

Romans and Christians: Bearing Witness and Performing Persecution in Bible Camp Simulations

Scott Magelssen and Ariaga Mucek

It was very realistic. Too realistic for some. Looking back it resembles what you see in the news today of terrorist attacks. That being said, I heard from a couple a campers years later that said that night they decide[d] to follow Jesus no matter what. It became their faith in Christ not their parents. It was an interesting night.

Bruce, “Communist Leader”
Luther Park Bible Camp

The Christians are in there! We’re gonna get the Christians!

Rev. Christy Fisher
Wesley Club

You just can’t do that kind of thing these days.

Luke Halverson
Lake Wapogasset

For those who grew up campers, summer camp conjures utopian images of dips in the lake, evening campfires, and cool, tanned, college-aged staff with sandals and acoustic guitars. Bible camp (variously called confirmation camp or church camp) is no exception, and in addition harkens former young Christian campers’ nostalgic memories of chapel and Bible study, and, at least in the Lutheran variety, a kind of benevolent zeal on the part of the counsellors for Jesus and the Holy Spirit not generally found in church services during the year.¹ But Bible camps have not always relied exclusively on the types of programming that generate good feelings. Along with these idyllic associations, campers may also remember activities that elicited sadness, anxiety, and fear, whether through teary commitment rituals of confession and absolution of sins and participatory passion plays featuring characters in Holy Land costume (i.e., bathrobes), or through emotionally rigorous role playing games. This essay presents a history of the immersive field game called “Romans and Christians,” a simulation of the early Church in which Roman soldiers hunt down and round up illegal followers of Jesus Christ as they try to find and gather in a secret location to worship.

Offered as a way of teaching Church history and Christian identity through play, “Romans and Christians,” we argue, has its origins in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social reform practices associated with YMCA and Boy Scout camps. The model transferred to Bible camps sometime around the 1970s, where it took on a Church historical narrative. The game’s narrative, as well as its use of dramatic elements like props, costume, and surprise, continued to develop and shift in response to the changing political context, and especially in response to major events like the Cold War, until it peaked in emotional charge and affectivity during play and popularity in the 1980s.

Scott Magelssen is associate professor and the Director of the Center for Performance Studies in the University of Washington’s School of Drama, where he heads the BA academic program. His most recent book is *Simming: Participatory Performance and the Making of Meaning* (2014). **Ariaga Mucek** is a third-year undergraduate student at the University of Washington and is studying drama performance, minoring in anthropology.

With changes to childhood education paradigms favouring child safety starting in the 1990s, and further in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Romans and Christians quickly waned in popularity and fell out of use in mainstream protestant camps. “It’s not a game that’s very pervasively experienced in any of our Lutheran Bible camps [today],” says Don Johnson, executive director of Lutheran Outdoor Ministries, which currently oversees Bible camps affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (Johnson 2016). Modified versions of Romans and Christians are still played by church youth groups in North America, and variations of the rules can be found online in religious education resource materials and online youth ministry sites, as we will describe later in the essay.

In the game, the youth simulated the persecuted Christians under an oppressive regime, and the goal was to make it to the secret worship place without being captured—and, if capture did occur, to escape or even convert the guards by giving a testimony. To be sure, how a game that simulated persecution became such a compelling experience for Christian groups during the late twentieth century is worth further consideration. Especially when, at least in the United States, Christians have seemed to be one of the least oppressed religious groups in the nation—and our nation, many believers claim, is a Christian one. Was Romans and Christians a kind of devotional bearing witness to the early martyrs through performative embodiment? Was it a kind of conservative allegorical positioning of the Church against the threat of a godless secularism? Was it a rehearsal—a kind of “boot camp” for equipping young people to practise their faith and evangelize in the public sphere? And in what cases could the game have gone too far, manipulating the emotions of adolescents high on the Spirit and low on sleep by terrorizing them with threatening adult strangers, using elements of chase and ambush to trigger “fight-or-flight” states, and not always framing the simulation with orientation and debriefing exercises? Particularly vulnerable to these less desirable outcomes would have been campers of colour or other at-risk groups, or those who already found activities associated with organized religion alienating or intimidating. In the following pages we draw on performance theory and personal interviews with camp leadership and staff, as well as Scott’s own experience in a compelling “Communists and Christians” adaptation in the 1980s, to historically situate Romans and Christians in a larger scope of play and immersive simulations (“simnings”) as educative practices, analyzing how the game made use of performative motifs and dramaturgical elements to maximize emotional arcs.²

Theoretical Approaches, Background, and Context

To date, there are no published historical analyses of Romans and Christians as a religious performance practice. A historical analysis is valuable in that it can give a better picture of the manner in which educational play has been used in religious settings to inform or reinforce values and identity formations, and to connect to fellow members of the community of belief. The challenges posed by such an inquiry, given the lack of scholarship, include the relative paucity of archival evidence that would provide specific dates in which the game was played, as well as the scarcity of reliable documentation of its origins or points of transfer from other cultural practices to Bible Camp programming. Nevertheless, through corroborating oral histories from our interviews we are able to identify key date ranges over which Romans and Christians emerged and developed, and significant events that informed changes to and the gradual demise of the game. In order to delimit the scope of our research for this essay, we focus in particular on the versions of Romans and Christians designed for pre- and early-teen participants of approximately eleven to thirteen years

of age and practised in camps affiliated with mainstream Protestant denominations: Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopalian, and so forth.

The structure of Romans and Christians is rooted in other field game models. At its heart, it is a modified tag game, with elements of hide-and-seek, kick the can, and cops and robbers. In this case, the sanctuary or secret worship place is “gool” or “dell,” and the Romans are “it.” In one variation we found, for example, Christians could get out of jail if tagged by another Christian (bootec50 2009). The successful maintenance of the game’s narrative template, in which players represent persecuted Christians—custodians of a budding religious movement in danger of being snuffed out by occupying imperial forces—may not, in fact, be as necessary for the game’s completion. The players must, in essence, all get to “gool” before those who are “it” can get them. Other learning institutions, like museums and schools, deploy similar immersive “good-guy-bad-guy” games as a way to teach about history or social issues. Conner Prairie Interactive History Park outside Indianapolis offers “Follow the North Star,” an immersive Underground Railroad experience where visitors play fugitive slaves trying to escape to freedom in the north while the bad guys are slave owners, bounty hunters, and just plain inhospitable racist northerners (Magelssen 2013, 29–47). The Hñãñu community in El Alberto, Mexico, have created the “Caminata Nocturna” in which tourists from all over the world come to pretend to be migrants attempting to illegally cross the Mexico–U.S. border while avoiding the Border Patrol, drug cartel soldiers, and other threats (96–112). David Jortner, a theatre scholar at Baylor University, remembers the Jewish Summer Camp activity “Escape to Palestine” where campers had to get themselves out of German-occupied Europe before it was too late (Jortner 2016). With other attractions and institutions adopting such a seemingly successful performance mode for teaching, what was it about Romans and Christians that prevented its continued broad use as an effective mode of pedagogy for communicating history or religious identity? We explore some answers in the following pages.

We situate our historical analysis within recent scholarly discourses on evangelical performance.³ Our work is informed primarily by that of John Fletcher and Jill Stevenson, each of whom draws explicit connections between performance and religious belief. In particular, we refer to the idea Fletcher outlines in *Preaching to Convert* and elsewhere that some iterations of Christianity position themselves as fighters in a global war against the forces of secularism, the battlegrounds being schools, popular culture, and the legislative arena. We argue that an immersive game in which participants play underdogs hunted down by those who disagree with their beliefs can easily serve as an example par excellence of what he calls a “dystopic performative” (Fletcher 2013, 171). We also take up Fletcher’s invitation to direct scholarly attention to religious performances with just as much rigour and responsibility as we would any other form of activist performance, even if we take ethical issue with some of the activities we examine (Fletcher 2007, 22; Fletcher 2010, 116). We find Jill Stevenson’s work on religious performance in *Sensational Devotion* helpful in her articulation of “evangelical dramaturgy,” which she defines as a set of practices “designed to foster embodied beliefs that respond to specific devotional needs and priorities.” These practices, contends Stevenson, “constitute a worldview even as they reinforce it” (Stevenson 2013, 4). We also, however, look to Claire Maria Chambers, Simon W. Du Toit, and Joshua Edelman, who, in the introduction to their edited collection *Performing Religion in Public*, caution scholars to be mindful of perpetuating a binary opposition between public and religious realms. Rather than viewing these realms as fixed and stable with their own competing sets of truth claims, argue the editors, the religious and the public should be seen as always already “imbricated” in one another, and their relationships constituted performatively, though experience, affect, and presence (Chambers, Du Toit, and Edelman 2013, 3). In this regard, we maintain that Bible camp performances can be understood as

both taking place in a separate religious realm, apart from the world, but also very much within and constitutive of the public sphere.

Regarding how we theorize Romans and Christians as a performance, we situate our study within scholarship on gaming and play. As an immersive, participatory simulation, Romans and Christians can be understood as what Scott has referred to as a “simming of witness,” which “use[s] performance to express empathy or solidarity with the victims of a present or a past injustice, trauma, or to commemorate an event that helped constitute the fabric of a community’s identity.” It can also be seen as a “simming of reification,” which “confirm[s] and cement[s] values, dilemmas, political states, or doctrines that already exist in the abstract in a community’s perception, but which the community feels must continually be policed and maintained.” Given that Romans and Christians ostensibly performs the past, it can even be interpreted as a “simming of invocation,” where a successful escape from the Romans to join with fellow Christians to spread the Gospel “rehearse(s) for a future reality and advocate(s) for that future reality” (Magelssen 2013, 13–15).

With Johan Huizinga and other theorists of play, we recognize that play is fundamental to human activity and helps establish and reify values, relationships, and identity, and is as such foundational to human development (Huizinga 2004, 117). Romans and Christians may be examined both in terms of narratology, that is, how the overarching activity plays out a “text” with characters, plot, and a beginning, middle, and end, but also with “ludology,” the way in which each participant’s experience can be understood as unfolding autonomously, governed by the rules of play and the game interface, and in which the plot as such is not experienced as directing the action. Gregory Bateson writes compellingly about situations in which the metacommunicative elements of play (“this is a game”) often blur with real life in the minds of the participants, so that they have a hard time dissociating themselves psychologically from the game in which they are immersed (Bateson 1972, 180; Bateson 2004, 121–31). “Deep play” can comprise situations approaching psychological or physical danger, or in which the safety net of game rules are otherwise unclear or compromised (Schechner 2002, 118). Instances of campers or counsellors taking the game “too far” and pushing the envelope of emotional safety, risking psychological trauma, not to mention the loss of the intended message, can be conceived especially as examples of deep play.

Simming Early Christians: Community through Deep Play

The Romans and Christians scenario is ostensibly drawn from the first centuries of Church history and the lives of the early martyrs, when the budding religious group based on the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth was condemned by both Jewish authorities and the Roman Empire, until Christianity became legalized in the fourth century. The game found biblical foundation, for instance, in the story of Paul’s imprisonment and preaching about the Holy Spirit in Acts 28. Paul’s letters to the churches in Rome and Corinth also contain passages of encouragement in the face of persecution. In his letter to the Romans, Paul tells believers to “Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer” and “bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them” (Rom. 12:12, 14). In 1 Corinthians he says, “be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:58). Most persecution of followers of Christ in Christian scripture, however, is at the hands of Jewish authorities, rather than the Romans. The Romans are the villains only insofar as they administered the justice demanded by Jewish authorities against Christian offenders. In one of the more notorious examples in Acts of the Apostles, Paul and Silas are turned over to the Roman authorities by the Jewish leaders after Paul

cast a fortune-telling spirit out of a slave girl, which ruined her owners' financial prospects. This is the episode in which an earthquake frees all the prisoners, but Paul and Silas remain to convert their jailer, who is about to kill himself for losing all under his wardenship (Acts 16:16–40). The Romans seem to have been disapproving but fairly tolerant of Christians until the reign of Marcus Aurelius (ruled 161–180) in the second century. This is where the stories of the martyrs in the arenas and death by lions and other wild beasts start, and what church father Tertullian rails against in his “On the Spectacles” (ca. 197–202). In other words, the iterations of Romans and Christians we have found in our research anachronistically either conflated dozens or hundreds of years of early Church history into a single temporal representation or simply tended not to focus on a particular historical period.

The purposes behind adopting the game become clearer if we consider the emphasis on learning and identity formation through physically challenging or rigorous play coupled with the elevated psychological states brought about through heightened competition and narrative templates of “good guy–bad guy” or “us vs. them.” To be sure, the impact and success of Romans and Christians depends on affective and experiential playing out of a campaign in which persecuted underdogs outrun and outwit the frightening and oppressive authority figures. Through problem-solving, field tactics, and subterfuge, the persecuted Christians gain ground which up to that point has been held by the opponent. As in a drama, the stages of the campaign are marked by the heightening of conflict and emotional engagement, peaking at a climax, and resolving in a denouement. In this case, the conflict concerned the question of whether the community of faith would be captured and assimilated or punished, or would succeed through commitment to the ideas that bind the community together. Furthermore, as we will argue, the Romans and Christians activity functioned dramaturgically as an emotional and physical climax within the larger scope of a week at Church Camp. The game created an experience where play was at its darkest and emotional safety was at its lowest so that the remainder of the week could be devoted to reaffirming communal values in a larger denouement.

The use of immersive programming to create an emotional climax belongs to a familiar dramaturgy used in many initiation cycles ranging from military boot camp to fraternity and sorority hazing rituals. It is the pattern Victor Turner parsed out in his writings on anthropology and performance, from the social dramas he argued were played out in aboriginal puberty rites and Greek tragedies (breach → crisis → redressive action → schism or reintegration) to his elaborations on Van Gennep's *rites de passage* in which the magic and efficacy of the ritual happens in the liminal betwixt-and-between stage between the initiate's past and future states (Turner 1982, 69; Turner 1996, 532). In Romans and Christians, the participants' liminal phase comprised most of the game. When camp counsellors representing Romans initiated game play, campers were transformed into frightened fugitives from the law, with no access to the rules or resources with which they were familiar only moments earlier. Through dramatic play in which they had to determine friend from foe and discern the skills they must employ in this topsy-turvy world to survive, these initiands ritually became tried and tested young adult Christians, and they were recognized as such at the end of the game when welcomed back into the community.

In *Medieval Theatre of Cruelty: Rhetoric, Memory, Violence*, theatre historian Jody Enders traces the trauma-learning link all the way back to the ancients. Aristotle, for instance, teaches us that truth can most properly be achieved for tragic audiences through representations of pity and fear, and Cicero and his contemporaries believed that anything spoken under torture was probably more *true* because

physical pain gives the speaker the “force of necessity” (Enders 1999, 2, 1). Hence, the idea that if a nun raps a student’s knuckles with a ruler in parochial school, the learning will better stick. Richard Schechner defines deep play as play in which “there is very high risk physically, fiscally, and/or psychologically” (Schechner 2002, 118), and where “much of the fun of playing, when there is fun, is in playing with fire, going in over one’s head,” and “the risks to the player outweigh the potential rewards” (92). When representational play and games like *Romans and Christians* introduce elements of risk in an environment otherwise characterized by physical and emotional safety, such as when the authority figures shift from benevolent caregivers to opponents bent on capturing and punishing, they create precisely such high-risk situations for campers and thus fit squarely into deep play.

The deep play model of summer camp simming was established by the creators of summer camp, the Boy Scouts and the YMCA and their descendants, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Initiation-style immersive activities were very much in keeping with Progressive-era doctrine for building character through a survival-of-the-fittest paradigm (Macleod 1983; Mechling 2001; Rosenthal 1986). In Boy Scout handbooks throughout the twentieth century, for example, can be found the philosophy that the best and most efficient path to moral and physical hygiene at an abbreviated span (one or two weeks) in the outdoors was through exhausting the subject with rigorous tasks, breaking his ties to immoral things, and then prompting a pledge of allegiance and submission to a higher order. One of the Scout Virtues states: “He should so learn to discipline and control himself that he will have no thought but to obey the orders of his officers” (Boy Scouts of America 1911, 7).

Racist and masculinist from the beginning, the Boy Scouts were conceived by founder Lieutenant General Robert Stephenson Smyth Baden-Powell as a way to pull England’s young men from the country’s national inefficiencies—irreligion, indiscipline, want of patriotism, corruption, disregard of others, cruelty, showing off, loafing and shirking, low moral standards, and social ills from crimes of violence to mental and physical deficiency—through demanding regimens that would build character, mental and moral toughness, and a military-grade preparedness (Rosenthal 1986, 5). Historian David I. Macleod adds “effeminacy” to the list of deficiencies causing national anxiety and writes that the Boy Scout invention of the camp experience was a culmination of Boy Scout and YMCA leadership’s ambitions. “Summer camp,” he writes, would be “one of those ideal institutions in which Progressive Era Americans sought to reshape personal values and social relationships” (Macleod 1983, 233). Camp was both an opportunity for licensed misbehaviour and a period of indoctrination to patriotic and parareligious ideals. The time away from the city would “enable campers to vent their boyish savagery under close control” but at the same time “campfire rituals and natural beauty would induce mild cases of adolescent romanticism” (234). In addition, the exposure to the outdoors would harden campers’ bodies and sharpen their senses. In the words of early camp planners, two weeks at camp would make the young men “tough as Indians” and “brown as berries” (234). Such Progressive-era survival-of-the-fittest rhetoric became embodied in the move to *Romans and Christians* games, which emphasized grit and resilience as a way to survive until the end of the game when the Christians successfully outwitted and outlasted the Roman oppressors.

Indeed, within the structure of the week(s) at Boy Scout camp, writes Jay Mechling, Boy Scout campers are routinely and consistently subjected to situations which test and reify their membership in the community as well as their male heterosexual identity. This testing, in the years of Mechling’s fieldwork in the late twentieth century, would come in the form of constant youth-on-youth and adult-on-youth perpetrations of unease through informal ribbing, hazing, and teasing as well as more

formalized games like Treasure Hunt and Capture the Flag. In these games, which are in essence ritualized male combat, the maintaining of the “play frame” is key to the efficacy of the ritual. For instance, in a game that requires boys to wrestle in a semi-naked state while playful accusations of homosexuality are hurled at one another, the play frame is meant to guarantee the subject can emerge heterosexual, that is, free of sexual attraction or stimulation by the other boys’ bodies (Mechling 2001, 82–83). The danger, writes Mechling, is the threat of disrupting the delicate balance that needs to be maintained between frames. If initiation to the community comes through ritual humiliation (accusations of homosexuality), and either the perpetrator or the victim refuses the play frame or takes it too seriously (actual cruelty, actual offence or internalization), the ritual divides the community rather than creating a stronger communal bond (108–9). Highly competitive and violent camp-wide games of Capture the Flag at Scout Camp, argues Mechling, ritually play out social conflict with the goal of establishing group fraternity and, in Victor Turner’s sense, *communitas*. As with informal rituals, maintaining the play frame is key to Capture the Flag’s success. “The ‘as if’ mood of play,” he says, “gives it the power to comment upon everyday life in ways that would be too frightening or too disruptive if done ‘for real.’ Both ritual and play help the participants reflect upon themselves and upon the social order” (157–58).

The games of Capture the Flag Mechling witnessed in his fieldwork strike the reader as savage, dangerous, and violent, yet somehow the Boy Scout troupe initiands emerged from the game year after year that much more closely connected. “How a game, one of the most structured forms of play,” wonders Mechling aloud, “can lead the players through the conflict of competition, through disorder and doubt, to a new integration of *communitas* is surely among the most miraculous transformations of play” (158). Here again, with the “winning” of the game in Romans and Christians, the campers not only prevail over persecution but shore up the values and identities associated with the Christian community.

Given the absence of documentation regarding the transfer of the Capture the Flag model of initiation game to simming early Christians in Bible camps in the mid-to-late twentieth century, it is likely that it was not prompted by a recommendation from executive levels, but rather a rapid spread through word of mouth among a “community of practice” (see Boud and Middleton 2003; Wenger 2008), that is, a loose informal learning coalition of camp leaders and counsellors who identified value in the way the game relied on fright and physical and emotional rigour. In Enders’ model of learning through pain and intensity, the affective states brought about by Romans and Christians, it would seem, are affected by the manner in which the game fits dramaturgically into the schedule of a week at camp. The ethnographic interviews we conducted with camp leaders show that Romans and Christians was typically played on the third night of a five-day week at camp, where campers were at an emotional high and running on adrenaline. Strategically scheduled to be a climactic experience, Romans and Christians physiologically and affectively prepared participants for a more profound faith experience.

In Scott’s Bible camp week, the placement of Romans and Christians fit into the ideal dramatic arc or pyramid plotted out by Gustav Freytag in his *Die Technik des Dramas* (The Technique of Drama) in 1863, which include inciting incident, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement. Sunday through Wednesday afternoon were devoted to rise-and-shine wake-up devotionals, Bible study, community building among cabin groups, mealtime skits and prayers, camp songs introduced and rehearsed at morning and evening chapel and campfire, and long soul-searching conversations with cabin-mates and counsellors into the wee hours lit by flashlight, all of which contributed to the “rising action” of the emotional arc of the week. Romans and Christians, a climactic point that

occurred on Wednesday night, then subverted the relationships of trust established between campers and counsellors. By the time the hunt began, the campers had been equipped with a muscle-memory of the grounds and woods, and the tunes and words to the songs they could sing for solidarity with other fugitive Christians—and, if they dared, to evangelize to the soldiers and guards. By the end of Wednesday night, the campers were emotionally shattered, physically and mentally exhausted, and grasping for structures by which they could put their lives back together: ripe, in other words, for a recommitment to Jesus and to one's traumatized fellows. The rest of the week, Thursday through Saturday, comprising the falling action part of the week, could be devoted to cool down and denouement: building the campers back up with corny variety shows and maudlin teenage confession and forgiveness rituals. At Luther Park, for instance, the campers would write their sins on a square piece of paper, which would then be nailed to a cross in stacks and set aflame, where the sins would curl up into nothing less than black roses.

Bayli Hochstein, Campus Minister and youth coordinator with the Catholic Newman Center at the University of Washington, confirms the dramaturgical arc described above is an intentional part of achieving spiritual goals. She told us that she structures weekend sleep-away retreats with an emphasis on an emotional arc that explicitly focuses on an intense high point for “deepest impact”: “The emotional impact of each activity, game, and talk is taken into consideration. Our retreats typically achieve one or both of the following objectives: to learn about a specific Church teaching or religious figure, or to establish or rejuvenate a retreat participant's intimate relationship with Christ” (Hochstein 2016). For the latter goal in a typical weekend retreat, Hochstein “follow[s] an emotional arc” beginning with “relatively shallow activities (getting to know names of participants, meeting your reflection small group) and gradually develop[ing] into a more introspective, emotional, and eventually cathartic experience.” Hochstein offers the example of the Jesus Dance, a “high impact skit portraying Christ's Mercy and Love,” followed immediately with reflection, “healing and prayer.” The last day of the retreat, according to Hochstein, is dedicated to helping campers process what they have learned and to develop ways to implement it in their lives.

Romans and Christians, The Cold War, and “Fear Mongering”

In the accounts of Romans and Christians above, the simulations used representational play to evoke a historical narrative of the first centuries of the budding Christian movement. We refer to these practices, used throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, as the first wave of Romans and Christians at Bible Camps. As the camps continued to practise the game into the mid-1980s, program leaders and staff adapted the Romans and Christians narrative template to reflect the times, responding, in particular, to the heightening of the Cold War and the arms race between the United States and the Soviets, ushering in a second wave of practice. The mid-1980s were a particularly anxious time for middle school children, with heightened political rhetoric between the US and the Soviets, even as détente approached in the following years. At any given time, young Americans were led to believe, the proliferation of nuclear weapons would allow for devastating nuclear attacks that would wipe out life on the planet, an angst-ridden scenario over which they had no control. The 1984 teen movie *Red Dawn*, the first film to garner a PG-13 rating from the Motion Picture Association and featuring a Soviet invasion of rural America, capitalized on these public anxieties. Romans-and-Christians-style games began to adopt a narrative of an invading force antagonistic to Christian religion in order to take advantage of anxieties with which young people could personally relate. Because the game began to intentionally erode or elide the boundaries between an imagined, distinctly “other” world and the present reality, these adaptations could be framed no longer just as

historical empathy and bearing witness, but as anticipatory scenarios for which young people might actually need to prepare. All these elements made the game quite effective in eliciting emotions of alarm and fear.

Scott experienced Romans and Christians as a junior high camper in the mid-1980s at a Luther Park Bible Camp in Chetek, Wisconsin, which was an outdoor ministry of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin, part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Scott remembers that the event began one evening midweek, as the eleven- to thirteen-year-old campers were at evening chapel. Several armed soldiers in camouflage fatigues led by an adult that none of the campers recognized burst through the back doors and took position around the small congregation. The leader of the invasion then crossed up to the front of the chapel and said that they were communists and that worship was now illegal under the new occupying force.⁴ The campers were to report to their cabins for further instructions. Then, to illustrate his disdain for Christianity, the communist leader shoved the altar cross to the floor. The campers screamed; some cried. The youths were escorted by armed guards who earlier that day had been their counsellors to their cabins where they were told to lie in their bunks while a guard browbeat them about the stupidity of faith in an imaginary God. One of Scott's bunkmates tried talking back to the guard. "Do I hear you being a smart ass?" the guard demanded. The swearing was mild, but by far the most shocking and threatening the campers had heard uttered by any adult that week. With that—if any camper's willing suspension of disbelief hadn't been achieved at the outset with the frightening adult stranger leading the storming of the chapel—any remaining hint of ironic or detached attitude was quickly stifled.

The details of the narrative blur after that for Scott, both because the scripted part of the scenario fell away to the more ludic playing out of the game, and also because the rigour and the chaos of the proceedings probably made a stable through-line difficult to discern. But the main elements were as follows: the campers, cabin by cabin, were able to escape their captors and run into the darkening woods. Word started to spread that there was a secret gathering down by the lakeshore, and Scott and his fellow fugitives eventually made it to safety, where they sang gentle camp songs like Peter Scholte's 1968 folk hymn "They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love." At the end of the evening, the campers and grownups had a long postmortem discussion about the experience. Several of the campers were still crying as the activity broke up.

As research for this essay, Scott contacted Luther Park staff alumni through a Facebook group, which has about 470 members, and asked if any remembered the game. He mentioned the communists and Christians version he played as a camper. Several from the group responded that they remembered the activity, which had been called "Underground Worship." "Laura" describes this activity as one in which campers "were banned from gathering for worship and had to carefully navigate through the woods to a secret worship space . . . without getting caught by the authorities" (Laura 2016). "Tina" commented, "the underground service was very intense. I remember feeling very sorry for the lake neighbors as we, as counselors, were always really believable screamers in the woods" (Tina 2016). In an unexpected answer to his query, the frightening adult who played the leader of the invading communists the night Scott experienced the game as a camper posted a comment. "I was the commie leader that night," writes "Bruce." "It was very realistic. Too realistic for some. Looking back it resembles what you see in the news today of terrorist attacks. That being said, I heard from a couple a campers years later that said that night they decide[d] to follow Jesus no matter what. It became their faith in Christ not their parents. It was an interesting night" (Bruce 2016).

Bruce's memory of the evening corroborates that of Scott: it wasn't just profound and frightening because Scott was an awkward sixth-grader being chased by adult strangers in league with counsellors no longer as he knew them. Even to Bruce, the communists and Christians game may have been "too realistic," "resembling terrorist attacks." Luther Park was not alone in pushing the boundaries of taste and safety with Romans and Christians-style games in the 1980s. We spoke with Luke Halverson, the program director at Lake Wapogasset Bible Camp (Wapo) in Amery, Wisconsin. Halverson grew up as a "camp kid": His father was on the staff at Wapo for several years. He remembers playing the role of a fugitive Christian trying to find the secret Bible study, and running and hiding from the "soldiers" to avoid imprisonment. His father would tell stories, in fact, of increasing the level of realism and distress some summers: "He couldn't do this today, he'd carry around his shotgun as an extra mode of fear, cars would pull up and he'd bring them into the game—and you just can't do that kind of thing these days" (Halverson, 2016). Such representational practices, no longer simply simulating a historical period but actually playing on perceived possibilities of enemy invasion and imposition of atheist martial law, illustrate the game's evolution into its second wave, characterized by a distinct turn toward dark play.

Novelist Smith Henderson wrote a one-page story for the *New York Times Magazine* in July of 2014 in which he similarly looks back at a frightening simming of terrorists apprehending Christians in their quotidian camp activities. When he was an eleven-year-old at sleep-away camp in Montana, he and his fellow campers were ambushed by raiders with rifles on horseback wearing bandanas over their faces, who started rounding them up and loading them into a trailer pulled by a pickup. Henderson got away, only to learn later that this was a staged event,

a part of the camp experience, some edifying fear-mongering, like the Christian haunted house I visited the Halloween before. . . . These were no bandits or kidnappers. The children in the trailer were hauled up some switchbacks to a nearby vista and given a lecture on what it was like for Christians in the Communist world. How kids just like them were, even today, rounded up for re-education. Christians weren't safe in China, the Soviet Union and maybe even here in America one day, if they weren't vigilant. (Henderson 2014, n.p.)

The new levels of surprise and "fear-mongering" that emerged with camp practices in the 1980s elicit some amount of ruefulness and embarrassment on the part of past camp programming directors. We spoke with Rev. Christy Fisher, who now serves as a pastor at the Wesley Club at the University of Washington, a progressive, LGBTQ-affirming community in the University District of Seattle. Fisher served as a program director at a Presbyterian Bible Camp in Colorado for several years. In their version of Romans and Christians, the counsellors stealthily surrounded the chapel while the campers were at worship, then in a flash attack boarded up the windows and banged on the planks, yelling, "The Christians are in there! We're gonna get the Christians!" Fisher and her colleagues "were never super-conscious" of how they might be "othering" people," or of whether there were kids who might have a history of trauma that could be triggered by the game. But it is a game she finds "totally cringe-worthy now," she says, especially given some of the kids who were in at-risk portions of the camper demographic. "It would have been really upsetting." She finds ironic the idea of representing Christians as persecuted, when "Christianity is the biggest religion in the United States. It's kind of like an Empire. *We're* the ones doing the persecuting. It's been so oppressive to the LGBTQ community and people of color." Moreover, she says, there did not seem to be a real reason for doing the game, other than a tradition her staff inherited. We asked if there was a follow-up conversation or debriefing with the

campers at the end of the game, putting the game into context. “Oh no,” she answered. “There was no context” (Fisher 2016).

At Fisher’s camp, at Lake Wapogasset, in the version Scott experienced, and in the Montana ambush of Henderson’s account, there was an emphasis on psychological immersion, realism, and a believed-in investment in the fictive world of the game. A blurring of boundaries between game and reality in keeping with the mode of deep play described by Geertz and Schechner then added to and heightened the learning-through-trauma model articulated by Enders. Both Bruce the “Commie Leader” and the programmers at Henderson’s Church Camp clearly link the emotional and affective intensity of the game to the powerful learning and/or spiritual experience the game purported to offer. It was again in these instances, however, where the educational game slipped into the seductive and exciting realm of deep play. As such, a discernable baseline for youth emotional and physical safety became relative to individual adults’ notions of what was permissible, as in the example of adult aggressors wielding real firearms—rifles, a shotgun—to amplify terror of the imaginary world.

The End Times for Romans and Christians at Bible Camps

Our interviews with camp leaders suggest that after the 1980s, churches used Romans and Christians less and less often, and the game moved from a chaotic field game—“the action was all over the place,” as former camp director Randy Youngquist-Thorow describes it—into modified, more staid versions in indoor environments, signalling the beginning of a third wave of development. The risks to the emotional safety of campers may seem to have led to the end of Romans and Christians summer camps, which became inappropriate for the changing world as quickly as they had emerged. Jon Skogen, who was a camp program director at Luther Crest Bible camp in Minnesota until 1998 and is now the administrator for Lutheran Outdoor Ministries, which oversees camps affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, told us how his staff stopped playing the game “because of the amount of fear that it brought up” in the campers. “Pitting [the campers and adults] against each other was more detrimental than positive” when the goals were to “focus more on positive experiences and [to] bring people together and be more inclusive,” Skogen told us. “As a director you are hoping that your staff will gain the trust of campers. Campers look up to the staff as role models. To me, [Romans and Christians] played on their trust and in some cases really split that” (Skogen 2016).

Howard “Skip” Reeves, who was a director at Imago Dei Bible Camp in Wisconsin during the years Scott experienced Romans and Christians as a family camper, and who is now pastor at Calvary Lutheran Church in Golden Valley, Minnesota, feels that there is potential in experiential games like Romans and Christians. “‘Thrill’ is a good word,” he says. But he cautions that immersive games should be used for the right reasons and that “follow-through” is vital. Fear, he says, is a quick way to fulfil the goals of an exercise: “You play on emotional fears of the people—like the election this year,” he added, referring to the campaign strategies of Donald Trump. “Worship is disrupted . . . and of course you’ve got people who’ve been displaced and they’re in this brand new place, so fear is part of the fulfilment.” But, more than fear, he says, “the experiential part is crucial. Where the rubber meets the road. What we’re dealing with here is there is innate substance in us in our subconscious to understand the freedom we have to grow up in this time in history.” Such a powerful experience, however, won’t make a difference spiritually without a proper follow-through to connect the emotions with the learning. “If it’s a history lesson it’s one thing. . . . What we try to

do is individualize commitment to Christ and to supply, by any means we can, the gifts of the Gospel and strengthen commitment to the Gospel and be the hands and the feet of the Gospel.” Reeves had opinions about why adaptations like Romans and Christians were happening in the 1980s at camps. “It would be good for preachers to go back to their congregations and tell them what they’re doing at camp,” i.e., that they’re fighting the good fight in the Cold War. “But if it’s a life lesson,” he says, “if you can go beyond that, and think about the Gospel, that’s a gift” (Reeves 2016).

Randy Youngquist-Thurow, now executive director of Agapé/Kure Beach Ministries in North Carolina, similarly quit the game about thirty years ago. At the camp in which he first started as support staff and then worked as a counsellor, Romans and Christians had been practised from the late 1970s into the early 1980s, with mixed reactions from the campers from “this is powerful” to “I’m just scared.” But the move to discontinue the game actually came from the counsellors, “who started saying they didn’t want to do it anymore.” Youngquist-Thurow told us that the counsellors “didn’t like it when some of campers and even some of the counsellors took it too far” or when “there was strife between counsellors when there was disagreement about effectiveness of the game” (Youngquist-Thurow, 2016).

In addition to growing unease fomenting among camp staff, Romans and Christians faced changes in attitudes to youth programming in general as attitudes about child safety and mental health changed in the next decades. Romans and Christians and Boy Scout Games like Capture the Flag all glaringly come before September 11, 2001, which marks a threshold moment in approaches to youth and young adult activity programming, parents’ expectations of sleep-away camp, and the survival-of-the-fittest ideals of childhood grit, risk-taking, and resilience. In the face of the 2011 terrorist attacks, youth counsellors and educators became more attuned to the emotional well-being of pre-teen and teenage children, and many educators began incorporating more lessons and activities that promoted tolerance of others and strategies to avoid stereotyping of religious and ethnic groups (See, for instance, Castle 2001; Towns 2011). The us-and-them scenarios created by games that developed out of Boy Scout initiations, like Romans and Christians, now strike many camp programmers and directors as contrary to the goals associated with camp today. Youngquist-Thurow explicitly linked 9/11 to the philosophical changes in camp programming between the days of Romans and Christians in the 1980s and today, especially when it comes to the idea of establishing camp as a safe environment. “The world has changed quite a bit,” he told us. “The idea of being safe was not an issue back then. Safety became an issue after 9/11, especially for the parents.” The kind of camp shenanigans and practical jokes made popular by movies like the 1979 Ivan Reitman movie *Meatballs*, starring Bill Murray, is the perception the camping world is still trying to distance itself from, he said. Today’s camp experience is intolerant of bullying, and the programming is focused on building self-esteem. In other words, building up without the old step of tearing down. Youngquist-Thurow also identified 9/11 as the turning point for representations of religious and ethnic others in camp programming. He could see the problematic representational practices that would result in a Romans vs. Christians game like Scott experienced. “Our world is much more aware of the stereotyping in a game like this” (Youngquist-Thurow 2016).

It should be said that not everyone in camp leadership was glad to see the end of Romans and Christians at Bible camp. For Luke Halverson, the game was a highlight of his summers growing up at Lake Wapogasset. “Uncomfortability breeds growth,” he maintains. “Even if they cried,” he continued, “afterward, they could reflect and say the impact on them was great.” Halverson acknowledges that safety has become much more of a concern since his youth in the 1980s. Wapo

tried an immersive experience similar to Romans and Christians in the summer of 2005 called the Refugee Hike, and it did not continue longer than that summer of programming. “Picture this happening on a property of 200 acres. It’s woods and trails and doing this at night. A kid did something, she sprained her ankle, and the time to respond was complicated,” so the activity had to be scuttled. “It’s really about the safety of the kids,” he agrees, but “we become more and more limited on the risk we can take even if it’s part of the experience.” Enrolment is even down in some of the more rustic programming Wapo operates, like Wilderness Canoe Base in Northern Minnesota, deep in the Boundary Waters region far from the reach of technology.

Air conditioning is now a requirement for a parent to say yes to camp. Technology—Kids can’t have cell phones at camp and that is enough for [a] parent to say no. “How am I going to trust you if I can’t get hold of my kid every day?” . . . We need to cater more towards—I’ll just say it—what the mother would expect if she would go to camp. (Halverson, 2016)

As Halverson sees it, Romans and Christians disappeared not because of any executive action, but because of the gradually changing expectations for safety. “It just kind of worked its way out.” But Halverson regrets the loss of the spiritual opportunity Romans and Christians offered and maintains that camps shouldn’t feel guilty about having put campers in a bit of peril back in the 1970s and 80s. “There’s a certain amount of power that comes with putting yourself in situations that you don’t have to worry about on a daily basis,” he says, “and to realize the power of community and worship that surpassed the time of fear. And it was well worth the risk” (Halverson, 2016).

Finally, for some Christian denominations, like the Lutheran Church to which Imago Dei, Luther Park, and Lake Wapogasset Bible Camps are attached,⁵ Romans and Christians posed the danger of straying from central theological tenets that confirmation and Christian youth education programs purport to teach. Lutherans’ doctrine of salvation, for instance, is that Christians are saved by grace through faith, which draws on Paul’s letter to the Ephesians: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8). In this regard, a game that requires maintaining outward faith, testifying to the Holy Spirit and evangelizing to win strikes some Lutherans as theologically tangential to Evangelical Lutherans. Don Johnson, executive director of Lutheran Outdoor Ministries, agrees. “It could easily digress,” he told us. “I’m not sure that the lessons learned . . . would be consistent with the lessons we would want to be learning at church camp.” Johnson went on to say that “the competitiveness of Romans and Christians is not what we would hope that people would be having as biblical learners” and that it emphasizes “perhaps some works-righteousness that wouldn’t be consistent with our Lutheran understanding” of salvation (Johnson 2016).⁶ Given not only the changing landscape of pedagogy and child safety philosophy, but also the theological and evangelical problems with the game, first- and second-wave Romans and Christians could not be sustained and justified after 9/11 in Bible camp programming as evangelical dramaturgy, which Stevenson notes is most efficacious for a community when it is responding to and in concert with their needs and values.

Implications for Religion and Performance History

Is it possible to extrapolate larger or generalizable ideas and theories about the efficacy of immersive religious youth performance programming for Christian education and identity formation from the historical case of Romans and Christians? Our research reveals the ways in which elements of the

game were preserved or adapted for other experiential activities lend themselves to such takeaways. Key practices adopted by church groups include at the most obvious level an avoidance of programming that deliberately incorporates shock and fright into the pedagogical strategies. When performance programming looks to simulation games or activities that invite empathy with persecuted groups, successful learning is more likely to happen if there are intentional efforts to couch the performances within a clear play frame (“this is play”) and ample time for orientation and debriefing. Jim Badke, on the directorial staff at Camp Imadene in British Columbia and author of resources on camp counselling and leadership, has experienced Romans and Christians at the level of church youth group activities but does not feel it would be the best game for the camp setting. If the focus is on learning about persecuted Christians in the world, he says, “it could promote good discussion,” but if the game depends on “tension and emotion” and confronting campers with “the choice of professing or dying for their faith” it “carries the danger of being overly persuasive if not coercive.”

To create a very realistic setting (i.e., making it seem like a real situation) could be traumatizing; anything less will not likely achieve the purpose. Do any of us know how we would respond in such a situation? May we never have to find out, and if we do, I believe God will give grace to us in the moment that he will not offer to participants in a game. (Badke 2016)

Instances of third-wave Romans and Christians-style simulations played in church youth group settings most often use a different field of play than the grounds of a sleep-away camp, such as a darkened building during a church “lock-in” overnight retreat. Some versions seem to be essentially church history live action role-playing games, without an emphasis on realism. As the variation on the resource site www.youthpastor.com describes it, “The object of the Game is for the Christians to spread the word to other Christians, and for the Romans to kill/imprison all of the Christians” (baronsamedi212 2000). This version is intended to be played in the dark with flashlights. After the youth are divided into teams of Romans and Christians, the Christian leader reads a Bible passage from Romans 12, in which Paul admonishes the believers to “Bless those who persecute you” rather than seeking to repay anyone evil for evil. “For it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”⁷ As play begins, the Christians seek clues around the field of play that lead them to the location of the secret church, while Romans hunt down and catch them by shining a flashlight on them, as in laser-tag games. For each small group of Christians the Romans capture, some individuals die, and some go to jail. Those who die with clues in their hand must leave the clues in place. Jailed Christians are released after two and a half minutes (unless they act un-Christian, in which case time is added by the jailer). If the Romans get to the secret church before all the (still alive) Christians, the Romans win. In the event the Christians win, this version lets them do so spectacularly: “[The] only way to know that the Christians win,” according to the game rules, “is that all dead and alive shine their flashlights in the air (this symbolizes the Holy Spirit descending on the Christians)” (baronsamedi212, 2000).

Other third-wave iterations of the game stress a devotional component and emphasize connections between the persecution of early Christians and the secular world’s challenges to contemporary faith. In one of these versions, on CreativeYouthIdeas.com, “youth learn what it means to stand up for one’s faith and to totally trust God even in situations where they may face incredible adversity.” This

version begins with a lengthier devotional intro, in which participants imagine themselves as part of the early Church:

Everybody close your eyes. You are no longer at camp. You have been transported to the first century A.D., where disciples of Christ are being persecuted. . . . Anyone who publicly acknowledges that they are a Christian is condemned to be thrown to the lions. . . . There is a secret gathering of Christians in a yet-to-be-disclosed location. Your goal is to find your way to the secret location and join your brothers and sisters in this secret “underground church” meeting. Along the way you may be approached by one of the guards, who will simply ask you, “Roman or Christian?” If you reply, “Roman,” you will not be held any longer and you will be sent on your way. If you reply, “Christian,” you will be taken to a holding cell to await your fate with the lions. Picture yourself in such a society. What will you do? (Creative Youth Ideas, n.d.)

This variation does not automatically let the Christians out of jail after two and a half minutes as in the example above. The Christians can either convince the guards to let them go (a certain number of the guards are already secretly Christian), or Angel characters can release them (There’s biblical rationale, here, for Angel jailbreak: in Acts 12:1–11, an Angel miraculously frees Peter from his imprisonment under Herod during the Festival of Unleavened Bread). Just as this game begins with a substantial framing introduction, the game debrief, according to the website, “is the most important part of the entire game, and it must be done in a very sensitive way” (Creative Youth Ideas). In the first of two debrief options, the leader asks the participants to recall when they may have denied their faith in order to escape a soldier or because winning was more of a priority than bearing witness to their faith, and this is an opportunity to “really reach the kids on what it means to stand up for one’s faith and to totally trust God even in situations where they may face incredible adversity.” In the second option, the leader makes connections to the youths’ contemporary lives, in which they may be faced with the choice of whether to make their faith known. “If you admit you are a Christian, friends might ridicule you, [y]ou might not get that job promotion,” for instance. “You might be deemed as old fashioned and out of touch with today’s reality. The threats are more subtle and the consequences may seem less severe” than it was for the early Church, “but there are still pressures. Are you bold enough to stand up for your faith regardless of the circumstances?” (Creative Youth Ideas). The game closes with more scriptural passages: “and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Mark 13:13); “Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:58); and “Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong” (1 Cor. 16:13).

The web resource Kids of Courage version of Romans and Christians opts for an “adult Christian with a flashlight decorated to look like a candle,” who then roams the field of play for the youth to find, as opposed to a gathering or worship place in a secret location. Roman soldiers armed with “pool noodles” for swords search for and capture the Christians. As with the Creative Youth Ideas version, Christians can get out of jail by “witness[ing] to the guards by quoting Scriptures and singing worship songs.” The goal of this game is for the Christians to “find the light,” and to convert the Romans when they can, and while the instructions do not explicitly link the activity to the campers’ own experience (the game is framed as a way “to illustrate persecution endured by the early church” [Kids of Courage 2015]) the game is in keeping with the Kids of Courage organization’s emphasis on evangelizing. The site heavily disseminates material in particular on

children living in non-Christian countries where persecution is a reality (hence the name Kids of Courage). Thus, the fact that winning the game depends strongly on evangelizing and witnessing to the guards is the “only” way to get out of jail makes this version seem very much like a training exercise for these “kids of courage” to go out and evangelize on their own.

In other third-wave instances, church leaders have found ways to emphasize the principles behind Romans and Christians, in particular the devotional connection with Christians facing persecution in the past and in the world today, through other immersive and non-immersive activities. We talked to Drew Flathman, who was also program director at Imago Dei Bible Camp in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Flathman is now pastor at Lake Nokomis Lutheran Church in Minnesota. Flathman remembers playing the game, but, like the other former Bible camp leaders with whom we spoke, he is glad the game is no longer practised. The historical content of the game was “pretty sketchy” he recalled. There was one element where a participant could draw a half circle in the sand in the baseball infield in front of another, and the other could complete the sign of a fish with another half circle, a coded sign to be shared among Christians to convey membership in the secret community. While there was some accuracy to this particular element, there weren’t more than a few minutes devoted to the historical perspective (Flathman 2016). For Flathman, if the goal is to bear witness to the experiences of Christians who do not have the same freedom to worship as do Christians in the US, a much more powerful and “intense” activity would skip the simulation altogether. “Today,” he says, “it might be as helpful to say [instead of] Romans and Christians, let’s [consider] Nigeria or Laos or Cambodia to think about some of our brothers and sisters in faith in those places.” In the US, we have the freedom to worship wherever we want to. It’s like a menu: “we’re in a bubble,” he says. “There are churches on every corner, every size, of every faith. An individual today in the US doesn’t think twice that that’s a gift. We don’t have to think, whether it’s to walk into a mosque, or a synagogue and worship the way we want to.” But Lake Nokomis Lutheran Church has a companion congregation in the northeast part of Nigeria, and Christians there are targeted by the Islamic extremist group Boko Haram, so much so that “they have family members that have risked their life to go to worship.” Flathman brought up the word “intense,” saying, “It’s a good descriptor, but you can do that because it’s dark and you’ve got adults being the bad buys while these junior high kids are trying to figure out what to do.” In some Nigerian congregations, “women sit in the interior of the church and men on the outside aisles because they are protecting them. Something is more likely to come through the windows, like a bomb.” So, he concludes, “I would do that differently. Rather than “Oh no it’s getting dark,” the real intensity and the real story is more powerful and more lasting (Flathman 2016).

In their summer 2009 camp, Good Shepherd Roman Catholic Church in Long Island kept the early Church historical context and created a simulated world of the first-century Roman Empire without the traumatizing hunter-prey tag-game format from kick-the-can and capture-the-flag models. For Good Shepherd’s Vacation Church Camp, the programmers created an immersive environment simulating first-century Rome, where camper participants, aged five to ten years old, could see chariot races at the Coliseum, visit a Roman market (and make their own abacuses and harps), and “buy delicacies of the day such as grapes, dates and olives, using replicas of Roman coins” at a food shop. The Church’s illegal status was part of the simulation as well, but it was handled much more quietly and less violently than in games like Romans and Christians. Part of the campers’ experience included, for instance, attending an underground church, where they would speak in whispers, and paying a daily visit to the home of Paul, dressed in a white robe (played by “John Newhall, sixty, a retired Wall Street stock broker and a deacon at the church), who told them what it was like to be a persecuted believer (Jones, 2009, n.p.).

Conclusion

For historians, the performative simulation game *Romans and Christians*, as practised in US summer Bible camp programming between the 1970s and the 1990s, left behind very few documents, curricula, or programming literature that mark official acts of introduction, dissemination, or discontinuation. Rather, our research shows that the game was adapted and then fell out of popular use through a kind of organic word-of-mouth sharing of experiences between camp leaders and counsellors aligned through a community of practice. At its core, its origins share roots with nineteenth-century rituals of indoctrination and social reform, and with even earlier ancient and classical notions that learning works better if trauma and discomfort are involved. Many groups still practising *Romans and Christians* in non-camp settings have adopted the scenario without the intentional fear and hazing of an initiation game. For these practitioners, any version of the game ought to have clearly established goals, a full debriefing component that guides participants toward making connections vis-à-vis those goals, and competent, trained staff who can be mindful of risk and who can take steps to avoid putting campers in physical or psychological peril.

It is possible to suggest, then, that the versions of *Romans and Christians* played at Bible camps in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, are an artifact of pre-9/11 evangelical practice, both in terms of the culturally-specific pedagogical strategies for teaching faith, devotion, history, and spirituality, but also the worldview the game assumed about children—a worldview in which fear, humiliation, surprise, and confusion are the path to resilience, grit, and a stronger empathetic bond with members of the community who do not have it so lucky. Eliciting a kind of kinesthetic empathy with Christians in peril, then giving them a dose of that fear in a controlled virtual environment seemed to camp leaders and staff to be an effective way to achieve empathy. But these same leaders and staff found that empathy was difficult to achieve or maintain if the participants were too scared or too deep in play, that is, invested in the rules of the hunt, to make the connection to the Christians for whom they surrogated. Because of its emphasis on creating emotional crisis as a mode of affective and emotional religious experience, and less so on teaching the history of the Church in the first two or three centuries AD, the game's scenario lacked the kind of specificity or accuracy of detail that might have allowed it to continue as a historical educational simulation exercise. Further, as a teaching tool for how to be better Christians in the present-day secular world, Roman soldiers or communist raiders may have ultimately been poor analogies for evangelizing and bearing witness in the twenty-first century. If the goal was to build community through ritualized play, the obstacles to success ranged from degradation of established trust in adult leaders to the post-9/11 demands for safe spaces that disallowed what amounted to licensed terrorizing and bullying. Therefore, as historians looking to *Romans and Christians* as a case study for the ways in which the performative strategies of simulation and play have been adopted for youth programming in religious education and identity formation, we can conclude the following. Communities of evangelical practice associated with Bible camps found that dramaturgical practices emphasizing emotional conflict and steep dramatic arcs were effective means for achieving psychological and affective heights in experience. These same dramaturgical strategies, however, stood in the way of achieving pedagogical success in teaching religious history and disseminating community identity and values.

Notes

1. As the child of a Lutheran pastor, Scott spent many weeks of his summers as a youth at Bible camps in the Midwestern United States and served two summers as a Bible camp counsellor himself in college. Ariaga grew up in the Roman Catholic Church and never experienced *Romans and Christians* in her youth church. For

Scott, though, *Romans and Christians* occupies his earliest camp memories: he remembers as a child pulling his sleeping bag up over his head to muffle the terrifying blood-curdling shrieks in the darkness outside his family's cabin as the counsellors and confirmation-aged (sixth- and seventh-grade) campers enacted the narrative in the surrounding campgrounds.

2. For more on camp planning and philosophy, see, for instance, Badke 1998 and 2013; Bogardus 1955; Burrow 1987; Spath 1966.

3. We use “evangelical” as a mode of Christian religious practice centred in preaching and bearing witness to the events of the Gospels, namely the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the salvation of believers by God's grace through faith, as opposed to “Evangelical” as the churches associated with the recent conservative Evangelical movements and preachers linked to the Great Awakening tradition (e.g., Billy Graham, Robert H. Schuler, and so forth).

4. In a version of the game called “Underground Church,” submitted by “Joshua” to jubed.com, the participants play Christians in a town where it is illegal to openly admit being a follower of Christ, and they must avoid jailing by police (Joshua, n.d.). An activity on the Australian site youthgroupgames.com.au called “Bible Smugglers” is set in a communist country in which the participants must make it across the field of play, with a piece of wool tied around their wrist representing a Bible. Communists hidden throughout try to capture the Bible smugglers and take the wool from their wrists. “This game must be played at night!” the site insists, “Heaps of fun!” (“Bible Smugglers” n.d.). Not all readers find this one intelligible: “This is the weirdest game I've ever heard of,” writes “Bek” in the comments. “Agreed, what an outdated premise—christians vs communists? I mean really.” Others come to the game's defence, citing the persecution of Christians in China and Korea. Then more critics weigh in on the offensive vilification of non-Christians and the us-vs-them mentality the game seems to promote, to which “Clint” replies “Call it *Romans and Christians* if you're afraid of offending someone” (“Bible Smugglers” n.d.).

5. Luther Park and Imago Dei ministries are now part of the Evangelical Church in America (ELCA), which in 1988 merged the American Lutheran Church (ALC), the Lutheran Church in America (LCA), and the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) to become the largest US Lutheran denomination. The ELCA is typically more socially and theologically progressive than some of the other Lutheran denominations in the US, such as the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (LCMS) and Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS).

6. “Works-righteousness” is Martin Luther's term for the doctrine of works that says that salvation not only comes through divine grace but must also be justified through faith and works. Luther attributes this doctrine to the New Testament book of James: “So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (James 2:17). Luther's critique of works-righteousness was that it was impossible to achieve righteousness in the eyes of God through human merit. Interestingly for us, *Romans and Christians* hews much more closely to the doctrine of salvation maintained by the Roman Catholic Church, for instance in its emphasis on righteousness and charity, bearing witness to one's faith, and the regular practising of sacraments as the channels instituted by Jesus Christ for the grace of God and necessary for salvation. One might assume, then, that *Romans and Christians* would be a natural devotional and educational activity for Roman Catholic youth camps and retreats. But when Ariaga inquired whether there was a history of the game in the Roman Catholic Church, she got a surprised response. Hochstein, the Newman Center campus pastor, was horrified with the idea of trying to do such an activity at an outdoor camp, but not for the reasons we expected. For her, the game was a nightmare for maintaining protocol. With all the work the Church has been doing with policies and procedures to put limitations on individual adult-child contact in the wake of sexual misconduct proceedings, a game in a camp setting where chaos reigns and it is impossible to track the location of every individual participant at any point in time would set things back terribly. (Protocols for best practices and risk management in ministries and activities involving youth in the Roman Catholic Church are managed by VIRTUS, a branch of the National Catholic Risk Retention Group. See “Virtus Online: About Us,” https://www.virtusonline.org/virtus/virtus_description.cfm).

7. *Romans* 12-19-21, New Revised Standard Version.

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