of their praxis. They have “good praxis” without any need of preaching, and thus form the counterweight to the first category, which was characterised by its discontinuity between Christian praxis and preaching. Player 244 supplies another tool legitimizing such an “appropriation” precisely because he introduces the element of (self)sacrifice, even though he uses it in a corrupted sense from an authentic Christian point of view: he applies the term to those who were killed by Player 244’s own actions and by those of the other players, suggesting that the decision who gets to be “taken” is in not human but divine hands. (Self)sacrifice, but in the non-distorted sense, thus becomes an identification marker for “crypto” Christian behaviour.

Four characters from SQUID GAME qualify for this category: Ji-yeong, Cho Swang-woo, Seong Gi-hun, and an unidentified man thus far not discussed in this article. We begin with Ji-yeong, who opts to team up with Kang Sae-byeok before entering the fourth game (Episode 6, “Gganbu”). Since the two women have no idea what to expect, they presume they will have to work together. When the game itself is presented – Marbles – the two quickly realise that only one of them will see the end of the day. Ji-yeong takes the initiative and suggests they play only one round together, for all their marbles at once: the winner is the one who can throw one marble the closest to a brick wall. But before they play this one decisive round, the two women share their life stories, as described earlier in this article, including Ji-yeong’s confession of having murdered her abusive father. Kang also opens up and tells the story about her dark life in the North and how she and her brother were in the process of fleeing from North Korea when their father was shot and their mother taken captive.

When time has almost run out, the two begin to play their one round. Ji-yeong insists Kang starts: she throws her marble reasonably close to the wall. When it is Ji-yeong’s turn, she just lets her marble drop to the ground, thus deliberately losing the game, sacrificing herself for Kang to win this round. Refusing to take Kang’s offer to retry, she explains her sacrifice, referring to Kang’s brother in the orphanage: “I don’t have anything. [...] You have a reason to leave this place. But I don’t. [...] Someone with a good reason should be the one to leave. That is the right thing.” Very reluctantly



Fig. 10: Seong Gi-hun refuses to kill his friend Cho Swang-woo during the last game of the series, even though the latter gave him all the reasons to do so. Screenshot SQUID GAME, Episode 9, 00:45:47.

and visibly upset, Kang accepts Ji-yeong's sacrifice, and when she walks away, the other woman is shot dead by the security personnel overseeing the games.

During the last round of the games (episode "One Lucky Day"), Seong and Cho Swang-woo are the only two contestants left standing. Seong tries to kill Cho Swang-woo, but ultimately he is not capable of delivering the fatal blow, planting the knife instead into the ground next to Cho's head (fig. 10). Rather than claim victory, Seong halts and exclaims that he wants to quit. Based on the rule described earlier, the games can be ended if a majority of the players vote to do so. If both Seong and Cho vote to quit, both can go home, although without any prize money. Initially, Cho seems to want to take this opportunity, but then he says, "I am sorry" and plunges the knife into his own throat, taking his own life and thus making Seong the winner.

Cho's sacrifice at the last possible moment is even more remarkable in light of his earlier conduct. During the fighting, Seong's shouts have recalled those actions: "You killed them all!" Even though Cho has not technically killed all the other competitors, he did try to get his closest competition out of the way, even if that competition was his own team, including Ali, Seong, and Kang. During the second game (Honeycomb), Cho guessed the game before playing and purposefully made sure Seong got the hardest tasks. During the fourth game (Marbles), he cheated grossly by misusing Ali's trust in him to rob him of all his marbles, getting him killed by the security personnel. And



Fig. 11: A drunken homeless man appears to be freezing to death until the police arrive, alerted by an anonymous pedestrian. Screenshot SQUID GAME, Episode 9, 00:39:42.

in the aftermath of the fifth game (Glass Stepping Stones), he cold-bloodedly killed Kang, who had been mortally wounded by splintering glass.

The dissonance of the preaching and praxis dichotomy, however, reaches its peak in the ninth and last episode of the season (“One Lucky Day”). When Seong Go-hun is invited by the old man he thought was dead and the true nature of the games is revealed to him, both men witness a specific scene playing out outside the window of the apartment. It is 24 December, a half hour before midnight, so Christmas Eve, as the series conveniently signals to the viewer. Outside in the snow, a very drunken, apparently homeless man slowly passes out, risking freezing to death. Oh Il-nam, in between explaining his existential boredom and organizing the games, remarks on the situation outside:

That man over there. He must be drunk because he’s been sitting there for hours. He looks homeless too if I had to guess. He’s going to freeze to death if he stays out there any longer. And no one is going over to help or anything. Would you help out that guy? You think that you will stop walking and help that disgusting, stinking drunk, little piece of trash, huh?

And then, even on the brink of his own death, the old man cannot resist making a final critical point on human existence, while giving in to his gambling hobby. He offers Seong a bet:

Let's play something tonight. That man out there ... if he remains out there until midnight, I win. If anyone ... goes to help the drunk before then, in that case, you win. [...] Well, he's still out there. It looks like you've run out of luck. Tell me ... you still trust ... in humanity being good? [...] Look at that. There's someone who cares.

Seong clings to his hope that someone will intervene even as the old man giggles, certain that no one will. People in the street ignore the drunken man, passing him by, looking at him but not acting. Eventually an unknown young man checks on the homeless man, but he too walks away, apparently uninterested in his fate. Several seconds before midnight, a police car arrives (fig. 11). From within it two officers and the young man from earlier on, who seems to have alerted them, appear. Together they hoist the homeless man into the car and drive him away, presumably to safety. At the same time, Oh Il-nam dies, having barely witnessed his final defeat, while Seong Gi-hun comments, "They're here. People came to help. You saw it, didn't you? You lost."

After this experience – made up of learning the truth behind the games and viewing the example of the young man in the street – Seong puts his life together again. Having taken care of his personal hygiene and appearance, he collects Kang's younger brother from the Salesian religious sister's orphanage and introduces him to Cho's mother, both unaware of the fatal ends of their sister and son respectively. Seong offers a childless mother a new child to care for, while giving the orphan a caring mother. Seong leaves a trunk full of money for the two and disappears into the night.

SQUID GAME's Religion Criticism

The ninth episode of the series seems implicitly to quote two famous stories from the New Testament. The young man altruistically caring for the stranger dying at the side of the road echoes the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), in which a beaten, naked traveller is left to die alongside the road after being abused by robbers. A Jewish priest and a Levite, supposedly of high moral standards, pass by and do nothing, while a Samaritan – a foreigner in the eyes of the Jewish people – stops and goes to great lengths to help the stranger.

Likewise, the drunken man in the ninth episode has been robbed and abused by the harsh capitalistic society he is forced to live in, left to lie there by those who pass him by, only to be helped by an unlikely candidate. The

drunkard also shares certain qualities with the Samaritan: just as the Samaritan was regarded as a social outcast not worthy of attention, so too the supposedly poor drunkard is treated as a social parasite. And like the non-Jew of the Lukan parable, the non-Christian pedestrian enters to shame the rest.

The second implicit biblical quotation of the ninth episode is found when Seong links Kang's brother to Cho's mother. It seems to closely echo John 19:26–27, when Jesus, moments before his death on the cross, makes sure his mother and his “beloved disciple” will be taken care of. Jesus says to his mother, “Woman, behold, your son!” And then to the beloved disciple, “Behold, your mother!” And from that day on, the gospel tells, the disciple took Jesus' mother into his house, taking care of her for the rest of her life.

Even though the roles are reversed in “One Lucky Day” – the older woman here taking care of the younger man – the allusion is clear. Seong will leave the two behind after this scene: he will leave their company apparently forever, giving the woman and the boy to one another to nurture and love each other in the absence of both the woman's son and the boy's mother. Seong, as becomes clear at the end of the episode, will be “dead” to the world, for he cancels his flight to meet his daughter, probably already in the United States with her mother and stepfather, vowing he will dedicate his life to the prevention of the continuation of the games he had earlier participated in.

There is even a third quotation of, or rather an allusion to, the Christian metanarrative. The series points out that the seminal scene takes place on Christmas Eve, practically exactly at midnight, when Christmas Day starts. Christmas is the Christian celebration of its continuing faith in the notion of the incarnation, signifying that the transcendent creator of heaven and earth became “enfleshed” in Jesus Christ; the feast celebrates the birth of the Christian saviour. Due to inculturation and a continuous process of adaptation, the “birthday” of Jesus was marked in mid-winter, hence the image of snow. In “One Lucky Day” the remembrance of the Christian incarnation is embodied (!) not in an explicitly Christian character, as should have been the case, but in an anonymous character, a stranger in the streets with apparently no other motive to help a complete stranger than the intrinsic one of *caritas* (Christian charity). It is relevant in this context to mention that in Luke's gospel the risen Christ reveals himself precisely in the “stranger” who accompanies two of Jesus' disciples on their way home to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–32).

These quotations, allusions, and characterisations of (Christian) characters discussed in this article illustrate the “critical theology”, so to speak, of

SQUID GAME. Nominal Christians advocate their belief in helping one another because of a divine commandment central to their religion, but they fail again and again to live up to their own words when put to the test. Player 244 is the most outspoken but certainly not the only character in the series exemplifying this. By contrast, we witness several other non-Christian characters who display that specific behaviour so fruitlessly sought after by the Christian ones: compassion and care for their own sake, even at the cost of their own fortune, happiness, or even life (self-sacrifice). Seong and the Good Samaritan from the ninth episode are the prime examples belonging to this category.

Two options are possible. These altruistic non-Christians may actually be “crypto” Christians who simply do not know that they are acting out of Christian inspiration, as the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner has suggested with his idea of the anonymous Christian.²¹ Or good behaviour may not be exclusive to Christians, but can be found in all people “of good will”, as the angels sing to the shepherds in Luke’s version (2:14) of the birth of Jesus: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will to people.”²² I argue that the series opts for the second perspective, especially in the context of the South Korean prosperity gospel, refraining from “encapsulating” everything positive in human behaviour as inherently and necessarily Christian.

Goodness and evil can be found in all persons alike, the series suggests, in Christians as much as in non-Christians. But at least non-Christians do not brag about their faith-based moral superiority like some Christians do, even while unable to live up to the standards their religion holds before them.

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