

The Jesus Fund

A play by
Terry Milner

Burning Coal Premiere
FINAL REVISION

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CHARACTERS

DR. MICHAEL BRAND, mid-40's, progressive theologian and professor at New Theological Seminary in New York City.

DR. AUBREY LOTHROP, late 70's, the retiring dean of the seminary.

JONATHAN LEWIS, mid-late 20's, Jewish post-graduate fellow at the seminary.

JAMIL RANA, late 20's, Pakistani-American, unorthodox Sufi Muslim and post-graduate fellow at the seminary.

ILANA SHELBY, mid-30's, a very recent seminary graduate and now a post-graduate fellow and candidate for the Episcopal priesthood.

DR. DAVID PADGET, mid-40's, an NTS alumnus and son of the most famous televangelist in America. Handsome, very charismatic.

The first act and most of the second take place over the course of two days in springtime, on the campus of New Theological Seminary on the Upper West Side of New York City. The final scene takes place three months later. The playing area is divided into three sections: the outdoor quad of the seminary, the Faculty Common Room, and a dorm room.

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ACT ONE

SCENE 1

DR. MICHAEL BRAND addresses the audience as if lecturing to his class. He is reading from his latest book.

MICHAEL

"Some of you may not believe this, but it's true. One winter night in 1804, while he was still President of the United States, Thomas Jefferson sat down in his study, opened his Bible, took out a pair of scissors and literally cut all the stuff he didn't like out of the four Gospels. All the healing miracles, virgin births, resurrections and water-walking attributed to Jesus Christ went into the fireplace because, Jefferson would later confide to friends, he found them 'utterly unnecessary to his life as a Christian.'"

In the Faculty Common Room, AUBREY LOTHROP sits reading along in the same book Michael reads from above.

AUBREY

(to himself)

I think most people know about this, Michael.

On the Seminary Quad, JAMIL RANA, dressed in t-shirt and jeans, pierced in a few places, touches his forehead to the ground as we hear, faint and tinny through his headphones, the Kominas' "Muslim Call to Prayer."

MICHAEL

"He did this alone, at night and in absolute secret, fearful of the public hysteria he was certain would be whipped up by a religious Right that already regarded him as a heretic. A hundred and forty years after Thomas Jefferson, an Egyptian farmer dug up thirteen ancient manuscripts, as ancient as the Four Gospels, which also omitted the miracles, the resurrection, and references to Jesus being the Son of God.

The most famous of which was titled: 'The Gospel According to Thomas.'"

JONATHAN LEWIS enters the Quad, sees Jamil and sits near him. JAMIL opens his eyes, smiles, but does not interrupt his ritual. JONATHAN pulls out his own copy of Michael's book and begins reading it to himself. DAVID PADGET appears simultaneously. He is on television, and picks up reading from Michael's book where Michael left off.

DAVID

(reading)

"But to this day even some of the most progressive Christian denominations still give lip service to the idea that Jesus was uniquely divine, that he was born of a virgin, performed miracles, died for their sins and rose from the dead, and that anyone who doesn't accept all this is damned to hell."

(Looking directly into an unseen camera lens.)

Well, yeah! Don't act so surprised, Dr. Brand, that's what true Christians have always believed. Folks, let me say this about Michael Brand, the author of this - book. Mike Brand was a good man when I knew him, and a good friend. So if I could just ask you all at home and those here with us in the studio in Topeka, too, I'd ask for you all to just join me in prayer for my old friend who's so lost his way, and pray too, friends, for those who read this book and who may be led astray by it, that they just come and hear the true word preached...

(He puts down Michael's book and picks up a Bible)

...and read the only book that really tells it like it is, and that's this one I'm holding in my hands. Will you pray with me?

Lights fade on David. MICHAEL enters the Common Room where Aubrey sits, picks up a large framed document and climbs up on a chair to hang it on the wall.

MICHAEL

More?

AUBREY

Just a little. Damn, I can't see with these things anymore.

JAMIL concludes his prayer, takes his headphones off.

JONATHAN

(reading from Michael's book)

Listen to this part. "This teaching perpetuates intolerance of other faiths, and fosters a kind of spiritual schizophrenia in their clergy, by asking successive generations of seminarians schooled in science and reason to preach doctrines in which they themselves do not believe."

MICHAEL

(to Aubrey)

So? What do you think?

JAMIL

(to Jonathan)

I like it.

AUBREY

Hmm? Oh. That's good. That looks pretty good.

MICHAEL climbs down from the chair.

MICHAEL

I meant the book.

AUBREY

Oh. Well, sounds like you've decided it's a pretty hopeless case.

MICHAEL

Hopeless? I don't know. Depends on what case you're trying to make.

AUBREY

I'll take it home with me tonight.

MICHAEL

That's it?

AUBREY

Sorry?

MICHAEL

That's all you have to say about it?

AUBREY

I'm sorry, Michael. I have a few other things on my mind right now.

DAVID PADGET, now in New York, reappears and enters the Quad, looking a bit lost. He notices Jamil and Jonathan and, after waving off an unseen bodyguard, stands and watches from a distance.

MICHAEL

So, he's really here.

AUBREY

Got here yesterday.

MICHAEL

I still can't believe it.

AUBREY

Well, believe it. He accepted my invitation. Would you mind making tea?

MICHAEL

Sure.

AUBREY

Earl Grey, if there is any. He was the best and brightest student I ever taught. Terrible singing voice.

MICHAEL

Never stops him though.

AUBREY

He's the only pupil I ever lost to the Dark Side. The yellow ones, they're in the box there.

DAVID crosses toward Jamil and Jonathan.

DAVID

Excuse me, guys. I'm sorry to...Hello? Sorry...sorry to interrupt. I was looking for Dean Lothrop's office. I went to the building it used to be in, but apparently it's gone condo.

JAMIL removes his headphones.

JONATHAN

Yeah. He's on the other end of the quad now. See that grey stone building over on the right?

DAVID

You mean Bankston?

JONATHAN

Second floor.

DAVID

Thank you. I'm a few minutes early, actually..

But Jamil has put his earphones on, and Jonathan is trying to read. DAVID goes to leave, then turns around and walks back to them.

DAVID

Fellas, my name's David Padget. Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior?

The music suddenly changes from the plaintive "Call to Prayer," to one of the Kominas' louder, more raucous tunes, "Rumi was a Homo."

JONATHAN and JAMIL exit together, looking over their shoulders at PADGET as they do so. PADGET watches them, then exits opposite.

MICHAEL

God, this is going to be weird.

AUBREY

Is there milk?

MICHAEL

When are we meeting?

AUBREY

I take more milk than I used to.

MICHAEL

Aubrey?

AUBREY

Hmm?

MICHAEL

When is he coming?

AUBREY

Oh. He should be here any minute.

MICHAEL

And you actually think he'll help us?

AUBREY

If I didn't think there was a chance, I wouldn't have asked him.

MICHAEL

If he starts writing checks, it's only a matter of time before he starts writing the curriculum.

AUBREY

Having a fundamentalist scholar around will be good for us. Keep us squishy liberals on our toes.

MICHAEL

"Fundamentalist scholar" is an oxymoron. "God said it, I believe it, that settles it?" That going to be the new academic standard around here?

AUBREY

We can't afford academic standards right now. We've become far too insular, too isolated. Tell me something, Michael. When was the last time you actually engaged in a theological discussion, or any conversation at all, with a person you fundamentally disagree with?

MICHAEL

I talk back to the television a lot.

AUBREY

You just spent two years writing a book about religion, and you never once spoke to anyone with a different viewpoint? I think we need him here. We've gotten so damn sterile. No contamination! No dissent.

MICHAEL

We are the dissenters. They're the ones who purge their seminaries.

AUBREY

And we don't? David would have a pretty compelling counter-argument. You haven't exactly been the voice of respectful disagreement over the years.

MICHAEL

I don't know what you mean.

AUBREY

(picking up a newspaper)

"Scholars call Bible a Fairy Tale." "Jesus Rotted Away in His Grave," says Seminary Professor.

MICHAEL

Well, at least you read the reviews.

AUBREY

You've stooped to his level if you ask me. Look at this book jacket. It looks like the front page of the National Enquirer. This was that idiot publicist's idea, wasn't it?

MICHAEL

It's what you do, Aubrey. To sell books. And Patrick's not so bad. He's getting the message out.

AUBREY

Whose message?

MICHAEL

I was only speaking for myself.

AUBREY

That's not possible anymore. You know that. You dedicated it to me, Michael. Me and Ilana!

MICHAEL

You want me to take back the dedication?

AUBREY

You quote me, what, five times in the first chapter? When you say things like this in public, we're all guilty by association.

MICHAEL

Guilty?

AUBREY

Things are very precarious here, Michael.

MICHAEL

What are we guilty of? These are your ideas as well as mine. What have we got to feel guilty about?

AUBREY

"Secular Christianity" was not the title we talked about. You've taken it too far. This seminary has the smallest enrollment in our history. We've lost two faculty members while you were away. Dan Tessier was ordered by his church to stop teaching here, even as an adjunct.

MICHAEL

Dan Tessier is a Southern Baptist.

AUBREY

Who lost his job because of you.

MICHAEL

I saw you debate Pat Robertson at Bob Jones. You mopped the floor with him! And Falwell on Sixty Minutes.

You were like...God, Aubrey, you were like Emma Goldman standing on a soapbox pleading for the Christians of the world to unite and throw off their fundamentalist chains. What happened to you?

AUBREY

We're fighting for our lives here, Mike. Don't you understand that? We're broke.

MICHAEL

And letting David Padget come here to spout his right-wing evangelical bullshit theology is going to save us?

AUBREY

It isn't his ideas I'm after.

MICHAEL

You made him the first guest speaker in the new lecture series. The series I created, that I raised the money for.

AUBREY

Sure did. "The Red Church-Blue Church Colloquium." I do love that title.

MICHAEL

He'll change this place forever.

AUBREY

In three days? Now who's frightened?

DAVID appears, unobserved, in the upstage doorway.

MICHAEL

Not me. If David wants to come here and mix it up, I am ready.

DAVID

Excellent! Me too. Hello, Mike! Aubrey. Lord, it's good to see you both.

PADGET walks on in, shakes their hands.

AUBREY

David. Welcome back, son. It's been too long.

DAVID

You're looking well. What's this I hear about you retiring? I can't imagine. Wow! This place hasn't changed a brick in 20 years. Less crowded, though, right? Not as many students now as when we were here. Funny, we still call it the "New Theological Seminary." Must be close to 200 years old. So! What's the latest? A lot of buzz about the new book, Mike! You must be a pig in poop right now. Good for you.

AUBREY

David, would you like some tea?

DAVID

No, but I'll take a Diet Coke if you got one.

AUBREY gives MICHAEL a look,
prompting him to go look for a Diet
Coke in the refrigerator.

AUBREY

You're comfortable in the guest apartment?

DAVID

Oh sure. It's very nice.

AUBREY

We just renovated. Used to be faculty housing, when we had more faculty. We're renting them out to civilians these days, a little extra income for us.

DAVID

Good idea, but from what I hear, it sounds like you need to do more than rent out rooms.

MICHAEL

We're doing okay.

DAVID

(notices the framed document
on the wall)

Huh. I don't remember this being here.

AUBREY

It's the original deed to the seminary property. See what it says here...this was a cow pasture...hard to believe. We found it in a closet downstairs and had it restored.

DAVID

Right. Have you read it all?

(MICHAEL hands him the soda)

Oh, thanks.

AUBREY

No, most of it's still pretty illegible. Let's sit, shall we?
How are your parents, David?

DAVID

Mama's good. Dad's supposed to be retired you know, more or less. They said he'd never stop preaching, but he's 83 now. He still gets out there some, but I'm doing most of the day-to-day.

AUBREY

Yes, we heard. Congratulations.

Another long pause. AUBREY starts to fidget.

DAVID

I'm more of a businessman than a preacher, of course, but they-

MICHAEL

Christian hedge funds, isn't it?

DAVID

Investment bank. We call it "The Jesus Fund." We invest in companies that sign off on a list of Christian business ethics.

AUBREY

The Corporate Raider for Christ! That was a great headline. The Times, wasn't it?

DAVID

I believe that one was the Wall Street Journal.

MICHAEL

The Anglican Antichrist. That's what you called Aubrey once.

AUBREY

Michael...

DAVID

That was years ago.

AUBREY

I thought it was a pretty good line.

MICHAEL

Hateful and defamatory, but catchy.

DAVID

I didn't write it.

MICHAEL

You said it. That, and a lot of other things.

DAVID

Are you angry with me?

MICHAEL

No. I just thought we all might better have a little truth along with our reconciliation.

DAVID

You did say you wanted to "mix it up." I didn't think you meant right now.

MICHAEL

Well, I guess I could sit here and kiss your ass like Aubrey for the next half hour, but I just don't think I can stand it any more.

AUBREY

Michael!

DAVID

It's okay. Aubrey, before God, and with Mike as my witness, I want to sincerely apologize for calling you the Anglican Antichrist. It was over the top.

AUBREY

I accept your apology. There, Michael, you can stop defending my honor now.

DAVID

(picking up Michael's book)

Your latest.

MICHAEL

Yeah. If you'd like to read it...

DAVID

Oh, I've read it.

MICHAEL

It's only been out a couple of days.

DAVID

Your publicist sent me the galleys six weeks ago. Asked if I'd write a blurb for the dust jacket.

MICHAEL

God, he is an idiot.

DAVID

Don't blame him. I sell a lot more books than you do. Anyway, I guess he didn't use what I sent him.

MICHAEL

I guess not. What did you say?

DAVID

I met some students out in the quad. They seemed-

MICHAEL

Come on, Dave, what did you say?

DAVID

I said you were a biblical scholar of the first order.

AUBREY

And so he is. Now-

MICHAEL

Funny they didn't use the quote.

DAVID

I also said that if Michael Brand gets his way, Christianity would become not so much a religion as an ethnicity, in much the way secular Judaism has reduced millennia of sacred dialogue with the divine to a sort of historic preservation society for Klezmer music and matzo ball soup.

MICHAEL

And you've turned Christianity into an Amway convention.

AUBREY

Should we talk about your lecture?

DAVID

"The Red Church-Blue Church Colloquium." Awesome title, by the way.

AUBREY

It was Michael's idea, actually.

DAVID

Nice. And inviting me here was a smart move, too.

MICHAEL

That wasn't my idea.

DAVID

Funny thing, though, I haven't seen much about it in the press.

AUBREY

Well, we can't really afford a PR department you know.

MICHAEL

Guess we didn't think it was all that newsworthy.

DAVID

Maybe you didn't. Aubrey knew what he was doing. Look, fellas, my being here is a big deal. You've made some big mistakes lately, but having me here could really help you out.

MICHAEL

/Mistakes?

AUBREY

/Help us out?

DAVID

If there's one thing an evangelical preacher with a cable network, a university and no telling how many web sites ought to know how to do, it's help you with the media.

AUBREY

But you're only here a few days, David. There's not time.

DAVID

I may be a redneck preacher from Kansas, Aubrey, but I'm a famous redneck preacher with an even famouser daddy. I can get us into every major English-speaking news outlet on the planet by tomorrow night.

MICHAEL

What mistakes?

DAVID

Plus, with your money crisis you could use the exposure.

MICHAEL

What mistakes have we made? You have some examples?

DAVID

Actually, you've done some things pretty well. For one thing, this book jacket is a real eye-catcher.

AUBREY

(under his breath)

Oh, Good God.

DAVID

But you gotta get out there more. You can't just hide up in here and expect the thing to sell itself.

AUBREY

Are we talking about his book or this seminary?

MICHAEL

Every time I open my mouth I get beaten up.

DAVID

You mean the bit about Jesus rotting away in his grave?

MICHAEL

I was misquoted.

DAVID

Usually people get misquoted because they're too boring to quote accurately.

AUBREY

But David, surely bad publicity is -

DAVID

There's no such thing.

MICHAEL

How did I know you were going to say that.

AUBREY

You know, we're in pretty terrible financial shape.

DAVID

Yeah, I know. It's not all your fault. The liberal church is shrinking so fast, students and money must be hard to come by. How bad is it?

AUBREY

We have about three month's operating funds in the bank. We've already sold the west end of the quad to developers, but even with that we're still thirty million dollars in debt.

MICHAEL

Jesus Christ. How could this happen?

DAVID

You should be asking "how could this happen without me knowing about it."

MICHAEL

I knew we were in trouble, but -

DAVID

Trouble? Can you not read a simple financial statement?

AUBREY

The Board hasn't made this public yet. David, I don't know quite how to ask this, but you are an alumnus. I don't know if you...well...

DAVID

It's okay. I figured you had more than one reason for inviting me here. How can I help?

AUBREY

Well, your company, your investment bank.

DAVID

The Jesus Fund?

AUBREY

You invest in Christian organizations, don't you?

DAVID

Well, sort of. But we do it for profit. This is not a for-profit organization.

MICHAEL

I read you bought a pornography distributor.

DAVID

Yeah. They're shipping our line of inspirational DVD's now. See, we don't just invest in Christian companies. Sometimes we buy the other kind too, then we re-purpose them in line with our investment guidelines.

MICHAEL

Why didn't I think of this? It makes perfect sense. Just sell the place to Dave, let him turn it into Bubba's Bible College! Pay off the creditors, fund our pensions, shut the doors and to hell with our mission, our history and our students. What an idea.

AUBREY

Michael.

DAVID

I haven't offered anything. I was asked here. I'm just explaining what we do, Mike.

MICHAEL

Well, I think what you do sucks.

DAVID

You need to erase the debt entirely, get the seminary solvent again, and keep it functioning. I think I know how we might do it.

AUBREY

How?

DAVID

We - that is, the Jesus Fund - could be in a position to buy the assets of the seminary and pay off the debt. You'd have to relocate, I guess, but you'd keep the name, the brand.

MICHAEL

Relocate where?

DAVID

Well, you sure can't afford to stay in Manhattan. Listen, do you have a plan? Because if so, you just speak on up.

MICHAEL

I do have a plan, and it doesn't include turning this seminary over to a bunch of anti-intellectual, right-wing nut jobs out to make a buck and call it evangelism. This place has always led the way, forged new ground. The reason we're failing is because we've lost our nerve. We have to say in public, out loud, what we don't dare admit outside this room: that belief in a personal god is a delusion, a destructive pathology that as enlightened beings we can no longer defend.

DAVID

So what would be left for you to teach then, Mike?

MICHAEL

We teach new generations of priests and pastors to go out and undo the millennia of damage we've done to humanity in the name of God. To value the good the church has done as well, and realize it hasn't come from adherence to doctrines or purity codes, but to Christ's ethics of forgiveness, his view of institutional religion as corrupting, his belief in the equal dignity of all humanity. If we believe what we say, we should fight for it, teach it, and not apologize for it.

DAVID

So your plan is to put yourselves out of business. I don't think we'd be interested in that case.

AUBREY

David, wait. We'll give it some serious thought.

DAVID takes an envelope out of his jacket pocket and places it on the table in front of Aubrey.

DAVID

It's a straight up donation, no strings attached. Well, it has been great getting reacquainted.

AUBREY

Yes, thank you, David. Mike, I thought we'd introduce David to the Abraham Scholars this afternoon. David, you'll come?

DAVID

Of course. Well, thanks for the Coke, and the hospitality.

DAVID leaves.

AUBREY

You have to give me a chance to make something happen here, Michael. If you can't behave yourself then you need to be somewhere else until he leaves.

(AUBREY opens the envelope, takes out a check.)

It's a million dollars.

MICHAEL

Oh, God.

AUBREY exits, leaving MICHAEL alone in the Common Room as the focus shifts to the dorm room.

SCENE 2

JAMIL and JONATHAN's dorm room.
JAMIL, JONATHAN and ILANA SHELBY
enter talking. Jonathan carries a
to-go tray of coffees.

ILANA

So there was this huge, swirly, black and white mural painted
on the side of the building across the street. Gorgeous
piece.

JAMIL

Where was this?

ILANA

In Soho someplace. Anyway, there's this guy taking pictures
of it. Not a tourist, but a professional, obviously from
here.

JONATHAN

You were supposed to be back yesterday.

ILANA

Yeah, well, things back home took longer than expected.

JONATHAN

Here's your coffee.

ILANA

So anyway I cross the street to get a better look, and all
the sudden I realize, the guy is taking a picture of me.

JONATHAN

You take it black right?

ILANA

If it's good.

JONATHAN

You're the expert.

ILANA

People from Seattle lost the right to pontificate about
coffee sometime in 1999.

JAMIL

So what happened?

ILANA

Turns out he's the guy who painted the mural, apparently pretty famous. Anyway, he's having a show tonight downtown and guess who he invited?

JONATHAN

Awesome. Is he hot?

ILANA

Yeah. And he's the real deal. Business card, web site, he may even be heterosexual. Anyway, he said I could bring friends, so you guys should come too.

JAMIL

Cool.

JONATHAN

We have to present our paper on Thursday.

ILANA

Just come for a little while. Please?

JONATHAN

Why? You nervous?

ILANA

Yes.

JAMIL

Why are you nervous?

ILANA

Same old story.

JONATHAN

How many times have I told you? Don't tell them you're in seminary until after you've had sex.

ILANA

I know, I know. Somehow it always comes out in the first five minutes.

JONATHAN

You've got a few months before you start wearing the collar. There's still time for you to trick some unsuspecting urban agnostic into falling in love with you before he finds out you're a Jesus freak.

ILANA

That's where you guys come in. See, if he sees me hanging out with a Muslim and a Jew, he'll know I'm not one of those Christians.

JONATHAN

You're using us as your coolness cover to convince a hipster hottie to go out with you? That is so fucked up. What time is the show?

ILANA

I love you. Jamil, will you join our unholy trinity on a trip down to Chelsea tonight?

JONATHAN

Don't make Trinity jokes with a Muslim in the room. Christians think they're monotheists, Jamil. We humor them.

JAMIL

Okay. We shall go with you to the decadent art showing. But take care, infidel.

ILANA

I like you.

JAMIL

What were you doing in Seattle?

ILANA

It's home. I have to go back for Ordination Interrogations every few months. Pisses me off. Every time I go in front of that stupid committee they ask if I'm sleeping around. They never ask the boys that question.

JONATHAN

Maybe not the straight boys.

ILANA

Oh, and this time, they also asked me what I'm doing studying theology with an atheist!

JONATHAN

An atheist?

ILANA

Apparently some of them had seen Dr. Brand's book. I didn't even know it was out yet.

JONATHAN

(handing her the book)

Here.

ILANA

"Secular Christianity." He changed the title, you know? God, no wonder they're pissed. I hate the cover. Yep, there I am, top of the acknowledgements. Thank God my bishop is not completely insane, but that ordination committee...

JONATHAN

It's all good though, right? I mean, they are going to ordain you?

ILANA

I hope so. I haven't heard yet.

JONATHAN

Your family excited?

ILANA

My grandmother's not really sure what an Episcopalian is. She still thinks I'm a Baptist.

JONATHAN

Speaking of...have you met our distinguished guest?

ILANA

Oh My God, I heard! What the *(she mouths the word "fuck")*?

JONATHAN

Yeah, that was pretty much my reaction too.

ILANA

Jonathan, why?

JONATHAN

The Red Church/Blue Church thing. They needed a conservative.

ILANA

We've got some conservatives!

JONATHAN

I don't think they count Presbyterians.

ILANA

Whatever. It still freaks me out.

JAMIL

Yeah. He has bodyguards on the quad.

ILANA

You think he's armed? Maybe it's like one of those apocalyptic computer games. What is it called, RaptureWorld or some shit like that? He's here to blow us all away and save Christianity from the liberal hordes.

JONATHAN

As far as I know he's just here for the colloquium.

ILANA

They just love catchy little titles around here. Everything's an "Institute" or a "Colloquium.."

JONATHAN

Have you started writing?

ILANA

Writing what?

JONATHAN

Your section of our paper. We're supposed to deliver it on Thursday. You haven't even started, have you?

ILANA

Hey, I've had a lot going on. I got a couple pages done on the plane. What about yours?

JONATHAN

Jesus, Ilana, I e-mailed it to you a week ago.

ILANA

You know I don't read attachments.

JONATHAN

We're meeting with Dr. Brand this afternoon.

ILANA

Jamil, you haven't written your...?

(JAMIL hands her some pages)

"A Jihad of Love: Reforming Islam in the Image of Allah."
Shit, this is like fifty pages long!

JAMIL

It's just a rough draft.

ILANA

Okay, I guess I know what I'll be doing for the next two hours.

JONATHAN

Welcome back.

She pecks JONATHAN on the cheek,
then goes to do the same to JAMIL.

Um, Jamil, what's the rule here again?

JAMIL

Kiss the Muslim.

ILANA gives him a kiss on the cheek
and exits. JAMIL opens up a laptop,
takes a book down from the shelf,
lays it open and starts working.
JONATHAN looks over his shoulder.

JONATHAN

Where'd you get that?

JAMIL

The Rumi? It was a gift.

JONATHAN

It's in what, Persian?

JAMIL

Classical Persian.

JONATHAN

You read Rumi in Classical Persian?

JAMIL

Mm hmm ("yes").

JONATHAN

Ilana's really very brilliant. She just isn't what you call a planner.

JAMIL

Jonathan.

JONATHAN

Sorry.

He stops looking over Jamil's shoulder.

JAMIL

Do I make you uncomfortable?

JONATHAN

No! Why?

JAMIL

You seem restless.

JONATHAN

Yeah, well...

JAMIL

Hey, we've roomed together for almost two months. Relax, okay?

JONATHAN

Do you trust me?

JAMIL

Trust you with what?

JONATHAN

Trust me not to be freaked out about our differences.

JAMIL

We're not that different.

JONATHAN

Trust me enough to tell me things. I don't know. I don't know what I meant. I mean, yeah, it's been like two months and I still feel like there's a lot I don't know about you.

JAMIL

I don't talk as much as you do.

JONATHAN

You're always here, too. It's like you never leave the quad. Do you ever leave the quad?

(No response.)

Are you afraid of something?

(JAMIL opens his computer and starts typing.)

Sorry. You're right. I do talk a lot. But you don't talk at all.

JAMIL

Jonathan...

JONATHAN

Tell me about your family.

JAMIL

My mom's a professor at Northwestern, my sister's still in high school.

JONATHAN

And your dad and Dr. Lothrop went to college together, right?

JAMIL

Yeah, at Yale. My dad was here on a Fulbright.

JONATHAN

From Pakistan, right?
So what's he doing now?

JAMIL

Jonathan. I need to finish this.

JONATHAN

Sorry. Thanks, though. That was more than I've gotten out of you in months.

(Jamil types a few words.)

JONATHAN

So, Rumi, huh? You have a favorite?

JAMIL

Yes. I do.

JAMIL puts his earphones in and continues to work; JONATHAN lies down on his bed and reads.

SCENE 3

That afternoon. Focus shifts back to the Common Room. MICHAEL is still seated at the table. ILANA enters.

MICHAEL

Hi there, stranger. You're a little early.

ILANA

Sorry, I didn't know anyone was in here. I'll go to the library.

MICHAEL

No, no. Stay. When did you get back?

ILANA

About five hours ago. You?

MICHAEL

Yesterday. Seen Dr. Lothrop?

ILANA

I went by his office, he wasn't in.

MICHAEL

How was your trip? How was Seattle?

ILANA

Fine. Well, it would've been fine. I guess it was fine. Actually it was shitty.

MICHAEL

Why? What happened?

ILANA

What happened? You published a book called *Secular Christianity*, that's what happened. Have you lost your mind?

MICHAEL

Good to see you, too.

ILANA

Seriously, Michael, what the hell?

MICHAEL

Have you read it?

ILANA

I didn't even know it was out yet, but several members of my Commission on Ministry apparently did. Shit, Michael, they almost told me to cash in my plane ticket and drop out of this place. What were you thinking?

MICHAEL

I would appreciate it, Dr. Shelby, if you would do your professor the courtesy of reading his book before you cuss him out in the faculty lounge.

ILANA

Sorry. I just... Secular Christianity? When did this happen? This isn't what we worked on.

MICHAEL

Sure it is. I just took out a few qualifiers. Anyway I wasn't under the impression my research assistant had final editorial approval.

ILANA

My name is all over this! "Spiritual schizophrenia?" That wasn't in the original. Did you stop to think-?

MICHAEL

No, I guess I didn't. I just couldn't do it. I couldn't write another book that talked around the big questions. We don't believe that stuff anymore, why do we have to keep saying we do?

ILANA

You speak for yourself, Dr. Brand. You've got tenure here, and the cheap apartment in Manhattan that goes with it. I have a career to think about! My church is pretty liberal, Michael, but they aren't in the habit of ordaining priests who don't believe in God.

MICHAEL

You didn't write this! And since when did you start saying things like "believe in God" again? It's a useless, meaningless phrase.

ILANA

You know what I mean, Michael. They don't ordain atheists, or people who study theology with atheists.

MICHAEL

I'm not an atheist. I just think the church got Christ all wrong, and I want us to do something about it.

ILANA

So your answer is to destroy Christianity -

MICHAEL

I'm not trying to destroy it, I'm trying to save it. It's time Christianity matured into a belief system that no longer relies on superstition, Ilana. It's values should be enough, and they are profound: justice, mercy, radical forgiveness, radical acceptance of the other. Why do people find that so threatening?

ILANA

Maybe its because you write off everyone who believes in God as "superstitious."

MICHAEL

I had to start telling the truth. I'm sorry if it hurt you.

ILANA

I just wish you'd told me. The timing was awful.

MICHAEL

I'm sorry.

ILANA

Michael, I am genuinely scared.

MICHAEL

I never wanted to hurt you. But this is the truth as I see it.

ILANA

I know we're a little disingenuous. But Episcopalians are not fundamentalists, you know. We believe in evolution and dinosaurs and black holes and all the rest of it.

But if you're going to have a religion then there have to be some articles of faith, and some of those articles may ask people to suspend their disbelief in the service of a higher purpose.

DAVID enters.

DAVID

Hey Mike, sorry, I left my copy of your...hello.

ILANA

Hi.

MICHAEL

David, this is Ilana Shelby. Soon to be Reverend Ilana Shelby.

DAVID

No kidding? Reverend?

ILANA

In a few months, if all goes well.

DAVID

Well, congratulations, Miss Shelby.

MICHAEL

Doctor Shelby.

ILANA

Ilana.

DAVID

Good to meet you, Ilana. You teach here?

ILANA

Post-doc. I'm doing some work with the Abraham Institute.

MICHAEL

The new interfaith studies program.

DAVID

Interfaith studies, well, good for you. It's important work. Our ministry helped a thousand Jewish families resettle in Israel last year alone.

ILANA

A thousand. Wow.

JAMIL and JONATHAN enter the Common Room.

MICHAEL

Hey guys, this is David Padget.

DAVID

Hello again. We didn't really meet properly this morning.

JONATHAN

No. I'm Jonathan Lewis. This is Jamil Rana. You didn't meet him properly either.

JAMIL

Hello.

DAVID

Jamil, it's a pleasure.

MICHAEL

And you've met Ilana.

DAVID

Soon-to-be-Reverend Ilana.

ILANA

Please, don't jinx me, David. I'm teetering on the brink of disaster.

JONATHAN

(under his breath)

David?

ILANA

And really behind in my work. Sorry. I'm not very prepared for this meeting. I took the red eye from Seattle last night.

MICHAEL

Dr. Padget's the keynote speaker at the Colloquium on Thursday, as you all know. I thought we all might share a little of what we're going to talk about.

JAMIL

Isn't the dean coming?

MICHAEL

He wasn't feeling well.

DAVID

Should we start with a word of prayer?

ILANA

Actually, we don't really do that. In class, that is. I mean...I pray...in chapel and...other places.

DAVID

I am sure not in Kansas anymore. This is a seminary, isn't it? I mean, we all believe in God, right?

JONATHAN

What do you mean by "believe?" What do you mean by "God?"

DAVID

Are these hard questions?

JONATHAN

Why don't you ask Jamil whether he'd like to pray?

DAVID

I think I just did.

JAMIL

Actually, I've already prayed twice today. Muslim, you know.

ILANA

This is an interfaith studies program. We're a little different from the rest of the seminary.

DAVID

I gotta admit, when I got here yesterday, I wondered where all the Christians had gone.

JONATHAN

Spring break.

DAVID

So, what are you guys presenting on?

JONATHAN

Conflict between the Abrahamic faiths. It's just a work in progress but we're going to present what we've got. Mine's on Christianity's inherent anti-Judaism.

ILANA

And mine says that's crap.

JAMIL

Mine is more a critique of my own tradition than an attack on the other two.

DAVID

You think Christianity is anti-Semitic, Mr. Lewis?

JONATHAN

Anti-Judaic. Yes, among other things.

ILANA

There are many different Christianities, Jonathan. We're not all the same.

JONATHAN

You are where it counts, unless you're ready to drop half the New Testament. You argue that it's only Christians like Dr. Padgett here who are the problem. But whether you're a liberal or conservative, Protestant or Catholic, you still stand up every Sunday morning, sing songs, recite prayers and read scripture that claims "Jesus is the only son of God" and that "no one comes to the Father except through him." The only difference between you and him is that he probably believes it.

DAVID

Son, my father and I have arranged for the relocation of more than 17,000 Eastern European Jews to Israel. Not Jews for Jesus. Orthodox Jews. We've built them homes, schools...

JONATHAN

Your father didn't start that program because he loved Jews. He did it to bring on the apocalypse, to fulfill prophecies. Do those little old ladies from Lithuania know that?

DAVID

Any further questions?

ILANA

Oh, he's just getting started.

JONATHAN

I may not get another chance. Dr. Padget, you use those people like human shields to protect the interests of right-wing American politicians and big business, and to further your own world view.

JAMIL

Meanwhile innocent Palestinians and Israelis continue to die.

DAVID

I really think you two are oversimplifying this whole thing.

JAMIL

Your criticisms of Islam are hard to oversimplify, Dr. Padget. "Islam," you said, is "not a religion, it is rather a heretical misjoinder of Judaism, Christianity, and demonic paganism."

ILANA

Okay. Listen, can we not - ?

DAVID

I'm not opposed to interfaith dialogue, folks.

JONATHAN

Dialogue isn't enough. You have to change.

DAVID

No.

Now what? Didn't get us very far, did it. Jonathan, interfaith dialogue isn't about trying to change the other person's traditions and beliefs. It's about finding common ground despite our disagreements.

JONATHAN

That's a very modern viewpoint.

DAVID

I think so.

JONATHAN

That wasn't a compliment, Dr. Padget. Modernity says we all need to get along. We say remove the reasons we can't.

DAVID

And lose everything that makes you who you are? Dr. Brand's Secular Christianity? Is that what your church is teaching now, Ilana?

ILANA

Not yet.

MICHAEL

I wish.

JAMIL

Dr. Padget, when you saw us on the quad this morning, the first thing you did was ask if we had accepted Christ.

DAVID

That's right. I had to.

JAMIL

So Jonathan was wearing his kippah, and I was praying, obviously a Muslim. In some countries you'd be executed for it.

DAVID

Not here. In this country I'm free to talk about my faith, and you are free to harangue me to your heart's content.

JAMIL

I'm from Chicago, Dr. Padget. This is my country too. And I don't want to convert you.

DAVID

But you're free to try. Why shouldn't we all try to convince each other? Beats denying God entirely, which is his solution.

MICHAEL

I don't deny God, Dave. Just your idea of God.

JONATHAN

It can't keep being about conversion! Christians have got to get over their evangelical impulses once and for all.

DAVID

But it's a central tenet of my faith. I am commanded to bring souls to Christ.

JAMIL

The problem is not that you want us to be Christians, it's that you think we're damned if we aren't.

DAVID

Muslims don't proselytize, don't think we're damned, don't go on crusades? That's a hard sell these days, Jamil.

JAMIL

Some do, yes. Violently even, of course. Why do you think Muslims like me are calling for reform?

ILANA

If Christ is Christ, David, we all get to him sooner or later. What's wrong with letting Jamil follow his own path?

DAVID

I don't have the power to allow or not allow Jamil to do anything. But I do have to speak the truth in love, and the truth is Jesus Christ is the way, the truth and the life, and unless you accept him as your lord and savior you shall not be saved.

ILANA

That's your truth, David.

JONATHAN

You know what my truth is? Here's my truth.

JONATHAN exits.

JAMIL

Jesus, Jonathan.

ILANA

Come on. Sorry. Sorry.

ILANA exits with JAMIL.

DAVID

Wow! That was awesome.

MICHAEL

Seriously?

DAVID

That was a real conversation. A real religious conversation. Do you have any idea how long it's been since somebody talked to me like that?

MICHAEL

Is this what you plan to do on Thursday? Evangelize the Jews and Muslims?

DAVID

How would you like to come preach at my church one Sunday?

MICHAEL

That's the most terrifying thing I can think of.

DAVID

Not as terrifying as what that young man just did. I know your secret, Mike. You're an evangelist, too, of a sort. Come on, you'd like nothing more than the chance to stand in front of every evangelical congregation in America and tell them just how wrong they are.

MICHAEL

Technically that would make me a prophet, not an evangelist.

DAVID

False prophet maybe.

MICHAEL

Are you really going to try to take over the seminary?

DAVID

I'm not trying to take over.

MICHAEL

Please don't. Just because you're still pissed off at me over something that happened almost twenty years ago.

DAVID

Do you really think this has anything to do with-

MICHAEL

I got tenure, you didn't, and you blamed Aubrey. You've been punishing him ever since.

DAVID

I didn't get tenure because I couldn't publish.

MICHAEL

You couldn't publish because you couldn't write.

DAVID

Thanks.

MICHAEL

I didn't mean it like that. Obviously you can write.

DAVID

But I couldn't write what he wanted. I'm here because Aubrey asked me to come. Why he invited me in particular, I don't know. But did you even stop to consider it might be good for you and me to exchange ideas? Let me share my perspective?

MICHAEL

What perspective would you like to give me exactly?

DAVID

I'm just telling you what he said. I thought it was your idea.

MICHAEL

My idea?

DAVID

The Red Church -Blue Church Colloquium. Didn't you come up with it?

MICHAEL

Yes, but I didn't expect you to be the first speaker. I was expecting something a little more low-key. A few days of making nice then we could all go back to fearing and mistrusting one another.

DAVID

You know I'm not going to make it that easy on you. Sometimes I wish I was back here. Especially now.

MICHAEL

Why?

DAVID

Because I think you're giving up the faith without a fight.

MICHAEL

I'm not giving up the faith, I'm defending it.

DAVID

Mike, you wrote God out of the Gospels! You've demoted Jesus from incarnate god to misunderstood rabbi.

MICHAEL

Because that's who he was!

DAVID

You treat the Bible with all the respect of one of your students' research papers. Don't you understand how frightening that is to my people? God's word is everything to them.

MICHAEL

Then they're not worshipping a living God, David. Let alone Jesus Christ. You're teaching them to worship a book.

DAVID

That "book" has saved a multitude from lives of misery and despair.

MICHAEL

So has Oprah Winfrey. That doesn't make her uniquely divine. And it definitely doesn't mean I have to take everything she ever said literally.

DAVID

That's just offensive.

MICHAEL

All I am saying is that it's time to evolve.

DAVID

To what? "Secular Christianity?" You call that a Gospel?

MICHAEL

It beats the hell out of "Pray and Grow Rich: The Gospel of Prosperity" by David Padget, Jr. What was the other one? "Get God and Get Happy." But my favorite is "Born Again Billionaires." You think *I'm* rewriting the Bible?

DAVID

We would kill on the lecture circuit, Mike! Seriously, I could book us in twenty cities.

MICHAEL

Then there was that lovely two-volume set of children's books: "Heather Needs a Daddy" and "Daddy's Roommate Touched Me Bad."

DAVID

Somebody should be taking all this down. Are we gonna keep doing this for the next two days? I'll hire us a stenographer! Better, let me get my buddy at CNN on the phone...

MICHAEL

What are you talking about?

DAVID

Can I stick around for a few days? After the colloquium I mean.

MICHAEL

Why?

DAVID

Because I'm having the time of my life! I never get to do this. I loved being here. Arguing with you, staying up all night. All I ever get to do now is preach to the converted. Have you ever seen my talk show? Two men in shiny suits and a Botoxed blonde woman, sitting on an overstuffed floral couch, smiling and agreeing with each other about how great God is. Damn, it's boring!

MICHAEL

Is that why you're back here, threatening some kind of a hostile takeover of the seminary, because you're bored?

DAVID

You know, my dad was furious at me for coming to school here.

MICHAEL

I remember.

DAVID

We were reading books here they burned at the seminary he went to. When he found out I'd enrolled at NTS, he was here the next morning. My father, the Reverend David Padget, Pastor to Presidents, stormed onto this campus and shouted at Aubrey for a solid hour in this very room. Accused him of corrupting me, turning me away from God. I was crying, screaming back at him, pleading with Aubrey not to listen. But I didn't need to. Aubrey never flinched. Daddy backed down, and I stayed. You and I graduated. Aubrey hired us both and I never thought I'd leave. Figured I would teach here the rest of my life.

MICHAEL

But you didn't get tenure.

DAVID

It was probably for the best. I did start to lose my faith here. There's only so much questioning, so much criticism you can read when you're that young before you do start to doubt. Before you decide maybe it'd be better for you to go to business school.

MICHAEL

So that's what you did.

DAVID

It was a big change. No more angels on pinheads! Instead it was economics, probabilities, and contracts. I finally understood God! I lost my faith at seminary, and got it back at Harvard Business School.

MICHAEL

Sounds like a best seller. Probably outsell "Secular Christianity" by about a billion copies.

DAVID

There's no market for your theology, don't you understand? To stay in business you've got to have a product that people want or need. Religion is no different. People give up something, they get something back. Just like a contract.

MICHAEL

That's not exactly my understanding of grace, but...

DAVID

When has any human being done anything without any expectation of reward or fear of punishment? Give yourself to God, confess Christ as your Lord and Savior, and he'll make you prosper, in this life and the next! It's an iron-clad contract. Did you know that legally, if you promise to sell me something, and I promise to pay you for it, it makes no difference how lowball the price we agree on is relative to its value. The law will enforce our agreement no matter what?

(He looks around, finds a paper clip and holds it up.)

What is this?

MICHAEL

It's a paper clip.

DAVID

What if this morning, when you and Aubrey and I were having our little visit, I had offered to pay off all the seminary's debts outright. In cash. Plus I'd also renovate the entire campus, repair everything that's broken, buy back those condos and fill them with students. I'd empty my own bank account to do it. You're sure there's some catch, something up my sleeve but I tell you to trust me, that I know what I'm doing. Do you trust me, Michael?

MICHAEL

No, David. I don't.

DAVID

But Mike, all I want in return is this.

MICHAEL

A paper clip.

DAVID

That's right. Just a paper clip's worth of faith, and you inherit everything.

MICHAEL

Sorry, but I don't even have that much faith in you, David.

DAVID

Then you'll spend an eternity bitterly regretting your choice.

MICHAEL

Are we talking about a business deal or the fate of my immortal soul?

DAVID

Yes.

MICHAEL

That is the most fucked up version of atonement theory I have ever heard.

DAVID

Why? Because its logical? Coherent? At least I can articulate my theology. Can you?

MICHAEL

Yeah, didn't you hear? I wrote a book about it. You're right, though. I can't compete with the clarity you offer, or the threats you make. Three hundred years after the enlightenment and millions still believe just like you.

DAVID

Let me ask you something. What is the point in building a church for postmodern intellectuals? It's like designing an airplane for a jellyfish. They don't want it.

MICHAEL

I don't care. I think it happens to be right. Listen, just because I can't condense my theology into an elevator speech doesn't make it meaningless. You build churches that look like big box stores, offering eternal salvation and material happiness for thirty per cent off, Sunday only!

DAVID

Last time I checked, Wal-Mart is the most profitable retailer in the history of the world.

MICHAEL

No Wal-Marts in New York City.

DAVID

Not yet.

MICHAEL

Please don't do this thing. Please just leave us alone.

AUBREY enters the Common Room.

AUBREY

There are precious few places like this left in the city. Quiet. Green. I walk the quad three times a day just because. Beautiful old buildings. A church that hasn't been turned into a theatre or a nightclub. But they're mostly empty. And I can't figure out how to fill them. For the first time in my life, I feel paralyzed. Like one of those old saints carved in stone above the chapel doors. In the end, that's all any building is, really. Just empty spaces defined by concrete or stone, framed in wood or steel, wrapped in glass. Some are beautiful, full of people and light and life, and some are just...buildings. Without people, they're just real estate.

DAVID

You know, if we bought the place and paid down the debts, you guys would have enough money to relocate. Build a new campus, even.

MICHAEL

Relocate? Where would you suggest? Jersey?

DAVID

Would you rather see the place close down? What have you got to lose? You'd still be the new Dean, Mike. It'll still be New Theological, it just won't be in New York. Why not move it to Jersey, or maybe even the South? You know, you could afford twice as much space in North Carolina.

AUBREY

This seminary has been in New York City for two hundred years. The city's always been part of who we are. What is our responsibility here? To hold the place together with spit and chicken wire until the faithful return? Or let it fall into ruin, as a testament to our failure.

DAVID

You don't have to do either.

AUBREY

David, I'm not going to sell you the seminary.

DAVID

Okay, then. What if...what if we - the Jesus Fund, that is - bought the land and buildings, but then leased them back to you. Say, a five-year lease, at well-below-market rates.

MICHAEL

Buy the seminary and make us your tenants?

AUBREY

I'm not sure I follow.

DAVID

You could use that money to pay off the debt, then you'd have, say, five years to make this place successful again.

MICHAEL

Oh, man, that's perfect.

AUBREY

Michael-

DAVID

It'd be nominal rent. There'd be a lease, of course, with the usual provisions...

AUBREY

Provisions?

DAVID

Standard stuff. Then, at the end of the lease, you have the option to buy back the property at a price we'd agree on in advance. Not a bad price, either. See, you'd still have time to turn it around. Then you'll either retire here, Mike, or you'll move on and this will be somebody else's argument.

MICHAEL

How moving that our distinguished alumnus here cares so much about this place he'd do what sounds like a really terrible business deal just so he can be our landlord?

DAVID

It's not a bad deal! It's a city block in Manhattan, probably worth at least two hundred million.

MICHAEL

So it's not a bad deal for you. You get the place for what, 10, 15 percent of market? Plus the rent for five years.

DAVID

I'm offering you a way forward. Why won't you consider it?

AUBREY

It's up to the trustees, not me.

DAVID

I hear there's a meeting tomorrow.

AUBREY

At which I was planning to propose bankruptcy.

MICHAEL

Jesus Christ.

AUBREY

Five years. Then what?

DAVID

You have the option to buy it back and stay in possession. Five years will give you time to see where things are going. If the liberal church has a future. If it does, things'll turn around here. You'll have donors and students...

AUBREY

And if we don't turn it around...if the Blue Church continues to lose numbers and money...you get a block of prime Manhattan real estate for a fraction of what it's worth.

DAVID

That's pretty much the deal, yeah. Well, there is one more thing I'd ask.

AUBREY

What's that?

DAVID

That you let me stay involved. Help with the fundraising. Maybe teach a class or two.

MICHAEL

I told you, Aubrey. I told you. So, let's see, Dave. You buy the seminary, become our landlord - I know, nominal rent - join the faculty, and, and what, does your father get to be chairman of the board?

DAVID

My dad doesn't know I'm offering this.

MICHAEL

Come on, you don't make a move like this without checking with your old man.

DAVID

Mike, if my dad had his way, we wouldn't be having this conversation at all. It doesn't matter. This is my company, my deal.

MICHAEL

Well it's brilliant, Dave. You have managed to create a theological futures market! You're going to win the Nobel Prize for Economics, man, because this is sheer genius.

AUBREY

It is a novel idea.

MICHAEL

So we're not even going to try to raise the money ourselves.

AUBREY

Who'll give it to us? Maybe he's right, Michael. If we can't prove the worth of our ideas in five more years, we really should find another line of work. We have nothing to lose here.

MICHAEL

No we don't, because you've just surrendered.

AUBREY

I could lock you out of the Trustees meeting.

DAVID

Yes, you could. Don't. Aubrey, please, I don't want to hurt you or this place. I love NTS. I even like him.

AUBREY

I'll put you on the agenda. I won't fight you.

AUBREY exits. DAVID pulls out his mobile phone and starts to dial.

MICHAEL

Your cufflinks are diamond-encrusted Jesus fish.

DAVID

My mom gave them to me.

MICHAEL

They say a lot.

DAVID

I'll stop wearing them if it'll make you feel better.

MICHAEL

Oh, I feel fine. I understand you better now, at least.

DAVID

Good. So... you're okay with this?

MICHAEL

God, no. But it's not up to me.

DAVID

You could go to them yourself, tell them how you feel.

MICHAEL

No. I couldn't. Aubrey is still the Dean, he's the one who talks to the Trustees, not me.

DAVID

I meant everything I said, Mike. About you staying on. And I'm serious about the speaking tour, CNN, the whole thing. It's important to me that you and I work together.

MICHAEL

Work together?

DAVID smiles, pulls the paper clip out of his pocket and hands it to Michael.

DAVID

(on phone)

Hey, Daddy, how are you feeling today?

(To Mike, his hand over the
phone:)

Mike, seriously. I-

(Back on phone, as he EXITS:)

Sir? Yes, I'm here, Daddy. I'm on the agenda but listen, I
think I have a better idea.

DAVID now gone, MIKE sits, opens
the Book of Common Prayer and tries
to read as the lights fade.

SCENE 4

The dorm room, later that evening.
JAMIL, ILANA and JONATHAN enter,
with bags of takeout food.

ILANA

Why didn't we eat downtown?

JAMIL

Because there aren't any kosher halal Vietnamese take out
places in Chelsea.

JONATHAN

No good ones anyway. No, for that one must return home to the
Upper West Side.

ILANA

Why did we have to get Vietnamese? Why do we have to eat? I'm
not even hungry. Good wine at that gallery, though.

JONATHAN

You need to eat.

JAMIL has put on music as the
others set the food out, then he
begins to dance. The music builds
as he invites ILANA into it, then
JONATHAN.

ILANA

Oh, he hated me. HA - TED - ME.

JAMIL

Who, Zach? No he didn't. Now shut up and dance.

JAMIL shows them some moves until
the music drops to a low hum. JAMIL
stops, kneels in front of them and
recites a prayer:

JAMIL

You, Who are the Perfection
of Love, Harmony, and Beauty,
The Ruler of heaven and earth,
open our hearts, that we may hear your Voice,

which constantly comes from within.
Allah, Most Merciful and Compassionate,
unite us all in your Perfect Being.
Amen.

ILANA

Do Sufis know how to pray or what?

JAMIL

I'll copy it out for you.

JONATHAN pulls out a little glass
pipe and a lighter from under his
bed, hits the pipe and passes it to
JAMIL, who lights it and takes a
hit.

ILANA

Sorry I dragged you guys down there.

JONATHAN

I thought it was awesome. Free booze and a roomful of Chelsea
boys.

ILANA

I was the only single female heterosexual in the room, and he
was the only straight man, but as soon as he found out I was
in seminary he suddenly decides he has to pee.

JAMIL

Maybe he did.

ILANA

For fifteen minutes? No, I give up. It ain't happening.
Why don't you get an apartment?

JONATHAN

With whose trust fund?

JAMIL offers her the pipe.

ILANA

No thanks. I got enough troubles. I'll take a beer though, if
you got one.

JONATHAN

In the fridge. Does your diocese drug test?

ILANA

No, I just don't think it's a good idea to do it on the seminary campus!

JONATHAN

The collar is already on. Jesus. Still, I guess that's best. Don't want a pot-head priest running the church.

ILANA

Jonathan?

JONATHAN

Yes?

ILANA

Are you sure this stuff is kosher?

JONATHAN

I think I would know.

JONATHAN dips a spring roll in peanut sauce and holds out one end of it to JAMIL, who takes a bite as he passes the pipe back.

ILANA

Well, you're...

JONATHAN

Reconstructionist. I also keep kosher. Not because I have to.

ILANA

God forbid.

JONATHAN

The founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, said that tradition has "a vote, but not a veto." I tend to give tradition a weighted vote, but that's all.

ILANA

So why do it?

JONATHAN

Because of the taamei hamitzvot - the reason for the commandment. Because it slows me down and keeps me out of the pizza joints. Also it's good for me.

ILANA

Not sure those fried fish blobs meet that test.

JONATHAN

Rabbi Kaplan lived to be a hundred and two. Kashrut is a way of instilling holiness into an activity that most people nowadays don't think very sacred.

ILANA

As I recall there was nothing sacred about your mother's matzo brei.

JAMIL

You guys are hilarious.

ILANA

Jamil, if his mother ever invites you over -

JONATHAN

You'll eat everything on your plate.

ILANA

What about you, Mr. Muslim Person? What are you doing eating this stuff. And smoking weed!

JAMIL

It's my sacramental stash. My Holy Hash.

ILANA

That's yours?! I knew he was a stoner, but you?

JONATHAN

Also I go to the gym three times a week.

ILANA

I just want to know how you decide which commandments to keep and which ones to ignore.

JONATHAN

Hey, forgive me for not following Jewish law closely enough for an Episcopalian.

ILANA

I'm just trying to understand who you are now.

JONATHAN

I think you're trying to understand who you are now.

ILANA

I just don't know what we're doing here. Do any of us believe in a personal God anymore? If we don't then what the hell does it matter if I'm ordained? What would I be doing but perpetuating lies?

JAMIL

Myths aren't lies. If they were, do you think they would have survived so long? Tonight at the gallery, when you weren't ogling the artist, did you look at the art? Some of it was crap. Most of it. But there were two, two paintings I suspect will still be around in a few hundred years. Maybe longer. And it wasn't about their geometric precision, their perfect use of perspective or their photographic realism. It's that when I looked at them, I could see myself. Something the artist did told me I wasn't alone, that I was understood, that she knew I'd be looking at her picture one day and my heart would beat faster.

ILANA

I don't want to be a museum curator for a dead religion.

JONATHAN

Then help it live again. Embrace the myths that work, get rid of those that don't, and change the church. Ilana, you're about to be ordained.

ILANA

I'll have to swear I believe in God. They ask it in the ceremony. I want to have an answer.

JONATHAN

Do you?

ILANA

Do I what?

JONATHAN

Have an answer?

ILANA

Do you?

JONATHAN

I'm Jewish. It's complicated.

ILANA

You'll talk for days about what you eat, but not about what you believe. I don't have that luxury.

JONATHAN

What we eat is what we believe! Judaism is tradition, culture, food. It's about finding the wisdom and the beauty in all of those things. I think what Michael is arguing for is that Christianity can do the same. Islam too.

ILANA

You're talking like he can do anything about it. Nobody cares what we say or do here.

JAMIL

That is not true.

ILANA

Huh?

JAMIL

(suddenly passionate)

Jews and Muslims have a huge stake in this, Ilana. Maybe life or death. No, not maybe. It is life or death. Trust me I know, I...

ILANA

Hey. Hey, Jamil?

JAMIL

Don't ever think it doesn't matter!

JONATHAN

You know, there are some Christians who think it's God's will that all the Arabs and all the Jews kill each another. They send us to Israel by the thousands because they think it'll be ground zero for the apocalypse and the second coming of Jesus. That way we'll all be in one place so they can throw us all into hell at once.

JAMIL

Hey, we can still be roommates.

JONATHAN

Awesome.

ILANA

My church doesn't believe Jews and Muslims are going to hell.

JONATHAN

But that just makes you a bunch of hypocrites, don't you see? If you don't believe we're going to hell, then you can't believe a lot of the rest of it. If you had read my chapter of our paper...

ILANA

I will. I'm sorry. Right now I'm wasted and embarrassed and I want to go to bed.

JONATHAN

Hey. Coffee in the morning?

ILANA

Okay. Text me. Good night.

JAMIL & JONATHAN

Good night.

ILANA leaves. JAMIL begins to undress for bed.

JONATHAN

(A bit stoned.)

I'm glad we're roommates. I'm glad you're a liberal Muslim.

JAMIL

Is that what I am? I have never heard a Jew make these arguments. Especially not to a Christian. Who are you?

JONATHAN

Who do you say that I am?

(waving the Rumi at him)

You never told me what your favorite was.

JAMIL takes the book and reads aloud, occasionally looking up at JONATHAN.

JAMIL

I'll try to translate.

"There is some kiss we want with our whole lives, the touch of spirit on the body. Seawater begs the pearl to break its shell. And the lily, how passionately it needs some wild darling. At night, I open the window and ask the moon to come and press its face against mine."

JAMIL closes the book, slowly walks back to his bed and climbs under the covers as the lights on the dorm room fade to black.

SCENE 5

Later that night. The dorm room is dark; JAMIL and JONATHAN lie asleep in their beds.

DAVID walks onto the quad, sits on a bench and surfs on his tablet computer. The glow from the tablet illuminates his face.

In the darkened dorm room, JAMIL is having a nightmare. He tosses, turns and talks in his sleep. JONATHAN wakes, clicks on his lamp, gets up and goes to him.

JAMIL

What...?
Is it blasphemy? Is it?
Peace be upon him...peace be...

The just, the merciful...
How long...? How long...?
The babies are bleeding...the babies, can you hear?
Dad? Dad!!!

JAMIL wakes and sits bolt upright.
JONATHAN sits on the edge of
JAMIL's bed and puts his arms
around him.

On the Quad, David hears Jamil's
cry and looks up toward their
window.

JONATHAN
Hey, it's okay. It's okay. Shhh.

JAMIL
(crying)
Fuck. Ahhh, fuck...oh, God...

JONATHAN
What was it? What were you dreaming about?

JAMIL
My dad. And the kids in the school, the little girls were...I
can't, Jonathan...I can't...

JONATHAN starts to release him, but
JAMIL won't let go. JONATHAN slowly
rocks JAMIL back to sleep as he
cries a bit, then they curl up
together on JAMIL's bed.

DAVID shuts off his tablet and
EXITS as the lights fade to black.

END OF ACT ONE

ACT TWO

SCENE 1

The next morning. In the dorm room, JAMIL is pulling on shoes to go for a run. He grabs his phone, headphones and EXITS. AUBREY enters the courtyard with a cup of tea. He is short of breath and a bit wobbly. He walks about, looking around at the trees and the buildings for a moment before he sits heavily on a bench.

JAMIL reemerges in the courtyard.

AUBREY

Hello, son.

JAMIL

Hi. What's going on out here?

AUBREY

What? Oh, well, thanks to Dr. Padget, we're being interviewed by CNN this morning. They're setting up over there.

(JAMIL NODS)

AUBREY

Would you like to talk?

JAMIL sits next to Aubrey.

In the dorm room, JONATHAN wakes, sees Jamil is gone, and gets dressed in a hurry.

AUBREY

How are you and Jonathan getting along?

JAMIL

Well. Very well.

AUBREY

Hope it wasn't too obvious, our putting you two together.

JAMIL

Obvious?

AUBREY

Just like us, hmm? Put a Muslim and a Jew in the same dorm room, world peace will result.

JAMIL

You put a radical Sufi and a Reconstructionist Jew together. We may not be the most representative sample.

AUBREY

I suppose we did prime the pump a bit.

(Jamil sits next to him, yawning.)

You had a bad night? I thought they had stopped. Hoped they had.

JAMIL

Yes, sir. Me too.

AUBREY

You should really see someone about it.

JAMIL

I can't. Not until I know what happened to him.

AUBREY

You know we would take care of the expense.

JAMIL

I know. I'm just not ready.

AUBREY

And there's no news at all?

JAMIL

My mother goes to these meetings, it's always the same. They believe he's dead, but can't produce a body. They may never be able to. Dr. Lothrop, I know he would want me to thank you every day, a hundred times, for welcoming me here.

AUBREY

I keep my promises.

JAMIL

Last night Jonathan...I guess I woke him. He was very kind. He stayed with me awhile. He didn't ask any questions. He just stayed with me.

AUBREY

He seems to care a great deal about you. Talk to him?

JAMIL

I haven't told him everything, but I don't know if I can keep it from him.

AUBREY

Don't! He's a wonderful talker, you know. And sometimes he even listens. In any case, whatever you choose to tell him, I think you can trust Jonathan to be discreet.

JAMIL

It's tearing me and my family to pieces.

AUBREY

I told your father I would keep you safe as long as I could. But I'm old as dirt, and institutions don't last forever.

JAMIL

You mean the seminary?

AUBREY

The seminary. The church. The truth. We live in a time when these things are no longer taken for granted. Those who would preserve them for fear of the unknown and uncharted are in a pitched battle with those who would see them evolve. And then there are those who would scrap them altogether.

JAMIL

Like Dr. Brand.

AUBREY

And, as with any other battle, there will be casualties.

JAMIL

Which side are you on?

AUBREY

Right now I am on your side, son.

JONATHAN enters.

JAMIL

Hey. You're up early.

JONATHAN

Just, you know. Thought I might run with you today.

JAMIL

Really? Okay.

AUBREY

(Rising with difficulty.)

Looks like they're just about ready for me over there. We'll see you two at the lecture this evening?

JAMIL

Yes, sir. Dr. Lothrop? Thanks for the talk. You sure you feel okay?

AUBREY

I'm almost eighty, son. I never feel okay.

AUBREY exits.

JONATHAN

I was worried about you.

JAMIL

Yeah, sorry about all the drama. It was just a dream. A bad one.

JONATHAN

Wasn't the first time you've had it. Just the worst.

JAMIL

I know. Sorry.

JONATHAN

I was just really concerned, that's all.

JAMIL

I'm okay. How many times have I...?

JONATHAN

Well, we've been roommates for two months. I guess maybe three bad ones.

JAMIL

You should have said something.

JONATHAN

What do you dream about?

JAMIL

I dream about my father. I dream about...well, there's a guy questioning me, a soldier. He talks about my father, accuses him...but last night it was different. The guy wasn't a soldier...he...never mind. It's just a dream.

JONATHAN

Is this something that really happened? Something you're remembering?

JAMIL

No. Yes. Sort of.

JONATHAN

You need to talk to someone.

JAMIL

I can't.

JONATHAN

That's bullshit, of course you can.

JAMIL

Jonathan, my dad is missing in Pakistan. We don't know who has him or why, but he's been missing for months. I can't just trust some stranger to...

JONATHAN

You're trusting me.

JAMIL

You're not a stranger.

JONATHAN

I know in some cultures...guys in some Muslim cultures are more...demonstrative than in Western countries.

More physically affectionate with each other. But they don't mean...as far as I understand, it's not usually meant as, as a romantic thing, as an expression of love, in the way we might mean it. Maybe sometimes it is, I guess it probably is but what do I know? Anyway, I think maybe I need you to interpret for me which that was last night, because-

JAMIL

Jonathan. I'm from Chicago.

JAMIL kisses JONATHAN long and lovingly. After a moment they separate and exit together.

SCENE 2

Lights come up on another section of the quad. DAVID, AUBREY and MICHAEL step into the light, AUBREY futzing with an earpiece. All three face an unseen camera. After a moment of waiting, the lights grow noticeably brighter, and the interview begins. We don't hear the questions, only the answers.

DAVID

Ya'll good to go? Now just wait and they'll cue -
Good morning, George.

(Pause)

AUBREY

Good morning, George. Thank you.

(Pause)

MICHAEL

Hello.

DAVID

(after a pause)

You know, George, there are all kinds of Christians out there. We do disagree on some really important issues, that's true, but we agree on one important thing, that this institution needs to be saved. That's why we're partnering on this thing.

AUBREY

(after a pause)

Well, George, the issue is really is that it has gotten almost impossible for a nonprofit of any kind to have a substantial physical presence in Manhattan. Look at what's happened in this city. Charity hospitals are gone. Churches are falling apart because they can't afford to keep their buildings up. It's the same story all over the city...

MICHAEL

(after a pause)

Secularization is one factor in the church's decline, sure. But what is that about?

For some I think, materialism, the value we place on convenience and comfort, has replaced spiritual practice at the center of our lives. Others just can't accept the supernatural claims they think they have to swallow in order to be part of a church. Those are the...

DAVID

(after a pause)

Listen, George, I've known these men for more than twenty years, and I don't doubt for a minute that we can work together. We do have different ideas, it's true but I...

MICHAEL

Yes?

(Pause)

"Secular Christianity" is a book I wrote, it's not a description of the seminary's theology or of anybody's on the faculty here but me. Most of the people here wish I hadn't written it... Well he and I were students here together twenty some years ago, you know. We both love this place.

(Pause)

No, that's not exactly what I said...

DAVID

/George, what we're-

MICHAEL

/Because you can believe Jesus's body did in fact, you know, decompose, and still follow his teachings, George.

DAVID

Mike's got some fairly strong-

MICHAEL

No, George what I say in the book is that Christianity can have a future if it matures. Older religious movements within Judaism and Buddhism have shed their superstitions but still find value in their ethics, their traditions, even their rituals, without any need for a personal...

(Pause)

No, I didn't say there was no God. I said I hope Christianity will move past the need for one.

AUBREY

George, the point is we're all three... (pause)... sure, George. Thank you.

AUBREY

Thank you, George

MICHAEL

Thank you.

The lights go back to normal, and Aubrey makes his way to a nearby bench and sits down, breathless. DAVID and MICHAEL remove their earpieces. DAVID's phone starts ringing.

MICHAEL

Wow. Jesus.

DAVID

Sorry, it was my fault.

MICHAEL

What? I thought it went great!

DAVID

I put you out there too early. You're not ready.

MICHAEL

Aubrey, you okay?

AUBREY

(reaching into his pocket)

Just give me a minute.

AUBREY takes a small pill from a bottle and places it under his tongue.

DAVID

(on phone)

Hello, Daddy. Yes sir, I know. Did you...

MICHAEL

How many did you take?

AUBREY

Just one. I'll be okay in a few minutes.

DAVID

Well, this is a Jesus Fund deal, Daddy, not yours. Nobody's thinking you support it, that's why we did it this way.

MICHAEL

Should I call someone?

AUBREY shakes his head "no."

DAVID

But Daddy, you're not majority shareholder anymore...I said you don't have a majority-

His father hangs up on him. DAVID puts his phone away, notices Aubrey and Michael.

MICHAEL

He gets a little angina sometimes, when he's stressed.

AUBREY

It's better now. What was that all about?

DAVID

What?

AUBREY

Your dad didn't care for the interview?

DAVID

Doesn't matter. What about you? Are you okay?

AUBREY

Of course I'm okay.

MICHAEL

Let's get you back inside anyway. David, I'll see you in the Common Room.

DAVID

Sure.

MICHAEL and AUBREY exit one way, DAVID the other, making a call as he goes.

SCENE 3

JAMIL, JONATHAN and ILANA stream into the Common Room and take their places at the table. JAMIL and JONATHAN pop open laptops, get books ready. Ilana reads from her phone:

ILANA

(reading from her phone)

Look at this: "Christian right offers olive branch, financial help to ailing liberal seminary."

JONATHAN

(reading from his laptop)

Wow, NTS is mentioned by six major religion bloggers in the past hour. The Daily Deist: "New Theological Seminary's Deathbed Conversion."

JAMIL

Blogspell tweets: "NTS Sells Soul to Jesus Fund for Fifty Million Pieces of Silver."

ILANA

Jesus, this is all I need right now. Yesterday NTS was a bunch of atheists, now we're all evangelicals. Either way I'm screwed.

JONATHAN

What's going on?

JAMIL

New York Times: "David Padgett, Jr.'s evangelical investment firm, The Jesus Fund, has offered to acquire the assets of New Theological Seminary in a deal allegedly worth fifty million dollars."

ILANA

So that's why he's here.

MICHAEL and DAVID enter.

DAVID

I got a text from my guy at Fox. We're on tonight at 8.

MICHAEL

Fox?

DAVID

Prime time, buddy. And despite you going horribly off message this morning, I just got an email from our publisher.

MICHAEL

Hello, everyone. You guys are early.

DAVID

Amazon just ordered a ten thousand copies of *Secular Christianity*. They said, listen to me now, the publisher said that if you'd agree to do this tour with me, they'd pay all your expenses and bump your advance up a hundred percent. Double, Mike.

MICHAEL

Why?

DAVID

'Cause they know you're gonna sell books. You're gonna sell books because I'm gonna tell people to buy them. My people. They may burn them, but that money spends just the same.

MICHAEL

You've been busy.

DAVID

People do tend to return my calls.

JONATHAN

Excuse me, are we having a meeting or...?

MICHAEL

Yeah, yeah listen guys, I have to take Aubrey to the doctor. They want to do some tests.

ILANA

What kind of tests?

MICHAEL

They're just being cautious. He was having chest pains and they want to make sure he's okay.

ILANA

Oh, God.

MICHAEL

He's fine for now. Anyway, Dr. Padget thought you all could use this time to talk about the Red Church Blue Church -

JONATHAN

You sold him the seminary.

MICHAEL

Well, not exactly. Shit, you may as well know. The seminary is broke, you all probably knew that. And a wealthy alumnus has in fact come forward to help bail us out. We're not actually selling...

JONATHAN

How could you do this?

MICHAEL

We made some very bad financial decisions over the years. We've paid insufficient attention to market forces that-

DAVID

The fact is the seminary has no students, and the churches it serves are shrinking, because the theology taught here is not selling.

MICHAEL

Amazon just ordered ten thousand copies.

JONATHAN

So you're going to come here and change it? To what?

DAVID

I really want to answer that, Mr. Lewis, but just...Mike, listen. We need to talk about the deal.

ILANA

Would you guys shut the hell up about your damn deal?! How is Aubrey?

MICHAEL

He's okay. He has meds he takes but they want to do some tests.

Look, you guys, this seminary business, it's what Aubrey wants us to do. If it works out the way David has promised, we won't...

JAMIL

(reading from his laptop)

Sorry. "Retired evangelist Dr. David Padget Sr. released a statement early this morning stating his opposition to The Jesus Fund's bailout of New Theological Seminary, and announcing plans to block the move, with legal action if necessary."

MICHAEL

(to David)

What the hell?

DAVID

He really didn't like that interview.

MICHAEL

Was this part of the plan?

DAVID

No. What do you mean?

MICHAEL

I mean I trusted you.

JONATHAN

Not me.

DAVID

Mike. I got this.

MICHAEL

Guys, would you come up to Aubrey's place and give me a hand? He wants to pack a bag in case they admit him.

JONATHAN

Sure, of course.

DAVID

I didn't know.

JONATHAN

You coming, Il?

ILANA

In a minute.

JAMIL and JONATHAN exit with
MICHAEL.

ILANA

What are you doing here?

DAVID

I don't even know anymore. Shit. Shit!

ILANA

What?

DAVID

I said "shit." I can say that here. I can't cuss in public, you know. If I do it's on YouTube in an hour. And since I am in the middle of one gi-normous shit storm right now, I figured it was a good time to say it.

ILANA

I get to cuss from the pulpit if I want to, as long as I don't deny the Virgin Birth.

DAVID

My ex-wife couldn't take it. The Jesus Fish Bowl, she used to call it.

DAVID's cell phone, which sits on
the conference table, rings once.
He shuts off the ringer.

ILANA

Guess it wasn't important.

DAVID

Oh, it was important.

ILANA

I thought he was retired.

DAVID

My dad? Officially, maybe. But he's still David Padget. Have you ever met him?

ILANA

No. We used to watch him on TV, when I was little. My grandmother never missed his program. We'd visit her in Georgia in the summertime, and she'd make us watch him. At the end of every service, all those people, hundreds, answered the altar call, singing all the way.

DAVID

(singing)

Just As I Am...

DAVID AND ILANA

(both singing)

Without one plea,
But that thy blood was shed for me.
And that thou bidst me come to thee, oh lamb, of God I come,
I come.

ILANA

So this bailout or whatever, it was your father's idea?

DAVID

Originally. But he wanted a total takeover, purge all the lefties and move our people in. I thought we could do something more -

ILANA

- Christian?

DAVID

Fun. And I thought I had it under control. But now he'll torpedo the whole thing if he can.

ILANA

Why? Why here? Does he hate us that much?

DAVID

No, no. He thinks he's above that.

ILANA

Then why is he doing this?

DAVID

We started The Jesus Fund so we could buy up ungodly institutions and either change them or put them out of business.

When we heard the seminary was in trouble, my dad wanted to move in and take over. I was all for it. But when I saw the two of them again, and we started talking and debating? I've been so lonely for it. For real conversations. So I decided, if Mike and I could bring the place back, start enrolling more students, generating more revenue, we'd turn it around. Together.

ILANA

But that wasn't your father's plan.

DAVID

No. No, he wanted a total takeover. And he'll probably succeed.

ILANA

You sound pretty sure of that.

DAVID

When your friends use the word "Christian," what do they mean? I don't mean your seminary friends, I mean civilians. When they say "Christian," who are they talking about? You, or me? Is it an insult, or a compliment? Do they even think of you as a Christian?

ILANA

Sometimes I have to remind them.

DAVID

And sometimes you don't bother. Sometimes, you're even uncomfortable with it yourself.

ILANA

If it's a guy I'm dating, usually they just stop calling when they find out. Or sometimes my friends will be in conversation and going on about "The Christians" and then they turn to me and are like: "You know we don't mean you." Or "Dude, I didn't mean all Christians were..."

DAVID

Like me. It's just like Kleenex.

ILANA

Kleenex?

DAVID

Most people say "Kleenex." They don't say "facial tissue" because everybody knows what a Kleenex is. It was a brand but now it's generic. When people say "Christian," they mean Conservative Evangelical. That's why Mike won't be running this place in five years. There's just no overcoming that brand.

ILANA

So why aren't you taking his calls?

DAVID

He's going to win. No matter what I do, or what I want.

ILANA

What do you want?

DAVID

To be back here, with people who struggle and wrestle daily with the questions everybody on my side already think they know the answers to.

ILANA

Why can't you? I mean, what's stopping you?

DAVID holds up his mobile phone.

ILANA

Oh.

DAVID

Now he knows I've been disloyal, that I've got a plan of my own.

MICHAEL enters and crosses to the break area, rummaging through the tea and coffee things.

MICHAEL

He won't go to the ER until he has his tea.

DAVID goes over to the framed document on the wall, reading it over.

DAVID

You said this was the original deed for the seminary?

MICHAEL

What? Oh, yeah. They found it a few years ago, in a closet. We paid several thousand dollars to restore it.

DAVID

Have you ever read it?

MICHAEL

No, I don't think so. Where the hell is the -

DAVID

Let me help you look. You really should read it sometime.

MICHAEL

It's yellow. The little tea packets are yellow. Jesus, where the...

DAVID

It's okay, we'll find it.

MICHAEL

It's not okay! I hate this place.

DAVID

No you don't.

MICHAEL

I hate it without him here. I don't even care what happens.

DAVID

Yes you do. You're not going to give up without a fight.

MICHAEL

Why not? Once Aubrey's not around, who's left? Nobody wants to teach here anymore. Nobody good.

DAVID

I'd teach here again in a second, even if the deal didn't go through. Here's some. It's really more beige than yellow, don't you think?

MICHAEL

No, I don't. It's yellow.

DAVID

Yellowish beige.

JONATHAN and JAMIL enter.

JONATHAN

The Dean says he's not going to the hospital.

MICHAEL

Jesus. Let me go talk to him.

ILANA

(looking at her phone)

They're going to ordain me!

JAMIL

What? Hey, that's fantastic!

JONATHAN

What did they say?

ILANA

(Reading:)

"While your association with Michael Brand and his work continues to cause us concern, we found your own statement of faith compelling and refreshingly honest. You are the future of this church, and we are confident your ministry will bless us all for many years to come."

JONATHAN

Oh, God, Il. It's so awesome. Congratulations.

JAMIL

When is it?

ILANA

June. You guys have to come. You, too.

MICHAEL

I cause them "concern."

ILANA

Come anyway. I'm sorry I cussed you out.

MICHAEL

I'm so happy for you. Really I am. Now, come help me talk to Aubrey?

ILANA

Of course.

JAMIL

Go with them.

JONATHAN

No, let's all go.

JAMIL

Time to pray, Jonathan.

JONATHAN

Now?

JAMIL

Yes, it's time. Go, I'll be up soon.

JONATHAN gives him a quick kiss on the lips and heads out the door; ILANA is momentarily thrown.

ILANA

(To Jonathan as she follows him out:)

Okay, that...did you just...?

JONATHAN

Outside.

They exit. JAMIL pulls a small mat and a photo of a smiling, bearded man out of his backpack and sets it nearby, facing DAVID.

DAVID

Here, I'll give you some privacy.

JAMIL

No, please stay. I have a few minutes.

DAVID

Who's that?

JAMIL

That's my father. Do you really know the President?

DAVID

Yes. Well, I knew the last one better.

JAMIL

Were you ever in the military, Dr. Padgett?

DAVID

National Guard.

JAMIL

Any active duty?

DAVID

One tour. Got a lot of press.

JAMIL

Were you ever in Afghanistan?

DAVID

Yes. I was a chaplain.

JAMIL

You remind me of someone I met there. This man was not a chaplain.

DAVID

Well, then it couldn't have been me. What were you doing in Afghanistan?

JAMIL

My father was running a program that set up schools for Afghan kids in the refugee camps in Pakistan. Sometimes he'd go across the border to bring children from villages there into Pakistan. Of course it was illegal. Anyway, last summer I went with him. One afternoon we were meeting with a group of mothers - most of them widows - and their children, mostly girls. A bomb went off just outside. Three of the women were killed. I don't know how many children. I saw them. My father's leg was hurt. They questioned us before we even left the hospital.

DAVID

Who questioned you?

JAMIL

First some locals, then the Americans. They flew me out that night. I don't know where to. I never saw my father after that.

DAVID

But you, you're an American citizen, aren't you?

JAMIL

Yes, but my father is not. One morning they took me to a plane and a day later I was in Chicago. I thought for sure we were going to Cuba until they opened the door and it was freezing outside.

DAVID

They wouldn't have taken you to Cuba.

JAMIL

I stayed with my mom and my sister for a few months after they let me go. But it was like they thought it was all my fault what happened. Our phones were bugged, they were reading my e-mails. My mom couldn't take it. I wanted to go back to school, so...

DAVID

Why here?

JAMIL

My dad always wanted me to get to know his friend Aubrey, study with him. They were at Yale together. He always told me "Aubrey Lothrop is a true Christian, Jamil, and he will not turn you away." And he was right. Dr. Lothrop has been a good friend to me. But...well, he's a lot older than I thought.

DAVID

My father's had two bypasses and he's still kicking my ass.

JAMIL

I know you disapprove of us, of Islam. But I want you to know, Dr. Padget, my father is a man of God. A kind man who risked his life many times over to save others. And he loves Jesus. He taught me the Sermon on the Mount before I was twelve.

DAVID

You must love him very much.

JAMIL

You have connections. Friends who might know something.

DAVID

My friends wouldn't be much help. There's a new crowd in now.

JAMIL

But your father...

DAVID

My father? Jamil, before we went into Afghanistan my father told the President that he was doing God's will by going to war against Islam. My father sent me into the military so I could tell young soldiers the same thing. And I did. They'd come to me weeping, suicidal, looking for forgiveness for the horrible things they had done. I told them that the people they killed in Iraq and Afghanistan were evil. That they had to kill to protect their country, and that God would forgive them.

JAMIL

Did you believe that?

DAVID

I believed it was my duty to tell them that.

JAMIL

I wonder if one of them killed my dad.

JAMIL prepares to pray. The Call to Prayer is heard. DAVID waits a moment, then exits.

Lights fade.

SCENE 4

Later that afternoon. AUBREY enters the courtyard, supported on ILANA's arm, with MIKE and JONATHAN walking behind.

AUBREY

Now don't be such a nanny, Michael. I feel fine now. I just want to sit out here for awhile.

MICHAEL

My car's right outside the south gate. We packed a bag. Please, Aubrey.

AUBREY

I'm not going anywhere.

ILANA

Here. At least sit down.

ILANA and AUBREY sit on a bench.

AUBREY

That's better. Sit here with me. So, soon you'll be a real priest! When does the great ontological change take place?

ILANA

In two months.

AUBREY

We should celebrate!

MICHAEL

You need to go to the hospital.

AUBREY

And you need to stop acting like my mother.

ILANA

We'll celebrate in Seattle. Promise you'll be there.

AUBREY

I can't promise that, I'm afraid. But I couldn't be happier for you. You had some trouble at first, what changed their minds?

ILANA

They sent me one more question. "Do you believe in God?"

JONATHAN

You knew that was coming. What did you say?

ILANA

(pulling a folder out of her
bag)

I sent them what I wrote in our paper. This is what I said:
(*she reads*)

"Do we know there is a God? No, we don't. But what do we mean by "God?" God the rulemaker, the one who created a lake of fire for unbelievers, for wrong believers, for abortion doctors and Muslims? If that is what is meant, then no, speaking for myself, I don't believe. But if God is consciousness, compassion, forgiveness and healing; if God's perfect love looks anything like what Jesus taught and how Jesus lived and died for his people; if God is the creative, animating spirit that gives meaning to what otherwise would just be biology; well, if that is God, I still don't "know" for sure. But I hope for that God. I want that God to exist. And I am giving my life over to that hope."

JONATHAN

Not bad.

AUBREY

Would you two give us a moment?

ILANA

Yes, sir.

JONATHAN

Sure. Feel better.

ILANA

(To Michael:)

You take it easy on him. He needs to rest. Get some rest, okay? Don't let him rile you up.

ILANA and JONATHAN exit.

MICHAEL

I should make you go.

AUBREY

How?

MICHAEL

I could call 9-1-1.

AUBREY

What would be the point in that?

MICHAEL

I ought to take you in right now.

AUBREY

Mike, one bypass is enough. I was ready to go back, let them do it all one more time, but all I could think about was how much I'd rather be sitting right here, talking with students, arguing with you. I know it's wrong. This place doesn't belong to me. But it is home.

MICHAEL

I hope it always will be.

AUBREY

It won't. But it looks like I may be spared the move. I'm sorry to be leaving you with the mess.

MICHAEL

Aubrey -

AUBREY

It wouldn't be so bad if, I don't know, if a storm or earthquake had taken the place. But to just go out of business. I haven't fought all my life for a piece of land, or some shabby old buildings, even though I do love them. No. I've spent the better part of sixty years trying to save an idea, not an institution. Fortunately the idea survives, in you.

MICHAEL

You don't seem too happy with where I'm taking it.

AUBREY

What good is a younger generation if nothing changes? But listen, Michael. I want you to consider the possibility that this place may have served its purpose.

Maybe it needs to die, so something else can live. It may just be that you and David are both right.

MICHAEL

Is that what you're going to say to the Trustees?

AUBREY

You think I stayed home from the hospital just so I could sit through another Trustees Meeting? I'm done with that. With all of it. As of this minute, I am retired. I'll ask one of the students to help me type the letter; you can take it to the trustees tonight. I'll recommend they name you interim dean. I'll also recommend that you accept David's offer.

DAVID enters.

DAVID

What are you doing out here?

MICHAEL

He chained himself to the bench.

AUBREY

You see this little tree, fellas? This is an American Chestnut. Forests of them covered millions of acres until somebody got the bright idea to import some foreign stock, and with it came a blight for which the ancient forests had no defense. See how it grows out of this old stump? That's as big as it ever gets, thick as your forearm, maybe ten, twelve feet tall. Takes about that many years. Then the blight comes, the cankers appear, it dies back, and there's just the old stump again. I've seen it through four lifetimes. In the late 19th century, this one used to shade the whole south side of the chapel in summer. There's an old picture of it in the common room. Taken before the blight. It can't kill the roots, you see. They are strong.

DAVID

I know they are.

AUBREY

I don't know what's going to happen to me, or this place, or the church. Certainly don't know if human beings will ever figure out this whole God thing. I know we can't go on like we are. So does Michael. So do those three children who came here for that very purpose.

David, if you spend all your time fighting for turf, son, you'll tear up the ground underneath you. Find yourself living in a desert. Preach your Gospel, Michael. Sing to the Lord a new song! Let them have these old buildings. God isn't in there. God's in there: living, dying, living again. Waiting for the end of the blight. Tell them, David. Both of you. Tell them to get up out of the pews and plant a tree or two. Build up that kingdom, don't sit on your asses waiting for it to come after you're dead.

MICHAEL

Come on. It's getting warm out here. Let's get you home.

AUBREY

David, come here. I love you, son. And I know you are trying to do right by your father, by the seminary, and by your God. I'm sorry to say this, but you may not be able to reconcile all those things.

DAVID

I know. I'm working on two out of three.

Aubrey rises with difficulty.

MICHAEL

Where do you think you're going?

AUBREY

I think I'll take a little walk.

MICHAEL

Let me come with you.

AUBREY

No. You two need to work some things out. Don't worry. I won't go far.

Aubrey exits.

DAVID

Guess this means you're in charge.

MICHAEL

I am ready to recommend your offer to the Trustees tonight. Five years to get solvent, right?

DAVID

That's what I wanted, I promise.

MICHAEL

I know. I didn't believe you at first, but I do now. We'll have to postpone the colloquium, but hell - in another year that's all we'll be doing! Red church, blue church, Jews, Muslims, Hindus...we'll get the students, the grants coming in, we'll pay back the Jesus Fund and -

DAVID

I'm sorry, Mike. Please, I need you to know I did everything I could to change his mind. I mean, my offer was made in good faith I swear to you. But I just / couldn't make him...

MICHAEL

What are you talking about? Change whose mind?

DAVID removes an envelope from his jacket pocket and hands it to MICHAEL, who opens it and starts to read the document inside. After he has read the first few lines, Michael goes inside and runs into the Common Room.

DAVID

Mike!

David goes after him. In the Common Room, Michael compares the document in his hands with the framed Deed on the wall, then he walks away, still reading.

David walks over to the Deed and looks at it.

DAVID

You almost can't read it, can you? "Should the property conveyed by this Gift cease to be used for the sole purpose of training ministers of the Christian Gospel, all right, title and interest in said property /shall revert to the grantor..."

MICHAEL

(reading from the lawsuit,
overlapping him)

"shall revert to the grantor or the grantor's heirs, as set forth in his last will and testament." This is a lawsuit.

DAVID

My dad's lawyers filed it this afternoon. You really should have read this.

MICHAEL

Why would I? That family donated this land a hundred and fifty years ago. Who is Lydia Reynolds Lipton?

DAVID

Weeks ago, we had our lawyers look all the way back to the beginning. They found the file copy of this deed, with this language in it. See, it was our ace in the hole. If you wouldn't agree to turn the seminary over to us, we'd find an heir desperate enough to sue you to get it back.

MICHAEL

But we did agree! I just agreed -

DAVID

You agreed to my terms, not my father's. When he saw that CNN interview he called me, told me he would cut me off completely unless we went through with this.

MICHAEL

How can they sue us after all this time?

DAVID

It's complicated, but apparently, because of this language in the deed, if the heirs could prove to a judge that NTS was no longer truly Christian, they could take the seminary back. So we bought their interest.

MICHAEL

But we are still a Christian seminary. Some judge is going to tell us we're not?

DAVID

With all these Jews, Muslims, and agnostics running around the quad - you writing books like *Secular Christianity* - it wouldn't be hard to make the case that you are no longer "training ministers of the Christian Gospel," that the place should be given back to the family.

MICHAEL

Oh my God.

DAVID

So we found an heir, the most desperate heir they could find in this otherwise wealthy family.

MICHAEL

Lydia Reynolds Lipton.

DAVID

The Jesus Fund bought her interest, now we stand in her shoes, legally speaking. The plan was for me to testify as an expert witness, and someone who knows the place inside and out.

MICHAEL

You came here at Aubrey's invitation. You slithered back onto this campus under false pretenses, took advantage of an old man, an old, sick man who truly loved you and offered you nothing but reconciliation and forgiveness. And you're going to stand up in a courtroom and say he's not a Christian?

DAVID

No, I'm going to say you're not a Christian. He's not the dean anymore.

MICHAEL

You son of a bitch.

DAVID

Please believe me, Mike. / This isn't what I wanted.

MICHAEL

God! Why didn't I see it? It's always the simplest explanation. You didn't get tenure twenty years ago, so once you had enough money, you just decided to buy the place so you could come back and take it over! Then when daddy wouldn't let you, when it didn't work out the way you wanted-

DAVID

This has nothing to do with what happened back then.

MICHAEL

Actually, it has everything to do with it. When you came up for tenure, Aubrey was on your side. He told the committee, "David Padget is just the leavening this place needs to really rise." The vote was 5-4 against you. I was on the committee, David.

DAVID

How did you vote?

MICHAEL

I thought your ideas were dangerous and destructive, that you were intellectually inferior. And I didn't want the competition. I was scared of you. Scared of your charisma, your money, your father. Scared that if we kept you on, one day you'd take over the place.

DAVID

Funny how it all worked out.

(Michael goes to exit, David stops him.)

Mike, I promise, I will sell my interest and give you all the money before I'll let him take it over. I've had it, you hear me? I won't go along. I swear I won't. I control The Jesus Fund.

MICHAEL

Then call off this lawsuit!

DAVID

Then what? You're still bankrupt. Let's say you do raise enough to pay off the creditors. What then? How long can you keep this place open? Don't you see? With me you had a chance. We could have done something new here. We still can -

MICHAEL

Stop it! It's too late for that. You've beaten us, David. Stop pretending you ever wanted anything else.

DAVID

I promise you. This is all going to work out for the best.
Mike...

Michael reaches in his pocket,
pulls out the paper clip, hands it
to David and exits. Lights fade.

SCENE 5

On the quad, three months later. It is late summer or early autumn. In the blackout, the sound of construction equipment, jackhammers and the beeping of trucks backing up.

As the lights come up, orange construction mesh surrounds the chestnut tree, protecting it from the heavy equipment.

Jonathan, Jamil, Michael and Ilana stand near the tree. David stands off to one side. The men wear dark suits, Ilana is wearing a cassock and surplice.

On a small table near the chestnut, an ornate pall covers a square box. MICHAEL holds a Book of Common Prayer open in front of Ilana as she extends her arms and reads:

ILANA

"Into your hands, O merciful Savior, we commend your servant Aubrey. Acknowledge, we humbly beseech thee, a lamb of your own flock, a sinner of your own redeeming. Receive him into the arms of your mercy, into the blessed rest of everlasting peace, and into the glorious company of the saints in light."

Ilana removes the pall from the box, and hands the box to Michael. He takes it over to the tree, opens it, and pours powdery, grey ashes into a hole dug amid the roots of the chestnut.

ALL

(cued by Ilana)

Amen.

They all stand in a silent circle, staring at the tree, the ashes.

ILANA

Think they'll really save this poor little tree?

MICHAEL

Who knows? They did promise to save the chapel.

JONATHAN

It'll make an awesome Starbucks.

DAVID

(quietly, to Jamil)

How's your father?

JAMIL

He's recovering. Dr. Padget, I can't tell you how much -

David stops him with a gesture.
Jonathan's phone vibrates.

JONATHAN

Our car is here. Okay. (to Ilana) Good luck in Seattle, priest.

ILANA

(hugging Jonathan)

Please be careful. I mean it. E-mail me when you get there, okay?

JONATHAN

Hey, don't worry about us. There's probably tons of Jewish Muslim gay couples teaching religious tolerance in Jerusalem. What could go wrong?

David pulls several white envelopes
from his jacket pocket. He hands
one to Jonathan.

JONATHAN

(opening his envelope)

The Aubrey Lothrop Center for Interfaith Reconciliation.

DAVID

The last of The Jesus Fund. May it finally live up to its name. Use it well, my friends.

JONATHAN

This ought to get us started. Thanks. Both of you.

JAMIL

We better go.

ILANA

Bye, sweetie.

JONATHAN

Bye, you.

ILANA

Be careful.

Jamil and Jonathan exit.

ILANA

I better go change before they kick us out.

DAVID

(handing her a check)

Here. Put a roof on the church or something.

Ilana takes the check, hugs David,
turns to Michael, hugs him, and
exits.

MICHAEL

I'm sorry.

DAVID

For what?

MICHAEL

For my lack of faith.

DAVID

The Lord always welcomes his stray sheep back to the fold,
Mike.

MICHAEL

No. I meant my faith in you.

DAVID

I'm the one who lost his faith back then. If I hadn't-

MICHAEL

No. Aubrey was right. The barriers we put up, surrounding ourselves only with people who agree with us. It is a blight on the land. It kills anything new that tries to grow.

DAVID

Then it's time we did something about it. Open that up.

Michael opens the envelope, pulls out a sheet of paper and a check.

MICHAEL

(reading the brochure)

"Red Church-Blue Church: the Padget and Brand Debates."

DAVID

That's the startup money. Come on, Mike. Whadda ya say? The first topic will be same-sex marriage. We'll sell out every stop!

MICHAEL

I don't know...

DAVID

Come on. John Chapter 2, Mike. The wedding at Cana...

Michael starts to walk off, following Ilana. David walks with him, arguing as they go.

MICHAEL

The wedding at Cana? Really? You're gonna trot out / that tired argument?

DAVID

At the wedding at Cana, by his words and deeds Christ defined marriage as between /one man and one woman -

MICHAEL

He didn't say a thing about it!

DAVID

He was there, and when he -

MICHAEL

Jesus was attending a Jewish wedding, David. And Judaism allowed for polygamy / well into the Rabbinic period...

DAVID

Now funny you should bring up polygamy. Because that's exactly the road you head down when you start arguing in favor of same-sex marriage...

They continue their argument as they exit.

Lights fade.

End of play.