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PRESENCE-CENTERED SPIRITUALITY:
LIVING WITH RESONANCE IN THE SECULAR AGE

A DISSERTATION IN THE PRACTICE OF MINISTRY
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
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BY
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Doctor of Ministry Dissertation Approval

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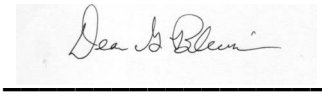
We, the undersigned, determined that this dissertation has met the academic requirements and standards of Nazarene Theological Seminary for the Doctor of Ministry program.



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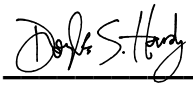

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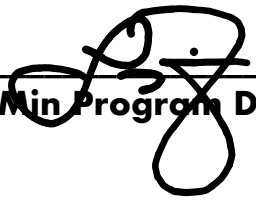

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Michael David King
Ash Wednesday, 2022
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ABSTRACT

Michael King

Presence-Centered Spirituality:
Living with Resonance in the Secular Age

North American churches' struggle with contemporary culture seems to coincide with evidence offered in Charles Taylor's evaluation of the *Secular Age* and expressed through the theological analysis of Andy Root and James K. A. Smith. Charles Taylor and Hartmut Rosa's concept of the acceleration of time provides understanding of why ministry leaders and pastors' lives are stress-filled, with little margin to even nurture their own soul and life with God. Ministry in North American churches appears hurried and formulaic with imagination for Christian formation sorely lacking. As congregations hope to re-imagine ministry in the secular age, how might they locate, and articulate, Christian practices that resonate within a world where mystery and enchantment appears absent in what Charles Taylor describes as "the immanent frame?"

Presence-centered spirituality proposes an embodied, robust, spirituality to live and make meaning within our current Secular Age. The approach informs and shapes Christian formation and ministry, cultivates communities of practice, and guides a way of living the good life that Jesus Christ offers. Presence-centered spirituality seeks to move beyond the cognitive realm to experience and encounter God.

Interaction with Charles Taylor's philosophical theory of modernity, Hartmut Rosa's sociological theory of Resonance, T. H. Lurhman's anthropological research on religion and practice, Andy Root's *Christopraxis* theological framework, along with a host of other scholars deepens a presence-centered approach to life, spirituality, and ministry to move forward toward freedom from modernity's dominance on Christianity in the Western World. Intentional presence-centered rhythms of life enable ministry leaders to be spiritually formed for the sake of others as they nurture communities of Christian practice as artists, curators, and storytellers. A rhythm of life focused on prayer, solitude, contemplation, scripture engagement, community, ministry, theological reflection, justice, stability, proximity, *Kairos* time, mindfulness, and other embodied spiritual practices are essential to living presence-centered and faithful in the way of Jesus Christ with resonance in the Secular Age.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

KJV	King James Version
MSG	The Message
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version

TABLES

INTRODUCTION

Personal Retrospective

I have lived all of my life in Kansas City, the heartland of the USA, firmly situated in the Bible Belt. The extent of my childhood religious experiences centered around amazement of nature and the universe which led to deep thoughts about the origin of it all and the mystery of why I even had a life. As I got older, my family occasionally attended a mainline church. My attendance became regular as I entered my early adolescent years of development. I remember being drawn to stories of faith and religious experiences shared by other churchgoers. Their stories moved me and opened me to the idea of a God with whom we could have a personal encounter and who desired to encounter us. I can still remember the physical, emotional, and spiritual feelings I had listening to those stories of faith.

I also remember being moved by the liturgy in my church. The reading of the Scripture text, praying *The Lord's Prayer*, reciting the *Apostle's Creed*, singing the *Glory Be*, and participating in responsive readings became deeply meaningful for me. This was happening in the midst of the adolescent awkwardness I was experiencing while trying to figure out my identity. As I reminisce, I'm grateful I was in a church that allowed me to explore who I was and who God was in a rather generous but messy and time-consuming manner. During my final years of high school, while accumulating extensive experiences of adolescent experimentation, I found myself several times being caught up in some kind of existential calamity in which Christ came to me in profound ways in the midst of my crises. Those experiences ultimately solidified my desire and passion to follow God in the way of Jesus Christ.

During college, I got involved in a ministry full of wonderful people who were moving quickly toward a fundamentalist way of practicing Christianity. The culture wars in North

America were emerging, and my spiritual journey was soon filled with a long list of do's and don'ts in pursuit of becoming truly spiritual. I even completed a Master's Degree, with encouragement and sponsorship from Jerry Falwell, at Liberty University. I had become a card-carrying member of the Moral Majority and a proud (arrogant) fundamentalist. We emphasized using our minds to know the Bible—after all, our emotions and experiences were not to be trusted because they would certainly lead us astray.[1]

After more than a decade of living within fundamentalist Christianity, I experienced an epiphany that led me to realize I was more like the Pharisees in the Gospels than like Jesus's own disciples. This awakening, after much angst-ridden wrestling, resulted in repentance for what I had become and launched the beginning of a new journey restructuring much of what I believed and practiced concerning Christianity. I soon began calling myself an evangelical, but after several years I began to notice many of the same problematic aspects of fundamentalism, which I desired to leave behind, within evangelicalism (albeit, packaged as kinder and gentler).

By the year 2000 and the beginning of a new millennium, I was becoming increasingly disillusioned with much of North American evangelicalism.[2] I felt that Christianity had been retrofitted for the American Dream and fueled by a Western rationalist agenda. I began to rethink what it meant to be a follower of Jesus Christ. I began to rediscover the mystic in me that was drawn to the beautiful liturgy of my earlier church experience. I was drawn to the classic works of early Christianity, which fueled my desire to live a life of intimacy with God. Driven to explore Christian history and thought, I discovered Nazarene Theological Seminary and its proclivity to include the classic texts of Christianity with an emphasis on thinking about theology

[1] Mike King, *Presence Centered Youth Ministry: Guiding Students into Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006). For more detail on my experiences in fundamentalist Christianity see the Introduction and Chapter One.

[2] Ibid., 24-41. For a critique of evangelicalism and ministry practice see Chapter Three, "Dysfunctional Evangelical Youth Ministry."

in the context of the texts, doctrines, and lives of the early Christian theologians—the mothers and fathers of the church. By getting a fuller picture of church history, reading the primary source documents from early Christianity like *On the Incarnation* by St. Athanasius, and traveling extensively around the world to observe Christianity in other cultural contexts, my view of Christianity was reorienting around something less bound in Western ideology.

The devotional texts and prayer books written throughout church history captivated my imagination about living life with a passionate pursuit of Jesus Christ. Texts like *The Practice of the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence, *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis, *Confessions* by St. Augustine, *Revelations of Divine Love* by Julian of Norwich, plus many more, moved me toward the Love of God. Texts like *The Rule of St. Benedict, Life Together* by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and *The Didache*, inspired me to think less about individualism and more about life in community. Discovering, reading, and praying the classic *Prayers of the Church* from a variety of ancient prayer books, along with the *Book of Common Prayer* reshaped my idea of prayer into something deeper, wider, and more theologically robust than I had ever experienced before.

I was discovering afresh my first love, to be with Jesus Christ, to sit at his feet like Mary in Luke's Gospel. I wanted to be attuned to and dwell in the presence of God in a consistent and transformational way. And I wanted to do this with others, in community, not by myself. An important aspect of this dissertation is the commitment I made to stay—to embrace stability—in the ministry where I had been serving for nearly two decades. It would have been so easy to find a place to serve that was more compatible with the changes happening in my life with God. But staying rooted in place would become a life lesson that, in many ways, defines who I am. I

stayed and embraced the calling to curate an environment with my spiritual community to learn, adapt, and grow.

With the dawn of a new millennium came a progressively wide array of sociological, philosophical, and theological questions about knowledge (epistemology), the good life, authenticity, personhood, justice, equality, sexuality, and much more. I became connected with a lot of others in ministry who had similar backgrounds and were asking the same questions I was pondering about what it means to follow Jesus in our changing cultural context. What does a missional church look like at the dawn of the 21st century? Why is North American evangelicalism so aligned with a political agenda? Why are so many people walking away from the church? What are the epistemological issues that impact our theological pursuits? What kinds of ecclesiological, theological corrections need to happen? Often the cultural context was described as "postmodern." Soon, the issue of postmodernity, what it was, what it meant and how we respond to it became a lightning rod. Thank God, burning at the stake wasn't an option for dealing with religious opposition in North America.

Responding to the turbulence within the church, megachurch Pastor Rick Warren wrote *The Purpose Driven Life,* which sold millions of copies.[3] While undoubtedly providing hope for many trying to navigate through the tumultuous times, *The Purpose Driven Life* is a great example of theologically shallow Christianity wrapped up in North American pragmatism. I began to think more deeply about the theological, ministry, and life framework I was focusing on as presence-centered. Contrasted with *Purpose Driven,* presence-centered is about practicing the presence of God in all aspects of life and ministry. Being presence-centered involves living life and engaging in ministry out of the fullness of your life with God. Living presence-centered

[3] Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002).

requires a community ethos, not an individualistic posture. A presence-centered spirituality embraces a rhythm of life that nurtures and cares for our souls, engages in ministry within a communal framework, and orders our lives to embrace a way of living that leads to life to the full as Jesus promised in John 10:10.

In 2006, IVP published *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry: Guiding Students into Spiritual Formation*. *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry* described how Youthfront (the ministry I lead) was practicing a theologically robust youth ministry, not with inventive pedagogical theories, innovative programs, or novel cutting-edge ministry strategies. We were actually recovering classic Christian formation, which seemed more pre-modern than postmodern, especially since we weren't really sure what postmodernism was. *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry* critiqued North American evangelical youth ministry practices steeped in modernity's many influences shaped over 500 post-reformation years. The ideas set forth were not new and innovative but suggested the importance of recovering classic Christian practices and Christian thought that have been a part of two thousand years of church history. Unfortunately, this also added to the apprehension of many frightened by reconsideration of ecclesial practices, the growing focus on spiritual formation, theological inquiry, and alteration of hermeneutic methodology. Many "concerned" evangelical Christians labeled my book and its ideas "new age," "mysticism," or "too catholic." Often, these were the same people who were really worried about all things considered postmodern.

Following the release of my book, I continued to build a presence-centered theological framework. Serving as the Chief Editor for the *Immerse Journal*[4] and focusing on the role of practical theology for ministry and spiritual formation, coincided with my *theological turn* and further movement away from pragmatism as a hermeneutical structure.

[4] Mike King, ed., *Immerse Journal* (Kansas City, MO: Barefoot Ministries, n.d.).

Dissertation on Presence-Centered Spirituality in a Secular Age

This dissertation attempts to articulate a presence-centered spirituality within the cultural reality of an increasingly dominant Secular Age firmly rooted in an immanent frame. Even within a Secular Age, Christian spirituality can provide a relevant witness to an unbelieving world. Human beings living in a secularized culture find themselves drawn to transcendent possibilities that possess the potential to move them deeply. Charles Taylor's theory of secularization, which includes the possibilities for transcendence even within the Secular Age, provides a critical issue for this dissertation. Viewed through a theological lens, Hartmut Rosa's sociological theory of human beings' relationship to the world expands the reality of a spiritual, transcendent experience. Rosa's concept of *resonance* deeply corresponds with a presence-centered spirituality. T. M. Luhrmann's anthropological research of human practice as "kindling a sense of God's presence" reinforces a presence-centered spirituality that includes embodied practices, engaged in community, as an essential dynamic of its theological framework.

A *theological turn* provides a key component for fleshing out a presence-centered spirituality. Theologian Andy Root inspired and continues to influence this theological turn.[5] A growing passion for theology fueled my thinking and practice of presence-centered spirituality. My doctoral studies both deepened my thinking about presence-centered spirituality and continue to guide the formational practices critical to a presence-centered spirituality. The scholarship reflective of my studies and represented in this dissertation richly add to a presence-centered spirituality framework.

Presence-centered spirituality does not describe some new, innovative, theological, or spiritual construct. Presence-centered life and ministry occur in all cultures and in all times. Yet

[5] Andrew Root and Kenda Creasy Dean, *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011). Root and Dean coined the phrase "theological turn" in this text.

presence-centered spirituality can serve as a corrective move over and against a North American evangelical mindset entrenched in pragmatism and nationalism.

The imagination for Christian formation in the evangelical church appears sorely lacking, largely reduced to “prayer,” “reading the Bible,” “going to church (the one that best meets my needs),” “loving my country,” “being pro-birth,” and “voting for the right candidate.” When someone might ask the average church attender to describe their prayer life, these congregants may feel hard-pressed to speak of specific practices of prayer or Bible engagement. Emerging generations find themselves increasingly disengaged with the life of the church. The shallow, yet normative spirituality of Christian ministers, pastors, and leaders leads to burnout and, therefore, remains problematic for shepherding congregations in healthy ways. Ministry leaders and pastors live stress-filled lives with little margin to nurture their own souls. Ministry appears hurried and quirky, rather than living holistically from the overflow of a full life. Business leadership models fuel pastoral ministry in the church rather than a kenotic move to followership. Furthermore, churches and Christian organizations seek new programs and additional resources as primary tools of growth, while overlooking the importance of a relational ontology for Christian spirituality, personhood, community, and life to the full.

Living a presence-centered life, one rooted in a presence-centered community of Christian practice, proves challenging in the contemporary cultural landscape of our Western world. And yet, I believe it is possible to renew the ecclesial witness to our culture of the alternate reality of God’s Kingdom and God’s work of the restoration of all things.

Chapter Overview

In Chapter 1, I will set forth Charles Taylor's arguments for his theory of secularization. The cumulative dynamics of his secularization theory has resulted in what he calls the Secular Age in current Western civilization. Taylor, a prolific philosopher and professor from Canada, provides an astute construct to think about modernity, post-modernity, and secularization. Taylor seeks to answer how and why society moved from an enchanted world in the year 1500 (when the social imaginary of the West remained pregnant with transcendence and almost universal acceptance of the reality of God) to 500 years later when society finds itself firmly entrenched in an immanent frame. In this immanent frame, faith appears extremely fragilized, and the social imaginary is defined as hyper-skeptical about the existence of a God—especially a God who people encounter or a people who God encounters. While this shift might appear, at first, depressing to followers enthusiastic about God, religion, or church, the description provides a meaningful way to understand the current culture and clues to how people might find a way to move forward into God's future. Taylor's theory of secularization, with all its philosophical, sociological, and religious concepts and social dynamics provides a significant contextual framework for the importance of presence-centered spirituality.

In Chapter 2, I will argue for the importance of a theological turn toward a presence-centered spirituality in the Secular Age. The process of a turn to the theological in life and ministry increasingly shift the focus more intentionally toward the present reality of people's lives and the actual issues they are dealing with. This requires the necessity of theological reflection and action from a pastoral impulse and posture. Engaging in ministry as a practical theologian requires that we seek discernment to understand the dynamic complexities that may be involved in a person's life and how they might encounter God's action in those realities. Root's theological work helps us think about how people can faithfully live in a way that

acknowledges a person's agency and personhood, while allowing participation in the arrival of a God who comes to them as the ultimate Minister who justifies and transforms.

In the midst of the dominance of pragmaticism as an overarching characteristic of North American Christianity, we must consider what needs to be jettisoned and what needs to be recovered and renewed. Interacting with the work of Root, theological reflection provides discernment to connect ministry, with a generous pastoral posture, in collaboration with God's action on behalf of those to whom God ministers. God comes to us as minister, as Root indicates, which proves essential in moving from an understanding of ministry as "the subject" to a belief in God as the heart and subject of ministry. The theological turn required for this moves us from a primary focus on human action to divine action. Root challenges us to find the intersections of human and divine action in life and ministry. Essential for a presence-centered spirituality in a Secular Age is a theological framework that describes the importance of both the immanence of God, in Jesus Christ, and the transcendence of a God who desires to reveal Godself to us and desires to commune with us. Root's engagement with the implications of Taylor's Secular Age further informs this dissertation.

In Chapter 3, Hartmut Rosa's theory of *resonance* provides an important insight to support spirituality practiced in Taylor's immanent frame. Taylor argues that religion and other events have the potential to occasion transcendence. Taylor indicates this potential of transcendence may unexpectantly emerge within the "immanent frame," a possibility that points to something mysterious and more substantive beyond a "non-faith" vision of human flourishing. Rosa explores this "potential to occasion transcendence." To argue for transcendent encounters in a presence-centered way of life and ministry, Rosa's concept of resonance proves vital for describing a culture wide desire for—and experience with—something transcendent beyond the

immanent frame. The reality of meaningful transcendent experiences is normative in a presence-centered spirituality, way of life, and ministry. Rosa's theory of resonance provides a brilliant structure to think about what it means as a follower of Jesus rooted in a Christian community, to think theologically, engage in ministry and spiritual practices, and encounter God within our Secular Age. For Rosa, resonance is not just an emotion or a feeling but ultimately a mode of relationship. Thinking theologically about Rosa's theory of resonance has contributed significantly to and deepened the concept of what it means to be presence-centered. Living life to the full involves resonant relationships of encounter, not only within ourselves, but also with others, with God, and with God's creation.

Chapter 4 offers an argument for the critical role of bodily practices in nurturing a presence-centered spirituality, drawing on Tanya Marie Luhrmann's research and findings on religious practice and belief from the field of anthropology. Luhrmann's work supports the case that liturgy and spiritual practices with bodily engagement are fundamental in faith formation, establishing faith frames and beliefs. Luhrmann makes and defends her assertion that prayer, ritual, and worship remain critical for people to feel that God is present and accessible. Her data reinforces presence-centered spirituality. Luhrmann's description of the effectiveness of "Spiritual Kindling" coincides with presence-centered rhythms of life. Luhrmann's anthropological lens acknowledges the inner awareness (mindfulness) that stimulates human imagination and fuels human beings ability to grasp that which is not necessarily accessible to the senses. Engaging the body proves essential to curating an environment for the flourishing of communities of Christian practice. Presence-centered spiritual formation is rooted in both classic Christian practices, along with a consideration of new holistic practices with an emphasis on the

importance of bodily engagement, rhythms, and theological imagination. Christian formation in the Secular Age must happen within a community of Christian practice.

Chapter 5 transitions from descriptions of characteristics and dynamics of the Secular Age (Taylor); the critical need for a robust theological turn (Root); evaluation of resonance as a mode of meaningful relationships (Rosa); and the efficacy of spiritual practices impact on vibrant, embodied faith (Luhrmann); toward the case for presence-centered spirituality providing a holistic and relational way of life and ministry in Jesus Christ that practices the presence of God in the midst of a Secular Age. Presence-centered spirituality is fueled by a robust Christology and *Christopraxis*, which fuels a passionate priority to sit at the feet of Jesus and learn what it means to practice the presence of God. The hiddenness and/or absence of God is examined as we consider the theological reality of transcendence and God's presence in the Secular Age. The importance of practicing the presence of God and connecting this to the imitation of God and participation in the divine nature of God is explored as essential for presence-centered spirituality.

Chapter 6 examines the importance of a developing a holistic spiritual rhythm of life. Much attention is given to the importance of prayer as a foundational characteristic of a presence-centered spirituality. A plethora of Christian prayer practices are considered—some ancient, some new—that move toward Paul's instruction to "pray without ceasing."[6] Much space and attention is given to prayer in developing a rhythm of life because of the essential role of prayer in presence-centered spirituality. The use of the body in prayer is also emphasized in presence-centered spirituality supported by Scripture and the work of Rosa and Luhrmann. Additionally, other important aspects of a presence-centered rhythm of life are explored. These aspects include Scripture engagement that goes beyond an exegetical approach to include

[6] 1 Thess. 5:17.

devotional interaction with the text through *Lectio Divina*, meditation, contemplation, and imagination. Presence-centered spirituality includes praying with nature to broaden the potential for transcendent encounters with the divine and to experience resonance. Filling our lives with tangible reminders, calling attention to the presence of God, proves important in a rhythm of life. Discovering the unique things that make a person feel alive is a part of that person's spirituality and should be incorporated into their presence-centered rhythm of life. Also, listening and being fully present to the people we encounter along the way is at the heart of presence-centeredness.

Chapter 7 examines why presence-centered spirituality is a communal rather than an individual endeavor. A presence-centered spirituality requires a Christocentric and Trinitarian shaped community to live it out. In the individualistic world of the Secular Age with its unique project of identity formation pursued in the guise of authenticity, it is extremely challenging to curate a presence-centered community. The expressive individualism and exclusive humanism of the Secular Age appear insufficient for making meaning and often these mutual perspectives lead to alienation. We will explore how persons can become fully presence-centered toward one another. We consider Jean Lave's situated learning theory as the pedagogical approach to presence-centered spirituality and how this shapes spiritual formation and learning in community.

Chapter 8, the final chapter, examines the art of living and curating a presence-centered spirituality. Curating a presence-centered spirituality approaches life and ministry with the posture and heart of an artist within a community, passionately pursuing love, relationship, resonance, restoration, and redemption in Jesus Christ. Artists of presence-centered spirituality embrace the art of storytelling, the necessity of contemplation, and a posture toward resonance as essential characteristics of presence-centered spirituality. We consider counter-cultural

theological ideas about *place* and *time*. Presence-centered spirituality requires intentionality in living that include thinking about *time* and *place* differently. Jesus's incarnation forms thinking about rootedness in place and developing a theology of place, enabling a presence-centered community of Christian practice to emerge. In tandem with Jesus's incarnation was his *kenotic* move of *displacement*. We examine how the practice of pilgrimage is important in light of commitment to rootedness in place. Presence-centered spirituality is also inseparable from a posture of regard toward *kairos* time and a proper understanding of how to interact with *chronos* time. *Eucharist* helps us embrace a new understanding and vision of time. *Sabbath rest* is a practice that helps people not be overcome by the Secular Age's frenetic acceleration of time. Living presence-centered is at the heart of living life to the full, making meaning for people's lives, and the flourishing of communities of Christian practice in a Secular Age for the sake of God's mission in the world.

CHAPTER 1:
THE EMERGENCE OF A SECULAR AGE AND ITS IMPACT ON CHRISTIANITY AND MODERNITY

Charles Taylor and the Secular Age

In 2007, Charles Taylor published *A Secular Age*. His overarching thesis was to describe secularization happening in religion and culture from a historical perspective by scrutinizing the Western world's evolution of modernity. Taylor does not hold to a subtraction pattern for this process but new, ever adapting, forms of religious belief, and expression. More specifically, Taylor declared, "the change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others."[7]

Since its release, *A Secular Age* has generated abundant analysis and formal discourse that is still picking up steam among historians, educators, philosophers, sociologists, and theologians. Eminent church historian Marty Martin stated, "The people with whom we hang out are almost of one mind in showing enthusiasm for *A Secular Age*. I know of humanities and divinity faculties that are studying it for a year, so provocative is it."[8] Rene Kollar states, Taylor "adroitly studies multifaceted and complex historical events such as the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the Romantic movement, and the counter culture of the 1960s to show how Western culture has arrived at the secular age."[9] The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams weighed in on Taylor's view of secularization: "*A Secular Age* offers a uniquely rich historical and philosophical overview of how we came to take a disenchanted world for granted —quietly inviting us to reflect that if disenchantment and the absence of the divine were learned

[7] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

[8] Douglas Shantz, "The Place of Religion in a Secular Age: Charles Taylor's Explanation of the Rise and Significance of Secularism in the West" (paper presented at the Iwaasa Lecture on Urban Theology, Foothills Alliance Church, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, March 16, 2009). Shantz was quoting Martin Marty.

[9] Rene Kollar, "A Secular Age," *The Heythrop Journal* 52 no. 3 (2011): 535–536.

habits of mind, they might not necessarily be the self-evidently rational truths so many think they are."

Before he died, Robert Bellah, American sociologist and the Elliott Professor of Sociology at the University of California, Berkeley wrote, "Charles Taylor's remarkable book *A Secular Age* achieves something quite different from what other writers on secularization have accomplished. Most have focused on decline as the essence of secularism—either the removal of religion from sphere after sphere of public life, or the decrease of religious belief and practice. But Taylor focuses on what kind of religion makes sense in a secular age."[10] And, noted philosopher/theologian Alasdair MacIntyre touts, "Taylor's book is a major and highly original contribution to the debates on secularization that have been ongoing for the past century. There is no book remotely like it."[11] Taylor's evaluation of secularization and his articulation of the spiritually evolving terrain have instigated much scholarly dialogue and deeply informed this dissertation.

While many books prove noteworthy in their own right. Taylor's work, as the reviews suggest, provides a perspective that appears innovative in explaining contemporary culture. Taylor's writing also seems to speak directly to a given social setting influencing Youthfront as the ministry changed during the last twenty years. Taylor speaks particularly into contemporary evangelicalism, especially those evangelically-minded ministers introduced to postmodernity. Understanding Taylor's helpful voice, alongside others, explains some of the continued interest in—and fatigue around—postmodern evangelical ministry. Taylor provides an alternative path forward, giving the motivation for addressing the Secular Age as a primary goal in this writing.

[10] Robert N. Bellah, "The Rules of Engagement: Communion in a Scientific Age," *Commonweal*, September 12, 2008, https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/rules-engagement.

[11] Alasdair MacIntyre, "Endorsement: A Secular Age," *Harvard University Press*, accessed May 2, 2020, https://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?content=reviews&isbn=9780674026766.

Setting the Stage for the Secular Age

It wasn't long after the beginning of the new millennium when the dialogue about modernity and postmodernity moved to the forefront of thinking about theology, sociology, philosophy, doctrine, and ecclesiology within evangelical ministry. Words like epistemology, deconstruction, metanarratives, and post-foundationalism shaped conversations in pursuit of meaning and truth. As this dialogue grew, fueled by conferences, articles, books, and online forums, ministry leaders seemed to predominately gravitate toward one of two postures, either viewing postmodernity as a danger to the church, to Christians, and the truth (with a capital "T"); or embracing postmodernity as a wonderful new opportunity to more fully be the church, a more authentic Christian, and facilitate correction from the ill effects of modernity which had domesticated faith and neutered truth. Myron Penner, who served as editor for *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, describes the polarization triggered by this issue:

> The group of Christian scholars, who favor postmodernism, tend to believe that the postmodern naysayers just do not "get it," that they are too blinded by their modern prejudice and categories to engage with postmodernity meaningfully. Meanwhile, the tendency of the Christian critics of postmodernity is to believe that the other group is slipping into heresy by merely mentioning the possible value of the insights of the postmodern turn.[12]

Penner pronounced postmodernity as a "fundamental change in the way the world is perceived" an "ethos," "Zeitgeist," or "worldview."[13] Whether a person embraced postmodernity or were repulsed by the subject, it was a cultural lightning rod for many people engaged in ministry.

Postmodernity

[12] Myron Penner, ed., *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn: Six Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 14.

[13] Ibid., 17.

Some have argued that postmodernity just describes hypermodernity[14] while others view postmodernity as the emergence of a philosophical reality that brings correction from modernity's overreaching rationalist agenda dominating the last 500 years of Western civilization. Hauerwas's assertion was that "many aspects of modernity are the result of a corrupt or corrupted Christianity."[15] Hundreds of leaders around the country were part of the vanguard of this new, evangelical, movement (often called the *Emerging Church Movement*) leading to a reshaping of ecclesiological practice and inspiring theological imagination. Voices like Brian McLaren[16] (liberal leaning, culturalist, story-teller), Tony Jones[17] (practical theologian, provocateur), Phyllis Tickle[18] (author, religion editor), Doug Pagitt[19] (author, pastor), and Michael Frost[20] (missiologist, theologian) provided energy alongside others for this exploration of what it should look like to live in the way of Jesus within a growing postmodern cultural context.

Serious evangelical theologians like Stanley Grenz and John Franke began to engage early and directly in this movement and dialogue. Together they wrote the book, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*[21] in 2001, which inspired much

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[14] J. Richard Middleton and Brian Walsh, *Truth is Stranger than it Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

[15] Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, "'Long Live the Weeds and the Wilderness Yet': Reflections on A Secular Age." *Modern Theology* 26, no. 3 (2010): 350.

[16] Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian: A Tale of Two Friends on a Spiritual Journey*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

[17] Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry: Exploring Cultural Shift, Creating Holistic Connections, Cultivating Authentic Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Youth Specialties, 2001).

[18] Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008).

[19] Doug Pagitt, *Reimagining Spiritual Formation: A Week in the Life of an Experimental Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

[20] Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally in a Post-Christian Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006).

[21] Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke. *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context*. 1st ed. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.

conversation on what it means to know, believe, think theologically, and live in a postmodern world. Penner, writing about Franke's contribution to postmodern theological inquiry, states:

> By and large, Franke sees postmodernism as a basic fact and a cultural reality. He finds this situation is not nearly so bleak as modernity proved for Christian theology, and, in fact, believes it presents Christian theology with an opportunity. Franke is interested in the nonfoundationalist turn of postmodern discourse. The heart of this turn, for Franke, is the concept of a 'chastened rationality' that has given up on the modern quest for absolute certainty and indubitable foundations for knowledge… Despite denying modernist claims of universal rationality or infallibility, such a theology is global, Franke argues, in its faithfulness to ecumenical orthodoxy.[22]

Those who were passionate about the postmodern question seemed obsessed with French philosophy but not necessarily interpreting or understanding this thinking very well.

Theologian James K. A. Smith weighed in relatively early in the postmodern, emerging church conversation. In his book *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*[23] Smith sets out to correct misperceptions of what prominent French postmodern philosophers Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Michel Foucault were saying. Smith explores whether these philosophers were dismissing and deconstructing Christianity by examining the meaning of each one's defining slogan of postmodernity. For Derrida it was the assertion, "There is nothing outside of the text." Postmodernity is "incredulity toward metanarratives" was Lyotard's argument, and "power is knowledge" was the view of Foucault. Smith believed these statements were surrounded with misunderstanding of what these philosophers were actually trying to say. In fact, Smith argues that the claims of these French philosophers essentially resonate deeply with orthodox Christian views and could serve to correct modernity's negative impact on Christianity. Smith included a short summary on how these postmodern concepts might be helpful for the church:

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[22] Penner, *Christianity and the Postmodern Turn*, 27.

[23] James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?: Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006).

> • **Derrida**. Deconstruction's claim that there is "nothing outside the text" can be considered a radical translation of the Reformation principle sola scriptura. In particular, Derrida's insight should push us to recover two key emphases of the church: (a) the centrality of Scripture for mediating our understanding of the world as a whole and (b) the role of community in the interpretation of Scripture.
> • **Lyotard**. The assertion that postmodernity is "incredulity toward metanarratives" is ultimately a claim to be affirmed by the church, pushing us to recover (a) the narrative character of Christian faith, rather than understanding it as a collection of ideas, and (b) the confessional nature of our narrative and the way in which we find ourselves in a world of competing narratives.
> • **Foucault**. The seemingly disturbing, even Nietzschean claim that "power is knowledge" should push us to realize what MTV learned long ago: (a) the cultural power of formation and discipline, and hence (b) the necessity of the church to enact counter reformation by counter disciplines. In other words, we need to think about discipline as a creational structure that needs proper direction. Foucault has something to tell us about what it means to be a disciple.[24]

Deconstruction had been all the rage. No doubt, the role of deconstruction as a philosophical and literary method of critiquing meaning is an important aspect of seeking reality and truth; but deconstruction within ecclesial contexts during the 2000's became more of a cultural mindset toward blowing things up.

James K. A. Smith calls for moving away from this idea of "deconstruction" declaring that "when Derrida introduced the term in the late 1960s, he did not intend it as a primarily negative notion, even if he did intend it as a kind of criticism. For Derrida deconstruction is ultimately positive and constructive."[25] And Lyotard, according to Smith, critiques "metanarrative" in the context of "the supposed rationality of modern scientific stories about the world" claiming to be "demonstrable by reason alone."[26] Lyotard makes a distinction between "narrative knowledge" and "scientific knowledge" according to Smith.[27] Focusing on recovering

[24] Ibid., 23-24.
[25] Ibid., 34.
[26] Ibid., 65.
[27] Ibid., 66.

Scripture as narrative and discovering the biblical authors shaping of the text was exhilarating and generative.

Moving Toward More Productive Conversations and Practices in a Secular Age

The conversation of what it looks like to do ministry in the context of a Secular Age may provide a more constructive opportunity for theological reflection and dialogue on issues like soteriology, ecclesiology, spiritual formation, apologetics, hamartiology, and much more than the postmodern conversation has. Postmodernity became such a lightning rod. Many associates who cried "slippery slope" about any conversation with a postmodern perspective have taken up to a decade to eventually come to grips with many of the changes necessary for theological or ecclesial corrections. While the conversation is still moving forward, this same group may be more open to engage with the dynamics of what Taylor calls the Secular Age.

When Charles Taylor states that we live in a Secular Age, what is he actually saying? What is a Secular Age, and how did it emerge? Taylor asks, "Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?"[28] These are critical and essential questions to be considered and explored for contextualizing Christianity and spiritual formation in our current cultural environment.

In the midst of the many views of secularization, Taylor takes a unique and different approach to "secularization theory." The dominant streams of social theories of secularization tend to describe how a society undergoes transformation away from spiritual and religious values toward increasingly nonreligious ideals and standards. These hasten religions movement toward decline and irrelevancy as a result of growing incompatibility with modern scientific advancement. But Taylor believes the move toward secularization is not a "subtraction story" in

[28] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 25.

which religion's place in society is gradually replaced and diminished by rational and enlightened advancement. With this thesis, Taylor stands out among other historians, philosophers, and sociologists. Taylor's work is centered on the history of philosophy, and the history and sociology of religion.

The Move Toward Secularization

Instead of viewing modernity as a phenomenon that increasingly swallows up religion, Taylor makes the assertion that a combination of conditions over the last 500 years have shaped and "fragilized" both faith and disbelief. According to Taylor, the good life in the Secular Age comes through exclusive humanism for the purpose of human flourishing. Taylor calls this the "immanent frame." And this immanent frame, according to Taylor, "constitutes a 'natural order, to be contrasted to a 'supernatural' one, an 'immanent' world, over and against a possible 'transcendent' one."[29] But Taylor sets out to show that religion occasions transcendence. This transcendence, which can unexpectantly emerge within the "immanent frame," points to something mysterious beyond human flourishing. If the diminishment of religion is not the result of a subtraction story, what is behind our current state of secularity? Michael Warner, Yale professor of English and American studies describes Taylor's view in which "secularity in its modern Western sense is significantly a product of the long history of reform movements within Western Christianity."[30] Taylor, according to Warner, believes this Western reform movements "also helped shape the rise of an understanding of an impersonal natural order in which God intervened less frequently (if ever) and which could be the object of a purely natural science."[31] So, Western Christianity contributes to the emergence of a Secular Age.

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[29] Ibid., 542.

[30] Michael Warner, Jonathan VanAntwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, eds., *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 10.

[31] Ibid., 15.

Taylor begins the historical story of his thesis even before the Protestant Reformation, with late Medieval dissatisfaction toward religious hierarchy and structures within Latin Christendom. There were many attempts to narrow the gap between the lives of laypeople and the religious elites. There was a growing priority to discipline the whole society to higher standards. The religious renewal of the Protestant Reformation had three primary foci: a move away from the dual system of religious practice in hopes of more personal devotion overall (not just the religious orders but also the laity), a move away from sacramental religious practice and a growing emphasis on inward devotion and imitation, and the idea of salvation by faith ever important because of views of judgment and damnation.[32]

The Protestant Reformation

For Taylor, the Protestant Reformation is central to the story of "the abolition of an enchanted cosmos, and the eventual creation of a humanist alternative to faith… (The Reformation is the) engine of disenchantment."[33] Taylor, specifically points to reformer John Calvin and his theological framework as one of the biggest factors in hastening the disenchantment of the world and domestication of Christianity. Historian Douglas H. Shantz agrees with Taylor's critique of Calvin and declares, "Calvin rejected the sacramental religion of Roman Catholicism, the elements of magic in the old religion, in a way that Luther did not. Calvinist Reform also focused on the re-ordering of society. This included three levels of order-building: a disciplined personal life, a well-ordered society, and the right inner attitude."[34] Through the Reformation process many religious things (relics, bread, wine), places (the woods, cemeteries, sanctuaries) no longer contained power, magic, or forces that could impact

[32] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 63, 70-72, 75.
[33] Ibid., 77.
[34] Shantz, "The Place of Religion in a Secular Age," 14.

vulnerable human beings' "porous selves." In *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, Warner declared,

> The reform effort also helped shape the rise of an understanding of an impersonal natural order in which God intervened less frequently (if ever) and which could be the object of a purely natural science. It shaped equally a transformation of the self to create individual subjects—"Buffered selves"—able to take a distanced view of everything outside the mind.[35]

These dynamics profoundly impacted Latin Christendom and fueled a growing emphasis upon lay piety. Unfortunately, along the way important facets of spiritual life were side-lined through this process of "excarnation." In its fear of idolatry, the Reformation brought a disembodying of spiritual life; religious life expressed itself less and less in meaningful bodily forms and more and more "in the head." Taylor believes this movement toward excarnation has resulted in the spiritual life shifting from an embodied reality to the locus of the mind.

Shantz notes Taylor's critique of the Reformation for its tendency to homogenize and reduce Christianity.[36] Historian Jonathan Sheehan, picks up this thought:

> Among its many potent effects, reform pushed Christianity toward "excarnation," pushed Christianity away from corporeal practices to mental states, to doctrinal propositions to which one can assent or not. This newly powerful doctrinal core of Christianity is, many historians assert, essential to this side of the hinge, essential to the "Christian" as it emerges out of the early modern period. This is not just a Protestant shift. Indeed, the "confessionalization" thesis points to the convergent evolutions of Catholicism and Protestantism in the early modern period. As Christianity splintered in the wake of the European Reformation and each group produced a confession (the Lutheran Confession of Augsbürg, the Catholic Tridentine Confession, and so on), the content of these confessions came to define the very essence of the religious lives of their adherents.[37]

Taylor argues that the Protestant Reformation and, in many ways, the Catholic Counter-Reformation, fueled by the influence of Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution intertwined, systematically shrinks Christianity to the sum of its doctrinal statements. While this dynamic

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[35] Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun, *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, 15.

[36] Shantz, "The Place of Religion in a Secular Age," 14.

[37] Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun, *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, 222.

took centuries to unfold, it seems to have approached an apex from the last third of the 20th century up unto the present time. In many ways, since the turn of the 21st century, concerns over these dynamics fueled the emerging church conversation, the missional church movement, the ancient-future stream, and church planting efforts along with many expressions of critiquing and reimagining biblical, doctrinal, ecclesial, theological, epistemological, philosophical, and sociological issues.

The Changing Scope of Religious Belief

In his review of *A Secular Age*, religion scholar Martin Marty argues that not only does Taylor want to "keep the doors between science and religion open, he also wants to widen the window to transcendence, some sense of the 'beyond' that secular thinkers have tried for centuries to close. He is what we might call a 'Christian humanist' and is therefore critical of what he calls 'exclusive humanism.'"[38] Taylor defines "exclusive humanism" as the conviction that the good life lived to the fullness of human flourishing is thoroughly possible without transcendent or metaphysical reality.

Taylor stresses that religious belief has changed in substance and scope for people living in the Secular Age. Matthew Rose, Director and Sr. Fellow at Berkeley Institute, describes this change:

> The mark of a secular society is that believers can no longer enjoy a "simple" or "naïve" faith. The "conditions of belief" have changed such that Western Christians are now unable to believe without reservations, without uneasily looking over their shoulders. The honest believer must concede, "I am never, or only rarely, really sure, free of all doubt, untroubled by some objection—by some experience which won't fit." In sum: Secularism means that our Christian experience is now shaped by a lurking uncertainty. To be secular is therefore neither to deny the existence of God nor to affirm the triumph of science over religion.[39]

[38] Martin E. Marty, "A Secular Age by Charles Taylor," *Church History* 77 no. 3 (2008): 775.

[39] Matthew Rose, "Tayloring Christianity: Charles Taylor is a Theologian of the Secular Status Quo," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life*, December 2014, https://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/12/tayloring-christianity.

Rose concurs with Taylor's view that secularization is not caused by the subtraction of one set of beliefs for another. Rose reminds us that Max Webber is the strongest proponent of the idea that archaic religious beliefs have been replaced by rational, science-based beliefs. Taylor's argument against "subtraction theory" eclipses Webber's view concerning the relationship between secularization and religion. Instead of a gradual subtraction of Christian beliefs, Taylor argues that the very nature and conditions of beliefs have changed.

Key Concepts and Terms in Taylor's Framework of Ideas

Secular 1, Secular 2, Secular 3

Taylor tries to nuance his explanation of what the "secular" of a Secular Age means by describing the characteristics and key elements between three unique progressions and distinctions of secularity. Taylor's definition of *Secular 1* describes Western Latin Christendom's definition of the non-religious, profane activities. Obviously, going to Mass, observing the church calendar, prayer, monastic life, the priesthood, etc. were religious and sacred activities and vocations. Working as a farmer or laborer was profane and secular. There was a very defined and established dichotomy between sacred and secular activity. Doing secular work didn't mean you were not religious; it just meant that activity wasn't classified as sacred. Taylor summarizes *Secular 1* as the retreat of religion in the public life. In *Secular 1*, the secular realm is distinguished from the sacred realm. In the sacred realm people do religious things like partake in Eucharist and in the secular realm people do irreligious things, like secular work.

In *Secular 2*, Taylor describes the reality that more people ceased to pursue religion or define themselves as religious. In *Secular 2* we have the rise of atheism and the growth of the influence of rationalism and scientism. In *Secular 2*, people who describe themselves as

"secular" are acknowledging that they are not religious. Taylor summarizes *Secular 2* as the decline in belief and practices.[40]

Taylor argues that *Secular 3* is something altogether unique in that it describes the actual conditions of belief. "The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace… belief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives. And this will also likely mean that at least in certain milieu, it may be hard to sustain one's faith."[41] Taylor summarizes *Secular 3* as the actual change in the conditions of belief.[42] And it is *Secular 3* that increasingly defines cultural contexts in the Western world. Although, in the USA, aspects of *Secular 1*, *2*, and *3* dynamics are in play and descriptive of the uniqueness of the USA which was founded without an official state religion or church and as a result may be more of a *Secular 2* culture than Western European contexts.

From Enchantment to Disenchantment, From a Porous Self to a Buffered Self

Taylor defines two sets of tandem concepts—the shift from an *enchanted* versus *disenchanted* world and the shift from a *porous self* to a *buffered self*—to describe how people largely viewed and interacted with the world and faith in the pre-modern versus modern age. In the premodern age, people primarily viewed reality through the lens of an enchanted world and believed the individual was a porous self that could be directly impacted through supernatural forces. Taylor describes disenchantment as the undoing of the enchanted world ruled by spiritual and moral forces. In the enchanted world, the self is porous, vulnerable to spirits and demonic forces. The individual needs a protector. The self was vulnerable to a world of enchantment in

[40] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 423.
[41] Ibid., 3.
[42] Ibid., 423.

which powers and spirits could invade and influence the person. A person could be overtaken by an evil spirit. The person living in the social imaginary of the enchanted world was extremely vulnerable to the forces outside of their personhood and there was a dependency on the church, church calendar, liturgy, holy days, and clergy to offer them protection. In the disenchanted world, the porous nature of the person shifts toward the idea of a *buffered self*. The modern "buffered self" is protected from these kinds of fears. For the modern, buffered self, the possibility exists of maintaining a distance from, and disengaging from everything outside the mind. As a result, the "buffered self can form the ambition of disengaging from whatever is beyond the boundary, and of giving its own autonomous order to its life. The absence of fear can be not just enjoyed, but seen as an opportunity for self-control or self-direction."[43] And ultimately this dynamic would provide the "freedom" to be the kind of individual one chose to be based on their own internal choices.

Modernity's Impact, Both Good and Bad

Culturally dominating religious beliefs were gradually being reimagined over the centuries from the 1500's to present, toward a scientific way of understanding the world, both seen and unseen. Without a doubt, much of these changes were and still are welcomed, even by the most religious communities. We are thankful for medical advancement, for vaccines, surgeries, antibiotics, and medicines. We would not want to roll back progress resulting from science. Unfortunately, inspired by the reformation and the growing influence of the enlightenment, theologians and Christian thinkers assumed that faith, belief, doctrine, and how we read the Bible needed to be reworked into rational, enlightenment concepts in order to not be left behind in the progress of scientific advancements. American Episcopal ethicist, Timothy Sedgwick, described the premodern enchanted world as "sacralized and drenched with powers—

[43] Ibid., 38-39.

spirits, demons, cosmic forces—that break in upon the self, that must be directly encountered, engaged, placated, honored; hence the importance of holy things and holy places, sacred mysteries and sacramental rites, prayers and incantations."[44] Like Taylor, Sedgwick describes the disenchanted Secular Age in which the individual self is buffered from the unseen supernatural powers. "The world is no longer sacralized, and the powers that press upon the human person are experienced and understood as affecting the self and then interpreted. In other words, the world is interpreted in terms of the experience of self, and the process of disenchantment begins."[45] Sedgwick continues, "the conditions are set for expressive individualism in which the ethic for the self is to realize his or her own potential self, whether God-given or self-created."[46] This is how we get to the current emphasis on authenticity, expressive individualism and the exclusive humanism of the Secular Age. The following adapted graph describes the characteristics of the *Secular Age*, *Secular 3* mindset.

[44] Timothy F. Sedgwick, "A Secular Age," *Anglican Theological Review* 93 no. 3 (2011): 512-513.
[45] Ibid., 513.
[46] Ibid., 514.

Tenants	Characteristics
1	People should see any life purpose beyond human achievements, as well as any purpose found in an afterlife, as irrational, unscientific, bias, or fanatic views.
2	People should reject the claim that the world is influenced by supernatural or moral powers
3	People should accept that the universe is random and not created by any deities. Thus, time is seen as a constant rather than moving toward a certain conclusion
4	People should reject the claim that human is bound by any sacred purpose.
5	People should see human rationality and power as paramount, and this rational power should be utilized to control the nature in order to achieve the goals of humanity
6	Religion should be separated from public spheres such as politics, economics, and ethics

Table 1: Characteristics of Secular Age *Secular 3* Mindset[47]

In Taylor's *Secular 3*, the world is largely viewed as predictable, governed by the rules of the universe, not supernatural forces. The premodern idea of cosmos is replaced by the modern universe. The *cosmos* of our ancestors was ordered, hierarchical, and meaningful. Now we find ourselves in a universe that is no longer limited, hierarchical, or meaningful. The scientific revolution describes a universe whose features are a challenge to biblical religion and its notions of cosmos. This also involved the dismantling of a Christian understanding of time. For people living in the Medieval period, time was organized around the idea of divine or higher times *(kairos).* The church's liturgical year re-enacted what happened when Christ was on earth and God entered into human time. Today we live life overly bound up within the horizontal flow of secular time (*chronos*).[48]

[47] Joevarian Hudiyana, et. al., "Can the Activation of Analytic Cognitive Style Determine Endorsement of Secular Belief?", *Journal of Pacific Rim Theology* 13 (January 2019), https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1017/prp.2019.23.

[48] I will explore the issue of time and postures toward time in Chapter 8.

All of these factors began to chip away at the idea of a supernatural, enchanted world pregnant with transcendent reality. Taylor makes the solid case that the Protestant Reformation primarily, along with the lesser effect of the Catholic counter-reformation movement, were the biggest factors in reshaping Western culture and paved the way for the move away from *Secular 1* toward *Secular 2* and ultimately *Secular 3*. Taylor cites a significant factor for motivating the Protestant Reformation was the growing dissatisfaction of the religious hierarchical structures viewed as corrupt and self-serving.

Ancien Regime, Age of Mobilization, and Age of Authenticity

To further establish a historical narrative for the movement and evolution toward a Secular Age, Taylor lays out three broad "Ages" through which the West has moved since the Middle Ages: *Ancien Regime, Age of Mobilization*, and the current *Age of Authenticity*. According to Taylor, in the *Ancien Regime*, religion dominated the *social imaginary*, the world was enchanted, filled with religious festivals, pilgrimages, holy days, Christian relics, and supernatural forces at work, both good and bad to impact the porous self. After the Reformation, Taylor articulates a shift into the *Age of Mobilization.* During this time period, the process of disenchantment begins, new social structures emerged—i.e., unions, memberships, religious orders for lay people, and denominations for the many splintering streams of Protestantism. It is during the *Age of Mobilization*, fueled by the dynamics of post-reformation, that clerical authority and powers are diminished, especially among Protestantism. Now the onus was on all "believers" to be priestly in their religious practices, not only in the church but everywhere in everyday life.

Taylor argues that the strength of the *Age of Mobilization* was a significant factor leading to the fusion of religious identity with political identity in North America. "The Republic secures

the freedom of the churches; and the churches sustain the Godly ethos which the Republic requires."[49] Of course, this fusion was setting the stage for the emergence of culture wars in the last third of the 20th century which continues to gain momentum today, adding to the complexity and impact on the streams of conversations and movements mentioned in the last paragraph. This fusion also led to the plethora of new streams of organizing one's self within the multitude of options that matched one's spiritual and political ideologies even within Catholicism and Protestantism. But the choices that one would have as options was about to explode as the *Age of Authenticity* began to emerge.

The Age of Authenticity and Expressive Individualism

The 1960's marked the emergence of the *Age of Authenticity*. The social imaginary influencing the *Age of Authenticity* is rooted in an "expressive individualism." Taylor acknowledges, "Intellectual and artistic elites have been searching for the authentic way of living or expressing themselves throughout the nineteenth century. What is new is that this kind of self-orientation seems to have become a mass phenomenon."[50] Today our culture is experiencing an explosion of tension around an ethic of authenticity which weaponizes a multitude of personal priorities from religion, social, gender, sexual, political, racial, etc. categories creating divisive ideologies that splinter connections to smaller and smaller affinity tribes that see those who don't embrace their perspectives as an "other" to be judged for not being "woke" to their level of enlightenment. What has become important for those whose lives are ordered around this concept of authenticity is not "truth" necessarily but "my truth." Taylor also describes the ethic of the *Age of Authenticity* as a full blown "pursuit of happiness." This has been fueled by the consumer revolution in which consumers are encouraged to express their personal taste in their

[49] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 453.
[50] Ibid., 473.

consumption.[51] The move toward developing identity in this manner (personal tastes, needs, and affinities), previously only the domain of the rich, was now potentially accessible to all. The impact of this is yet to be fully realized. The concept of human identity and what it means to be a "person" has been discussed as long as human beings have been walking on planet Earth. What it means to be human and the pursuit of understanding personhood and one's identity has occupied the minds of philosophers, sociologists, economists, and theologians for centuries.

In the *Age of Authenticity*, however, there is a new understanding that an individual alone has the right to form their own identity. In previous centuries, the place where meaning was made was primarily the parish connected to the church, and/or the community one lived in. Now the primary place of meaning making, in the age of authenticity, is the individual and each individual is expected to curate their own identity. Social media has powerfully enabled this project. The individual can shape their identity online in whatever way they imagine it to be. However, this does not always go well, because the shaped identity creates extreme angst unless their organized identity is affirmed, liked or loved, by their online connections, and/or other people in their social network. In this social environment, if one is not quick to affirm a person's chosen identity, she or he can quickly be labeled as an oppressor. These dynamics have increased, in my observation, toxic ideologues on both the far right and the far left, making life miserable for those who don't embrace their ideologies.

In the *Age of Mobilization*, the choice of denomination and the particular nuances they afforded the congregant, still took place within the faith of the broader church and the creeds—a framework of belief. But in the *Age of Authenticity* with its expressive individualism, religious practice is not only a personal choice but it must make sense in terms of one's own spiritual development. Shantz states, "The focus is now on my spiritual path, and what insights come to

[51] Ibid., 474.

me."[52] Taylor argues that this movement shifts away from the "object of faith" toward the genuineness of the individual's feelings. Increasingly over the centuries since the Reformation, the movement of religion toward the "buffered self" stressed "feeling, emotion, a living faith which moves us. "This was the case, for instance, with Pietism and Methodism, for whom a powerful emotional response to God's saving action was more important than theological correctness."[53] And this is the case for many varieties of new emerging belief systems that seek to fill in the pluralistic openings for new ways of seeking human meaning and the good life.

Taylor offers some positives about our current realities within the *Age of Authenticity*. Those who are pursuing spiritual yearnings are actually looking for a direct experiential encounter of the sacred. There is also a desire for a holistic spirituality, "a kind of unity and wholeness of the self, a reclaiming of the place of feeling, against the one-sided pre-eminence of reason, and a reclaiming of the body and its pleasures from the inferior and often guilt-ridden place it has been allowed in the disciplined, instrumental identity."[54] While Taylor makes strong assertions about the characteristics, beliefs, and behaviors associated with these historical frameworks, he cautions, "We cannot understand our present situation by a single ideal type, but if we understand ourselves to be moving away from an *Age of Mobilization* and more into an *Age of Authenticity*, then we can see this whole move as in a sense a retreat of Christendom."[55] And by Christendom, Taylor means, "a civilization where society and culture are profoundly informed by Christian faith."[56] While Europe has moved deeper into the ideology of the *Age of Authenticity* and has a much more established post-Christian ethos, the USA, while feeling the widespread implications of the ethics of authenticity, is still engaged in the realities of the *Age of*

[52] Shantz, "The Place of Religion in a Secular Age," 27.
[53] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 488.
[54] Ibid., 507.
[55] Ibid., 514.
[56] Ibid., 514.

Mobilization. To call the USA a post-Christian culture raises the eyebrows of Europeans who still view North America as an exceedingly Christian society.

The Social Imaginary and the Immanent Frame

How the evolution of a Secular Age unfolds has much to do with the social imaginary of a particular culture. In discussing Taylor's account of the ascent of secularism in the Western world, Douglas H. Shantz writes, "By 'social imaginary' Taylor refers to the ways in which people imagine their social existence and the expectations and normative notions that accompany them. This is a better term than social theory because theory only applies to a small intellectual minority."[57] In the afterword section of the book *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age,* Taylor responds to the scholars who critiqued *A Secular Age* by clarifying what he means by describing the dynamic of a "social imaginary":

> I want to speak of "social imaginary" here, rather than social theory, because there are important differences between the two. There are, in fact, several differences. I speak of "imaginary" (1) because I'm talking about the way ordinary people "imagine" their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms but carried in images, stories, legends, etc. But it is also the case that (2) theory is often the possession of a small minority, whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. Which leads to a third difference: (3) the social imaginary is that common understanding which makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy.[58]

Taylor describes the historical and philosophical transition from the pre-modern *social imaginary* where the cosmos and world is enchanted and transcendent realities impact everyday life toward a disenchanted *social imaginary* shaped by modern science and worldviews steeped in an all-encompassing "immanent frame" ultimately defining the condition of belief and unbelief. Taylor believes the immanent frame defines normative life in all of Western culture and now seems to extend into more of the non-Western world.

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[57] Shantz, "The Place of Religion in a Secular Age," 14.

[58] Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun, *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, 308.

In the emerging *social imaginary* of the disenchanted world the identified *buffered self* now embraces rationality as the guiding value. Even people of faith living in the immanent frame of the Secular Age do not see a significant problem living within a self-contained immanent order. In the social imaginary of the pre-modern world of Christianity, a priest would be the first person summoned if a loved one went into convulsions because certainly some evil had come upon them. Today, we can't even think like that; we call 911 or rush them to the hospital to be treated by physicians, because, of course, science trumps superstition.

For people living comfortably in the immanent frame, Taylor cites "exclusive humanism" as the ideology embraced for making meaning and seeking to live the good life. James K. A. Smith provides a helpful approach to thinking about Taylor's criticism of exclusive humanism as an alternative to religious ways of making meaning. Smith, in his helpful book *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, writes, "So it wasn't enough for us to stop believing in the gods; we also had to be able to imagine significance within an immanent frame, to imagine modes of meaning that did not depend on transcendence."[59] Taylor insists that the pursuit to do good and make meaning out of human life (Exclusive Humanism) falls short of explaining away beauty, mystery and glimpses of transcendence. As a result, Taylor describes both belief (faith) and unbelief as "fragilized."

Fragilized Faith and Unbelief—Open Takes and Closed Spins

Approaching this dynamic of the immanent frame in which both faith and unbelief are fragilized can be confusing. Michael Warner notes, "It would be more accurate to say that the book attempts to show how stances of skepticism and faith are interwoven and mutually 'fragilized.'"[60] Taylor's descriptions of "open take" and "closed spin" are helpful. Those who are

[59] James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), 27.

[60] Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun, *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, 7.

engaged not in science but scientism represent a good example of those who are ***all in*** on "Closed Spins" (arrogantly ignoring any possibility of the metaphysical), making no room for anything outside of the immanent frame. David Storey, professor of philosophy at Boston College, believes Taylor's main objective is "to draw the immanent frame into focus, lay bare its origin and development, and plead that an 'open spin'—i.e., a strong sense of faith in a transcendent reality and the pursuit and vision of a good that transcends human life—is not foreclosed, and a closed spin—i.e., 'this is all there is'—is not demanded, by the frame itself."[61] Storey believes that Taylor is "attempting to pry open space in the secular age for a new dimension beyond the 'three-cornered' affair of the religious (traditional), the secular humanist (modern), and the 'spiritual but not religious' (postmodern)."[62] Taylor believes there are times when something transcendent like overwhelms an individual and the experience opens up the social imaginary of that person, who as a normative way of seeing the world discounts anything beyond a purely rational explanation. Something impacts them so deeply that they are dumbfounded about how to process the event or encounter they experienced. They are moved and/or surprised to recognize more mystery in the so-called happenstances of their lives and this results in the potential for an "open take" toward the transcendent, the spiritual, toward a feeling that there must be more to life, moving them to an openness toward God.

These transcendent moments can be triggered by an experience, perhaps the birth of a child, the death of a loved one, an intense conversation with a friend or stranger, an encounter with the beauty of nature, the arts, a film or concert, or even a visit to a museum. In this way, their unbelief is fragilized and they are newly open to mystery and something beyond rationalism

[61] David Storey, "Charles Taylor's A Secular Age: Breaking the Spell of the Immanent Frame," In *Rethinking Secularization: Philosophy and the Prophecy of a Secular Age*, ed. Herbert de Vriese and Gary Gabor (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 181.

[62] Ibid., 207.

and exclusive humanism. James K. A. Smith further describes Taylor's argument about fragilized belief and unbelief. He writes, "Even as faith endures in our secular age, believing doesn't come easy. Faith is fraught; confession is haunted by an inescapable sense of its contestability. We don't believe instead of doubting; we believe *while* doubting. We're all Thomas now."[63] Smith proceeds to illustrate Taylor's description of this kind of cross-pressure by interacting with the writing of Julian Barnes in his book, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* written in 2008, and selected as a New York Times best book of the year. The first sentence in Barnes's book is, "I don't believe in God, but I miss him."[64] There are tremendous opportunities to minister to people wrestling with fragilized belief and people wrestling with fragilized unbelief. Understanding these dynamics open space to come alongside people when the social imaginary of their immanent frame is rocked by a glimpse of the transcendent.

The Occasion for Transcendence Beyond the Immanent Frame

If, as Taylor argues, the decline of religion and faith is not the result of a "subtraction story" normative in most secularization theories but is actually a change in the perception and nature of faith, then we are left with many options to consider and engage belief. The "Nova Effect" is Taylor's term for the "galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane,"[65] leading to "the steadily widening gamut of new positions which have become available options for us."[66] This Nova Effect develops with the rise of the *Age of Mobilization* (post-Reformation) providing new options primarily among social elites and intellectuals at the end of the 18th century. Taylor reminds us that Christian faith, in the Secular Age, is one among many options that people have.

[63] Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular,* 4.
[64] Julian Barnes, *Nothing to Be Frightened Of* (New York, NY: Vintage, 2008), 1.
[65] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 300.
[66] Ibid., 423.

The principal characteristic of the religious landscape of today is not that faith or religion has declined, but that it has diversified and splintered.

So, in the Secular Age with its plethora of ideologies and options, Taylor is not satisfied with contending for human "meaning" through a "belief centered" approach to religion. *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* summarizes this:

> Religion, for Taylor, entails some sort of "transcendence" especially "the sense that there is some good higher than, beyond human flourishing. He does not mean belief in specific doctrines. Nor does he understand belief as an abstract intellectual commitment to the truth of a propositional statement. Rather, he devotes considerable effort to showing how that sort of narrowed "epistemological" approach is part of a package of cultural and intellectual changes that make religious belief difficult and "embattled," even while they make for advances in other domains, like science.[67]

Belief must move beyond the restrictions of a logic-centric cognitive realm as a sole source of knowing. There must be a corrective that involves the whole person for faith to be meaningful and robust in the Secular Age.

Moving Forward Together

Taylor lays out a very helpful framework for engaging our current cultural realities. Religion, the Christian church, and youth ministry—the world I live in—are trying to navigate the plethora of changes in the 21st century. How do we make meaning? How can we know what we know? What does truth look like? How do we understand the Bible? How do we engage in discipleship and spiritual formation? How do we engage the pressing social issues of our day? How do we become more deeply human in our being? What does it mean to be a person? Can we encounter God? Does God encounter us? These, and many more questions are critical to engage and I believe Taylor's work *A Secular Age* is a significant contribution to thinking theologically, sociologically, philosophically, and psychologically about these essential matters.

[67] Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun, *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, 10.

This is an exciting time to be alive. All is not lost. When we think about a Secular Age, we can easily make the assumption that it is "game over" for religion and belief. Michael Welker, discussing the future of religion in the world states:

> Almost 80 per cent of people on the globe today express a religious affiliation? In fact, this religious trend is globally increasing quantitatively rather than declining if we consider developments in China. And this despite the promise that the twentieth century would usher in the so-called scientific and technological "disenchantment of the world"![68]

Taylor does not argue that we can return to an "enchanted world," nor would we want to (I appreciate modern medicine and many technological advances). Taylor's description of the Secular Age opens up wonderful new opportunities to embody the Christian story and live full and meaningful lives in the way of Jesus Christ.

Douglas Shantz declares, "*Secular Age* is an encouraging book for people of faith. Taylor affirms a future for religious belief and encourages young people to 'explore beyond the boundaries' offered by the immanent framework of exclusive humanism."[69] Taylor describes the running attacks on belief and religion within the narrative of modern human progress as the "spectre of meaninglessness." Taylor asserts, "As a result of the denial of transcendence, of heroism, of deep feeling, we are left with a view of human life which is empty, cannot inspire commitment, offers nothing really worthwhile, cannot answer the craving for goals we can dedicate ourselves to."[70] This is truly a great time to be alive and understanding the times philosophically, socially, psychologically, spiritually, and theologically, opens up wonderful opportunities and hope for what it means to be a flourishing human being living the Good Life.

Other Voices Concerning Church, Ministry and Theology in a Secular Age

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[68] Michael Welker, "Habermas and Ratzinger on the Future of Religion," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63, no. 4 (2010): 456-473.

[69] Shantz, "The Place of Religion in a Secular Age," 37.

[70] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 717.

An embodied faith is of critical importance in the Secular Age to counteract the move away from the Reformation inspired, rational infused impact of excarnation. James K. A. Smith writes:

> Modern Christianity tends to think of the church either as a place where individuals come to find answers to their questions or as one more stop where individuals can try to satisfy their consumerist desires. As such, Christianity becomes intellectualized rather than incarnate, commodified rather than the site of genuine community.[71]

To recover, embrace, and order our lives within classic Christian formation—within an intentional community of Christian practice—is the most subversive way to live fully for God in the way of Jesus Christ in the Secular Age.

Karl Rahner's Supernatural Existential and John Wesley's Prevenient Grace

While Taylor has his share of critics that I find interesting and helpful, including other secularization theorists, philosophers, and historians, I will focus on a couple of critiques that add to my engagement with Taylor for the life of the church, the Christian faith, and a presence-centered theological framework. An inciteful and interesting engagement of Taylor's ideas on the occasion for transcendence in the Secular Age is a scholarly article titled, "A Rahnerian Theological Response to Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*" by Catholic theologian Daniel Horan.

Horan examines Karl Rahner's theological concept of the *Supernatural Existential* to critique Taylor's assertion of transcendence and his lack of an explanation of this phenomenon. Horan argues that "Rahner's notion of the Supernatural Existential serves to complement and more concretely illustrate Taylor's at-times tacit, if conflicted, advocacy for some sort of human characteristic that seeks, desires, or is otherwise oriented toward something 'beyond human flourishing.'"[72] Horan specifically focuses on Taylor's "overly cognitive framework."[73]

[71] Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*, 29.

[72] Daniel P. Horan, "A Rahnerian Theological Response to Charles Taylor's A Secular Age," *New Blackfriars* 95, no. 1055 (2014): 21.

[73] Ibid.

Therefore Taylor, Horan argues, "only ever engages in a secondary-level or *a posteriori* reflection on belief and unbelief, thereby (perhaps unwittingly) precluding the possibility of considering the *a priori* 'condition' for his proposed 'conditions for belief or unbelief,' otherwise known as 'secularity 3.'" Horan believes reading Rahner and Taylor together provides a much more robust view of the Secular Age, the human condition and spiritual realities.

While Taylor consistently writes about the human pursuit for something greater beyond the reach of exclusive humanism, he doesn't offer much in the way of how that happens outside of the immanent frame from a transcendent perspective. For Horan, Rahner, through his theological concept of the supernatural existential, unlocks greater spiritual possibilities in the Secular Age. While Horan acknowledges that Taylor attempts to open up the "immanent frame" with the concept of having an "open take" instead of a "closed spin," he believes this falls short of a true "open take" of the transcendent. Horan lays out how Rahner's concept of the supernatural existential provides a powerful theological framework to Taylor's theory of secularization. Describing Rahner's supernatural existential, Horan writes that it is:

> A doctrine that arises organically from both his assertion that the human person (*Dasein*) is spirit (*Geist*) and that this spirit is always already historically situated in the world, the supernatural existential seeks to conceptualize and articulate the *a priori* graced-experience of being human that is intrinsic and constitutive. While it is indeed, by virtue of being an *existential*, a dimension of the whole human person, Rahner is clear that this existential is not simply a natural element of human existence, but instead the gratuitous gift of God.[74]

For Rahner, the reality that human beings are created in the image of God and have a divine *telos*, whether they are aware of that or not, and God's self-communication is a reality, whether they are aware of that or not, all point to the "occasion of transcendence" in the Secular Age as *a priori* event.

[74] Ibid., 32.

This perspective falls in line with Wesley's theological concept of prevenient grace. Prevenient grace is the gift of God that opens human beings to God's transcendent encounter and offer of salvation in Jesus Christ. And this happens even within the immanent frame. Both Rahner's supernatural existential and Wesley's prevenient grace open up the possibility that human beings living in the immanent frame of the Secular Age can experience the transcendent and engage in good works (beyond exclusive humanism) even if they are not Christians. NTS graduate and Duke professor theologian Randy Maddox writes:

> Wesley presents a position analogous to Rahner's assertion of the common human experience of transcendence when he claims that there is present in all people a basic knowledge of the existence of God and of God's attributes, along with the universal experience of freedom and responsibility—all the product of prevenient grace.[75]

This interaction with the transcendent is more compelling within the immanent frame of our Secular Age, as opposed to Taylor's potential random glimpses of transcendence untethered and foreign to human nature. Horan argues:

> What Rahner intends is not a bifurcation or rigid demarcation between something "other-worldly" or transcendent and "this-worldly" or immanent, but instead he describes the intrinsic openness of all human persons toward the infinite horizon, the absolute mystery, the wholly other or, simply, 'God,' as the very grounding for categorical or immanent experience. The quotidian experiences of ordinary, this-worldly actions within the "immanent frame" are made possible, according to Rahner, by virtue of the supernatural existential.[76]

Rahner's assertion that a human experience with transcendence as an *a priori* grace, along with Wesley's theology of *prevenient grace* opens up a whole new way of thinking about Taylor's idea of the occasion of transcendence within the immanent frame of the Secular Age in which we live.

The Secular Age and Presence-Centered Spirituality

[75] Randy Maddox, "Karl Rahner's Supernatural Existential: A Wesleyan Parallel?" *Evangelical Journal* 5 (1987): 9.

[76] Horan, "A Rahnerian Theological Response to Charles Taylor's A Secular Age," 35.

Bringing Taylor's ideas into conversation with presence-centered spirituality opens ways to think more deeply about what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ in a Secular Age and what it means to minister to people living in the immanent frame. Seeking a transcendent encounter with the presence of God when this God is mostly hidden is at the core of a presence-centered spirituality. Ordering our lives to practice the presence of God makes it essential to curate an environment where we nurture ears to hear the Spirit of God and eyes to see the action of God at work in the world. In the Secular Age, to live faithfully for God in the way of Jesus Christ we must embody what we believe by engaging with others in prayer practices, such as fixed-hour prayer (daily offices), meditation, imaginative prayer, *Lexio Divina,* Lament, etc., along with solitude, sabbath-keeping, observation of the church calendar, liturgical worship, a high view of eucharistic practice, spiritual retreats, pilgrimage, hospitality, generosity, simplicity, ministry (service), corporate Scripture reading, theological reflection, lived out works of justice, mercy, and more.

Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, in their article *Reflections On A Secular Age*, make the argument that their theological construct of the "radical ordinary" focusing on "tending to ordinary life" add significant possibilities for the Secular Age. Stanley Hauerwas's call to live in the Secular Age in a "radical ordinary" manner resonates with a presence-centered spirituality. Hauerwas and Coles argue that their posture of tending to ordinary life "offer a more variegated account of the possibilities in our 'age' than do Taylor's depictions of the irruptions of transcendence that the immanent frame cannot control."[77] Smith weighs in: "While in modernity science was the emperor who set the rules for what counted as truth and castigated faith as fable, postmodernity has shown us the emperor's nudity. As such, we no longer need to apologize for

[77] Hauerwas and Coles, "Long Live the Weeds and the Wilderness Yet," 349-62.

faith—we can be unapologetic in our kerygmatic proclamation of the gospel narrative."[78] People of faith do not need to be apologetic about their faith in the Secular Age; but the integrity of faith claims will be examined and considered by the broader culture thoughtfully if they see it through a lens of meaningful acts of kindness and good works toward humanity and the world.

In these cultural waters of expressive individualism seeking meaning in the age of authenticity, we would do well to recover the much-maligned formula: "There is no salvation outside the church." This doesn't mean that a particular ecclesial body is the dispenser of grace or the arbiter of salvation; rather, there simply is no truly lived out Christianity apart from the body of Christ, which is the church. People need people in community. The body is the New Testament's organic model of community that counters the modernist emphasis on the individual. Church becomes the alternate narrative for proclaiming and embodying what is real and it includes both immanence and transcendent realities. God was so transcendent that God seemed far from us. But the message of the Gospels in that God came near. God came to us. God became human, and that is the ultimate fullness of the concept of immanence. Hauerwas declares that it is a "good thing that Christians now live in a world in which it is no longer impossible not to believe in God."[79] This makes Christianity something that is not just assumed but personally embraced and believed, not just as an individual but as a person in community with others following in the way of Jesus who is actually with us. Once we believe in a God who comes to persons in and through Jesus Christ, Hauerwas argues, nothing can be more immanent than God with us.

Based on the broad engagement with Taylor's work, it is incontrovertible that he is making a profound contribution within the scope of articulating a theory of secularization to

[78] Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism?*, 71.

[79] Hauerwas and Coles, "Long Live the Weeds and the Wilderness Yet," 350.

provide a better understanding of modernity, hyper-modernity or, his choice of nomenclature, *a Secular Age*, in describing our current cultural milieu. However, I wonder, at times, if he is actually describing most accurately the way intellectuals view the world. I've yet to meet someone who is obsessed with Taylor's thesis of a Secular Age that wasn't connected, at some level, to academic life. These concepts need a broader reach beyond academic life. I see people all around who are living in the immanent frame but still seem to find it relatively easy to embrace faith. I also believe that many of those with a firm belief in a simple faith have not moved into a *second naivete*,[80] and their faith is working for them. Additionally, I am surrounded by thoughtful and passionate Christians who have engaged in a healthy process of deconstruction and worked through to a *second naivete*, acknowledging the immanent reality they live in but also open to the mystery of transcendence and God at work in the world.

Being open to the concept of transcendence breaking into the immanent frame of the Secular Age and a belief that God is at work in the world and desires relationship with people can be reinforced through Taylor's work but requires other theological and scholarly works to fill out a robust presence-centered spirituality. This requires a theological turn, not only in seeing the strengths and limits of Taylor's descriptions, but also fashioning a way forward for imagining and practicing presence-centered spirituality. In the next chapter, Dr. Andy Root's warrant for this theological turn provides a framework for addressing other social scientists speaking into these issues, along with other theological ideas. This theological turn assists to explain and expand a presence-centered spirituality.

[80] Mark I. Wallace, *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology* (Macon, GA: Mercer, 1990). Wallace writes that Ricoeur's second naivete concept asserts "all understanding follows an arc that begins with an initial preunderstanding of reality that we bring to the text (mimesis 1), the restructuring and configuration of this initial understanding of reality by the text (mimesis 2), and the final intersection between the world configured by the text and the world of the reader (mimesis 3)" (p56). Wallace continues, "Ricoeur is well known, and rightly so, for his argument that a theological hermeneutic completes its task only in the moment of personal appropriation when the claims of the text are applied to the concrete experience of the interpreter. The text accomplishes its meaning only in personal appropriation" (p57).

CHAPTER 2:
A THEOLOGICAL TURN IN THE SECULAR AGE

With a turn to the theological, thinking about the deep questions of life and faith required a different way of being with people and engaging in ministry. Instead of organizing to avoid certain issues and the reality of doubt, diving into meaningful and serious dialogue to wrestle with difficult issues and doubt were life-giving and essential. The days of proof texting and attempts to maintain a posture of certainty were over. The pivot from having all the answers to mostly having questions and becoming increasingly comfortable with paradox and uncertainty was a breath of fresh air.

When I started ministry as a youth worker in the mid-seventies, youth ministry was primarily viewed as an evangelistic endeavor, a way to get kids into heaven. Trying to become more sophisticated about this during the 1980's and 90's involved building meaningful relationships that secured the right to lead them to Jesus. Rarely had I thought about Christian formation, especially from a perspective of Christian history and thought or what I've come to refer to as Classic Christian Formation. As I entered the 21st century, everything was lined up for my experience of a full-on theological turn in my thinking, ministry, and life.

The Church in Trouble

My theological turn away from ministry efforts steeped in pragmaticism was occurring simultaneously with a wide and deepening anxiety about the decline of the evangelical church, particularly the exodus of young people in the church. Barna Research, Fuller Youth Institute, Lifeway, and a host of other evangelical think tanks were fueling this growing concern with data of decline and calls to double-down on efforts to attract and keep young people in the church. But something seemed off about what needed to be done about the data revealed. According to Erik Leafblad, "The evangelical imagination so robustly on display undergirds an approach to

ministry more attuned to socialization than God's action, despite the evangelical conviction of God's agency. The result is a flattened sense of divine action, in which God becomes an object of ministry practice with the dynamic of socialization."[81] Leafblad argues that when ministry is pragmatically viewed as a tool to be used in the immanent frame of the Secular Age, it makes God an object of ministry instead of the subject of ministry. The church, therefore, actually abandons a theologically robust view of ministry and instead embraces a technological framework for ministry. Leafblad continues, "Ministry ends up masking the very subjectivity of God which evangelicals profess, and serves to objectify God as part of the apparatus of the evangelical imagination. God serves an instrumental function of the church as the central subject of ministry."[82]

In this paradigm, ministry is more related to skills of organizational leadership, good planning, resource creation, and strategy development. Currently, groups like Barna Group, Fuller Youth Institute, and Orange are examples of this. What is communicated by this is that human action (strategy) for ministry is the most important factor for successful ministry. The problem is that strategy then becomes the subject of ministry instead of God. The proof that the "strategy" works follows in numbers indicating internal growth and an expanded reach. All of these organizations, ministries, and churches that embrace a pragmatic approach to ministry still find themselves filled with people of sincere passion and love of God. Yet the ministries seem to lack an awareness for the importance of robust theological reflection to seek ministry primarily in the action of God's work and mission. For Andrew Root and others, discerning the intersection of divine and human action provides the most profound location of God's mission.

Root's Call for a Theological Turn

[81] Erik Leafblad, "Ministry as a Strange Tool: A Study in Ministerial Logics" (PhD diss., Luther Seminar, 2020), 55.

[82] Ibid., 56.

Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry[83] was the first book published by Root, who had completed his PhD at Princeton Theological Seminary and begun his role as Assistant Professor of Youth and Family Ministry at Luther Seminary in his hometown of St. Paul, Minnesota. *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry* quickly shook the youth ministry landscape by dealing with the prevailing pragmatic ideologies of the day, which viewed relationships with young people as the means to an end. Youth ministry was primarily about seeking successful pragmatic strategies as the key to unlock effective youth ministry practice and results. Root critiqued the predominant pragmatic youth ministry practice of the day and argued for a robust Christology at the core of transformational youth ministry. Root explored the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theological framework involving the questions ministers—including youth pastors—should ask, "Who is Jesus Christ?", "Where is Jesus Christ?", and "What should we do?" Bonhoeffer's theological questions can immediately be applied to conversations that churches and ministries should begin incorporating into the practice of theological reflection concerning everything.

Root argued that youth pastors must do the work of theological reflection in the midst of concrete, real-life ministry experiences. Youth ministry in North America over the last half of the 20th century had not engaged deeply with theological thinking and reflection. A prevailing concept within youth ministry was the idea that we must earn the relational right to share Jesus Christ with young people. This also led to the thinking that if youth workers focused on building relationships with the right kids—the influencers (athletes, leaders, cheerleaders, popular kids, etc.)—they would naturally bring all of the friends they influence into the youth ministry of the church or parachurch. This thinking and ministry philosophy often led to action dissonant to a theologically sound way of ministry.

[83] Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 221.

The reality is that Jesus Christ is present to us in the concrete experience of our relationships one with another. Root argued in his book that current ministry practice viewed relationship as something that leads to a third thing—which is salvation. Root declared that in Christ, relationships are not a means to a "third thing." Root hoped that when a youth worker became committed to entering deeply into the life of young people in a meaningful incarnational way through the person of Jesus Christ the view of youth worker as "fixer," "programmer," and "piped piper" would cease to be a relevant measurement of success. Through this theological framework, youth workers were challenged to stop doing youth ministry to young people and begin sharing life and ministry **with** young people. And yet, in many ways, this actually increased the anxiety of many within youth ministry because the very system of youth ministry culture was mostly designed for efficiency and results, and the system was enforced by a broad, anxious church ethos throughout North America.

Christopraxis, A Nuanced Practical Theology

Root has fully and vocationally embraced practical theology as a critical aspect of engaging in meaningful ministry in Jesus Christ. For Root, practical theology is ministry. He makes a strong argument that much of academic inspired practical theology focuses almost entirely on human action to the neglect of divine action. He has sought to distinguish himself and his work in seeking to develop a practical theological framework that pursues the intersection of human and divine action. So, what are the theological themes within this framework of practical theology that establishes his work? Root is definitely obsessed as a practical theologian with the event of God's revelation. The Revelation of God, how God makes Godself known, is the driving "one big thing" motivation of his theological project. Root declared in his seminal theological work, *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross*, "If practical theology is to

be practical (attending to concrete experience) but yet *theological*, then it must make central the encounter of divine and human action. It is my hope… to reimagine practical theology through the experience of divine action."[84] Doing practical theology, as Root defines it, is an impossibility if we are not actively engaged in ministry.[85]

It was the release of Root's book with Kenda Creasy Dean in 2014, *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry*, that moved the phrase *theological turn* into a larger arena of dialogue and consideration. Root and Dean skillfully illustrate the essential role practical theology plays as an imperative correction toward authentic Christian formation of young people. The authors describe and advocate for a theological turn that will not only prove to be a key factor in transforming the way of engaging youth ministry, but also result in widespread ecclesial change. Today's young adults eagerly participate in deep theological reflection that allows them to wrestle with the issues that can truly bring meaning to their lives.

Root fleshes out the process of practical theology starting with the "Experience" (What is going on?). The experience can be anything from a conversation with a person, a conflict, an event, a program, a crisis in a person's life, etc. What a practical theologian does following the experience is make time for the second step, "Reflection and Evaluation" (sometimes alone,

[84] Andrew Root, *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 8.

[85] *Christopraxis* is Andy Root's seminal theological work. While most of his books are targeted to youth ministry, this book is not. However, I believe it is critical for curating a theologically robust youth ministry philosophy and practice. Root's main premise is that the work of practical theology has largely focused on human action to the neglect of divine action. This book argues for a practical theology that seeks the intersection of divine and human action. For Root, practical theology is ministry. Central to ministry is a theology of the cross. God comes to us as minister in our impossibilities (death) to bring possibility (resurrection). God's coming to people takes the shape of ministry. So divine action happens in ministry one to and with another. Root describes his embrace of "critical realism" as essential to his *Christopraxis*. Root demonstrates a common theme of the individuals he interviewed in the first section of this book as they shared their encounters with Jesus Christ. The common theme is that Christ came to them in their impossibilities (death-like experiences) and brought possibility (resurrection). Root presents a practical theology that is centered on the act of ministry through which divine and human action occurs. We, therefore, participate in God's own being by being ministers to others. Root frames justification, after Eberhard Jüngel, as God's very being as becoming. Human beings are justified as they encounter the event of God's action of ministry, wherein God justifies and human beings (sinners) are justified. For the human minister, the interaction between ministry and theological reflection is critical.

sometimes with others) in order to understand what may be happening. Root acknowledges that in this phase of the process the social sciences may be helpful, but the emphasis is on understanding the "concrete humanity of those with whom you are in ministry." Root insists that if we stop here, we fall short of robust theological reflection. We must lean into Scripture (the normative set of assertions about the shape of God's ministry). We must also not neglect the Christian tradition, "the thoughts of theologians who went before us."[86] The third step for Root is "Action." How might we act for and on behalf of those we minister with? How might our reflection and evaluation of an experience lead us to act next as we continue to minister. This process is a constant cycle for the theologically passionate minister. Root's cites the neglect of many practical theologians who focus primarily on human action as an academic pursuit. Too often the academic theologian lives in the theological reflection and evaluation phase without concrete encounters of ministry experiences or actions. On the other hand, Root laments the typical neglect in much of North American ministry to stay in the realm of experiences and action without a rich rhythm of theological reflection and evaluation. Embracing this process of theological reflection enables those engaged in ministry to more fully participate in God's divine action with others, the church and the world. *Revelation*—how God reveals Godself—is at the core of his entire theological project. For Root, revelation, God's presence, comes as God's act of ministry as Minister. God's revelation is not an ethereal abstraction but an actual event of God's own self.

A Practical Example

As an example, Youthfront, the organization that I've served on for decades, began to spend much more time in theological reflection about the ministry we engaged in. We made

[86] Root and Dean, *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry*, 43-44.

shifts in how we taught, how we facilitated dialogue with youth, how we thought about spiritual formation, and how we thought about programs. Theological reflection, along with the practices we embraced as a community of Christian practice, changed so much about our ministry and lives. We began to curate the idea that our camps and ministry sites, which had more than 5,000 participants, were theological playgrounds where young people could explore what it means to encounter God, discover God at work in the world, become a follower of Jesus Christ, and participate with God for the restoration of all things. It was a place where they could be honest about their lives, their doubts, and their dreams. We switched from doing ministry to kids and began inviting young people to participate with us in our community of Christian practice through fixed-hour prayer, engaging with Scripture as sacred text through contemplation and ancient Christian practices like *lectio-divina* and imaginative prayer, along with theological dialogue and reflection concerning all areas of life and faith. A growing emphasis on a robust theology of the cross began to further shape presence-centered spirituality, ministry, and life within our community of Christian practice.

Theology of the Cross, Place Sharing, Being Present to the Other

Root has been acutely shaped by Martin Luther, especially Luther's *Theologia Crucis* (Theology of the Cross) and the *Crucified God*. A theology of the cross is at the core of Root's theological framework. Jesus Christ is the fullest revelation of God. Jesus Christ, as fully divine and fully human, enters into the reality of human brokenness through his incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. Root declares, "Jesus stands simultaneously as the true representative of God and the true representative of humanity; it is in this dual representative nature that salvation is achieved."[87] Root cites Douglas John Hall, "Jesus is with us so unreservedly that he may represent us before God; and Jesus is with God so unreservedly that he may represent God to

[87] Root, *Christopraxis*, 56.

us."[88] Being presence-centered fixates on a robust theology of the cross. We are transformed by the *Crucified God*[89] who, through the foolishness of the cross, reveals God for us, in Christ, more fully than we can fathom and moves us into engaging in life and ministry as theologians of the cross. Entering into the pain of another human being with compassion is critical for presence-centered life and ministry and so often finds us at a place of God's presence bringing possibility into the existential crises of a person's impossibility. Presence-centered spirituality focuses on God's being as minister, who comes to us, who encounters us, who speaks to us. When we enter into the pain and brokenness of someone we are ministering with, we encounter God. Jesus Christ, as minister, is in the midst of this presence we share with one another. This is an occasion of transcendence that Taylor talks about.

Root's focus on Bonhoeffer's concept of "*Stellvertretung*" (or "place-sharing" as Root names it)[90] involves the entering into the pain of another's personhood to be with them and share in their reality. The concept of place-sharing contributes significantly to the development of what it means to be presence-centered as we participate with God in ministry, with those suffering, enveloped in the reality of Jesus Christ on the cross, crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"[91] Presence-centered spirituality embraces a God who has entered into the deepest pain of what it means to be a human being in this broken world, a God who identifies with us, suffers with us, and comes to us in our impossibilities (death) to bring possibility (resurrection).

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[88] Ibid. Root is quoting Douglas John Hall, *Professing the Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1993), 526.

[89] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993). This book has deeply shaped my theological thinking about what it means to be a theologian of the cross and what it means to be *present-centered* with others in their pain and suffering.

[90] See Root, *Christopraxis*, Chap. 5. While I resonate with Andy's description of Bonhoeffer's concept of "*Stellvertretung,*" I will suggest, in Chapter 8, that being presence-centered with the other person—or "presence-sharing"—is a better description of what Bonhoeffer was describing.

[91] Matt. 27:46.

Building upon this theological posture, Root interacts with theologian Eberhard Jüngel in *Christopraxis,* leaning on Jüngel for his theological development of *Justification*. Root declares in the introduction of *Christopraxis*, "I use Jüngel as a mutual dialogue partner to see justification not simply as a static doctrine of thought but as an epistemological perspective that articulates a concrete, lived reality of God's ministering action in the world."[92] Root describes justification as "the shape divine action takes in the concrete and lived world, coming through nothingness to give new possibility."[93] For Root's theological framework, justification is the evidence (epistemological account) of human beings' experience of encounter with Jesus Christ who comes as minister in our nothingness and impossibilities (death) to bring possibility (resurrection, new life).

When it comes to ministry Root often speaks of the importance of engaging others in the concrete relational reality of their lives:

> "The concrete" refers to the work that must be done to understand the fullness of the other's reality and discover how and why their world is impacting them like it is. By "relationship," I mean that the other has become dear to us—which is what causes us to do "the concrete" and seek to understand who they are within the multiple systems and situations that impact their person."[94]

We, therefore, participate in God's own being by being ministers to others.

This participation describes a presence-centered interaction. Root affirms Jüngel's assertion, describing God's very being as becoming. Human beings are justified as they encounter the event of God's action of ministry, wherein God justifies and human beings (sinners) are justified. For the human minister, the interaction between ministry and theological reflection is critical. It is in the existential crisis of human beings that God arrives bringing hope. This is most often where God reveals Godself. Root speaks often of the "God who arrives" and

[92] Root, *Christopraxis*, 14.
[93] Ibid., 15.
[94] Root and Dean, *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry*, 58.

"God as event," a coming to us in encounter. This describes a God who is present to us and desires us to be present to God. This encounter is the intersection between human and divine action. It is at this intersection that God arrives in Jesus to bring possibility (resurrection) in the midst of impossibility (death). This intersection provides the place of transformation by a God who saves. This intersection is presence-centered.

So, God's coming to people takes the shape of ministry and divine action happens within ministry one to and with another. But how can we know this coming of God to transform and justify is real? Root describes his embrace of "critical realism" as essential to his *Christopraxis* theological construct. Root demonstrates common themes among the individuals he interviewed in the first section of *Christopraxis* as they shared their encounters with Jesus Christ who came to them bringing hope to the hopelessness of their lives. When these stories of transformation occur in people's lives from all socio-economic backgrounds and from all corners of the world then critical realism makes the assertion that these testimonies of encounter (presence) with the divine cannot be easily dismissed and discredited. For ministry that is presence-centered, critical realism is essential, especially within the immanent frame of our Secular Age.

A Philosophical Turn for Root

Root included *A Secular Age* in his *Christopraxis* bibliography (published in 2014), although Taylor's thesis doesn't show up prominently in the book's content. However, with the announced three-volume set dealing with the Secular Age and funding from the John Templeton Foundation to apply Taylor's work to current ministry realities, Root entered into what has become a half-decade and running obsession with philosopher Charles Taylor's work.

Faith Formation in a Secular Age

Faith Formation in a Secular Age was the first volume of a three-volume set dealing with what it means to live in the Secular Age. Root explores in this volume what it means to live in the age of authenticity where finding one's identity and purpose is viewed as an individualist pursuit and how faith formation is impacted in this environment. Root believes it is the influence of the age of authenticity that has resulted in the misguided glorification of the "spirit of youthfulness" in our churches and has led to an unhealthy obsession of the church with youthfulness. Root first developed his thinking about the impact the spirit of youthfulness has had on the church from Bonhoeffer's *Eight Theses on Youth Ministry*, fleshed out in his book *Bonhoeffer as Youth Worker*. These ideas have significantly added to Root's critique of much of North America's current youth ministry practice within the church, both evangelical and mainline. This critique also zeroed in on the growing evangelical angst, perpetuated by the likes of the Barna Group, Fuller Youth Institute, along with a long list of alarmist denominational findings and evangelical voices calling for a double-down on pragmatic efforts to retain the emerging generation of young people in the church before it's too late.

Root, acknowledges that the *Ministry in a Secular Age* series focused on Charles Taylor's work is a working out of his practical theology of *Christopraxis.* The first part of *Faith Formation in a Secular Age* deals with the rise and growth of the cult of youthfulness that has pervaded, not only culture, but also the church in the age of authenticity. Root deals with Taylor's three understandings of "secular." It is the impact of *Secular 3*, which views divine action and transcendence as untenable, that is the dominant form of secularism we are currently dealing with. Roots exploration of faith and faith formation in a *Secular 3* context is to seek an understanding of faith through "experiences of loss, brokenness, and death, but also the

liminality of joy and transformational hope."[95] Root explains that faith is more than trust in Jesus because to have faith is to enter into Christ; it is to have our being taken into the being of Jesus and being bound to the faith (faithfulness) of Jesus Christ. Root fleshes out the pattern of discipleship and faith formation in the Secular Age. "We are justified through the hypostatic personhood of a minister (Jesus Christ) who has entered death for us (*kenosis*) and overcome this death with the ministry of life in his person (*hypostasis*), our justification is our transformation (*theosis*)."[96] We are crucified with Christ, and as a result, "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."[97]

The Pastor in a Secular Age

In the second volume of the series, *The Pastor in a Secular Age: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God*,[98] Root traces the history of the role of pastor and the *social imaginary* through six different time periods by examining a prominent pastor from each period, not necessarily as the best pastor in the historical period they represent but as an archetype. Root describes how each pastor archetype (Augustine, Thomas Becket, Jonathan Edwards, Henry Ward Beecher, Harry Emerson Fosdick, and Rick Warren) engaged in and viewed ministry and the pastoral role they fulfilled in their cultural context. Root brings us to the current reality of the Secular Age and describes the pastoral malaise that describes many current pastors wondering what it truly means to be a pastor in a non-enchanted world where we live firmly in an immanent

[95] Andrew Root, *Faith Formation in a Secular Age: Responding to the Church's Obsession with Youthfulness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 117.

[96] Ibid., 189.

[97] Gal. 2:20.

[98] Andrew Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age: Ministry to People Who No Longer Need a God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2019).

frame and there is little social imaginary for the concept that God is active in our world in any meaningful way.

Root looks at the shift Taylor describes from the porous self to the buffered self, the age of mobilization (denominationalism) to the age of authenticity (personal identity formation) and expressive individualism. The second half of *The Pastor in a Secular Age* begins to lay out a vision for the pastor in the secular age. Root leans heavily on theologian Robert Jenson in describing God's being in becoming. God is a living God who makes Godself known as an event in history and human beings participate in God's being through God's acts of ministry. This is constitutive of a presence-centered ministry. The pastor in the Secular Age emphasizes God's ministry to us and each other as the intersection between divine and human action. The church becomes the place where we give testimony of Jesus's ministry as event where we have encountered divine action. The pastor in a Secular Age prepares God's people through preaching, prayer, communion, and other spiritual practices to hear and witness a God who speaks and acts on our behalf even in a disenchanted world. Root pays homage to Pastor Eugene Peterson, at the conclusion of his book, by emphasizing Peterson's claim that the most important one thing a pastor in the Secular Age can do is teach their people to pray. Prayer nurtured and practiced as an act of communion with God and worship of God is at the core of being presence-centered.

Naming Eugene Peterson as the prototype pastor for a Secular Age, shaped by exclusive humanism and expressive individualism, is consistent with what it means to be a curator and architect of a presence-centered community where the most important thing we can do pastorally is to teach people to pray, engage in practices to nurture our spirituality and care for one another,

and patiently wait for the encounter with a God who will reveal Godself even in the immanent frame of the Secular Age.

Transcendence and the Good Life in a Secular Age

As previously mentioned in Chapter 1, Taylor asserts that the Protestant Reformation set the stage for a theological, intellectual, and philosophical process deeply impacting faith and the social imaginary of Western culture. The Reformation project largely rejected the mystery of lived Christianity. The Bible became the object of analysis through rationalism and enlightenment thinking. Christianity—increasingly focusing on reason, rationalism, modernity and secularization—resulted in Western Christianity becoming more and more a religion of the mind with a priority toward pursuing right thinking. According to Taylor, these ideas and philosophical movements led to *excarnation* making Christianity, especially the Protestant expression, a disembodied, rational endeavor. By the end of the 18th century, Enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant "sought a religion without revelation."[99]

Without a culturewide reliance on faith in God and a social imaginary that fundamentally embraces the idea of a governing immanent frame minus transcendent possibilities, what constitutes the good life today? Root, faced with the conundrum of making sense of faith and the good life promised by Jesus Christ in John 10:10, believes the move requires a robust theological turn in the Secular Age. Root emphasizes the importance of incarnation and God's ongoing revelation in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is still the God who comes to us in our impossibilities (death) to bring possibility (resurrection). Root calls for this theological turn to move us away from pragmaticism as a framework for faith in the Secular Age. Through critical realism, Root

[99] Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality: A Brief History*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 148.

argues that people encounter a living God who transforms, even in the immanent frame of a Secular Age.

For Taylor, the good life in the Secular Age is expected to come through exclusive humanism for the purpose of human flourishing. The immanent frame "constitutes a 'natural order, to be contrasted to a 'supernatural' one, an 'immanent' world, over against a possible 'transcendent' one."[100] However, Taylor also asserts that religion and other events have the potential to occasion transcendence. Taylor's argument for the potential of transcendence, even in the immanent frame dominating the social imaginary is consistent with Root's argument for God's action of revelation to human beings. According to Taylor, the potential of transcendence, which may unexpectantly emerge within the "immanent frame," points to something mysterious beyond non-faith formed human flourishing. Presence-centered spirituality assumes the experience with that which is transcendent and encounter with the presence of God. So, what does the occasional glimpse, experience, or encounter with the transcendent look like, and how might we think about this more fully within the immanent frame of the Secular Age?

Taylor writes, "A way of putting our present condition is to say that many people are happy living for goals which are purely immanent; they live in a way that takes no account of the transcendent."[101] As the social imaginary of human beings in the Western world shifted from a "porous-self," vulnerable to supernatural influence and interaction in the pre-modern world, to a "buffered-self (identity)," in today's world, this has firmly entrenched a "social and civilizational framework which inhibits or blocks out certain of the ways in which transcendence has historically impinged on humans, and been present in their lives."[102] The result of this immanent

[100] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 542.
[101] Ibid., 143.
[102] Ibid., 239.

frame is a supposed disappearance of the supernatural and imagination for transcendence has been radically reduced in modernity.

Taylor argues the disenchanted world of the immanent frame falls short for human beings desire to make meaning. “A disenchanted view of the world needs a theory to explain the continuing power of (a phenomenological sense that we are in contact with something greater).”[103] Taylor articulates three forms the *malaise of immanence* may take: “(1) the sense of the fragility of meaning, the search for an over-arching significance; (2) the felt flatness of our attempts to solemnize the crucial moments of passage in our lives; and (3) the utter flatness, emptiness of the ordinary.”[104] This malaise of immanence leave an opening for encounter (at minimal, the desire for encounter) with something transcendent within, and beyond. This is important for the practice of presence-centered spirituality. While Taylor is vague concerning the possibilities within the immanent frame for a transcendent encounter, he clearly asserts that it is still normative for human beings to long for encounter with something transcendent, something that opens them up to a reality greater than they can comprehend or easily explain rationally.

Root is more definitive than Taylor in declaring the reality of a divine encounter and transcendent experience with God in and through Jesus Christ. It is this so-called potential encounter with transcendence that adds gravitas to the practice of a presence-centered spirituality in the Secular Age and helps make meaning of a transcendent experience. While Taylor consistently writes about the human pursuit for something greater beyond the reach of exclusive humanism, he doesn’t offer much in the way of how that happens outside of or within the immanent frame. However, Hartmut Rosa has much to say about this presence-centered reality that he calls *Resonance*.

[103] Ibid., 518.
[104] Ibid., 309.

CHAPTER 3:
PRESENCE-CENTERED SPIRITUALITY AND RESONANCE IN THE SECULAR AGE

Hartmut Rosa is a German sociologist and political scientist who serves as Professor of Sociology at the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, Germany. He is also the Director of the Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies in Erfurt, Germany. His doctoral dissertation at Humboldt University of Berlin was titled, "Identity and Cultural Practice, The Political Philosophy of Charles Taylor." Rosa's theory of *Resonance* (a sociology of our relationship to the world) adds multiple layers of depth to the theological concept of a presence-centered spirituality and life that experiences the transcendent reality of a God who seeks to encounter us. Rosa adds a sociologist's voice into my thinking as a practical theologian about what it means to be alive to myself, to others, to God, and God's creation.

Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World

Rosa builds on Taylor's theory of secularization by arguing that modernity can be defined by social acceleration fueled by technology and innovation. Rosa's work on a sociology of time resulted in the book *Alienation and Acceleration*.[105] The modern period, according to Rosa, is driven by *dynamic stabilization*, a concept critical for understanding how our world works. Dynamic stabilization states things must actually grow in order to even remain stable and be sustainable. The promise of technology and innovation claims to provide more margin for our busy lives and increased efficiency. But the actual result of technological advancement and innovation is an *acceleration of time* that requires we move faster than ever just to maintain some kind of stability. Acceleration becomes an "aimless, endless compulsion toward escalation."[106]

[105] Hartmut Rosa, *Alienation and Acceleration: Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality* (Malmö, Sweden: NSU Press, 2010).

[106] Hartmut Rosa, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2021), 2.

Rosa defines acceleration, "*as growth in quantity per unit of time*… and can be understood as an irrevocable *tendency toward escalation* rooted in the fact that the social formation of modernity cannot stabilize itself except dynamically."[107] This means that in order for modern capitalist society to even maintain some level of stability and status quo it must "forever be expanding, growing and innovating, increasing production and consumption as well as options and opportunities for connection."[108] This provides a perfect storm for our anxious-ridden world.

What is quite intriguing is Rosa's insistence that the solution to acceleration is not slowing down, taking it easy, or even "deceleration."[109] Consistent with Rosa's assertion that simply slowing down is not the solution to meaningful life in the Secular Age, presence-centered spirituality is not about the simple life, or a general slowing down. Presence-centered spirituality is about living meaningfully in the present with one's own self, with others, with God, and with all God's creation.

Resonance: A Way of Thinking about Transcendence in the Immanent Frame

Rosa's seminal work to date is his 554-page book, *Resonance: A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World,* first published in German in 2016 and English in 2019. As a result of acceleration, human beings' relationship to themselves, others, time and space, objects, and the world around us is increasingly impacted in dehumanizing ways. Rosa lays out in his concept of resonance how destructive the "endless compulsion toward escalation" is to our lives, leaving us depleted, burned out, and surrounded by mute relationships with others and the world. How we find ourselves situated in the world makes a huge difference in our pursuit of "the good life." How we approach life, think about our life, and live our life has a lot to do with whether we feel

[107] Ibid., 1.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid.

connected to ourselves, others, and the world or disconnected—whether we feel like a participant in life or merely an unfulfilled observer of life that seems to be rapidly passing us by.

Making Meaning Through Expressive Individualism in an Age of Authenticity

For Taylor and Rosa, the impact of our current social emphasis on hyper individualism which has arisen over the last five decades has resulted in what Taylor calls "a widespread 'expressive' individualism."[110] Root weighs in here with his critique of the church in the USA focused on rampant pragmaticism centered on a focus of individualized faith, instead of a communal, relational faith. There is significant agreement between Taylor, Rosa, and Root on the growing impact of alienation resulting from a dysfunctional pursuit of "authenticity." Within his theory of resonance, Rosa argues that alienation can be best understood as a "mode of relating to the world in which the subject encounters the subjective, objective, and/or social world as either indifferent or repulsive."[111] In Charles Taylor's earlier work, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, he discusses the rise in the Western world of the individual and states that the perceived freedom of the modern individual has come by "breaking loose from older moral horizons."[112] Tragically, Taylor describes how the perceived gains for individual freedom has led to loss of a broader vision of our relationships with others and the world. We see this in new language that has emerged focused on being "my authentic true self" and embracing and speaking "my truth."

This ideology of authenticity has grown to demand that no other person can or should try to shape (or really have anything to say about) a person's selected identity. However, individual crafted identity and freedoms are, ironically, dependent on social media likes and affirmations from those they encounter. Taylor notes, "This individualism involves a centering on the self and

[110] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 473.
[111] Rosa, *Resonance*, 178.
[112] Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 3.

a concomitant shutting out, or even unawareness, of the greater issues or concerns that transcend the self, be they religious, political, historical. As a consequence, life is narrowed or flattened."[113] This effort of creating an individualistic identity based on "my truth" often fuels self-centered, narcissistic behavior that actually leads to alienation. Taylor writes, "I want to show that modes that opt for self-fulfillment without regard to the demands of our ties with others or demands of any kind emanating from something more or other than human desires or aspirations are self-defeating, that they destroy the conditions for realizing authenticity itself."[114] These issues are particularly relevant in the current generational stage of late adolescence and emerging adulthood. And they present a significant challenge for our culture overall and our faith communities in particular. Taylor declares:

> Only if I exist in a world in which history, or the demand of nature, or the needs of my fellow human beings, or the duties of citizenship, or the call of God, or something else of this order matters crucially, can I define an identity for myself that is not trivial. Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands.[115]

True freedom and authenticity is not about "freedom from" but "freedom for." True freedom is deeply relational, not individualistic.

Alienation and Relationlessness

The individual autonomy so highly valued in the age of authenticity is not, according to Rosa, "the solution to, but one of the causes of modern experiences of alienation."[116] Rosa, in an article published in *Global Dialogue* (a magazine of the International Sociological Association), explained:

> Alienation is a particular mode of relating to the world of things, to people, and to one's self in which there is no *responsivity*, i.e., no meaningful inner connection. It is a

[113] Ibid., 4.
[114] Ibid.,35.
[115] Ibid., 40-41.
[116] Rosa, *Resonance*, 183.

> relationship without genuine relation. In this mode, there certainly are causal and instrumental connections and interactions, but the world (in all its qualities) cannot be appropriated by the subject, it cannot be made to "speak," it appears to be without sound and color. Alienation thus is a relationship which is marked by the absence of a true, vibrant exchange and connection: between a silent and grey world and a "dry" subject there is no life, both appear to be either "frozen" or genuinely chaotic and mutually aversive. Hence, in the state of alienation, self and world appear to be related in an utterly indifferent or even hostile way.[117]

Alienation results in a person experiencing their feelings, emotions, body, and the other (person or world) they encounter as a disconnected, a non-responding, mute interaction. There is nothing there. The harder a person tries to present a true "authentic" self through an existentially developed idiosyncratic pursuit untethered to something rooted beyond an ever-changing desire to experiment with something new, the more alienated they become often leading to increasing levels of depression, directionless, and anxiety.

Resonance as the Antithesis of Alienation

For Rosa, "Resonance is the 'other' of alienation."[118] Alienation within the concept of resonance can be defined as "a relation of relationlessness (Rahel Jaeggi)… Alienation is the antithesis of resonance."[119] Rosa stresses the core need for meaningful relational connection:

> Phenomenologically speaking, we all know what it means to be touched by someone's glance or voice, by a piece of music we listen to, by a book we read, or a place we visit. Thus, the capacity to feel affected by something, and in turn to develop intrinsic interest in the part of the world which affects us, is a core element of any positive way of relating to the world.[120]

However, being touched by something "other" (be it a person, art, music, nature, etc.) is not true resonance, according to Rosa, until we respond back in connection to that which affected us. Rosa uses a metaphor of *tuning forks* to describe the dynamics of resonance. If a tuning fork is

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[117] Hartmut Rosa, "The Idea of Resonance as a Sociological Concept," *Global Dialogue*, July 9, 2018, https://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/articles/the-idea-of-resonance-as-a-sociological-concept.

[118] Rosa, *Resonance*, 178.

[119] Ibid., 184.

[120] Rosa, "The Idea of Resonance." See footnote 95.

struck so that it begins to vibrate and a second tuning fork is brought into proximity with it the non-vibrating tuning fork will also begin to vibrate in resonance with the first tuning fork. We, therefore, "seek resonant relationships to the world either as the *first* (self-anchored) or the second (world-anchored) tuning fork."[121] For Rosa, being truly resonant with the world and opened up to a transcendent experience requires that we not be stuck only in the role of the second, or responding tuning fork but also embrace the posture of openness to function as the *first tuning* fork. Therefore, we are not only open to a reactive encounter, but we embrace a posture of openness to interact and encounter the other (person, object, place, or thing). Presence-centered spirituality focuses on practices and awareness that help us tune the strings of a person's life for resonant participation, collaboration, and accompaniment in the divine life of God and God's creation. Resonance or presence-centeredness requires limiting individual autonomy to embrace a posture of being open to a mutual encounter with the other.

Rosa reminds us that the modern Western world has "radically abandoned the idea of the human being as a creature designed with a particular purpose in life, a *telos*."[122] In our current cultural milieu, we find ourselves adrift in the immanent frame constantly hyped by an ever-increasing pressure to compete for ever-decreasing resources. So, it is little wonder the world for many seems unsafe and often dangerous. As we act within a script of *dynamic stabilization*, it becomes more and more difficult to establish resonate relationships. Constantly trying to outdo the other makes it impossible to experience resonance with each other.

The question of what it means to live the "good life" is a question at the forefront of all human beings' pursuit to make meaning. This has been a question asked throughout human

[121] Rosa, *Resonance,* 143.
[122] Ibid., 18.

history from a philosophical, sociological, and theological perspective. From a Christian perspective, Jesus declares that he came that we might have life and life abundantly.[123]

Modernity's Move Toward Excarnation and the Loss of Devotion to God

In modernity, the process of excarnation was fueled by an emphasis on the cognitive way of knowing, reducing spirituality largely to an understanding of, and obedience to, the right Christian information (which differs based on the cultural and subcultural contexts). The move by many emerging churches and faith communities seeking to live faithfully in the Secular Age are emphasizing a broader epistemology that involves the person holistically along with a desire for greater harmony and connection with the world in which we live. *Orthodoxy* (right thinking) without *orthopraxis* (right practice) and *orthocardia* (right heart) falls short of what it means to follow God faithfully in the way of Jesus Christ. All three—*orthodoxy*, *orthopraxis*, and *orthocardia*—prove necessary for presence-centered spirituality.[124] Taylor describes how modernity shifted the Christian view toward the idea that:

> our duty to God consisted in establishing and conforming to the moral order (God) had designed for us. The proofs of (God's) existence and goodness pointed to (God's) design of a world in which this order was appropriate, and (God's) endorsing of it through the rewards and punishments (God) offers us… What got lost was the sense that devotion to God, for its own sake, was the centre of the religious life.[125]

Taylor's contention that the devotion to God for its own sake has been lost in the Secular Age is a reality presence-centered spirituality and Rosa's theory of resonance addresses.

Taylor declares, from a Christian perspective, the missing centerpiece is "the love of God" which could give us "an alternative way of describing Wesley's rebellion against the

[123] John 10:10.

[124] Gregory Scott Clapper, *John Wesley on Religious Affections: His Views on Experience and Emotion and Their Role in the Christian Life and Theology* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1989). In this book, Clapper coins the phrase *orthocardia* and explores its formational and theological implications.

[125] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 312.

established piety of his day."[126] The current trajectory of the evangelical church toward an emphasis on selective morality (anti-gay, abortion elimination, etc.) is an example of Taylor's critique. A sense of devotion to God and God's kingdom set aside for pseudo-Christian political ideology (capitalism, partisan politics, militarism, nationalism, anti-immigration, gender politics, racism, etc.) is diminishing a clear picture of what it means to be Christian in the world. At a time when faith is already fragilized and no longer an attractive alternative for emerging generations, this adds to the growing cynicism directed at Christianity. Likewise, Root adds to this assessment with his critique of evangelical pragmaticism focused on programs and metrics of success (based on numbers) and not centered on devotion to God as the subject of ministry.

Axes of Resonance, Relationship with Ourselves, Others, God, and Creation

So, what does it look like for communities of followers of Jesus Christ, who live in the immanent frame, to live in a way where the love of God is a centerpiece; where the focus is devotion to God for its own sake; where the mystery of incarnation moves us, where we live a presence-centered life; where a relationship of *resonance* with ourselves, others, and the world is normative leading to the flourishing of life all around us? These questions and issues are critical for the ongoing work of rethinking what Christian formation should look like today and what ministry should like in the Secular Age.

For Rosa, "Resonance is not an emotional state, but a mode of relation."[127] The resonate relationships in the world fall into three axes of resonance. These axes of resonance are horizontal, diagonal, and vertical. Horizontal resonance occurs between two or more people involving families, churches, organizations, work environments, etc. Diagonal resonance involve relationships to events and things. Vertical resonance is the realm of religion, God, nature, art,

[126] Ibid., 312.

[127] Rosa, *Resonance*, 168.

etc. Rosa believes, “an accommodating reorientation of the everyday practices of social actors from the bottom up is also required, with the aim of taking horizontal, diagonal, and perhaps also vertical resonant relationships out of their commodified special zones and reintegrating them into reproductive everyday practices.”[128] Presence-centered spirituality seeks to do this by ordering and organizing around holistic “everyday practices” that tune persons in community to be receptive toward the experience of horizontal, vertical and diagonal resonance.

Horizontal Resonance

All connections between human beings fall in the horizontal axes for the potential of resonance in relationships. Horizontal resonance occurs between two or more people involving families, churches, organizations, work environments, etc. Within this axis, there are many challenges and obstacles of experiencing resonance with others. Living in the acceleration of the modern world with its formula of dynamic stabilization makes it very difficult to “simultaneously resonate and compete with others.”[129] Rosa fleshes out the challenge of societies effort to create the sphere of *family* as a “harbor of resonance.”[130] He interestingly uses the biblical nativity story to describe the social world, often indifferent (*the inn*), sometimes hostile (*Herod*) in contrast to the Holy Family with its horizontal resonance between the baby Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, and its vertical resonant connection to a star, angels, and “heaven and nature sing,” and I would add diagonal resonance—the connection of this event with that which had been foretold, hoped for, and longed for. Rosa asserts that Christmas is largely celebrated today as a “celebration of family” and reminds us that this holiday, which can be an extremely resonate event, can also be the occasion that “intra-familial obstruction of resonance frequently becomes

[128] Ibid., 441.
[129] Ibid., 202.
[130] Ibid.

visible and the potential for alienation erupts into reality."[131] "The realization that family alone cannot fulfill all of modernity's expectations of social resonance and thus requires some kind of complement is not new to late modernity," states Rosa.[132] For Rosa, family, as the "sole harbor of resonance" in a "competitive or indifferent world, is structurally incapable of fulfilling the demands for resonance that are focused on it."[133] However, as unrealistic as the expectation of the family to provide the foundation of resonant relationships is, the family still provides a principal context for both pain and alienation as well as love and acceptance. Life-giving resonant relationships within a family context don't just happen; they must be nurtured. Buber declared, "When a man loves a woman so that her life is present in his own, the You of her eyes allows him to gaze into a ray of the eternal You."[134] According to Rosa, "The eyes are the central human organ of resonance, and it is the forgiving look which is able to re-establish two people's capacity for resonance and thus their friendship as a loving, responsive relationship."[135] Gazing in to the eyes of another person, face-to-face, is a resonant experience for some and extremely uncomfortable for others.

Resonant Friendships

Friendship proves fundamental to the good life and provides a potential significant source of resonance in one's life. Friendship is different than familial relations because they don't necessarily involve obligations. Strong, meaningful relationships with others (friends) must be cultivated over a long period of time. Presence-centered spirituality requires deep friendships with those who are fellow sojourners. A circle of friends is critical to live a presence-centered, resonant life to the full. Rosa writes, "Two people are friends when a resonant wire of sympathy

[131] Ibid., 203.
[132] Ibid., 209.
[133] Ibid., 208.
[134] Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 154.
[135] Rosa, *Resonance,* 214.

and trust vibrates between them."[136] He continues, "Long-term friendships, which oftentimes stretch all the way back to one's school days, moreover also produce something like a *biographical* resonant wire."[137] With 46 years at Youthfront, serving alongside seven staff members with 25 plus years on staff, ten staff members of ten plus years, there is a strong sense of connectedness in our biographies, remembering good times and bad times; these relationships often serve as "catalysts of resonance" providing ways to "put us back in touch with ourselves."[138] These deeply spiritual, long-term friendships actually necessitate "irritating and fighting with each other… as an unavoidable part of friendship as a resonance event."[139] Long-term friendships maintained along the way are instrumental in shaping our identity. Heidegger's work on defining what it means to be a person (*dasein*) is shaped by the people we are in relationship with and the landscape (place) we grow up in and inhabit.

One of the critical issues of curating an environment that leads to presence-centeredness (resonance) occurs through being embedded in a community of Christian practice. The more the community of Christian practice leans into a common life around values, beliefs, and action, the more likely these shared experiences can result in resonant encounters. In this dimension of the horizontal axes of resonance, human beings must learn what it means to be in *I-Thou* relationships. Jewish philosopher Martin Buber's *I-Thou* philosophical work, centered on relational encounter, is important for the concept of resonant relationships. This must first be learned at the horizontal level of human relationships as we see the other—not as an "it" but as a sacred "thou" and how that changes the nature of our relationships. The human being moving

[136] Ibid., 210.
[137] Ibid., 213.
[138] Ibid.
[139] Ibid.

from *I-I* to *I-It* to *I-Thou* is the progression to becoming fully human, relationally resonant beings.

Human beings desire to be seen, to love, and be loved. When people begin to feel that they are not seen by a community, by other people they care about, they feel alienation. Church communities must be places that see people, see children, and see others not yet in their community. When church communities make people feel unseen, they can quickly become places of increasing hostility. Resonance theory should compel the curation of environments which cultivate relationship—relationship to one another, relationship to the place people gather, to the bread and wine, to the aesthetics that provide meaning for the community, and a passion to extend meaning and resonance to those outside the community.

Diagonal Resonance

Diagonal resonance involves relationships to events and things. Modern humans primarily view the world as an unanimated resource to access and consume. Most people give little thought to how they relate to objects in the world around them. Rosa writes, "It is a specific characteristic of Western modernity that in its cognitive organization of its relationships to the world, it ascribes no resonant qualities to *things*, i.e., to non-human or at least non-animal objects."[140] Rosa continues, "The rational or cognitive universe of modernity, established and legitimized by science, is thus a 'mute universe' in which no other voices but those of human beings can be heard."[141] This was not the case in the pre-modern world where things, creatures, and objects had the potential of speaking in a variety of ways in an enchanted world. Through rationalism and the *excarnation* of the Protestant Enlightenment project, human beings interact with things and objects almost exclusively on an instrumental level. Things, objects, and the

[140] Ibid., 226.
[141] Ibid.

entire universe are viewed as essentially "mute." Only human voices are relevant. In the premodern, enchanted world, animals, nature, etc. had character, essence, spirit, and could be a source of resonant relationship with human beings. St. Francis is an excellent example of experiencing resonance with Brother Sun, Sister Moon, and the wolf of Gubbio. This kind of relationship with the *other* thing or object is developed fully by Buber's concept of *I-Thou* vs. *I-It*. Buber declared, "The eyes of an animal have the capacity of a great language. Independent, without any need of the assistance of sounds and gestures, most eloquent when they rest entirely in their glance, they express the mystery in its natural captivity, that is, in the anxiety of becoming."[142] I regularly feel a resonant connection with my dog, Chile, through her gaze and other interactions we have. Rosa's work has made this kind of connection with non-human entities clear and understandable.

Meaningful interaction with the world around us appears critical for truly experiencing the world God created. Presence-centered spirituality prioritizes and privileges a posture of openness for encounter with God and the world God has created and is connected to. Rosa writes:

> It is critical to resonance theory that we understand resonant relationships to objects not simply as exceptional poetic forms of experience *apart from the real world*—and thus merely as enclaves in an otherwise essentially mute or hostile world—but rather as *everyday* modes of relation, i.e., as ways of relating to the world through things that are also possible in everyday life.[143]

Buber asserts, "One cannot divide one's life between an actual relationship to God and an inactual *I-It* relationship to the world—praying to God in truth and utilizing the world. Whoever knows the world as something to be utilized knows God the same way."[144] This kind of

[142] Buber, *I and THOU*, 144.
[143] Rosa, *Resonance*, 230.
[144] Buber, *I and THOU*, 156.

functionalizing and utilizing others, including God, is a dynamic of pragmatism within the church and much of Christian spirituality in the Western world.

Treating the world and things in the world as merely something to be consumed, to be exploited, will ultimately result in the same posture and attitude toward God. God is the Creator of the world and delighted in this creation. How can we not take our stewardship of the earth and all God's creation with the utmost of reverence? How do we experience the world, and how do we appropriate the world? Are we alive to the world and see it as other, as speaking to us and responding to us? As an example of trying to reorient my behavior of treating God's creation as a thing, an it, I have increasingly taken on the practice of personalizing important objects in my life. One of my favorite places is Beaver Lake in Arkansas. The lake, managed by the Army Corp of Engineers, has maintained a pristine, natural environment with crystal clear water and wooded shores. The lake speaks volumes to me with regularity, as do the trees and cliffs that line its shores. Rosa, citing Georg Simmel declares, "it is through working on and processing the world, grappling with its materiality (including intellectual and symbolic materiality), that the 'human soul,' what we now call subjectivity, first emerges."[145] Being with Beaver Lake makes me feel human and fully alive in my soul.

Resonance and Vocation

Resonance with things and objects also add meaning to vocation. The relationship between a worker and the things they use, make, and create mediate the craftmanship of the work. A painter loves the mediums they use because they make things come alive. A baker is delighted with ingredients and the end product they create which comes to life and becomes a thing desired that can literally impact the mood of those who partake of the cake, cookies, or pastries. Rosa insists, "Genuine responsive relationships in the sense characteristic of resonant

[145] Rosa, *Resonance,* 233.

relationships to the world thus develop between gardener and plants, scholar and books, carpenter and boards, baker and dough, violinist and violin."[146] And just as possible is that these things that can speak to us can also grow silent or seemingly resistant to a resonant relationship with us. There are times when art, books, musical instruments, nature, and other things grow silent, mute, and cease to resonate with us.

Rosa also argues that passion for sports is fueled by the "diagonal axes of resonance" creating a bridge between our bodies and the sport activities we participate in that allow us to be "situated in the world and connected with his or her body."[147] Rosa explores the way sports create a collective resonance for fans which is quite unique in modernity. "This produces not only what psychologists refer to as *joint attention* but also what we might call *joint emotion*. In this situation—for once—we can know and feel fairly accurately what the people around us know and feel, and the feelings manifested in our and their movements and expressions mutually reinforce each other."[148] Most sports fans will identify with Rosa's idea of *joint emotion* experienced while cheering on their favorite team. This *joint attention* and *joint emotion* creating collective resonance can also happen to a faith community participating together in profound liturgical worship and spiritual practices. While participating in religious practices together, participants not only have the potential to meaningfully connect with God but also with each other in ways that move them beyond the confines of the immanent frame into the mystery of a transcendent encounter.

Spiritual communities must re-member through Christian practices, liturgical activity, and rituals that can nurture robust diagonal, horizontal, and vertical axes of resonance. Spiritual practices like making the sign of the cross, breath prayers, bowing, putting hands in water and

[146] Ibid., 234.
[147] Ibid., 249.
[148] Ibid., 251.

touching the forehead to remember baptism, walking a labyrinth, kneeling, passing the peace and much, much more remind us that we have bodies that allow us to participate in resonant experiences powerfully shaping our lives.

Vertical Resonance

In Rosa's theory, he explicitly places the promise of religion for resonance in the vertical axis. The promise of religion is that there is something beyond our immediate perception, something that is responsive and offers *love* and *meaning* to overcome alienation in all its forms.[149] He cites Schleiermacher and Buber to make the case that the promise of religion corresponds well with his theory of resonance. Rosa focuses on Schleiermacher's assertion in his work *On Religion* that "all intuition proceeds from an influence of the intuited on the one who intuits…," and in this manner "religious experience can be redefined as an adaptively transformative relationship to the world in which the correlating experience of self-efficacy is achieved not through external action, but through internal movements of taking in, synthesizing, and apprehending."[150] Of course, Schleiermacher's theological construct falls short of the fullness of what a robust Christology adds to the promise of a transcendent encounter with the divine. This was Barth's critique of Schleiermacher,[151] but it is interesting how Rosa engages him. Rosa acknowledges that he is not arguing for Schleiermacher's theology as correct but instead to argue for the idea that "an essential aspect of religious experience and religion's appeal lies in the idea of an accommodating, responsive world that touches us, and that we are capable of meeting in turn, is eminently compatible with the Western religious tradition."[152] Resonance is a two-way exchange between the person and the other (person, nature, God, etc.).

[149] Ibid., 258.

[150] Ibid., 259.

[151] Karl Barth and Dietrich Ritschl, *The Theology of Schleiermacher: Lectures at Göttingen (*Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982).

[152] Rosa, *Resonance,* 260.

With Buber, Rosa focuses on his modes of relating to the world and things in the world—the *I-You (I-Thou)* in contrast to the *I-It*. The *I-You* speaks of a *resonate* relationship to the world or the other, and the *I-It* speaks of a *mute* relationship to the world. Rosa states, "Buber defines the human being, in accordance with the 'dialogical principle' he elaborates, as a being created with respect to a You—and for Buber this could well be an animal, plant, or thing—that the subject becomes itself and finds actual life."[153] For Buber, God is the "eternal You." God is a God who arrives, who acts, who comes in revelation. This is ultimate resonance. And Rosa, seems to acknowledge that this is the promise of Christianity, "There is one who hears you, who understands you, who can find ways and means of reaching you and responding to you."[154] Rosa and Buber's assertion that God who arrives and reveals God's own self happens through relational encounter is consistent with Root's *Christopraxis*.

The promise of Christianity, which Rosa acknowledges, is why spiritual practices are essential to Presence-centered spirituality and these practices must be rooted within a community of people striving to live out faith together in deeply tangible and meaningful ways. Rosa articulates the importance of spiritual practices:

> Religious practices (at least within the respective purviews of the world's various religions) are primarily rooted in the concept of vertical resonance, particularly the idea of developing a connection between human beings and God (or the realm of the ancestors); only in light of this vertical axis of resonance are horizontal and diagonal resonant relationships then also established (respectively, to the *community of believers* and, for example, to *bread* and *wine* or to holy sites and temples).[155]

Rosa's theory of resonance within the immanent frame of modernity has so much to work with theologically and within ministry practice. Rosa declares:

> In worship services and religious rites such as Eucharist and the benediction, the "experience" of deep vertical resonance is connected both to *horizontal axes* of resonance

[153] Ibid., 261.
[154] Ibid.
[155] Ibid., 200-201.

> between the faithful, who in Christian culture constitute a parish or community in "communion," and to *diagonal* resonant relationships, inasmuch as things and artifacts such as bread, chalice, wine and cross… are "charged" with resonance.[156]

Remember, these sacraments and rites were the "magical" things or "objects infused with power" that became disenchanted through excarnation.

In the vertical axis of resonance (the promise of religion), can we actually make the claim that we can encounter a living God who also encounters us? Can we have a meaningful resonant relationship with God in the Secular Age? Root's articulation of the philosophy of "critical realism" pushes back on the Enlightenment project of modernity, which privileges epistemology over ontology, claiming "there are entities that are real in the world that exist outside what can be known."[157] The theory of resonance can't be known fully with epistemological certainty. However, critical realism challenges the idea that resonance can't be a conceivable, knowable reality resulting in deep relational and ontological encounter with an "other." From the perspective of critical realism "we can assert that people have divine experiences of divine action… these experiences are revelatory: they are event-filled encounters of cause."[158] This is resonance. This is at the core of mystical encounters with God and God's creation. We experience something real because we are impacted to the very core of our being. We encounter the other and the other encounters us ontologically. "Reality is always ontologically more than epistemological systems can possess."[159] We feel something very real, very true, that opens us up to something transcending the immanent frame.

Resonance with God as a Being of Relation

[156] Ibid., 263.
[157] Root, *Christopraxis*, 192.
[158] Ibid., 200.
[159] Ibid., 215.

In the introduction to Buber's book, *I and Thou*, Walter Kaufmann explains that for Buber, "the only possible relationship with God is to address God and be addressed by God, here and now, in the present. For (Buber) the Hebrew name of God, the tetragrammaton (YHVH), means God is present… God is here."[160] Buber writes:

> I know nothing of a "world" and of "worldly life" that separates us from God. What is designated that way is life with an alienated It-world, the life of experience and use. Whoever goes forth in truth to the world, goes forth in God. Concentration and going forth, both in truth, the one-and-the-other which is the One, are what is needful. God embraces but is not the universe; just so, God embraces but is not my self.[161]

God is a being of relation, so we encounter God's very being as becoming.

Engagement with Eastern Orthodox theological thinking can help Christianity in the West consider how we might correct some of the ways we have allowed Western rational enlightenment to shape our theology and ministry. Rosa states:

> …the idea of God as a kind of *being of relation*, as expressed particularly in the doctrine of *perichoresis*—the relationship of the three persons of the triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), which fully interpenetrate each other yet remain distinct—as well as in the early Christian notion that God and the human soul are constitutively connected.[162]

Greek philosopher and Eastern Orthodox theologian Christos Yannaras makes the case for a relational ontology in describing how human beings, the person, is constituted. Our relation to the "other" and sharing in the personal otherness of human beings and the otherness of God is what makes us fully human and shapes our identity. Yannaras writes, "The presuppositions for the formation of subjective self-knowledge or self-consciousness are primarily relational (i.e., functions of relations), not primarily biological (i.e., products of instincts)."[163] Yannaras states, "The human infant begins life without reason, thought, judgment, or imagination. It is born

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[160] Buber, *I and THOU*, 26.
[161] Ibid., 143.
[162] Rosa, *Resonance*, 264.
[163] Christos Yannaras, *Relational Ontology* (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2011), 5.

endowed only with the desire for life-as-relation, which has come to be signified by the Latin word *libido* (desire, yearning)."[164] Rosa's theory of resonance also describes the role of *libido* and the desire for relationship. Rosa asserts that "infants and young children are resonant beings."[165] This insight is also implied by Jesus's teaching in the Gospel of Matthew:

> At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."[166]

We all know how curious and open a child is to the world around them. That Jesus says you must become like children is profound and yet often ignored as to its implications.

In his book *Shattered Lantern*, Rolheiser quotes Nikos Kazantzakis, "When I was a child, I became one with sky, insects, sea, wind—whatever I saw or touched… Shutting my eyes contentedly, I used to hold out my palms and wait. God always came—as long as I remained a child."[167] This openness to a resonate world is almost a universal reality except for those children who have been exposed to a mute relational environment. When we see a child who has been abused or neglected by caregivers, it is tragic and viewed by human beings as horrific. No doubt, this is consistent with what Jesus adds, "If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea."[168]

Yannaras describes *life-as-relation,* much like Rosa's dynamic of resonance, as "mediated initially by the desire for the mother's breast, the mother's body, the mother's

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[164] Ibid., 35.

[165] Rosa, *Resonance*, 248.

[166] Matt. 18:1-4.

[167] Ronald Rolheiser, *The Shattered Lantern: Rediscovering a Felt Presence of God* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 2004), 94.

[168] Matt. 18:6.

presence—her embrace, her tenderness, and her affection."[169] In emphasizing this aspect of relationality which deeply narrates what it means to be a human being at its formative stages, it seems that both Catholics and Orthodox have something important with art and icons that display the baby Jesus at Mary's breast, which most Protestants and especially evangelicals have ignored. Yannaras continues fleshing out this relational ontology: "This desire (the desire for life-as-relation) is mediated progressively by every call to relationship, which creates in the recipient of the call the desire for a permanent and complete union (i.e., intercourse, or syn-ousia, which in Greek has the root meaning of 'being with') with the invitatory fact."[170] For Yannaras, the desire for *syn-ousia* (being with), much like Rosa (resonance, relation with), includes the dynamic of beauty, an invitation for connectedness with the other. "The beauty can be that of the human person, but it can also be an indirect manifestation of the person: a gesture, a smile, the grace of the body, a song, a musical composition, a painting, a poem. A fact invitatory to *syn-ousia* can also be something beautiful in the natural world: a sunset, the sea, a flower, a landscape."[171] Yannaras's holistic scope of "being with" is very compatible with Rosa's resonance and both concepts add significantly to presence-centered spirituality.

Resonancelessness as Sin

Bringing a protestant perspective, Rosa points to Reformer Martin Luther to affirm resonancelessness (resistance to resonance) as sin and alienation. Sinful is "the soul curved in on itself," according to Luther (*homo incurvatus in se ipsum*). "Religion is then a promise that the world or universe or God still speaks (or *sings*) to us *even when we are incapable of hearing it*

[169] Yannaras, *Relational Ontology*, 35.
[170] Ibid., 5.
[171] Ibid., 35.

when all our axes of resonance have fallen mute."[172] When we are incapable of hearing from God, or think we are incapable of hearing God, we are bound up by impossibility (death) and are at a place where God, revealed most fully in Jesus Christ, often comes to us. God arrives in our impossibilities bringing possibility (resurrection) and transformation.

This idea of sinfulness resides at the core of Root's *Christopraxis.* Turned in on ourselves can close us to God's divine action encountering us. It is at the intersection of divine and human action that resonance with God is most profound. Root declares, "The event of transformational encounter that is God's ministry is contemporaneously the work of the Spirit to align us with the ministry of Jesus, moving us into concrete forms of ministry ourselves as the circuits of ontological union with God *through* Jesus Christ."[173] This encounter of ministry comprises horizontal, diagonal and vertical resonance connecting human beings with God's ministry in Jesus Christ as the "hermeneutic of God's very being." Human beings acting concretely with God's action for the good of the world is full on resonance and presence-centeredness. As Christians in ministry, our biggest question is one of resonance—"Where is Jesus Christ?"—because it is there, "being with" (presence-centered) in participation with God, where we want to be.

At the ontological core of God's own being, **God is minister**. God is always partially hidden, and we human beings are all partially blind; but when we participate with God in the act of ministry, we experience resonance and presence-centered reality in a way that makes us fully alive in our being as humans. Living life presence-centered, with resonance, allows us to vibrate within our own humanity/divinity, with others, with the created world, and with the God who we encounter—who encounters us. As we move into the next chapter, we will focus more on how

[172] Rosa, *Resonance*, 265.

[173] Root, *Christopraxis*, 100.

God can become real to us and can lead to a sense of God's presence at work in our lives within the immanent frame of the Secular Age.

CHAPTER 4:
ENCOUNTERING THE PRESENCE OF GOD:
HOW GOD BECOMES REAL TO US IN THE SECULAR AGE

The possibility of a transcendent encounters Taylor points to, the resonance Rosa describes, and Root's assertion of collaborating with God at the intersection of divine and human action all coincide with a presence-centered encounter with God. Taylor believes that many in the immanent frame, experience "modes of fullness" and respond to transcendent reality but "misrecognize" it and therefore, "shut out crucial features of it."[174] Through Rosa's concept of *resonance,* as a mode of relation, we can build on Taylor's idea of an open take toward the transcendent encounter within the immanent frame of the Secular Age. To further explore the experience of transcendence within Taylor's Secular Age, building on Root's *Christopraxis* and Rosa's sociological theory of resonance, we now turn to Tanya Marie Luhrmann's work as an anthropologist and psychologist. Luhrmann's research contributes to a theological exploration about what it means to encounter God in the Secular Age.

An Anthropologist's Exploration of How God Becomes Real

Tanya Marie Luhrmann is professor of anthropology and psychology at Stanford University. In her book, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others*, Luhrmann sets out to examine why faith endures. In the preface, she articulates her scope and big ideas. She declares, "This is not an atheist's book. It is not a believer's book. It is an anthropologist's book and a work of the anthropology of mind, that filter through which humans become aware of their world. Nothing I say here speaks for or against the genuine reality of gods and spirits."[175] Luhrmann obviously operates largely and comfortably within the immanent frame of the Secular Age. And yet, she remains perplexed that most of the theories about faith do not

[174] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 768.

[175] T. M. Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), xiv.

even consider, nor explore the practices religious people engage in to make a connection and nurture a relationship with God or divine beings and the change people are willing to embrace because of this relationship. Luhrmann makes it very clear that her work is not focused on false beliefs about religion but the "question of how gods and spirits become and remain real to people and what this real-making does for humans."[176] In her research[177] she shifts the focus, "If, rather than presuming that people worship because they believe, we ask instead whether people believe because they worship."[178] Luhrmann argues that prayer, ritual and worship are critical for helping people feel that God is present and accessible.

How Do We Come to Know, To Believe?

Through an anthropological lens Luhrmann acknowledges the inner awareness (mindfulness) that stimulates human imagination and fuels human beings' ability to grasp that which is not necessarily accessible to the senses. Also critical are detailed stories that inspire the feeling that God is real and/or near to us. When she states, "People who are able to become absorbed in what they imagine are more likely to have powerful experiences of an invisible other,"[179] she comes close to Rosa's description of an experience of resonance. Rosa states, "Practice also helps. People who practice being absorbed in what they imagine during prayer or ritual are also more likely to have such experiences"[180] Think, imaginative prayer, meditation, *lectio divina*, and other Christian practices that respond to Jesus invitation to *imagine* his stories and parables. These imaginative practices have been a part of Christian formation for two thousand years. Luhrmann states, "The intimate evidence for gods and spirits often comes from a

[176] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real,* x.

[177] Luhrmann uses ethnography studies, embedded in all kinds of faith communities, and engages in multiple methodologies to explore why people believe that gods are real. She uses a variety of tools to assess what is going on in the minds and perceptions of those who say they believe in God, gods or spirits.

[178] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real,* x.

[179] Ibid., xiii.

[180] Ibid.

domain felt to be in between the mind and the world—the thought that does not feel like yours, the voice that feels whispered on the wind, the person who feels there and yet beyond the reach of sight."[181] She asserts that these interactions are intentionally "kindled." She has also observed through her extensive research that prayer practices change the way people think. "Prayer is a specific way of using a faith frame, and it changes people because it changes the way they attend to their own awareness, their inner worlds. Prayer is an act of thinking about thinking."[182] Luhrmann's thought reinforces presence-centered spirituality and the reality that this spirituality can be "kindled."

Luhrmann also digs into defining belief, believing, and the different cognitive processes of knowing. She describes two patterns humans use to reason things out. The first pattern is "intuitions," a knowing of the gut; the second pattern is "deliberative thinking," involving rational, analytical thought processes. This description syncs up with biblical descriptions of "knowing." "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."[183] There is a knowing of the mind. "Lord, you have seen what is in my heart. You know all about me. You know when I sit down and when I get up. You know what I'm thinking even though you are far away."[184] There is a knowing of the heart. In John, Jesus cites the Old Testament, declaring, "Out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water."[185] A literal Greek translation states the flow of living waters come from the belly. This is in the context of a knowing of discernment through the Holy Spirit, which we often think of as intuition. A

[181] Ibid.
[182] Ibid., xiv.
[183] Rom. 12:2.
[184] Ps. 139:1-2.
[185] John 7:38.

knowing of the gut or intuition is not an obscure spiritual concept but is a focus of much psychological study.[186]

Ian Cron, an Episcopalian priest and psychotherapist, states, "When most people think of intelligence, they only think of head knowledge—scoring a high IQ, acing their SATs, or knowing how to build a rocket ship in the garage. We actually have *three* brains, or different centers of intelligence; the head, or *Thinking* Center; the heart, or *Feeling* Center; and the gut, or *Instinctive* Center."[187] These ways of knowing and discerning reality have been diminished by the Western Enlightenment project of modernity and rationalism.

Luhrmann cites philosopher Neil Van Leeuwen's argument that religious beliefs and mundane beliefs are held with different "cognitive attitudes."[188] Luhrmann writes, "To be clear, there are no doubt many kinds of belief commitments held with many different kinds of cognitive attitudes: beliefs about fiction as opposed to beliefs about facts, beliefs about doing as opposed to beliefs about knowing, beliefs about matters that define one's identity as opposed to beliefs about the mundane world."[189] In her research, she has observed people making a clear distinction between belief commitments and other kinds of belief. For mundane commitments, people tend to say, "I think"; for religious commitments, people tend to say, "I believe." Religious beliefs become a distinct part of a person's identity.

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[186] Siri Carpenter, "That Gut Feeling," *Monitor on Psychology* 43, no. 8 (September 2012): 50. https://www.apa.org/monitor/2012/09/gut-feeling. Dr. Siri Carpenter writes, "The human gut is an amazing piece of work. Often referred to as the 'second brain,' it is the only organ to boast its own independent nervous system, an intricate network of 100 million neurons embedded in the gut wall. So sophisticated is this neural network that the gut continues to function even when the primary neural conduit between it and the brain, the vagus nerve, is severed." The article quotes gastroenterologist Emeran Mayer, MD, director of the Center for Neurobiology of Stress at the University of California, Los Angeles: "When you consider the gut's multifaceted ability to communicate with the brain, along with its crucial role in defending the body against the perils of the outside world, it's almost unthinkable that the gut is not playing a critical role in mind states."

[187] Ian Cron, email message to author, May 10, 2021.

[188] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real,* 8.

[189] Ibid.

Luhrmann's argument is consistent with Taylor's argument for the prevailing social imaginary and the fragilization of faith within the immanent frame of a Secular Age when she says, "In a secular society, people can grow to adulthood quite comfortably without any religion at all."[190] When Luhrmann's states "most people behave as if there are ordinary expectations about how the world works, and that special expectations associated with spirits become meaningful and relevant only at special times and in special ways,"[191] she touches on Taylor's idea of an open take people occasionally experience on what seems like a transcendent breakthrough into the immanent frame. In describing the difference in mundane beliefs versus religious beliefs, she builds an argument for an ontological approach for religious believing.

Compelling is her assertion that "believing in" is a Western phenomenon and one that affects Western religion, especially Christianity in the West. The non-Western world doesn't necessarily experience this dynamic. "In other words, people only doubt that spirits are real in modern, secular, individualist societies."[192] This is an argument Taylor comprehensively makes in *A Secular Age*. This is also why Root's emphasis on critical realism is important in this conversation.

Rituals and Practices Fuel Beliefs

Luhrmann contrasts religious beliefs in the West with religious belief of the Amazonian Wari people. She is particularly drawn to their embodiment of ritual and practices, along with the role of the shaman who enacts a kind of liturgical performance to make their gods and spirits real to the people who otherwise wouldn't experience them through their normal senses. "The Wari' talk as if they need to pay attention and to behave as if the spirits are real in order to make them

[190] Ibid., 11.
[191] Ibid., 12.
[192] Ibid., 13.

present in their lives. If people don't do that the spirits disappear."[193] The evolution of the Western rational modern society described as the Secular Age has fixated on a cognitive way of knowing, a *knowing* of the mind, focusing on the intellectual approach of acquiring knowledge, while diminishing a knowing of the heart and gut. James K. A. Smith deals with this concern in his book, *You Are What You Love*, declaring the assumption that human beings are fundamentally *thinking things* as a product of Western modernity and not a biblical concept. "'You are what you think' is a motto that reduces human beings to brains-on-a-stick."[194] Embodying a holistic rhythm of life is a corrective for this kind of anemic Christianity, devoid of ritual, practices, liturgy, and embodied faith lived out in meaningful ways.

A robust rhythm of life in presence-centered spirituality (which this dissertation explores as we move forward) nurtures a mindfulness and posture toward experiences of resonance with ourselves, others, God, and God's creation. Luhrmann states, "What rituals (practices, prayer, liturgy, etc.) do is to remind people that gods and spirits matter."[195] Both Taylor and Rosa described these rituals and practices, at some level, as magical things infused with transcendent qualities. Modernity reshaped God and belief in God to conform to the Enlightenment project and now we find ourselves in a Secular Age, firmly entrenched in an immanent frame where, for most people, there seems to be no God to encounter. In many ways, human beings got lost in the pursuit of knowledge and mastery over the world, and gradually ontological commitments of the Western world have dramatically changed in the Secular Age.

[193] Ibid., 15.

[194] James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 3.

[195] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real*, 17.

Faith Frames and Beliefs

From Luhrmann's research, she suggests that those who have religious beliefs behave as if "they have a faith frame as well as an ordinary set of expectations about an everyday world."[196] Faith frame for Luhrmann is defined as "a sustained, intentional, deliberative commitment to the idea that there are invisible beings who are involved in human lives in helpful ways."[197] How does this faith frame develop in a Secular Age in which the social imaginary has a difficult time seeing or thinking beyond an immanent reality? Luhrmann points to a reframing that occurs in the people she studies who possess a vibrant faith. She sees good narratives as a common factor in good religion and committed faith beliefs. These narratives serve to reframe the process of knowing and believing.

The more detail in these reframing faith narratives the better they work to make gods and spirits real. "God is, indeed, in the details."[198] She cites James Wood, who "delightfully calls detail the 'thisness' of literature, borrowing the concept from medieval theologian Duns Scotus. 'Thisness' is the detail that 'centers our attention with its concretion.'"[199] She agrees, "If religion is a narrative that shifts attention away from ordinary, detail is the narrative mechanism that makes this shifting of attention possible."[200] Luhrmann points to the difficulty of engaging in a face-to-face relationship with a God without a face.

The Power of Story

Having detailed and rich stories make God real to people seeking relationship with God. She acknowledges, "Christians know the story of Jesus so well that his passion brings tears again

[196] Ibid., 21.
[197] Ibid.
[198] Ibid., 26.
[199] Ibid.
[200] Ibid., 27.

and again to their eyes."[201] Rosa affirms the philosophical assumption that human beings are storytelling creatures. Engaging in story, the story of God at work in the world and the story of God's encounter with human beings is essential for a vibrant faith that leads to the good life. This is not accomplished by filling people's heads with content, affirmations and facts that we deem "truth" in hopes of right thinking and right believing. James K. A. Smith declares:

> …we need to reject the reductionistic picture we've unwittingly absorbed in the modern era, one that treats us as if we're only and fundamentally thinking things. Instead, we need to embrace a more holistic, biblical model of human persons that *situates* our thinking and knowing in relation to other, more fundamental aspects of the human person.[202]

Embracing embodied practices that help persons lean into their feelings and emotions are essential for living into the story of God at work in their lives and active in the world in which they inhabit.

It is a universal desire of human beings to love and be loved. Detailed stories of God's love for humanity and the whole world is necessary in the Secular Age filled with what Rosa calls "mute relations" with ourselves, others, the world, and God. The human desire to be loved and connected to others in proximity and in community leads to the dynamic of becoming a *community of resonance* through their shared stories and language. Rosa demonstrates that this relationship is because they come to inhabit the same resonant spaces. Rosa asserts "they are first and foremost *communities of narration*, possessing a common repertoire of resonance-producing and resonance-directing stories."[203] Communities of resonance is a great description of a vibrant church, a spiritually focused Christian organization, or a passionate neo-monastic community, which is a necessity to live a presence-centered spirituality.

The Interaction of Affect and Emotion

[201] Ibid., 30.
[202] Smith, *You Are What You Love,* 6.
[203] Rosa, *Resonance,* 157.

We encounter and experience resonance with God when we come to believe God is love and that God loves us. Love is able to stir a vibration of resonance that is transformative. I return here to Rosa's tuning fork metaphor for resonance. Rosa declares:

> We can formalize the notion of a vibrating wire between subject and world in emotional-sociological terms as an experience or condition in which the subject is affected, i.e., touched and moved, by some segment of world, at the same time responding with an accommodating, outwardly directed emotional movement, with intrinsic interest (libido) and a corresponding expectation of efficacy.[204]

The theory of resonance involves "the interaction of *affect* (from the Latin ad*facere* or af*ficere*—to do *to*) and emotion (from the Latin *emovere*—to move out *from)* thus together form the aforementioned 'wire,' the bidirectional oscillation of which might playfully be represented as af<-fect and e->motion."[205] Resonance happens when something impacts us, moves us, inspires us. We are affected by someone or something outside of ourselves. We respond with emotion, with feeling. For Rosa, resonance is not just an emotion or a feeling but ultimately a mode of relationship. This af<fect and e>motion dynamic is what stirs up love, *eros*, with our spouse or a friend. But it also results in resonant relationship with beautiful music or landscape that inspire and speak to us. This af<fect and e>motion interaction is also at play in Rosa's vertical axis of resonance, the promise of religion, and the encounter/relationship with God.

The Mystery of Encounter with God, A Theological Turn

Theologically, God's coming to us as minister—especially in our brokenness and impossibility (death) to bring hope, possibility, and new life (resurrection)—is the epitome of a resonant relationship. This encounter with God as a phenomenological dimension is "bound in

[204] Ibid.,163.
[205] Ibid.

experience," states Root.[206] Deepening the theological concept of resonance, Root fleshes out Rosa's idea that resonance involves more than the phenomenological event of being touched and/or affected. Resonance also requires *efficacy.* Root declares that it is not enough for people to feel touched, "they must feel *called out to act*. They must follow."[207] In the vertical axis of resonance, God is one who comes to us, encounters us, and we have the choice to respond, to vibrate, and experience God.

Resonance also calls for us to not only respond with emotion but to act, to engage, to follow, and to reframe our relationship to ourselves, to others, to God, and God's creation. Luhrmann writes, "In *How Natives Think*, Levy-Bruhl argued that the distinctive feature of the 'primitive' mind was that such people (nonliterate, non-Western, and living in small-scale societies) experienced themselves as participating in the external world and the external world as participating in their minds and bodies."[208] Levy-Bruhl referred to this way of thinking and experiencing the world as "mystical." James K. A. Smith, channeling Robert Weber, believes, "Christian wisdom for a postmodern world can be found in a return to ancient voices who never fell prey to modern reductionism."[209] Presence-centered spirituality is not only about being open to the other (people, the world, God) but also a reaching out to the other (people, the world, God). Presence-centered spirituality is also curious about learning from the spiritual exemplars and mystics throughout Christian history.

Exploring Relational Ontology in Practice

[206] Andrew Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age: Keeping Sacred Time Against the Speed of Modern Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 199.

[207] Ibid., 205.

[208] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real,* 59.

[209] Smith, *You Are What You Love,* 7.

Rosa's "idea of God as a kind of *being of relation*,"[210] Yannaras's *relational ontology*, and Root's *place-sharing*, all shape and define the significance of our relation to the "other." Sharing in the personal otherness (presence-centeredness) of human beings and the otherness of God is what makes us fully human and shapes our identity. As a person, embedded in a community of Christian practice, practicing a common life together with God in the way of Jesus Christ should be normative instead of the oddity it seems to be in the Secular Age. Luhrmann devotes a whole chapter in *How God Becomes Real* to training and talent, declaring, "Many people assume that training and talent are important in many areas of life: ballet, violin playing, tennis. It seems more awkward to talk about talent and training when it comes to knowing gods and spirits because doing so seems to suggest that the human, not the god, gives rise to the events."[211] She disagrees with the thought that human talent and training diminishes God. The faith community, according to Luhrmann, can share talent and engage in training together to strengthen the bond between each other and with God. Developing a presence-centered rhythm of life filled with embodied practices and mindfulness can open human beings and communities to be more receptive to God and more efficacious in living out their faith.

Aptitude for Absorption, Toward an Affinity of Presence-Centered Spirituality

Luhrmann acknowledges that her research shows a human aptitude for "*absorption*—a capacity to be immersed in the world of the senses, inner and outer—and those who have a talent for it and train to develop it are more likely to experience invisible others as present… more likely to report sharper mental images and more unusual spiritual experiences. They are more likely to say that they experience a god as being present."[212] The consideration of some people

[210] Rosa, *Resonance,* 264.

[211] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real,* 60. See also Rosa, *Resonance,* 397; Rosa adds to this argument, "A violin generally becomes resonant only after many hours of lessons, and Latin poetry speaks only to those who have learned Latin."

[212] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real,* 60.

having an aptitude for spiritual transcendent encounters is fraught with implications of what that actually means and if aptitude can be developed or not.

Luhrmann uses an example of her fascination with the London world of magic. In examining this niche world of magic, she learned, "If you wanted to do magic, you had to practice magic… some people were naturally better than others… those who practiced would get better."[213] She describes how she came to realize that what magicians did to become a better magician through serious training and practice led to sharpened mental focus, a feeling of connection with unusual phenomena. The magicians were open to real magic. Luhrmann writes, "I started to realize that what magicians did in their training could be found in other spiritual practices around the world: in Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism… I began to think that mastery of those skills was associated with intense spiritual experience and the sense that gods and spirits felt real."[214] While embedding in and studying Christian communities, she observed, "The Christians sometimes said that after they began to pray actively, they not only experienced God more vividly, but their inner world became sharper and felt more real… They knew that practice mattered."[215] Luhrmann admits Christian participation sounds like practicing for sports, some people have more talent than others; but if you want to be really good, you must practice. "People who prayed actively said that their sensory world became richer, more alive."[216] While the experience of God cannot be turned in to controllable formula, the reality that practices are a means of grace fits within this conversation.

Luhrmann uses the *Tellegen Absorption Scale* to measures the inclination people have for absorption. She argues that the more you become absorbed in something (religion, mysticism,

[213] Ibid., 65-66.
[214] Ibid., 66.
[215] Ibid., 66-67.
[216] Ibid., 68.

prayer, meditation, etc.) the more it becomes real to you. "The Absorption Scale seems to pick up the enjoyable dimension—imaginative involvement, the delight we take in letting a story or sensation carry us away."[217] Is resonance at play here? Resonance is not just an emotion but a mode of relation. And while resonance cannot be manipulated with a formula or summoned at will,[218] being presence-centered, or practicing the presence of God shapes and forms the follower of Jesus to be attuned to God's presence and God's divine action.

While spiritual practices or being presence-centered does not enable us to conjure up God, spiritual practices can make us more resonant human beings and become more aware of an encounter with God. Robert Hamma declares:

> We often make the mistake of thinking that the aim of our personal spiritual practices is to produce an encounter with God. The purpose of prayer is not to produce experiences then and there, but to open us to the encounters that will occur when and where God chooses. A disciplined spiritual life heightens our awareness to the possibility of revelations occurring in the midst of the ordinary, but it does not create them.[219]

Presence-centered practices are a means of grace and can hone the purity of intentions.

Inner Sense Cultivation

Luhrmann insists that "absorption" does not explain religion, nor explain it away, but the reality that some people practice and nurture their faith "may help us understand why some people become gifted practitioners of their faith."[220] She argues that human beings can cultivate

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[217] Ibid., 71.

[218] Hartmut Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World* (Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020). In this follow-up book to *Resonance*, with controllability as a goal of modernity, Rosa argues that it is only through encountering the uncontrollable that we can most deeply and profoundly experience resonance with ourselves, others, the world and, yes, God. I experience this with my rhythm of fixed hour prayer, always going expectantly to pray and seek God, but also reminded of the hiddenness of God and often left surprised when God seems to encounter me in those times.

[219] Robert M. Hamma, *Landscapes of the Soul: A Spirituality of Place* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1999), 45.

[220] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real*, 72.

an inner sense through practice and training. She directly ties Christian prayer practice and the use of imagination with the dynamic of absorption, specifically mentioning Brother Lawrence[221] and St. John of the Cross.[222] From an anthropologist's perspective, Luhrmann describes the features of *inner sense cultivation*: 1) *interaction,* 2) *interweaving* and, 3) *sensory enhancement*.[223] She goes into detail about imaginative prayer and reflection as an "interaction" with one's imagination making gods and spirits real. Her examples of "interweaving" involve the practice of interlacing common prayers, such as the Lord's Prayer, with personal reflection and meditation. She attaches *Ignatian imaginative prayer* to the dynamic of "sensory enhancement" with the one meditating using their senses to dwell in the scriptural text. Luhrmann writes, "The practice of inner sense cultivation blurs the boundary between what is external and what is within. The mental muscles developed in prayer work on the boundary between thought and perception, between what is attributed to the mind—internal, self-generated, private, and hidden from view—and what exists in the world."[224] Jesus used parables and stories about concepts like the kingdom of God. These parables stimulate human imagination and reflection, and therein lies their brilliance. We become absorbed into these stories, and they transform.

Luhrmann's dynamic of absorption description proves compatible with Rosa's concept of resonance and strongly reinforces a presence-centered spirituality, embracing disciplines and a

[221] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real,* 73. As an example of the utilization of imagination, Luhrmann quotes Brother Lawrence, a lay brother who lived in a Carmelite Monastery in Paris during the 17th century. She writes, "In a much-loved text called *The Practice of the Presence of God,* Brother Lawrence writes, 'Sometimes I imagine that I'm a piece of stone, waiting for the sculptor. When I give myself to God this way, He begins sculpting my soul into the perfect image of His beloved Son.'"

[222] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real,* 73. "St. John of the Cross not only describes prayer as an active use of the inner senses, but remarks that the practice leads the one who prays to perceive what is not perceptible to the outer senses: 'There may come, and there are wont to come, to spiritual persons representations of objects of a supernatural kind. With respect to sight, they are apt to picture figures and forms of persons belonging to the life to come—the forms of certain saints, and representations of angels, good and evil, and certain lights and brightness of an extraordinary kind. And with the ears they hear certain extraordinary words, sometimes spoken by these figures that they see, sometimes without seeing the person who speaks them. As to the sense of smell, they sometimes perceive the sweetest perfumes with all the senses, without knowing whence they proceed.'"

[223] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real,* 74.

[224] Ibid.

rhythm of life that help us practice the presence of God. The Scripture, the meditation, the visualization of God's desire to encounter us af<fects the person praying and meditating and results in a response of e>motion. Luhrmann provides data from experiments conducted among Christian congregations measuring the difference in those who engaged in spiritual practices featuring "inner sense cultivation" and those who were given lectures on the Gospels. She reports, "We found that those who had done the inner sense cultivation practice had scores on the subjective measures of mental imagery vividness that were significantly higher… than those who had listened to the lectures."[225] These inner sense cultivation practices creates not just emotions that make people feel something (although they do); more importantly, they create a mode of relation with God.

To further emphasize the impact that "absorption" and "inner sense cultivation" has on a person's interaction with gods and spirits, she cites the work of David Abram, an ecological philosopher, which ties these concepts even more deeply with Rosa's idea of resonance. "The point for Abram, Luhrmann writes is that "entanglement means that we experience the world as responding."[226] In closing her argument on the role of "absorption" and "inner sense cultivation" Luhrmann declares, "These acts of attention change the way people come to experience gods and spirits in profound ways. Gods and spirits feel more present. They feel more real. And that allows the faith frame to become more anchored in their lives. When you can sing with angels, it is harder to lose track of the gods."[227] Inner sense cultivation, resonance, and present-centeredness open up modes of relations with God, but not in a guaranteed formulaic manner.

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[225] Ibid., 75.

[226] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real*, 77. The author discusses the core of David Abram's argument that modernity has diminished the occurrences of sensory experience. Before modernity, "we understood ourselves to live in a world that was alive and responsive, and that we attended to that world with senses alert in a way we can barely imagine today." Through her concept of inner sense cultivation and Abram's work, she aligns with Charles Taylor's argument of a disenchanted world and Rosa's argument of resonance and alienation.

[227] Ibid., 78.

The Uncontrollability of God: Practices Do Not Conjure Up God

Often, the critique toward those who demonstrate a passion for Christian practices is how those who engage in the practices come across like the practices ensure an experience with God. It is theologically important to acknowledge that Christian practices do not guarantee an encounter with God's presence. Although, Luhrmann contends that practice, training, and tapping into the dynamic of "absorption" and "inner self cultivation" all serve to make the potential of encounter with God more likely (she uses the phrase "making gods and spirits real"), Rosa would argue that this encounter (resonance) with God cannot be turned into a formula to guarantee a connection with God. Rosa declares, "Experiences of resonance are unpredictable in two ways. First, you can try to create a context that makes it likely that you will be deeply touched and transformed by something or someone, and that you will be capable of reaching out and responding to this touch."[228] But Rosa says this manipulation of experience through practices often leads to disappointment. Secondly, the desire for control in modernity actually reveals a world completely uncontrollable leading to "monstrous, frightening forms of uncontrollability."[229] Western rationalism demands that we seek to manage and control the world in order to manage our lives.

Rosa, interacting with Taylor and Max Weber (the founding father of modern sociology), argues that the project of making the world controllable actually leads to alienation toward a world (nature, religion, faith, God, etc.) that has fallen mute, disenchanted, and devoid of meaning. Rosa cites Emile Durkheim's view that the pursuit of controllability actually leads to alienation, relationlessness, and uncontrollability. This creates the "core element of modern ambivalence."[230] Hannah Arendt describes the structure of alienation as an existential relation of

[228] Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World*, vii.
[229] Ibid., ix.
[230] Ibid., 25.

relationlessness.[231] Rosa warns, "Modernity stands at risk of no longer hearing the world and, for this very reason, losing its sense of itself."[232] When Rosa uses the word "world" in this way we can easily replace world with "other human beings," "nature," "art," "God," etc. "Vibrant human existence consists not in exerting *control* over things but in resonating with them, making them respond to us—thus experiencing *self-efficacy*—and responding to them in turn."[233] Letting go of the need to control everything and becoming open to the mystery of encounter creates the possibility of resonance in relation with others, the world, and God.

Characteristics of a Mode of Relation

Rosa in defining resonance in all three axes (horizontal, diagonal, and vertical) stresses that it is not a metaphor or a subjective emotional state but is a "*mode of relation* that can be precisely defined by four exemplary characteristics: 1. *Being affected*… 2. *Self-efficacy*… 3. *Adaptive transformation*… 4. *Uncontrollability*."[234] In thinking about resonance in the vertical axis, specifically the encounter with God, *being affected* happens when we sense God touching or moving us. A person feels God is addressing them and communicating to them. This, in turn, can lead to *self-efficacy* through a response (e>motion) in which we experience being affected and affecting as a *mode of relation*. *Adaptive transformation* results from the resonate encounter that impacts us deeply leading to a transformational experience.

The encounter with a God who is mostly hidden and is beyond our ability to fully define or apprehend cannot be shaped into a formula, strategy, or process that ensures a resonate relationship. Attempting to control or force this leads to alienation and angst over a sense of relationlessness. Resonance, especially with God in the vertical axis, is entirely *uncontrollable*.

[231] See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958).
[232] Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World*, 28.
[233] Ibid., 31.
[234] Ibid., 33.

Rosa writes, “Resonance is inherently uncontrollable also in a second, more important sense. Whenever it occurs, we are transformed; but it is impossible for us to predict how exactly we will be changed and what the end result of this transformation will be.”[235] As an example with which most people can surely identify, Rosa mentions a favorite song that has moved us. If we play that song over and over again, we cannot expect to have the experience of resonance with that song that we may have experienced in the past. When we assume that we can summon an experience of resonance with a beautiful sunset, an inspirational piece of poetry or music, a powerful film, or an encounter with God, we will most likely feel a void instead. Rosa continues, “We no longer want to be reached, but rather to assert ourselves; we aim to experience self-efficacy not by affecting and being affected, but by instrumentalizing and manipulating people and things.”[236] This is why a spiritual rhythm of life should be ordered and organized around a level of discipline (often spiritual practices are called spiritual disciplines), and yet maintain a posture of the unforced rhythms of life. Spiritual rhythms aren’t embraced in an instrumental manner but to develop a posture of openness to being present to the present (presence-centered).

As Rosa describes the uncontrollability of resonance, he introduces the role that time plays in experiencing resonance with ourselves, others, the world, and God. Instead of the attempt to summon a resonate encounter with the world, others, or God by binding it in *chronos* time, we must maintain a posture of awareness and openness to the other. Resonance happens in *kairos* time, in due time or when the time is ripe. Rosa declares, “Resonance demands that I allow myself to be *called*, that I be *affected*, that something reach me from the outside.”[237]

Taylor, Root, Rosa, and Luhrmann Assert Faith is More than Right Information

[235] Ibid., 37.
[236] Ibid., 38.
[237] Ibid., 42.

Luhrmann (anthropologist) is helpful and collaborative with Taylor (philosopher) and Rosa (sociologist), and in many ways with Root (theologian), on the dynamic of faith in our Secular Age. All four of these scholars are critical of the Protestant project of reducing faith to the cognitive domain. Taylor speaks of disenchantment and excarnation fueled by reformation overreach. Rosa critiques Western modernity and the enlightenment project for leading to mute relationlessness with the world and God. Root critiques programs and resources as pragmatic strategies to deliver the right information for spiritual formation and encounter with God. Luhrmann acknowledges through her ethnographic studies that people must work (beyond simple cognitive assent) to make gods real to them. While Luhrmann states that faith is about the mind, she doesn't mean that in the sense of securing the right information about God but "the ontological attitude people take toward what must be imagined."[238] She continues, "People of faith must allow those invisible others to feel alive to them.[239] When Luhrmann describes the faith frame she suggests "there is a sense of 'thereness' more akin to emotion than to belief."[240] Similar to Taylor's *open take* within the immanent frame, Rosa's resonance framework of *af<fect* followed by a response of *e>motion*, and Root's critical realism to describe a God who comes as event to reveal Godself, Luhrmann states that gods cannot be known to be present in an abstract manner; they must be felt to be present, responsive, and engaged.

Luhrmann describes the "in-between" domain where God is encountered by people of faith that is located neither in a "person's own inner awareness nor in the everyday world."[241] She

[238] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real,* 79.

[239] Ibid. "You must be able to look at a glorious forest, and see not just an ecosystem but intentions. You must be able to be moved by a sunset, and to think not only of the structure of light, but of a maker. You must allow yourself to move beyond the bare world and trust that there is more to the world than you see. That is the challenge of the faith frame: a commitment *despite.*"

[240] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real,* 80.

[241] Ibid. Through her ethnographic research she describes how often a person of faith will say they experienced or heard God speak to them in whisper but the voice was not necessarily in their mind, nor in the external world. Hence her use of the "in-between."

contrasts the differences between American evangelicals and evangelicals in other parts of the world. American evangelicals "experience God more internally and less sensorially, as if their God feels less real to them than to evangelicals in other cultures."[242] She believes this is a result of the way they focus their faith on being a mind thing instead of a broader construct also involving the body and emotions. She cites Taylor's concept of the buffered self when declaring that "European Americans are invited by their cultural heritage to imagine the mind as a private place, walled off from the world, a citadel in which thoughts are one's own and no one else has access to them."[243] Luhrmann contrasts North American evangelicals with evangelicals she studied from Ghana. "Ghanaians imagine the mind as less private, less bounded, and more supernaturally potent than Americans do. Most Ghanaian words for thought and emotion are rooted in bodily experience."[244] The mind-body dualism of the Western world has led to the fragilization of faith that Taylor describes as a by-product of the buffered self.

The Encounter with God as a Mystical Experience

While Luhrmann states that it is rare for people to have profound mystical experiences, she argues that "almost all people of faith have some kind of experience of the nonordinary, and many have a moment that stands out as extraordinary. These events matter because they are this-world evidence that the world of the faith frame is real."[245] Luhrmann turns to the importance of testimony and storytelling for faith formation. She argues that it is the way people tell stories and how they practice engagement with those stories that are critical for making gods and spirits become intimately real to them.

[242] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real,* 83.

[243] Ibid., 85. Luhrmann continues fleshing this out, "Educated Americans often assume that the brain, that pulpy, wrinkled, three-pound weight, is real. But the mind, they will say, is an epiphenomenon, a byproduct: immaterial, nonsubstantial, and invisible." She cites the historian and psychiatrist George Makari as defining the "post-Enlightenment era as a time of the 'mind-eclipsed,' when some thinkers could describe the mind as a puff of mysticism…the mind became imagined as even more limited and fallible, a source of illusion, error, and prejudice."

[244] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real,* 87.

[245] Ibid., 110.

It is stories (testimonies) of God's coming to human beings as a minister in an event of bringing possibility (resurrection) in the midst of an existential crises (death) that resonate with a reality of transformation. The *event of God's revelation* is the theological hermeneutic of God's transformation of human beings. God's divine action as minister encounters us (*af<fect*) setting up the opportunity to move toward God (e>motion) in *resonance* (a mode of relation). Bringing the theological aspect of the encounter with God and how God becomes real involves looking at what can only be known in a purely empirical manner.

Root, as well as Taylor, Rosa, and Luhrmann, cite Søren Kierkegaard's work as a theologian and existentialist philosopher. Kierkegaard believed that the experience of the human being, their concrete human reality, was the starting point of making meaning in life. Building on Kierkegaard, Root adds the thinking of theologian Eberhard Jüngel in asserting that it is in the existential crisis of human beings that God arrives bringing hope. This is the place of transformation by a God who saves. So, God's coming to people takes the shape of ministry and divine action happens within ministry one to and with another. Root declares:

> Critical realism does not prove my articulation of divine action in my *Christopraxis* approach, but it does allow space for its possibility and creates this space by attending to experience. Moving practical theology into realism gives us many openings to discuss divine encounter because it raises the importance of practical experience.[246]

Testimony and storytelling are critical to faith formation through experiencing a resonate relationship with God as Rosa describes in his vertical axis of resonance.

As an anthropologist, Luhrmann places significant emphasis on testimony and storytelling as an embodied practice for making gods and spirits real. Root adds, "Theological discourse gives us the best epistemological tools to express and reflect on the reality of God's act in our concrete lives."[247] Human beings expressions and confessions of encounter with God

[246] Root, *Christopraxis*, 205.
[247] Ibid., 190.

throughout history and throughout the world can, through critical realism,[248] be viewed as real from a level of scientific discourse.

Practicing Embodied Faith Together

Story, practice, liturgy, and training serve to make God real for human beings in the Secular Age. They open us up to be attuned to resonance with God. Rosa declares that modernity is out of tune. Modernity, hyper-modernity, postmodernity, the Secular Age, or whatever we choose to call our current cultural milieu does seem to be out of harmony with the world overall, producing spiritual dissonance and making it confusing to live the good life. In our cultural context, we must reestablish a focus on persons in community instead of a focus on individuals. The modern project has placed much emphasis on an individual search for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Taylor's description of the current social dynamic of the pursuit of "authenticity" reveals that too often we try to establish our identity based on our existentially driven ambitions untethered to meaningful connections with a community of persons. More often than not, this leads to alienation instead of true authenticity. Spiritual formation and relationship with God is a communal process involving a group of people leaning into what they value and love by learning, growing, training, storytelling, and practicing their faith together. Luhrmann, Root, Rosa, and Taylor describe religion as the way people relate to God as a community, group, or society. This requires what Taylor calls "collective ritual" where agents are acting on behalf of a community.

[248] Critical realism seeks to think ontologically instead of solely within an epistemological framework. Critical realism claims that there are entities that are real beyond that which can be observed empirically. Theologically, through critical realism, we can affirm that human being's religious experiences and stories allow us to make epistemological claims about reality that can be rationally evaluated and embraced as real and true. For a deeper dive into critical realism, read Christian Smith, *What Is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

Taylor argues that the Christian religion (particularly Protestantism) departed from "bodily forms of ritual, worship, practices, so that it comes more and more to reside 'in the head.'"[249] He declares need for "new forms of collective ritual; rites of passage; individual and small group disciplines of prayer, fasting, devotion; modes of marking time; new ways of living conjugal sexual life; and new works of healing and sharing, which could give bodily and at times public expression to the worship of God."[250] In a culture of acceleration, time famine makes it exceedingly difficult to live in meaningful ways connected to a community of Christian practice because this kind of presence-centered life actually requires an intentional commitment of time.

The issue of how we view time in the Secular Age is a major factor in what it means to live the good life and what it means to live meaningful spiritual lives in communities of Christian practice. Rosa also calls for a new way to experience time, other than how time is currently being controlled by Silicon Valley (technology, innovation), by resisting the surrender to *dynamic stabilization.*[251] Rosa shows how the church lost the role of societies timekeeper. The solution for Rosa isn't *slowing down* to avoid social acceleration and the burnout it often brings. Instead, we need to develop, as communities of Christian practice, a new way to experience time through *adaptive stabilization*[252] instead of *dynamic stabilization*. Developing a robust *rhythm of life* is critical for shaping a community of Christian practice or congregation around a new way of keeping time through the church calendar.

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[249] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 613.

[250] Ibid., 613-614.

[251] Rosa, *Resonance*, Chapter XIV. Rosa defines *dynamic stabilization* as the pursuit of stabilization of modern societies that is only possible by escalatory movement, which is a systematic dependency on growth, acceleration, and increasing innovation in order to even maintain a level of equilibrium.

[252] Rosa, *Resonance*, 259. Related to *adaptive stabilization*, referencing theologian Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, specifically his work *On Religion*, Rosa writes, "Religious experience can be redefined as an *adaptively transformative* relationship to the world in which the correlating experience of self-efficacy is achieved not through external action, but through internal movements of taking in, synthesizing, and apprehending.

Like Taylor, Root, and Luhrmann, Rosa also mentions prayer. Rosa refers to prayer as a concept designed to produce "deep resonance." "Prayer aims at the form of our relationship to the world as such, as can be seen from the fact that it is both inwardly and outwardly directed. A person in prayer closes her eyes and turns within, but addresses something outside of herself, with the aim of establishing a palpable, intense connection between the two."[253] Continuing a discussion of religious practice, Rosa writes:

> In worship services and religious rites such as the Eucharist and the benediction, the "experience" of deep vertical resonance is connected both to *horizontal* axes of resonance between the faithful, who in Christian culture constitute a parish or community in "communion," and to *diagonal* resonant relationships, inasmuch as things and artifacts such as the bread, chalice, wine, and cross… are "charged" with resonance.[254]

From this worship emerges a kind of sensory network of resonance in which all three axes are capable of mutually activating and reinforcing each other. "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."[255] This Bible verse can be understood to mean that establishing the social axis is sufficient to evoke vertical resonance."[256] A person should be deeply embedded in a congregation, a community of Christian practice, that creates the potential to measure the *good life* not in terms of social acceleration and dynamic stabilization but in terms of the depth, quality, and meaningfulness of our relationship to ourselves, others, the world, and to God.

Spiritual Kindling

Like Rosa, Luhrmann's work also builds a strong case for the importance of embodied spiritual practices. She calls the process of making gods and spirits real, "spiritual kindling."[257] She defines *spiritual kindling* as small, intentional "acts of attention" which shapes a person's

[253] Rosa, *Resonance*, 262.
[254] Ibid., 263.
[255] Matt. 18:20.
[256] Rosa, *Resonance*, 263.
[257] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real*, 112.

unique experience of the gods and spirits. “I use the kindling concept to talk about spiritual presence because the evidence suggests that people in different social and religious settings not only attribute different kinds of events to a supernatural source, but that the act of attribution changes the experience of the event, and of future events as well.”[258] She continues by addressing the process of socialization and social construction and the reality that spiritual presence looks different based on the social setting. She goes even further, “I am also suggesting more—that local culture, as well as individual practices and individual differences, shapes the bodily experience of spirit and presence, and those experiences accumulate and change the nature of the experience over time.”[259] Her theory of *spiritual kindling* shapes what the spiritual community hails as spiritual or divine. Luhrmann’s *spiritual kindling* corresponds significantly with the spiritual practices embedded in a rhythm of life which shapes a presence-centered spirituality. The more specific events or experiences of divine connection are valued by a community, the more they will likely occur.

So, intentional actions and communal practices which are meaningfully storied begin to provide more evidence for the potential of vibrant faith and encounters with the divine. Luhrmann believes her research shows definitively that:

> the act of attribution changes the experience of the events—that local culture, as well as individual practice and individual differences, shapes the bodily experience of spirit, and that those experiences accumulate and change the nature of the event over time. As a result of these different cultural expectations, certain patterns of experience become more habituated and more fluent for members of that social group.[260]

She emphasizes that the evidence which people of faith use for their belief in gods depends on the “ways people learn to pay attention to the everyday experience of their senses and to the in-

[258] Ibid., 113.
[259] Ibid.
[260] Ibid., 125.

between, the domain between mind and world."[261] The mindfulness and awareness that develops add to the experiences religious people have, which enables them to speak more clearly of their encounter with the divine.[262] Collectively, these practices become deeply entrenched into spiritually flourishing communities and habituated into their way of life.

For a congregation to live a vibrant Christian life, presence-centered, in the Secular Age, experiencing resonance and a sense that God is real and can be encountered requires a more intentional way of living and participation in spiritual formation than the haphazard effort to attend church, when possible, pray as it seems appropriate, occasionally read the Bible, and try to be a good person. An intentional, ritualized, practiced sense of awareness and mindfulness are essential components for the encounter of God who is mostly hidden from us. The bottom line of Luhrmann's research, which she states over and over again in *How God Becomes Real*, is that *religious practices* are more important for living as if God were real than *religious belief*.

Presence-Centered Practice

Curating environments where communities of Christian practice can thrive in presence-centered spirituality is how to experience the good life within the immanent frame of the Secular Age. Developing an intentional rhythm of life (*spiritual kindling*) that creates structure for a Christian community of practice pushes against a meaningless capitulation to the immanent frame of the Secular Age, the shallow hopes of exclusive humanism, and surrender to the exhaustion of dynamic stabilization driving our cultural identity. Perhaps these ideologies of the Secular Age were in Eugene Peterson's mind as he paraphrased Matthew:

> Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work

[261] Ibid., 134.

[262] See Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real*, Chapters 6-7. I wish I had time and space to more thoroughly discuss Luhrmann's work, as she specifically examines the role that prayer plays in faith formation, how we speak of God and how we think God speaks to us.

> with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.[263]

Living a rhythm of life that practices awareness, prayer, feeding on the sacred text of Scripture, silence, solitude, ministry, worship, liturgy, participation in sacramental tradition, pilgrimage, and much more creates the environment where we are open to the encounter of God. Through the posture of presence-centeredness, we become the kind of people who long for resonance within our own hearts, with others, with God, and God's creation. We become the people who experience the good life that Jesus promised in John 10:10. And this happens even in the midst of the Secular Age.

[263] Matt. 11:28-30, MSG.

CHAPTER 5:
PRESENCE-CENTERED SPIRITUALITY

Living a presence-centered spirituality is infused with a tangible practice of the presence of God and a heart saturated by devotion to God and thoughts of God. Presence-centered spirituality attunes a person's life to live in such a way that they journey with the Spirit of Christ in every moment and experience along the way. Presence-centered spirituality embraces the transcendent and immanent reality that in Christ we live and move and have our being. Still, presence-centered spirituality does not serve merely as a pragmatic formula in which our actions and devotion ensure profound experiences and encounters of God in our lives. The posture of presence-centered spirituality is for a person's being to be intentionally present to the present. To be centered in presence requires practices that enable persons to eliminate the distractions that short circuit becoming fully alive human beings living the good life.

As noted, Taylor articulates an openness in the social imaginary of the Secular Age for transcendent experiences. Rosa adds to an exploration of transcendent experience with an examination of the constructive embrace of transcendence through his theory of resonance. Luhrmann's research on the efficacy of the bodily and imaginative practices of faith by communities to enhance belief builds on Rosa's and Taylor's arguments for the value of an open take on transcendent experiences (Taylor) and dynamics of resonance (Rosa). These theories provide a new perspective on Christian practices in the immanent frame of the Secular Age when seen through Root's argument for a theological turn and emphasis on critical realism. Presence-centeredness seeks to be where human action intersects with divine action.

The practice of presence-centered spirituality, either through living with a defined rhythm of life (as evident in Chapter 6), robust life in community (Chapter 7), or embracing the art of ministry with and for others in place and when the time is ripe (Chapter 8), relies on a posture of

openness to God's mystery and ministry, while engaging a "scaffolding" or structure that guides our efforts based on God's faithfulness and experiences from historic Christianity. These structures entail both acknowledging first a God that appears primarily hidden for people in the Secular Age and calling for practices and postures that present an openness to God, not the manipulation of God. These Christian practices, centered in a Christocentric vision of sitting at the feet of Jesus, invite people to both adopt a posture of seeing the very presence of God in everyday life and to imitate Christ through each person's participation within God's own divine being. The Christologically informed movement into practices that yield both an awareness of God's presence and an invitation to participate with God culminates at the end of the chapter with a deep, patient appreciation of God's resonant transcendence in the midst of the immanent frame.

The scaffolding of these practices, whether personal, communal, or ministry related, often begins with a mysterious, uncontrollable God who ultimately and intimately reveals Godself in Christ. This revelation opens the door to continued awareness and participation, postures that call people to "resonate" with the self-same transcendent God in a presence-centered spirituality. Articulating those underlying structures in this chapter provides the organizing scheme for the practices that might serve a presence-centered spirituality. In addition, those selfsame structures in this chapter allow ministers to also "reframe" and contextualize presence-centered ministry through the language of place and time in the final chapter of the dissertation.

How do We Connect with a Hidden God?

In the immanent frame of the Secular Age, it is largely assumed that God, spirits, the supernatural are absent or at least hidden. Rosa asserts that it is normative for people living in

Western culture to feel a mode of relationlessness with the world and God. Presence-centered spirituality declares that while God appears mostly hidden to our reality of experiencing what is near to us in the world, God comes to be present to—and with—us. While the encounter with God is beyond our ability to control and manipulate, presence-centered spirituality engages with practices (as set forth in Chapters 6-8) that nurtures awareness to the presence of God at work in the world and fine-tunes human beings' ability to experience transcendent reality.[264] The idea of the hiddenness of God is important to nuance in the immanent frame of the Secular Age. Even as Root stresses that God remains a God who is for us and comes to us, Root's use of "the absence of God" presents a view that doesn't fully resonate with the experience of practicing presence-centered spirituality. The perspective of God's absence implies that people can only wait and hope for God to show up. The hiddenness of God provides a better, normative descriptive of God, who is wholly other, yet always seeking relationship with all God's creation. Luhrmann asserts that engagement with practices (*spiritual kindling*) makes faith real and experiences with the divine tangible. Presence-centered spirituality engages in spiritual yet embodied practices, rooted in a robust Christology that connects human beings meaningfully to encounters with God's presence leading to the imitation of God and a deepening participation in God's divine nature.

Christian practices, especially prayer, remain central to presence-centered spiritualty. These practices serve as a means of grace. Practicing a presence-centered spirituality nurture eyes that become open to seeing a hidden God at work in the world and ears that hear the Holy

[264] Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World*, 11. In Rosa's theory of resonance, he makes the point that resonance is not possible if it can be controlled. His follow up book to *Resonance*, *The Uncontrollability of the World*, deals with this dynamic. Resonant, nor presence-centered encounters with God in others or in God's creation cannot be turned into a formula to ensure connection. In the secular age, hypermodernity comes with a promise to largely control the world and our environment. Rosa speaks of this ideology of control when he writes, "Our life will be better if we manage to bring more world within our reach."

Spirit speaking to us and through God's creation. Christian practices don't ensure a tangible experience with God nor an experience of resonance with the divine or with God's creation, but they put us in a stance of openness for the encounter with God. While assent toward a posture of awareness of God's hiddenness is normative in presence-centered spirituality, Root's use of "God's absence" in times of existential crises is important. There are times that it seems and feels to us like God is not present but absent. This theological truth is evident in Jesus's cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"[265]

Being presence-centered is a posture—one of openness that looks beyond the immanent frame toward possibilities of meaningful, sometimes transcendent encounters. This God, in Christ Jesus, moves us to become present to ourselves, to others, to God, and to all of God's creation. Being presence-centered points to Jesus Christ as the fullest, clearest, and most special revelation of God to human beings. Presence-centered life and ministry is *Christocentic.* Jesus Christ comes to us as Immanuel—God with us. God in Jesus becomes fully human while remaining fully divine. Presence-centered means being obsessed with Jesus's birth, life, teaching, death, resurrection, ascension, and ongoing presence with us always, and the anticipation of Christ's return when God will get God's way on earth as in heaven.

Sitting at the Feet of Jesus

Presence-centered practices should enflame human beings desire to know Jesus intimately—not just know about Jesus Christ but to know Christ relationally. This leads to the desire and passion to be with Jesus Christ as a disciple. Root's vision of *Christopraxis,* built on the work of Ray Anderson, describes the practice of the real presence of Jesus Christ, resurrected and presently actively working in the world. Root states, "Anderson is not primarily interested in how people think about Jesus (Christology) but rather how they experience the presence of

[265] Matt. 27:46.

Jesus."[266] Root quotes Anderson: "*Christopraxis* is the continuing ministry of Christ through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit."[267] The reality of Christ at work in the world, in the concrete reality of our lives, becomes the reality that shapes and informs theology.

Being with Christ and learning to live life to the full, as God intended, is an essential component of presence-centered spirituality. What is desperately needed today are those who view leadership as followership of the Lord Jesus Christ. The desire to be with Jesus makes it necessary to organize a rhythm of life to practice the presence of God. Leaders who are first and foremost followers of Jesus Christ must embrace the art of ministry as a curator, one who focuses on nurturing the environment of their community. Curators of presence-centered environments and communities of Christian practice must learn to sit at the feet of Jesus, like Mary in the Gospel of Luke:

> Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."[268]

Presence-centered spirituality involves learning from Jesus and walking in devotion with Jesus, which leads to the imitation of Christ and practicing the presence of God in all of life's experiences.

Practicing the Presence of God

Learning to practice the presence of God is an inherent disposition of presence-centered spirituality. While the idea of practicing the presence of God may not have seemed far-fetched in

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[266] Root, *Christopraxis*, 91.

[267] Ibid., 92. Root is quoting Ray Anderson, *Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 21.

[268] Luke 10:38-42.

the pre-modern, enchanted world, it is, no doubt, not considered normative even to the most religious persons living in the immanent frame of the Secular Age.

According to Brother Lawrence, the 17th-century writer of *The Practice of the Presence of God*, the primary posture of all Christians is to commune with God, to seek the presence of God. Brother Lawrence writes, "We cannot avoid the dangers and reefs that life holds without the very present help of God… How can we ask for it unless we are with Him? How can we think often about Him except through the holy practice that we must form within ourselves?"[269] Brother Lawrence insisted that being with God requires contemplation and constant thinking about God, and this necessitates the practice of forming a holy habit of doing so. Brother Lawrence proposed a holistic approach to practicing the presence of God, acknowledging God in many ways. He suggests that one consistently offer their heart to God throughout the day from small and mundane ways to big and significant ways. It was said of Brother Lawrence that he practiced the presence of God to the point that he found God everywhere, as much while he was repairing shoes as while he was praying with the community. In all that he did, Christ was at the center of it.

Practicing the presence of God for Brother Lawrence was not something he woke up, discovered, and experienced all of the sudden, like a surprise gift given by God. He had to nurture a contemplative posture of seeing God in all things and in all activities in which he engaged. This inherent disposition of presence-centered spirituality that recognizes and acknowledges the presence of God involves practices that help people become aware of God in their day-to-day lives. This kind of living attuned to the presence of God is what Karl Rahner called, "The mysticism of ordinary life."[270] Henri Nouwen writes, "The beauty and preciousness

[269] Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, translated by Robert J. Edmonson and Hal McElwaine Helms (Orleans, MA: Paraclete Press, 1984), 103.

[270] Karl Rahner, *Mystics in Everyday Life* (New York, NY: Crossroads, 1988).

of life is intimately linked with its fragility and mortality. We can experience that every day—when we take a flower in our hands, when we see a butterfly dance in the air, when we caress a little baby. Fragility and giftedness are both there, and our joy is connected with both."[271] Living this way is the blessed, joy-filled life. The Psalmist declares, "You show me the path of life. In your **presence** there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore."[272] The heart of presence-centered spirituality is the intention and passion to be present to self, others, and God in order to experience the fullness life. This intention leads to the imitation of God and participation in the divine nature of God.

Imitation and Participation

It is important to state, theologically, that the very essence of presence-centered spirituality and rhythm of life leans into the embrace and pursuit of the "imitation of God" and the theological importance of divine participation in God. Paul instructs believers to "be imitators of God."[273] And considering scriptural warrant for participation in the divine nature of God, Peter declares, "To those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ" and declares Christ's "divine power has given us everything needed for life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Thus he has given us, through these things, his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust, **and may become participants of the divine nature**."[274]

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[271] Henri Nouwen, "Life is Precious," *Henri Nouwen Society Daily Meditation*, October 19, 2021, https://henrinouwen.org/meditations/life-is-precious/.

[272] Ps. 16:11; emphasis added.

[273] Eph. 5:1.

[274] 2 Pet. 1:1-4; emphasis added.

So, human beings are called to the imitation of God and participation in God's divine nature. These two descriptions are the DNA for presence-centered spirituality.

God's Presence (Transcendence) and the Efficacy of Christian Practices

Curating a presence-centered spirituality where followers of Jesus Christ engage in spiritual practices, worship, prayer, ministry, and experience transcendent (Taylor), resonant (Rosa) encounters with God is a beautiful vocational calling. Nurturing a presence-centered environment doesn't happen quickly but requires faithfulness and patience over a long period of time. To see a community of people growing in a presence-centered spirituality is lifegiving. Great joy comes from experiencing others encounter God and experience God's presence in their lives.

Having a transcendent encounter of resonance, according to Rosa, requires *efficacy.* In the vertical axis of resonance, God is one who comes to us, encounters us, and we have the choice to respond, to vibrate, and experience God. At the same time, Rosa adds to the theological dialogue and tension concerning the role human actions play in the encounter with God. Rosa writes, "Resonance is something comparable to the moment of falling asleep: we cannot bring it about by simply willing it."[275] We can't simply will an encounter with God or a life filled with experiences of God's presence. However, engaging in practices that increasingly tune our eyes to see the unseen and ears to hear the still small voice of God's Spirit speaking strengthens the disposition of a presence-centered spirituality. And the disposition and posture of practicing the presence of God leads to sitting at the feet of Jesus, learning to imitate the life of God and increasingly share in the divine nature of God.

The efficacy of Christian practices, even in the midst of the hiddenness of God, leads to a presence-centered spirituality that, by faith, practices the presence of God at work in the world.

[275] Rosa, *The Uncontrollability of the World,* vii.

Presence-centered spirituality involves a commitment to the development of a robust and holistic, spiritual Rhythm of Life, which we will explore thoroughly in the following chapters. Luhrmann's concept of "spiritual kindling" reinforces a commitment to a set of imaginative and embodied practices that form persons and communities of faith and serve to make God real to those practicing their faith and living out their beliefs. These practices make space to regularly sit at the feet of Jesus in a posture of learning and adoration, making real the tangible presence of God and moving people into the imitation of God and participation in God's divine nature.

In addition to the most common Christian practices, it is important to identify and develop other lifegiving rhythms around the idea that every human being has gifts and passions that are an important part of who they are. These unique passions, gifts, and desires make up a person's spirituality. North American Christianity in the modern period has done a poor job of recognizing and nurturing this in the life of people. Spirituality has been reduced to a few things that ought to be a part of a follower of Jesus's life, while ignoring the beautiful nuances of how each person is uniquely created. Jesus Christ's incarnation as God in the flesh had much to do with revealing to us what it means to be fully human. We discover as we become more fully the human beings God created us to be, we become more like God.[276] We have to broaden our definition of what it means to nurture human spirituality. A person's passions and creativity are often an aspect of their creation in the image of God and a vital, often overlooked, part of their spirituality.

[276] See Michael J. Christensen and Jeffery A. Wittung, eds., *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007). I believe the Eastern Orthodox theology of divinization (*theosis*) should be explored more deeply within Western Christian thinking. The process of transformation into the likeness of God and partaking in God's divine nature toward union with God does not minimize our humanity but shows a more robust view of spirituality of human beings created in the image of God.

The *Ignatian* practice of examination (*examen*) is very helpful for discovering patterns in a person's life of lifegiving activities (consolations) along with those things which cause anxiety and distraction (desolations) for presence-centered living. The unique practices that should be incorporated in a presence-centered rhythm of life are discovered as life-giving to us through listening to our lives, noticing God's work in us, and what makes us fully alive. Living in this way is more of an art, instead of a science, resting on theological postures toward relationality, time, and place (Chapter 8). Living a presence-centered spirituality opens the hearts of human beings to encounter the living God at work in their life, in others, and in the world.

The beauty and joy that emerges in presence-centered spirituality is the good life. Timothy Jones and George Gallup, Jr., in their book *The Next American Spirituality: Finding God in the Twenty-First Century*, seem to reinforce Taylor and Rosa's ideas of transcendent breakthroughs in the immanent frame when they write, "Sometimes it overtakes us dramatically; sometimes subtly. Sometimes in a flash of revelation; more often in a dawning, building awareness. But more than many realize, people around us have regular moments of awareness of the unfathomable and ineffable."[277] Jones and Gallup, Jr. eloquently add to what it means to live presence-centered and the potential of a resonant encounter with God when they write:

> Bible characters and "saints" through the ages were no strangers to vivid experiences of God's presence. From Moses, who sensed God in a burning bush, and later had to be hid in the cleft of a rock while the glory of God passed by; to Jesus, who knew and conversed with God intimately; to Paul, the apostle who met a risen Jesus on the Damascus road; to Julian of Norwich, a simple medieval woman who found herself plunged into a profound awareness of God's love; to Teresa of Avila, a sixteenth-century Spanish nun; to John Wesley, who told of a heart strangely warmed; to women and men of modern times, experience is not to be despised.[278]

[277] George Gallup, Jr. and Timothy Jones, *The Next American Spirituality: Finding God in the Twenty-First Century* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2002), 56.

[278] Ibid., 55-56.

What a beautiful mystery life with God is; although beyond our ability to fully comprehend, we have a God who seeks encounter with us. Buber writes, "Of course, God is the 'wholly other'; but God is also the wholly same: the wholly present. Of course, God is the *mysterium tremendum*[279] that appears and overwhelms; but God is also the mystery of the obvious that is closer to me than my own I."[280] Presence-centered spirituality seeks to imitate God, in the way of Jesus Christ, and through intimate worship, with the work of the Holy Spirit, human beings grow in their participation with God's divine nature. As we move into the next chapter, we look at what practices and values might make up a presence-centered spiritual rhythm of life to deepen our union with God, even in the Secular Age.

[279] Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor of the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1923). *Mysterium tremendum* is a phrase coined by Rudolf Otto in his book *Das Heilige* (1917) describing the overwhelming sense of mystery and awe describing our contemplation of the divine.

[280] Buber, *I And Thou*, 127.

CHAPTER 6:
A PRESENCE-CENTERED RHYTHM OF LIFE

Presence-centered spirituality is shaped by a rhythm of life. Creating and practicing a presence-centered rhythm of life is essential for presence-centered spirituality. Luhrmann's research shows a dramatic difference in the faith frames, beliefs, and actions of those who engage in spiritual kindling (what I refer to as spiritual practices) compared to those who primarily depend on consuming spiritual content and information.

A variety of "Rules of Life" have been developed throughout Christian history within monasticism and other forms of Christian community. These rules of life have come from an array of locations and time periods, such as St. Pachomius's Rule (286-346), St. Basil the Great's Rule (4th cent.), The Rule of St. Augustine (5th cent.), Rule of the Master (6th cent.) and the most famous and enduring Rule of Life written by St. Benedict in the early 6th century.

Using the phrase "rhythm of life" instead of "rule of life" is more holistically descriptive of what it means to nurture a rhythm of presence-centered spirituality. Also, people in today's culture have an aversion to "rules." It is important to identify for a rhythm of life those things that are both implicitly and explicitly a part of a person's or community's spirituality. While most notable rules of life defined the daily life of a monastic community, we don't tend to organize our physical, social, or spiritual life around a 24-hour day. In today's world it is important to define a rhythm of life into categories of daily, weekly, periodically, and annually.

Some of the first things incorporated into a rhythm of life are the clearly-evident activities and practices of the Christian life, such as church attendance, Scripture reading, prayer, etc. After getting some of these more obvious things incorporated into one's rhythm of life, we must encourage the use of creativity and imagination to construct a broader holistic set of

practices that enable us to become so captivated by the presence of God that we notice the divine in what we see, hear, smell, sense, taste, feel, and experience.

Prayer as Foundational for a Presence-Centered Rhythm of Life

Most Christians would say that prayer is important. But do we pray? Of course, most Christians know about intercessory prayer, but do we pray as a way of life and ministry? Praying is a part of the human experience. Humans are the praying animal. Prayer is a gift from God for relationship with God. Through prayer, we grow closer to God's way of seeing the world and better understand who God is. We also learn a lot about ourselves and others through prayer. The practice of prayer is the seminal practice in a presence-centered spirituality.

And yet, especially nestled in the immanent frame of the Secular Age, prayer has been labeled irrelevant. Taylor, Rosa, Luhrmann, and Root all declare the importance and power of prayer. Even in the Secular Age, prayer has potential to be a resonance producing event. Root writes, "The pastor's vocation, particularly living in a secular age, is to teach people to pray."[281] Root quotes William Desmond's thoughts on prayer in response to Taylor's *Secular Age*, "Prayer at heart is not something that we do, prayer is something that we find ourselves in, something that comes to us as finding ourselves already opened to the divine as other to us and yet as in intimate communication with us. The porosity of prayer is the original site of communication between the divine and the human."[282] If the pastor or ministry leader understands the importance of prayer in their own life and then seeks to teach those they minister with not only how to pray but also to love to pray, they must discover the bountiful riches of prayer practices that have been developed over the scope of Judeo-Christian history.

[281] Root, *The Pastor in a Secular Age*, 273.
[282] Ibid.

Although prayer seems quite irrelevant within the immanent frame of a Secular Age, prayer is foundational for a presence-centered spirituality because prayer opens us up to the reality that God is present and personal. Root writes, "Prayer is the broadening of our attention on the world around us, looking again for the arriving of God, who announces himself by speaking to us, calling us to pray for others in and through our actions of ministry for them."[283] And, this rhythm of prayer in a presence-centered way of life connects us to God's action of ministry and to the story of God at work in the world.

Pray Without Ceasing

Paul gives a list of admonitions to the followers of Jesus in Thessaloniki. He declares, "pray without ceasing."[284] But Paul doesn't really explain how we could actually pray without ceasing. Is it even possible to pray without ceasing? This open-ended declaration from Paul to pray without ceasing has ignited the imagination of Christians all over the world and in all times throughout the life of the church to explore a plethora of ways to pray. Some of these prayer practices have explicitly come right out of Scripture, such as silence, solitude, The Lord's Prayer, praying the Psalms, and fixed-hour prayer. Other prayer practices have been developed in specific Christian communities and offered to the rest of the church. Presence-centered spirituality entails an openness to explore prayer practices such as meditation, contemplation, silence, solitude, imaginative prayer, the Jesus Prayer, praying with icons and art, keeping the daily office (fixed hour prayer), centering prayer, praying the Psalms, singing prayer, chanting prayer, respiratory prayer, praying with prayer ropes, praying the Prayers of the Church, praying the Lord's Prayer, praying with our bodies, and more.

[283] Ibid.

[284] 1 Thess. 5:17.

The amazing practices of prayer that have been developed over the millenniums are varied, rich, and profound. The training I received on prayer during my early Christian life reduced prayer to something resembling a Christmas wish list I was taught to pray through, snuggled in with reading the Bible, during my "quiet time." It wasn't until I was nearly a quarter of a century into my journey as a follower of Jesus that I discovered the richness of prayer practices developed throughout Christian history, with many reaching back further into Old Testament practices, along with practices emerging from other religions. What follows is a survey of some of the unique prayer practices for a presence-centered spirituality.

Fixed Hour Prayer

Fixed hour prayer or praying the daily offices of prayer is based on the idea of praying on behalf of the world. Fixed hour prayer has been the primary method for a daily rhythm of prayer, especially prayer in community. Praying in this way is important for a presence-centered rhythm of life. The concept of praying at specific times through the course of the day emerges in Judaism and is mentioned in the Old Testament.[285] The Psalmist declared, "Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous ordinances."[286] In the early church we see the observation of fixed-hour prayer continuing:

> One day Peter and John were **going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, at three o'clock in the afternoon**. And a man lame from birth was being carried in…When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he asked them for

[285] In the Book of Daniel, we read about Darius the King appointing three leaders to help him run his Kingdom. Daniel, a young Jewish man in exile from Israel, is one of three selected. It's not long before Daniel proves to be the most capable leader. The other leaders become jealous of Daniel. They tried to discredit Daniel, but his outstanding integrity made their efforts futile. So, they devised a trap to snare Daniel. They convinced Darius, the King, to sign a decree that any and all prayers prayed during a thirty-day period had to be prayed directly to the King himself. The consequence for those who defied this decree would to be thrown alive into a den of lions. The text reveals what happened next, "Although Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he continued to go to his house, which had windows in its upper room open toward Jerusalem, and to get down on his knees three times a day to pray to his God and praise him, just as he had done previously" (Dan. 6:10). Daniel knew about the plan to trap him but continued to do what he always did, he faced toward Jerusalem, dropped to his knees three times a day to pray. This was his normal rhythm and he kept it up in spite of the evil intent of his enemies. Daniel was practicing fixed hour prayer as any religious Hebrew would do.

[286] Ps. 119:164.

> alms… But Peter said, "I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk." And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. Jumping up, he stood and began to walk, and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.[287]

We read in Acts 2 that the disciples gathered on the day of Pentecost for prayer at "nine o'clock in the morning," which was the time for third hour prayer.[288] In Acts 10, we read about a very significant event—the conversion of Cornelius, the first gentile converted in the early church. In order to prepare Peter for the task of stepping outside of his comfort zone and sharing the gospel with Gentiles, God confronts Peter with a vision of clean and unclean animals. God instructs Peter to accept what was once considered unclean as clean. Peter's vision occurred as he was observing fixed hour prayer. "About noon the next day… Peter went up on the roof to pray."[289] This was the time for midday prayer.

The observation of fixed hour prayer was considered an important feature of early church practice. From the beginning of the life of the church, the followers of Jesus "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and **to the prayers.**"[290] Individuals, continuing Jewish custom, prayed at fixed times through the day and, in various parts of the church, developed the custom of devoting certain times of each day to pray in common.

Early church leaders wrote and spoke of fixed-hour prayer as an integral characteristic of Christianity. Praying fixed hour prayers have continued to our present day, although many branches of Protestantism have misplaced or forgotten the history, importance, and tradition of

[287] Acts 3:1-10; emphasis added.
[288] Acts 2:15.
[289] Acts 10:9.
[290] Acts 2:42; emphasis added.

this practice. Reading and praying the Psalms has been a practice of Christians since the first days in the life of the new church formed to live in the way of Jesus Christ.

The rhythm and intentional practice of prayer is a vital aspect of presence-centered spirituality. It is significant that more and more followers of Jesus Christ from all branches of Christianity are rediscovering this ancient family heirloom. The most common of the prayer times include morning prayer, midday prayer, evening prayer and/or compline.

Praying the Prayers of the Church

The most commonly used prayers during fixed hour prayer times are the classic Prayers of the Church. Many who have grown up in a church environment that focused on spontaneous prayer have discovered the beauty of these ancient written prayers of the church. These are prayers that have been prayed for centuries and have stood the test of time and culture. They are beautifully written and theologically robust. The Prayers of the Church allow us to pray on behalf of the world. Praying these prayers help us focus on others rather than on oneself. Those who pray the Prayers of the Church enact a communal priestly role by representing the people of the world before God in prayer.[291]

Silence, Solitude, Meditation and Contemplation

We must acknowledge the priority and importance of prayer when we see the very example of our Lord Jesus Christ consistently praying. Christ often snuck away to quiet places to pray and talk to his Father. "In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed."[292] Henri Nouwen, in his book *Out of Solitude,* wrote:

> It is in the lonely place, where Jesus enters into intimacy with the Father, that his ministry is born. Without a lonely place our lives are in danger, without silence words lose their meaning, without listening speaking no longer heals, without a lonely place our actions quickly become empty gestures. The careful balance between silence and words,

[291] See an example of Prayers of the Church in Appendix A.
[292] Mark 1:35.

> withdrawal and involvement, distance and closeness, solitude and community forms the basis of the Christian life and should therefore be the subject of our most personal attention.[293]

Silence beyond being quiet is the deep kind of solitude that is so essential in learning to really listen and becoming comfortable with a calm posture of simply being.

One of the hardest things for us to do in the midst of the dynamic stabilization driving our fast-paced world in which we live is to do nothing. Exclusive humanism as a social imaginary of the immanent frame holds no comprehension for doing nothing. The temptation of living under the influence of the age of authenticity is to become posers, trying to impress with a projection of who we pretend to be without much consideration of the interiority of our lives. Mother Teresa proclaimed:

> We need to find God, and God cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence. See how nature—trees, flowers, grass—grow in silence; see the stars, the moon and sun; how they move in silence. . . the more we receive in silent prayer, the more we can give in our active life. We need silence to be able to touch souls. The essential thing is not what we say, but what God says to us and through us. All our words will be useless unless they come from within—words which do not give the light of Christ increase the darkness.[294]

Scripture instructs us, "Be still, and know that I am God!"[295]

The Christian faith has been pressured in the Secular Age to project a sense of certainty about knowing the right facts, doctrine, and Bible verses. This has produced a Christianity that the world has come to despise. The regular practice of doing nothing, however, is crucial for spiritual growth. It keeps us from having an inflated view of our importance; it surfaces anxiety, fear, and worry along with our controlling strategies to keep from facing them; and it opens our heart to hear from our real, authentic selves and God. Meditation, contemplation, silence, and

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[293] Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Out of Solitude: Three Meditations on the Christian Life*, 1st rev. ed. (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2004), 14-15.

[294] Mother Teresa, *The Joy in Loving: A Guide to Daily Living* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1996), 228.

[295] Ps. 46:10.

solitude all offer different nuances of what it means to be with God in profound ways. Rosa writes, "The form and attitude of prayer, which in its very concept is designed to produce 'deep resonance' in the form of speech and action that both listens and responds, evolved in a way naturally from this promise" (the promise of one who hears you, understands you and responds to you).[296] Rosa asserts that prayer in all its forms are both inwardly and outwardly focused and cites William James work defining prayer as a "practice of relation."[297] A presence-centered spiritual rhythm of prayer creates a unique inward and outward connection of possibility for encounter with God.[298]

Using Your Body in Prayer

Prayer should involve more than the human mind and occasionally the tongue. Bodily involvement in prayer is essential. Involving the body in prayer is a pushback corrective from the Enlightenment move toward the cognitive domain being the sole center of human knowing and being. Through body language, we communicate to God. Even if we are not cognizant of what our bodies are saying about how we feel about God, they are speaking volumes. All through the Scripture we see examples of people using their bodies to communicate and pray to God. These bodily postures associated with prayer involve kneeling, standing, prostration, use of hands in a variety of ways, bowing the head, etc.[299]

[296] Rosa, *Resonance*, 261-262.

[297] Ibid., 262.

[298] Centering prayer is another ancient contemplative Christian prayer practice. This form of prayer emphasizing interior silence was one of the earliest forms of meditation emerging from Christian monasticism. This spiritual discipline helps to tune awareness to God's presence in and around the one praying. Centering prayer involves a clearing of the mind from the chaos that can easily dominate thinking. The focus is on being, on being who you are, on being with God, and wrapped up in the reality that you are the Beloved. With a few deep breaths the one praying settles into their body finding a comfortable posture, centering their hearts on God, allowing their minds to rest in Christ, the mind of Christ. The purpose of centering prayer is to simply rest in God's presence. When minds start to race with thoughts that distract meditation, the use of a particular, prechosen word or phrase reminds the prayer to return to being instead of planning or rehashing doings. Peace be still, Love, Lord Jesus, Sweet Holy Spirit, and Come Lord Jesus are examples of words or phrases that can be used to recenter the meditation of being with Jesus in God's embrace.

[299] Miscellaneous Bodily Postures of Prayer: There are so many other ways to use bodies in prayer. Jesus looked up into heaven when he prayed. Some people pray when they exercise. Some have a habit of talking to God

Sign of the Cross

Making the *sign of the cross* was around a long time before the Medieval period and was a meaningful part of Christian practice when we were a united church. A careful reading of church history will show that the practice and symbolism of the *sign of the cross* was not something that the reformers were interested in leaving behind, especially true of Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, who instructed his followers to make the *sign of the cross* at both the beginning and the end of the day as a beginning to daily prayers. In the *Small Catechism*, in the section on morning and evening prayers, Luther says, "When you get out of bed, bless yourself with the holy cross and say 'In the name of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.' This same instruction is given for bedtime."[300] Making the sign of the cross is a short prayer and meditation, reminding us to live the cruciform life in the way of Jesus Christ. This brings our awareness to the presence of the crucified Christ at work in the world and opens us to participate in the ministry of Jesus Christ with those who are suffering, moving us to be presence-centered with them in their pain and suffering.

Walking a Labyrinth

Walking a labyrinth is something that is becoming more accessible because labyrinths are being added more frequently to church grounds, cemeteries, gardens, college campuses, and parks. Walking a labyrinth is not a maze as some people think. A labyrinth is a path that leads from the outside of a circle, representing life, to the center of the circle. A labyrinth is a metaphor for life's journey and creates the space to contemplate one's life and relationship with God. Walking the labyrinth engages our whole body in this spiritual practice.

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when they run. Some pray best through singing or painting. Knitting has allowed some to connect deeply with God. In the Psalms, David spoke of praying in bed. The repentant tax collector prayed by beating his breast in repentance. For too long we have ignored the role our bodies play in Christian formation.

[300] *Luther's Small Catechism: With Explanation* (Saint Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2017).

Praying with Nature

A presence-centered spirituality embraces the reality that God's Spirit is present everywhere, including nature. We can encounter the divine through that which God has created. While God is greater than and transcends all created matter, God holds all things together. As we seek God through a presence-centered life in all of God's creation, we also remember that God is wholly other.[301] In Scripture we read the account of Jesus riding a donkey into Jerusalem on what we now call *Palm Sunday*. The multitudes were crying out, "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!"[302] The Pharisee tell Jesus to order the people to stop these shouts of adoration. Jesus tells them if the people were silent the stones would cry out. The location of this event in the life of Jesus feature stones everywhere around the Eastern Wall of Jerusalem. Jesus imagined the stones crying out in praise of God. Isaiah declares, "For you shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands."[303] Mountains and hills sing, with trees clapping their hands. God speaks through creation. Presence-centered spirituality seeks God in all things. Jürgen Moltmann affirms John Wesley's teaching that the perception of God "in all things" was a necessary part of faith in God. Moltmann wrote, "For him (Wesley) the separation of things from God was 'practical atheism.'"[304] Wesley's perception of God in all things defines presence-centered spirituality.

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[301] I am drawn to Jürgen Moltmann's concept of panentheism, which strongly informs my spirituality. Christ, "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col. 1:15-17).

[302] Luke 19:38.

[303] Isa. 55:12.

[304] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 317.

Being presence-centered is finding time to engage with God's creation, be present, listen, be aware, and worship the Creator. I love the way Eugene Peterson paraphrased Psalm 19:

> God's glory is on tour in the skies, God-craft on exhibit across the horizon. Madame Day holds classes every morning, Professor Night lectures each evening. Their words aren't heard, their voices aren't recorded, But their silence fills the earth: unspoken truth is spoken everywhere. God makes a huge dome for the sun—a superdome! The morning sun's a new husband leaping from his honeymoon bed, The daybreaking sun an athlete racing to the tape. That's how God's Word vaults across the skies from sunrise to sunset, Melting ice, scorching deserts, warming hearts to faith.[305]

This paraphrase resonates with Rosa who writes, "Our resonant relationship to nature is the result *not* of cognitive learning processes or rational insights, but of active or practical and emotionally meaningful experiences."[306] There are so many other unique ways to pray, to converse with God, and to open ourselves up to listen attentively for God's Spirit to speak in what often is that still small voice, to practice what it means to "pray without ceasing," to seek the face of God and nurture a presence-centered spirituality.

Other Prayer Practices

Before turning to other Christian practices, participants should consider that prayer practices remain vast and varied. This overview of prayer practices emphasize the importance of praying beyond a few specific emphases, and to expand the imagination for prayer.

Imaginative Prayer

We are imaginative beings because God created us with imaginations. Using our imaginations to connect with the divine can help us move from external head knowledge of God to an internalized, deeper knowing of God. Imaginative prayer is connecting with and hearing from God through mental images. An example would be putting yourself into a biblical narrative

[305] Ps. 119:1-6, MSG.

[306] Rosa, *Resonance*, 273.

by the use of your imagination and discovering how you and God might encounter each other in that place.

St. Ignatius of Loyola is most associated with the development and encouragement of imaginative prayer. As a soldier, he was a wounded in the Battle of Pamplona in May 1521. While bedridden and healing, he read a book on Christian saints. He found himself imagining that he was a part of the stories and discovered God present with him. Ignatius's imagination was used by God to transform him into a follower of Christ.

In his writings, especially *Spiritual Exercises*,[307] Ignatius instructs readers to imaginatively enter the gospel story: to see, smell, taste, touch, and hear what's unfolding around them. He saw imagination as the place where we can experience, embrace, and internalize spiritual truth. So, we don't merely read about the manger, the garden, and the cross. Instead, we're present to hear the cries of the newborn King, to feel a Son's pain as he pleads with his father to remove this cup and struggles within himself, and to see the nails driven into the flesh of our Savior. For Ignatius, imagination unites past with present, outward with inward, and brings us face-to-face with the living God.[308]

Journaling and Contemplative Writing

[307] Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius: Or Manresa* (New York, NY: Frederick Puster & Co., 1914).

[308] To practice Imaginative prayer, pick a Gospel passage you are familiar with. Get into a relaxed posture. Take a few deep, intentional breaths to connect with your body and center yourself. Slowly begin to read the Gospel passage, taking time to notice specific details. After you've read the passage, close your eyes and imagine entering into the story you just read. Allow your imagination to take you into the story. Perhaps, you imagine yourself as a curious bystander or even an active participant. How do you feel? What part do you want to play in this story? What do you hear, see? How do you react to others in the story? How might your participation in the story actually change the story, for better or worse? Can you imagine the situation you find yourself in having a particular odor? Are any tastes involved? Does anyone speak directly to you? Do you speak to anyone? Do you feel resistance to anything happening? Are you happy, sad, ambivalent, or joyful? What are the emotions you're experiencing? Is God speaking to you? What are you hearing? Let the whole experience enfold you, sweep you up into something you didn't fabricate or expect. Listen to your heart. Listen to your life. Discern when it's time to move out of the imaginative prayer. Sit with your experience. Continue to listen and learn. Contemplate your experience. You might want to write down some of your experience or thoughts so that you can return to this experience for further meditation.

The act of writing, for many people, helps connect the mind with the heart. Writing about your thoughts, questions, and the process of your spiritual journey helps you to think more deeply. What we write can also be something we return to for encouragement or to remember important things happening in our lives. Prayer and meditation through journaling is a very powerful discipline in a spiritual journey. Sometimes writing in a free-flowing way, ungoverned by careful wordsmithing can actually surprise you and make you feel like the Holy Spirit was also engaged in the writing process in order to speak to you. This practice can serve to increase mindfulness and awareness that God is present and working in our life and the world around us.

Praying with Art, Music, and Literature—Creating Art as Prayer

We were created in the *image of God.* We were designed to create and be imaginative people who collaborate with God who is the source of beauty and creativity. Being presence-centered means that we use all kinds of different art forms to engage the divine. This could involve going to art galleries to sit with different art pieces, contemplating beauty and spiritual themes. You can use paintings and sculptures for *visio divina* (divine seeing). You can use music for *audio divina* (divine listening). Poetry can powerfully stimulate theological reflection or enable us to contemplate spiritual themes. There is almost always someone in any given spiritual community who has the gift to create art which can be a powerful gift for prayer and contemplation.

Praying Scripture

The book of *Psalms* was the prayer book of Jesus and has been the focus of daily readings in communities of Christian practice for 2,000 years. Reading and praying through the

Psalms takes people through the whole gamut of human experience and emotion, from adoration to lament. These sacred texts challenge, irritate, provoke, and expose people to the broad interactions human beings have with God. The Book of Revelation is also a powerful source of prayers of adoration and worship. Revelation contains a great proclamation: "**"**Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come."[309] It continues with powerful praise: "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."[310] There are many other recorded prayers found throughout Scripture. Additionally, we can shape Scriptures into the subject of our prayers.

Singing Prayers

Singing prayers can be a powerful way of praying. Originally, the Psalms were written to be sung. At Youthfront, the organization I am a part of, we use texts of Scripture for our prayer songs during our daily offices of prayer.[311] We can also use sacred chorale music in prayer. Gregorian chant is also an other-worldly form of singing prayer. The community of Taizé[312] has beautiful Scripture prayer songs they have made accessible to those who want to use them for singing prayers.

Praying with Icons

This is something that many Protestants shy away from but is often the result of misunderstanding what it means to ***pray with***, *not to*, icons. This is a rich Christian tradition of prayer and devotion. There is a lot of accessible information available on the Internet about this

[309] Rev. 4:8b.

[310] Rev. 4:11.

[311] You can access these original prayer songs, along with the Youthfront Midday prayers on a free app called *Youthfront Midday Prayer*. Available for Apple and Android users.

[312] www.taize.fr/en

practice and its history, but I highly recommend the profoundly devotional book on this practice by Henri Nouwen called *Behold the Beauty of the Lord*.[313] It can be helpful to gradually introduce people to this kind of prayer and contemplation using paintings like Rembrandt's *The Return of the Prodigal Son* or his *Storm on the Sea of Galilee*, Raphael's *Transfiguration* or Matthias Grunewald's *Crucifixion*.

Table Prayer

Praying before a meal is a common way of praying for many Christians but there are ways to expand prayer practices as we sit at table together. Some families use a wooden prayer cube featuring different classic prayers of thankfulness and gratitude on each side of the cube. Many faith communities host Seder Meals during Holy Week as an intense time of prayer, liturgy, storytelling and feasting. Some pray after meals or use the time after a meal to check in with each other and use the practice of *examen* to surface desolations and consolations in their lives which become a matter of prayer one for another.

Prayers of Confession

Confession involves both a private and public component. *Confession* is the acceptance of responsibility for our behavior and attitudes that do not conform to the ways of God. To confess our sin helps us deal with guilt and imagine an alternate future free from the heaviness of our transgressions. To confess is not simply the recognition of a mistake; it is so much more. Confession is part of the calling of God on our life to repent. Confession has both inward (self-discovery, cleansing, honesty, and responsibility) ramifications and outward (reconciliation, authenticity, relationship-building, etc.) ramifications. Our confession and repentance is not only an obedient response to God but a relational response toward others—a response that often leads

[313] Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Behold the Beauty of the Lord: Praying with Icons* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1987).

to resonant relationships. James tells us to confess our sins, one to another.[314] Having this kind of humility and vulnerability with each other is a characteristic and element of a presence-centered community.[315]

Prayer Ropes

Praying with a prayer rope is another way of praying that concerns many Protestants and surfaces disdain among many evangelicals. Early Christian communities committed to rhythms of prayer started using stones, notches on a walking stick, or other methods to keep track of where they were in their practice of praying through the Psalms and other prayers within their liturgical life. Sometimes, Monks would wear a rope belt around their habit allowing the end of the ropes to dangle almost to the ground. They would add knots on these ropes as another way of tracking where they left off in their prayer liturgies. Eventually, the prayer rope was created to organize and serve as an aid to prayer.

Respiratory Prayer

Praying with the rhythms of the breath is another prayer practice to consider in a presence-centered rhythm of prayer. Respiratory prayer is sometimes referred to as "breath prayers." Most likely these kinds of prayers were developed for a couple of reasons. First, these prayers were developed in the overall pursuit of trying to follow Paul's instruction for followers of Jesus to "pray without ceasing."[316] Secondly, the Hebrew name for God, *Yahweh*, was believed to be so sacred that it wasn't to be spoken because human beings were not worthy to

[314] James 5:16.

[315] *The Book of Common Prayer: And Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church, Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York, NY: Good Books, 2016). One of the Prayers of the Church that is a consistent part of our prayer and liturgical life at Youthfront is the following prayer of confession. *Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against You in thought, word and deed, by what we have done, and by what we have left undone. We have not loved You with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. We are truly sorry, and we humbly repent. For the sake of Your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us, that we may delight in Your will, and walk in Your ways, to the glory of Your name. Amen.*

[316] 1 Thess. 5:17.

speak God's name. However, Jewish mystics believed that *Yahweh* wasn't the name for God to be spoken because *Yahweh* was actually the sound of the breath. The Book of Genesis informs us that God breathed into human beings, and they became animated, living souls.[317] We take our first breath of air when we exit the womb and our last exhale of breath at our death. When we take a breath, it is the sound of *Yah.*… when we exhale it is the sound of *weh.*… So, the first thing human beings do is speak the name of God. And it is also the last thing human beings do as they exhale the last breath of their life. Unfortunately, most human beings are not aware that their very existence comes from God. Bound by the social imaginary of the immanent frame, many followers of Jesus living in the Secular Age don't live the kind of presence-centered spirituality that acknowledges that in Christ, we live, move, and have our very being.[318] This dependency on Christ extends to the point that every breath we take, whether we are present to this reality or not, is a speaking of God's name. Listen to the sound of a deep breath in, *Yah.*… listen to the sound of your deal exhale, *weh.*… Thinking about your breath as a speaking of God's name and the gift of life from our Creator can help us to imagine that we can pray without ceasing. This can be a profound experience of presence, or as Rosa describes, *resonance*.

The Jesus Prayer

The *Jesus Prayer* is not only the most well-known prayer often used as a respiratory prayer, it is the Christian prayer prayed more than any other prayer throughout Christian history because of the frequency and repetition of the prayer. We witness the formation of this prayer by reading numerous accounts in the Gospels such as Jesus's encounter with the Canaanite Woman,

[317] Gen. 2:7.
[318] Acts 17:28.

Jesus's healing of two blind men, Jesus's cleansing ten lepers, the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector in the Temple, Jesus's healing of a blind beggar outside of Jericho, and the healing of blind Bartimaeus.[319]

> They came to Jericho. As he and his disciples and a large crowd were leaving Jericho, Bartimaeus son of Timaeus, a blind beggar, was sitting by the roadside. When he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to shout out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many sternly ordered him to be quiet, but he cried out even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and said, "Call him here." And they called the blind man, saying to him, "Take heart; get up, he is calling you." So throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. Then Jesus said to him, "What do you want me to do for you?" The blind man said to him, "My teacher, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way."[320]

Praying the first part of the Jesus Prayer, "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of the living God," while inhaling and pausing before exhaling and praying the second part, "Have mercy on me, a sinner," can be a very resonant practice. Imagine breathing in the goodness of the living God and exhaling sinfulness. Other phrases from Scripture can be used for respiratory prayers, such as breathing in, "Help me love you with all my heart, mind, and soul," and breathing out, "Help me love my neighbors as myself."

Some may wonder if praying like this is denounced by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount[321] when he instructs his followers not to pray like unbelievers who repeat "empty phrases" (NRSV) or use "vain repetition" (KJV). The key is the use of "empty," meaningless phrases and "vain," worthless repetition. In Revelation, we are told the heavenly creatures surrounding God, day and night, do not cease singing, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come."[322] Talk about repetition. But the repetition is not vain or empty, and that is the difference. No doubt, we human beings can sink into a relationlessness (Rosa) in our rituals but

[319] Matt. 15:21-28; Matt. 20:29-34; Luke 17:11-19; Luke 18:9-14; Luke 18:35-43.
[320] Mark 10:46-52.
[321] Matt. 6:7.
[322] Rev. 4:8.

being presence-centered, fully awake to God in our life and worship of God can be profoundly resonant.

Presence-Centered Thinking and Conversation with God

There are so many more ways to pray. A presence-centered spirituality creates a curiosity in our relationship and encounters with God. We pursue a life that seeks to bring our minds into union with the mind of Christ, allowing our thinking and internal conversations to interact with God's Spirit. We pray when we drive our car, brush our teeth, get dressed, do the laundry, and take a walk. We imagine a cup of coffee as a sacramental time with our Creator and sustainer of life. We use our imagination to live presence-centered, practicing the presence of God, and exploring ways to pray without ceasing. These different practices of prayer are like having multiple instruments making beautiful music in communion with the Spirit of God. These practices of prayer position the prayer to seek the face of God and sit at the feet of Jesus.

Establishing a rhythm of life to become *imitators* of Jesus Christ and move deeper into *participation* in God's divine nature is essential for presence-centered spirituality. In addition to the foundational practices of prayer, discovering and discerning other practices that make a person feel fully alive spiritually and presence-centered is the next step in establishing a meaningful rhythm of life. The scope of this project does not allow for a comprehensive exploration of all possible practices that might be considered in a presence-centered rhythm of life. Nor is there space to describe other potential practices to the extent given to prayer in the last chapter. However, it is important to survey a few other elemental considerations for a spiritually robust rhythm of life.

Presence-Centered Scripture Engagement

The practice of reading, studying, and meditating on Scripture is an indispensable part of a presence-centered rhythm of life. There are many places in the scripture that refer to reading and meditating daily on Scripture. The Enlightenment project and its role in the unfolding of the Secular Age turned Scripture, largely, into being viewed as a collection of propositional truth statements. This was the result of trying to stay "relevant" with the intellectual and epistemological shifts that were occurring. Many felt the Bible had to rationally prove itself as a history book and a science book.

Rosa uses the example of the Bible as a "resonant other" when people feel like it is something that they have not fully grasped or mastered. North American evangelicalism has increasingly doubled down on the Bible as a definitive collection of absolute truth statements. This is why the Bible has been diminished as a resonant text for many evangelicals and has tragically become a static collection of propositional statements. Those who embrace the Bible as sacred text, through which the Spirit of God may choose to use to communicate and reveal truth afresh, continue to encounter the Bible as a resonant text. What the Bible says to us is also impacted by how we respond to it. Approaching the Scripture as a living text allows us to have an open take to the possibility that the text may speak to us (*af<fect*) resulting in our response of *e>motion* potentially leading to a transcendent encounter.

While it is important to study the Bible text to understand the cultural contexts in which it was written, along with looking at books of the Bible in light of other books, and, especially looking at Scripture from an overarching narrative perspective, these methods fall into an exegetical engagement with Scripture. But it is also vital to develop a devotional engagement with Scripture. Many prayer practices are integrated with Scripture, such as imaginative prayer, praying the Psalms, using the lectionary in the daily offices of prayer, etc. Like the practice of prayer with all its

variations, so too, the practice of Scripture reading can take on many forms within one's rhythm of life.

Lectio divina is the spiritual practice of divine reading. This classic practice of meditating on Scripture, historically embraced by the broad Christian community, is being rediscovered as a transformational way to engage with sacred text. This practice opens up the participant, through meditation and contemplation, to a deep devotional engagement with Scripture. There is currently so much good information available and accessible in books and online concerning the methods of approaching prayer and Scripture meditation in this practice of divine reading.

Another consideration for Scripture engagement within a presence-centered rhythm of life is reading Scripture in community. There was a time in Christianity that the mentioning of reading Scripture in community would not be needed because reading sacred text in community was the normative practice. Paul instructs, "give attention to the public reading of scripture."[323] Being in a community that practices fixed hour prayer, including readings from the lectionary, accomplishes this to a degree, but additional times set aside to read a text and engage together in dialogue and theological reflection are rich experiences. One of the important practices that can develop through reading in community is to learn how to read Scripture over and against oneself. Human beings, personally and in community, tend to interpret Scripture through a lens that favors the reader/s. Calls for repentance in the text shouldn't be assumed as something the "other" should do but something the reader needs to consider.

Engaging in Scripture through imaginative prayer, meditation, and contemplation can animate the text and make it come alive. These experiences can create the resonance Rosa describes. Also, refer back to Chapter 4 for Luhrmann's description of engagement with

[323] 1 Tim. 4:13.

Scripture in this imaginative way as an "interweaving" and an "inner sense cultivation,"[324] both of which she describes as a way God, and Scripture becomes real to persons of faith.

Presence-Centered Listening

Being present to others is a practice, an art, and a way of life that is unreplaceable in a presence-centered spirituality. The opening statements in Benedict's Rule of Life are about listening. This involves listening for God's Spirit to speak to us. "Hearken continually within my heart, O son, giving attentive ear to the precepts of thy master."[325] Benedict goes on to remind the Benedictine community that they must be careful to listen to even the most novice among them because God might choose to speak through that person. You know how you feel when you are talking to someone who is preoccupied and not really listening to you. Maybe you have been at a conference or other public event and realized the person you were conversing with was occasionally scanning the room to find someone more important to talk to. That is a terrible feeling. Jesus demonstrated that even the children were worthy of his full attention and presence, rebuking his disciples for thinking otherwise. Because an encounter with Christ so often happens within the encounter with another, because where two or three are gathered Christ is in our midst, we miss many opportunities to experience Christ because of our lack of presence in those moments.[326]

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[324] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real*, 72-76.

[325] *The Rule of Saint Benedict* (London: SPCK, 1931), 1.

[326] Annie Tucker, "Seeing the Face of God—Parashat Vayishlach," *Temple Israel Center*, 2019, https://www.templeisraelcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Parashat-Vayishlach_RA-1.pdf. There is a beautiful Hassidic tale that teaches about seeing the face of God. "There once was a rabbi who was asked by his students, 'Master, how should one determine the hour in which night ends and day begins?' One student suggested, 'Is it when a person can distinguish a sheep from a dog in the distance?' 'No,' said the rabbi, 'It is not.' A second student ventured, 'Is it when one can distinguish a date tree and a fig tree from afar?' 'It is not that either,' replied the teacher. 'Please tell us the answer,' the students begged, 'How should one determine when night has ended and day begun?' 'It is when you look into the face of a stranger and see your sister or brother,' said the rabbi. 'Until then, night is still with us.'"

There is so much darkness in our culture today because we are not present to each other, because we don't look into the face of the other. We so easily demonize those we don't know or allow them to be a category that we can easily dismiss. Social media fuels this. People say things on social media to each other that would be very difficult for most people to say if they were actually face-to-face with the other. Being totally present to the people you are with is one of the greatest gifts you can give to them.

Reminders and Focal Points Toward Awareness and Mindfulness

Curating a presence-centered environment requires intentionality. Creating focal points, associations, and reminders in our lives is helpful for centering intentions. Placing a crucifix on a bedside nightstand can serve as a reminder, when going to sleep and waking up, that we are called to live the cruciform life. Burning incense can serve as a reminder that the fragrant, rising smoke represents the prayers of the saints reaching into the heavens and to the heart of God. Candles also release fragrance that stimulates memory and impacts human emotions. They also remind us of their association with liturgy. The flame is a mystical metaphor for the transcendence of God. For many, the sound of bells is a reminder of God's presence resonating throughout the world. Listening to beautiful chorale music, chant, and other sacred music can result in your life vibrating with resonance and passion for God.

Other Things to Consider in a Rhythm of Life

There are so many other things that can be incorporated into the life of one who desires to live fully a presence-centered spirituality. These Christian practices help a person to become more human in their being. Discover the things that bring you joy in your life and make them a priority in your rhythm of life. Allow your imagination to engage. Examine your life. What brings you joy? Some people love journaling, painting, dancing, horseback riding, working in

animal shelters, singing, cooking, running, knitting, baking, pottery, coffee, wine, chocolate, yoga, making music, or writing poetry and stories, and on and on. What makes you present to yourself, others, God, and God's creation? Embrace and name those things as a part of your presence-centered spirituality and incorporated them into a rhythm of life. This kind of intentionality fuels a presence-centered spirituality that nurtures eyes to see and bodies to feel God's presence and ears to hear the whispers of the divine in God's creation.

When a pastor or ministry leader develops an intentionally robust presence-centered rhythm of life they are more likely to engage in ministry in the Secular Age out of the fullness of a relational life with God. As Root declared, the most important thing for pastors to do in the Secular Age is to pray and teach those they minister with how to pray. To expand on that idea, it is essential for a pastor to embrace a holistic spiritual rhythm of life that enables her to deeply live a presence-centered life and shepherd her community to live in a presence-centered way of life together. Living with a mindful posture of presence-centeredness nurtures the life of a minister to curate a presence-centered community of Christian practice. Living a presence-centered spirituality without being embedded into a community of others is like expecting a fish to thrive on dry land. We now turn to explore presence-centered community.

CHAPTER 7:
PRESENCE-CENTERED COMMUNITY

Christian formation in presence-centered spirituality is personal, but it is not an individual endeavor. Christian formation is rooted in being a person in community with others collaborating and participating in God's kingdom. In Robert Mulholland's book, *Invitation to a Journey,*[327] he describes spiritual formation as the process of being formed in the image of Christ for the sake of others.

In being presence-centered, we become more fully the human beings we were created to be for relationship with God and others. In a spiritual journey to be presence-centered, we profoundly discover that we are not just individuals but persons deeply connected relationally to God and all of God's creation.[328] The focus of presence-centered spirituality on a communal way of life helps to avoid misusing spiritual practices and formation as a self-actualization or self-obsession process. This reminds us that we are presence-centered for each other. A presence-centered communal rhythm of life can also provide accountability that our spiritual practices don't actually deform us.[329]

Community in the Era of Authenticity, Expressive Individualism, and Exclusive Humanism

In the Secular Age, the idea of community is less important than the value of individualism. This is not how God created us to live. Taylor describes how the *Age of Authenticity* works in the Secular Age with its emphasis on expressive individualism and exclusive humanism. Expressive individualism asserts that each individual has to work out their

[327] M. Robert Mulholland, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

[328] Leafblad, "Ministry as a Strange Tool," 157. In Erik Leafblad's doctoral thesis, he declares, "To encounter God's presence (who) is to be called in one's life (when) to become present to the world (where). God-with-us really does mean us-with-God, and therefore with the world."

[329] Lauren F. Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018). For a theological argument on how Christian practices can be misused and spiritually deforming see Lauren Winner's excellent book on the dangers of Christian practice.

own human identity and they have the right to express that humanity in any way they feel like expressing it. Exclusive humanism is an ideal that an individual can find meaningful purpose for life without a connection to anything beyond the immanent frame of the Secular Age. This idea assumes no transcendent reality exists. Expressive individualism and exclusive humanism are key ingredients of the social imaginary that define the Secular Age. The problem with much of the pursuit of authenticity, fueled by expressive individualism and exclusive humanism, is that it often results in alienation.

Adding social media to this cultural dynamic has exponentially compounded the problem. Yes, individuals can create whatever identity they want to on social media, but if they are not affirmed in that identity by more "likes" and a growing "reach" of their social media sphere, the end result is often a feeling of aloneness, loneliness, and alienation. More studies are emerging showing the correlation between social media use and mental illnesses. It was shocking to find out that Facebook/Instagram has known its algorithms are toxic, especially for adolescent girls.[330] They continued to make filters allowing the user to change their appearance and developed algorithms that drove more clicks and interaction but also lured teen girls deeper into false information that potentially feeds mental illness, depression, eating disorders, and more destructive outcomes.

Christoformity and *Trinitarian* Shaped Community

The Christian faith is a faith built on community and relationship, starting with the Triune God. "The Trinitarian foundations of Christian belief demand that 'living' be understood in social or communitarian terms rather than in terms of an essentially individualistic model of

[330] "Protecting Kids Online: Testimony from a Facebook Whistleblower." *U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation*. October 5, 2021. https://www.commerce.senate.gov/2021/10/protecting%20kids%20online:%20testimony%20from%20a%20facebook%20whistleblower.

personhood."[331] Barna Research Group reports, "in our increasingly individualized culture, 56% of Christians declare that their spiritual life is entirely private."[332] We see how Christianity has been affected by the Secular Age when a majority of those who claim to be Christians feel that they want to keep their faith entirely private. This posture makes living a presence-centered spirituality an impossibility. The Scripture was written almost exclusively to communities instead of individuals. Christian communities, with their positives and negatives, are an irreplaceable and essential part of a person's Christian spirituality.

Scot McKnight, in his book *Pastor Paul: Nurturing a Culture of Christoformity in the Church*, asserts that *Christoformity*—being conformed into the life and way of Jesus Christ—happens through spiritual formation practices, rhythms, and worship within our communal life. According to McKnight, a community of Christian practice embracing *Christoformity* requires pastors to curate and nurture a culture "formed by [Jesus Christ's] life, by his death, and by his resurrection and ascension."[333] This happens in community, specifically communities of Christian practice. Tertullian declared, "No Christian is a Christian alone" (*unus christianus nullus christianus*).[334]

In addition to being *Christocentric* (centered on Christ), seeking to imitate the Lord Jesus (*Christoformity*), presence-centered spirituality is also emphatically *Trinitarian*, acknowledging the uniqueness and role of each person of the Trinity. The Western emphasis of the hierarchical shape of the trinity fashioned my early thinking of the Trinity. The Eastern

[331] Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 147.

[332] "Two in Five Christians Are Not Engaged in Discipleship," *Barna*, January 26, 2022, https://www.barna.com/research/christians-discipleship-community/.

[333] Scot McKnight, *Pastor Paul: Nurturing a Culture of Christoformity in the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2019), 4.

[334] Rowan Williams, *The Way of St Benedict* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2020), 55.

church ideas of Trinity as a distinct community in relationship, as the three in one and one in three, provides a much deeper understanding of relationality. Concerning the ontology of relationality, Orthodox theologian Christos Yanneras writes, "Every being exists only as a coherent combination of relations, only as situated within a network of relations. Common experience confirms that **what every being *is*** emerges as a result of relations between a host of causal factors."[335] God created human beings to be in relationship with God and each other. Our very personhood is wrapped up in relationship; in fact, our very being as persons is constituted by our relation to others. I am a son because I have a mother and father. I am a husband because I have a wife. I am a father because I have two sons and a daughter. I am a father-in-law because I have two daughters-in-law and a son-in-law. I am a grandfather because I have eleven grandchildren. I am a friend because I have friends. These relationships have shaped my identity as a person and define my personhood.

Presence-Centered Life Together and the Quest for Spiritual Community

Bonhoeffer's classic *Life Together*[336] is another important theological work for understanding how presence-centered spiritual formation is critically dependent on a Christian community practicing the faith together. *Life Together* was written by Dietrich while he was teaching and leading a community of Christian practice in an underground seminary in Finkenwalde, just beyond the German border in Poland. Poland was in control of the Nazi's at the time. In 1937, the Gestapo closed the seminary. *Life Together* was published two years after the closing of the seminary. Bonhoeffer believed

[335] Yannaras, *Relational Ontology*, 2; emphasis added.

[336] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, translated by Daniel W. Bloesch and James Harold Burtness (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005).

Jesus Christ was the center of Christian community. Bonhoeffer was convinced of the relationality of every person bound with others together in Christ as a divine reality. Christ's presence is in the midst of our relationships one to another. These relationships are presence-centered and prayer-focused.

In Angela Reed's *Quest for Spiritual Community*, she acknowledges a large body of research that reveals, "contemporary spirituality is more heavily absorbed with the self than with community."[337] She makes the argument that while spiritual formation practices often focus on an inward journey, personal encounters with God, and mystical experiences, it is critical for a community of persons seeking God's presence to engage in participation with God's action in the world. Reed describes the importance of person, community, and mission entwined: "The three are joined together through the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit… the Spirit can be understood as the energy of life present in the world today, attending to personhood, creating fellowship in community and calling towards mission."[338] Reed declares, "The image of the divine Trinity, or *imago Trinitatis*, is most fully found in human beings as they participate in community."[339] Living life together in community is the way God designed people to be most fully human in their being.

Situated Learning in Community

[337] Angela H. Reed, *Quest for Spiritual Community: Reclaiming Spiritual Guidance for Contemporary Congregations* (New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2011), 37.

[338] Ibid., 115.

[339] Ibid., 135.

A presence-centered community really reflects a "community of Christian practice." The phrase "community of practice" is used by Jean Lave, an anthropologist, who has studied and researched learning theory for decades. Her "situated learning" model is a social theory of education. Although the scope of this project won't allow for a deep dive in Lave's situated learning theory, a few broad-based comments about "situated learning" are important. Psychological theories of education have largely dominated the ways of thinking about education and pedagogy. Learning theory has focused on the individual's internal psychological processes. However, Lave's theory of *situated learning* explores the relationship between learning and the social environment (situation) where it happens. Lave states, "To the extent that being human is a relational matter, generated in social living, historically, in social formations whose participants engage with each other as a condition and precondition for their existence, theories that conceive of learning as a special universal mental process impoverish and misrecognize it."[340] People most naturally and effectively learn from each other, and this happens best within communities of people who are bound together.

One of the dynamics leading to our Secular Age, shaped by disenchantment and excarnation, according to Taylor, was the Enlightenment turn to an epistemological framework built upon propositional knowledge. One of the downfalls of the evangelical church has been the emphasis on concrete "propositional truth statements" embraced as absolutes applying to all people in all places. According to Lave, learning takes place in the context in which it is applied, where learning and knowledge are socially constructed. She describes apprenticeships as situated

[340] Jean Lave, "Teaching, as Learning, in Practice," *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 3, no. 3 (1996): 149.

learning. In Christianity, the word disciple carries the idea of being apprenticed to our Lord Jesus Christ. Becoming disciples involves a group of people learning together and living in the way of Jesus. "And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus…."[341] A community of Christian practice is a group of people who respond to Jesus's invitation to, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."[342]

Lave describes *communities of practice* as a group of people with a common passion who come together around that passion to learn more about the thing they love and encourage each other to practice their love for the thing they love with increasing devotion. For Lave, that could be the Chess Club, Skateboarding Club, a Surfing Community, or any other thing that people become passionate about. For presence-centered communities of Christian practice, the passion is following God in the way of Jesus Christ and allegiance to God's kingdom.

Pedagogy of Jesus

Situated learning describes the pedagogy of Jesus with his disciples. Jesus called disciples by saying, "Follow me." They learned what it meant to follow God in the way of Jesus as they lived life with Christ on a day-today, event-by-event basis. Jesus taught his disciples in real time. Being his disciple didn't require that they pass a test to confirm they had enough orthodox information firmly planted in their brains. Peter was a great example of someone who was accepted by Jesus, was following Jesus wherever he went, and yet hadn't figured out who Jesus actually was. He didn't have his theology and doctrine even close to being figured out. Jesus seemed to be fine with this reality because Peter was learning with everyone else following him along the way. Matthew's Gospel tells us:

[341] Col. 3:17.
[342] Matt. 11:29-30.

> "Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven."[343]

There were a lot of opinions floating around about who Jesus really was. Jesus wanted to know who is disciples thought he was. Finally, Peter declares, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." Jesus acknowledges that this reality had not been revealed to Peter by "flesh and blood." Jesus was saying that he, being flesh and blood, had not revealed his divinity to Peter. Nor, had it come to him through his own human understanding.

Peter's declaration that Jesus Christ was Messiah, Son of the Living God, came from God to Peter in the midst of Peter's life lived in the presence of Jesus. By the time this incident took place in Caesarea Philippi, the disciples had been with Jesus for approximately eighteen months. A year and a half, traveling with Jesus and being with Jesus, before Peter's declaration and proclamation that Jesus is LORD. It seems like Jesus, as rabbi, teacher was more interested in being in community with Peter, allowing him time and space to learn along the way. Jesus taught his disciples through the experiences they shared, both good and bad, in concrete, shared life together in community with one another. This way of learning and being formed spiritually happens in community and is the normative pattern of God's work among people gathered together, primarily as a church, but also a spiritual community or a ministry organization.

Youthfront as an Example of Presence-Centered, Situated Learning

As the Youthfront community sought to be presence-centered by leaning into situated learning and seeking to learn through the pedagogical approach that Jesus embraced, we became increasingly disinterested in developing curriculum to do to young people. The paradigm shift

[343] Matt. 16:13-17.

for us was to decide what it meant for the Youthfront staff community to become a community of Christian practice doing the things that we believed shaped our own spiritual formation. This presence-centered spirituality would inform our way of life and would be something that we invited those we ministered with to enter in with us in shared concrete ways of living and loving. We developed a communal rhythm of life[344] that formed us spiritually and this became our curriculum. Most Christian organizations and churches are led by people who want those with whom they minister to become people of prayer and people who serve God in meaningful ways. Unfortunately, too many of those who are leading aren't really practicing their own faith in ways they expect others to. Ask the average church staff what their practice of prayer is together and you often get a confused or anemic response.

We must minister out of the fullness of our own lives of intimacy with Christ. Jesus did not depart for periods of time away from his disciples, as recorded in the Gospels, to organize his teaching plan and generate a curriculum. It's hard to imagine Jesus using that time to brainstorm, "I think I will lead my disciples by that vineyard, winepress, sower in the field, sheepfold, lilies in the field, etc. so that I can teach them a lesson and help them gain a spiritual truth." No, those parables, metaphors and physical object lessons came in real time. Lohfink writes, "For the people of God to exist as a community, its social order has to be put into practice… it would be a catastrophic mistake to merely listen to the word of Jesus. His word has to be *done*."[345] Jesus wasn't creating content and brainstorming program events in those times of solitude; he was seeking the face of God, praying, and nurturing his relationship with the Father. Jesus was

[344] For a more detailed explanation of what a typical week looks like within the Youthfront Rhythm of Life see Appendix B.

[345] Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 58.

shepherding a community of practice who were being shaped to live wholeheartedly for God and God's kingdom.

Presence-Centered Community in the Midst of Political and Social Upheaval

In the midst of a contentious religious nationalistic environment in which we find ourselves, it is essential to lean into our localized communities of Christian practice, encouraging each other to live a presence-centered life with each other for the sake of the world. Our posture must be faithfulness and intentionality toward building and living a life caught up in unforced rhythms of life, seeking the good life centered on Jesus and the community of our Triune God. Learning to live presence-centered in a community of Christian practice is desperately needed in the Secular Age we are living in, and this time of great political and cultural dissonance we are experiencing in our country. A community of Christian practice, according to Lohfink, is a *contrast-society,* which is "a community which forms its own sphere of life, a community in which one lives in a different way and treats others in a different way than is usual elsewhere in the world."[346] This kind of witness—the witness of a contrast-society living abundantly for Jesus Christ in the midst of social and political upheaval—is the faithful response to the gospel the world needs to see.

Taylor describes the unfolding of the *Age of Mobilization* (19th and 20th centuries) emerging from the *Ancien Regime* (5th to late 15th centuries), in which the religious identity was bound to political identity resting with the King as the ultimate representative of God. In the *Age of Mobilization,* the political system is no longer viewed as a divine order, but was now dependent on human societies to form political systems that were congruent with God's laws. The formation of the United States of America is a prime example of the dynamics of the *Age of Mobilization* built on "We, the people" who embraced "self-evident truth" and had the right to

[346] Ibid., 56.

"life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Instead of the divine right of the King (*Ancien Regime),* in the *Age of Mobilization* it was about the divine right of the people to form a more just order of government. Taylor believes that the many deists that shaped the founding documents of the USA were after what clearly has become a civil religious ideology. And a civil religious, nationalistic ideology is far from God's kingdom. We see a radicalization of this idea that "God birthed the USA" at play in the toxicity of our current political conflicts. Taylor writes, "The background assumption of the Deist standpoint involves disintricating the issue of religious truth from participation in a certain community practice of religious life, into which facets of prayer, faith, hope are woven.[347] The crises many evangelical and mainline church leaders are overwhelmingly anxious about is losing emerging generations from church participation. But this anxiety is often more about political agendas than kingdom of God agendas. The best apologetic against this is a faithful and generous community living out the good news of Jesus, which is radically different from current political party agendas.

Considering the state of the church within North American culture, Stanley Hauerwas declares, "the mainstream church in America, is consumed by a culture of consumption. Americans increasingly discover they have no good reason for 'going to church.' The ever-decreasing number of Christians has led some church leaders to think our primary job is to find ways to increase church membership."[348] Unfortunately, most of the strategies involve pragmatic attempts to try harder doing the very things that have missed the mark of a robust spirituality of life lived in the way of Jesus Christ. Taylor goes on to say, "…attempts to 'prove' the existence of God, has to be understood as deployed with the horizon of such a common life, in this case,

[347] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 293.

[348] Stanley Hauerwas, "The Good Life: If Liberalism Failed to Deliver it, What Can?" *Plough*, October 13, 2021, https://www.plough.com/en/topics/life/work/the-good-life-hauerwas.

Christian."[349] Taylor states the best way to prove the existence of God is the witness of a community of Christian practice. Being presence-centered in our community of Christian practice moves us to be present to the moment, present to others with our full attention, present to the work of Christ among us and the world around us. This is the witness of Christianity desperately needed in the Secular Age.

Presence-Centered With and For One Another

Presence-centered communities of Christian practice seek to order their lives to embrace the journey of life together. Lohfink writes, "Jesus' intention of forming a reconciled society out of the fractured and diseased people of God was continued in the Pauline mission communities in the togetherness of the Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, man and woman."[350] Togetherness is described in the reciprocal pronoun "one another" (*allélón*), which is how persons in Christian communities of practice are to behave toward and love each other.[351]

Trying to live presence-centered in the Secular Age as an individual is not possible. We need a community of others striving to live life together. Reed, in her book *Quest for Spiritual Community* writes:

> Learning to live an undivided life is a central component of the life-long process of spiritual formation. We cannot possibly live the undivided life alone. We need others who join with us in welcoming the Spirit to construct a sacred space. Spaces crafted to welcome the soul and provide support for the inner journey are relatively rare. This

[349] Ibid.

[350] Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 99.

[351] Ibid., 99. Lohfink lists these examples of how we *allélón*, treat *one another* in community. Live in harmony with one another (Rom. 12:16); Admonish one another (Rom. 15:14); Wait for one another (1 Cor. 11:33); Have the same care for one another (1 Cor. 12:25); be servants of one another (Gal. 5:13); bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2); comfort one another (1 Thess. 5:11); build up one another (1 Thess. 5:11); be at peace with one another (1 Thess. 5:13); do good to one another (1 Thess. 5:15); be subject to one another (Eph. 5:21); forgive one another (Col. 3:13); confess your sins to one another (James 5:16); pray for one another (James 5:16); love one another from the heart (1 Pet. 1:22); be hospitable to one another (1 Pet. 4:9).

> sacred space is generated by a "circle of trust" that opens the door to the elusive soul and helps it recognize deforming influences that cause it to hide behind the false self.[352]

Generous living and ministry with one another and neighbors encountered along the way is the kind of witness that the broader culture has a hard time criticizing, especially when good works on behalf of the common good for all people emerge from the presence-centered community.

Together, people can learn to see and experience the astonishing ways God is at work all around us and come to awareness that our world, in so many ways, is filled with God's presence and is actually quite enchanted. Together, participants take up a vision of God's inbreaking kingdom that moves us to increasingly view the reality that all of life is becoming sacred to us. Thus, a community moves from the few sacraments they practice to a perspective that all of life and creation is becoming sacramental.[353] This is part of Jesus promise to bring life to the full.

In Lohfink's book, *Jesus and Community,* he describes communities of faith in Jesus Christ as no longer permitting relationships of control and domination. He writes, "Patriarchal domination is no longer permissible in the new family, but only motherliness, fraternity and childlikeness before God the Father."[354] A community of Christian practice is called to be "a community which forms its own sphere of life, a community in which one lives in a different way and treats others in a different way than is usual elsewhere in the world."[355] This witness as a *contrast-society* in Christ is the greatest proclamation we can make in our world today and is evidenced by generosity, compassion, mercy, justice, humility, and most of all love. A presence-centered community cannot ignore the path of finding meaningful ways to address justice and must work to undo injustice. Sheldrake writes:

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[352] Reed, *Quest for Spiritual Community,* 173.

[353] Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 39. Smith points out "the Reformers' rejection of sacramentalism is the beginning of naturalism, or it at least opens the door to its possibility. It is also the beginning of a certain evacuation of the sacred as a *presence* in the world."

[354] Ibid., 49.

[355] Ibid., 56.

> Human beings are not able to find true compassion, nor create structures of deep transformation, without entering into Jesus' own compassion. Only contemplative-mystical practice, within a context of social action, is capable of bringing about the change of heart necessary for a lasting solidarity—particularly one that embraces the oppressor as well as the oppressed.[356]

We have much to learn from communities of Christian practices throughout church history. We gather insight and instruction from the Gospels and Epistles on what it takes to nurture and maintain Christian community and what it means to follow the instruction from the prophet Micah that God desires us "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God."[357]

[356] Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, 138.
[357] Mic. 6:8.

CHAPTER 8:
THE ART OF PRESENCE-CENTERED SPIRITUALITY
A POSTURE TOWARD PLACE AND TIME

Presence-centered spirituality and ministry is not created, nor dependent on pragmatic formulas and programs, nor does it come out of an individualist pietism, but is nurtured by a spiritual rhythm of life and informed by a theological turn with a posture of seeking God's presence at the intersection of human and divine action. Presence-centered spirituality is the pursuit of a full life with Jesus Christ who brings resonance into our lives with others, God, and creation. Presence-centered spirituality must be nurtured in community with others.

So, what is the role of pastors, ministry leaders, and others who desire to live presence-centered with God and others? The passion and action required for nurturing a presence-centered environment for communities of Christian practice to flourish is more of an art than a science or strategy. The metaphor of a *curator* is helpful because a curator's role is to display in meaningful ways the art of the artist. The etymology of the word *curate* is Medieval Latin, as a noun the definition is "spiritual guide, ecclesiastic responsibility for the spiritual welfare of those in one's care, one responsible for the care (of souls)." As a verb, the word *curate* means, "be in charge of, manage" a museum, gallery, art exhibit, etc."[358] The ultimate artist is Jesus, fully divine, fully human. A curator focuses on the architecture of the environment, allowing the art of the artist to be displayed in the most inspirational and expressive ways. A label of curator is used broadly today to describe one who is actively involved in producing meaning. Curating communities of Christian practice involves helping people flourish as they lean into what it means to become fully alive human beings.

[358] "Curate," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed November 5, 2021, https://www.etymonline.com/word/curate.

Presence-centered spirituality requires the work of nurturing an environment for a community to engage in Christian practice together for human flourishing and the good of the world. This work and ministry effort is more descriptive of an art form than a science. It is certainly more fluid and organic than pragmatic programs and methodologies. This is true because it is dependent on the Spirit of Christ animating and breathing life into a curator's artistic endeavors to live life to the full and collaborate with God's mission. Presence-centeredness is dependent on orienting people's lives, ministry and relationships with God, others, and all of God's creation in a way that seeks the leading of Christ's spirit, and an awareness of transcendent and immanent encounters with God.

Curating presence-centered environments requires a palette[359] full of thoughtful ways to practice the presence of God in life and community. The artistic palette a presence-centered curator develops is for the pursuit of seeking to live in the way of the Artist of the entire cosmos and is filled with those things which uniquely resonate with how they are wired as a person in relation with the Triune God. The palette a curator uses for the practice of presence-centered life develops slow and organically. Rosa writes:

> Contrary to the notion that art is the product of "ability," of trained and practiced technique and corresponding skill, the modern understanding of art, fundamentally rests on the idea that art exceeds the accessibility of skill and technique. Hence the "true" artist is not only a brilliant virtuoso and technician but must also be possessed of the soul or spirit of art itself. And this ensoulment or inspiration can of course always be lost or simply fail to materialize; by no means can it be forcibly acquired through practice.[360]

[359] A palette is a surface containing a variety of colors the artist (painter) uses to create a work of art. The colors can also include a range of textures. Palette can also be used to describe a variety of flavors or foods. For my use of this word, I imagine the one who desires to live a presence-centered spirituality and curate presence-centered communities, developing a creative and artistic rhythm of life filled with practices, postures, and theological imagination to live the good life in Jesus Christ that bears witness to the goodness of God. And this God is a relational God, truly active in the Secular Age, opening up resonance within ourselves, with others, with God's own self, and with all of God's creation.

[360] Rosa, *Resonance*, 281.

Emphasizing the art of curating flourishing presence-centered communities of Christian practice does not ensure that one will become a renowned artist of the presence-centered life.

A great example is the Italian painter from Renaissance period, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. There is little doubt that great artists like Caravaggio receive training to develop their skills and then practice those skills extensively. However, the fact that Caravaggio could create a truly unique and dramatic display of light in his paintings set him apart as a master. In 1990, a miraculous discovery was made in Dublin, Ireland of Caravaggio's painting called *The Taking of Christ.* The painting had been lost for over 200 years. The painting hung in the Jesuit dining room in Dublin for nearly 75 years until it was discovered to be an original painting of Caravaggio. The painting is now on loan to the National Gallery of Ireland in Dublin. The large painting adorns a central wall in the gallery. On both walls leading up to *The Taking of Christ* are other paintings by Caravaggio alongside paintings of Caravaggio's students who tried to learn, through practice and instruction, how to paint in the brilliant manner of their master. The difference between the paintings of the master, Caravaggio, and the paintings of his students are stunning and make the point Rosa stated above. Caravaggio's art is a work, an event of resonance. It's not meant to be explained, only encountered, and it either speaks to you or it doesn't.

Rosa declares, "What we experience as beauty is the expression of the possibility of a resonant relationship to the world, a possible mode of being-in-the-world in which subject and world respond to each other. Beauty denotes a form of relation."[361] Being exposed to beauty does not ensure that a person will have an experience of resonance, but a presence-centered posture can open space for the possibility that a person might be affected in profound ways.

Three Dispositions for the Art of Ministry

[361] Ibid., 285.

Conceptualizing art as a metaphor for a presence-centered life lived well, for engaging and collaborating with God's action in ministry, and for curating a presence-centered community is a fitting metaphor because works of art are oriented toward an event of encounter. Art has a participatory reality in which it happens to us, or it doesn't. Leafblad suggests three dispositions for what he views as essential for the art of ministry: "1) becoming better storytellers, which corresponds with the *who* of ministerial actualism; 2) becoming contemplative environmentalists, which corresponds with the *when* of ministerial actualism; and 3) becoming open to the world, which corresponds to the *where* of ministerial actualism."[362] Describing "ministerial actualism," Leafblad writes:

> An alternative, theological-ministerial logic is constructed in dialogue with Karl Barth's actualism, what the author calls ministerial actualism. The essence of ministerial actualism is that God becomes the subject of ministry via God becoming-present-to-us. The ministerial advent of God in Christ entails a *who, when,* and *where* of ministry, worked out on theological grounds. This logic is thus transformative in that it is decentering, disruptive, and displacing in order that human persons might be reconstituted, returned to, and resituated in the fullness of life.[363]

Leafblad believes approaching ministry in this way makes God the subject of ministry instead of ministry being the subject. When ministry is the subject instead of God, ministry becomes a pragmatic framework based on human action with the benchmark of ministry being good and effective, reduced to whether it works or not. In this way, the definition of good ministry can be controlled by the human minister or ministry.

[362] Leafblad, "Ministry as a Strange Tool," 162-163.
[363] Ibid., ii.

An artist cannot ensure that their creation will move people or themselves based on the techniques they use or the mediums they apply. The reality is that they create art that becomes an event. Someone who beholds the art will either be moved or not. And so, it is for those who curate presence-centered environments for life and ministry. Environments of presence-centeredness can be curated, but whether they produce ministry results or not is dependent on the ultimate Minister and Artist, Jesus Christ. This is what makes patience, faithfulness, and trust essential characteristics in the process of curating a presence-centered environment.

The Art of Storytelling in a Presence-Centered Community

Storytelling is one of the dispositions Leafblad mentions for the *art of ministry* and is essential for curating a presence-centered spirituality and community. Luhrmann stresses that a religion that "enables its followers to sustain their faith frame… need good narratives."[364] Amanda Drury's book, *Saying is Believing*,[365] explores the role of testimony in the spiritual development of adolescents. Drury, in line with Luhrmann's argument for storytelling, discusses the reality that our stories actually serve to talk our way into deeper faith and faith commitments. Storytelling and testimonies not only shape persons, they shape the identity of the community they belong to. In telling stories well, persons actually become the story. A significant part of the story of many Christian communities is the *Apostles Creed*. In Drury's book she gives a brilliant metaphor comparing the historic creeds with practicing the scales in music, which provides a rich foundation for sharing testimonies that are more like singing a song and making concrete lived out music, the music of our lives. Revelation says, "They have conquered him (Satan) him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony…"[366]

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[364] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real*, 25.

[365] Amanda Drury, *Saying Is Believing: The Necessity of Testimony in Adolescent Spiritual Development* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015).

[366] Rev. 12:11.

The stories people in community tell each other and structure along the way are not static but take on a life that works to create community shaped by these unfolding narratives. Those who desire to curate a presence-centered life, ministry, and community must be a consistent but patient and assiduous storyteller over a long period of time. Krista Tippet, interviewing Irish poet and theologian Padraig O'Tuama, read words that he had written about stories:

> These are the kind of things we need for the tired spaces of our world. This is the way we need to move forward in a world that is so interested in being comforted by the damp blanket of bad stories. We need stories of belonging that move us towards each other, not from each other; ways of being human that open up the possibilities of being alive together; ways of navigating our differences that deepen our curiosity, that deepen our friendship, that deepen our capacity to disagree, that deepen the argument of being alive. This is what we need. This is what will save us. This is the work of peace. This is the work of imagination.[367]

People gradually become the stories, good or bad, they tell themselves.

The gospel was originally a storytelling tradition, and the early Christians were storytellers. Living into stories of presence-centered life, community and ministry creates a posture of flexibility and openness to the leading of God's contextualizing a community striving to bear witness of the great good news.

The legendary poet Rainer Maria Rilke, in his *Letters to a Young Poet*, wrote,

> Being an artist means: not numbering and counting, but ripening, like a tree which doesn't force its sap, and stands confidently in the storms of spring, not afraid that afterward summer may not come. It does come. But it comes only to those who are patient, who are there as if eternity lay before them, so unconcernedly silent and vast. I learn it every day of my life, learn it with pain I am grateful for: patience is everything![368]

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[367] Pádraig Ó Tuama, "Belonging Creates and Undoes Us," interview by Krista Tippett, March 2, 2017, https://onbeing.org/programs/padraig-o-tuama-belonging-creates-and-undoes-us/.

[368] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, translated by M. D. Herter Norton (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1934). Quoted in "Daily Dig," *Plough*, October 28, 2021, https://www.plough.com/en/subscriptions/daily-dig/odd/october/daily-dig-for-october-28.

Rilke describes being an artist means not counting and numbering. Countering and numbering is the metrics of church growth pragmatism. The art of curating a presence-centered spirituality for life, ministry and nurturing a community of Christian practice requires patience, or, as Rilke states a posture toward *ripening*. Presence-centered spirituality must embrace a unique posture toward time and place. This involves a rootedness in place and a theologically robust understanding of time.

A Presence-Centered Theology of Place

A robust theology of place is a major foundation of a presence-centered spirituality. Resonance with place, geography, landscape, home, etc., Rosa asserts, "…grows out of the conviction that there is something 'deep within us,' at the root of our existence and thus prior to all socialization and civilization (our inner nature), that is connected with and thus reacts and responds to external nature or *the elements*—beyond our conscious thought and perhaps even our sensations and perceptions."[369] In the Secular Age, very little meaning is attached to place and in Rosa's theory of resonance this lack of connection with place is devastating and responsible for enhancing modes of relationlessness. Because of dynamic stabilization and the priority of capitalism, people must remain unattached to place in order to stay mobile for the sake of economic development.

In his book, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity*, Philip Sheldrake laments the crises of place in Western societies and the resulting lack of rootedness. Sheldrake writes, "We come to know in terms of the particular knowledge of specific places before we know space as a whole or in the abstract. 'Spaces receive their being from locations and not from space.'" Citing Martin Heidegger's essay, "An Ontological Consideration of Place," Sheldrake points out how Heidegger insisted that "place is the house of being. To say that mortals *are* is to

[369] Rosa, *Resonance*, 272.

say that *in dwelling* they persist through spaces by virtue of their stay among things and locations. A 'person' for Heidegger was *Dasein*, or 'being-there.' In other words, to be a person is literally 'to be there,' to be in a particular place."[370]

And to "be there," to be present in the place where you are situated, is an absolute necessity for a resonant experience in all three of Rosa's axes (horizontal, vertical, and diagonal) of resonance.

Rootedness

Our social pattern of constant moving and a lack of rootedness has made it increasingly difficult to nurture environments for faith communities to thrive. Geography—physical place—plays a profound role in the development of human identity. In our mobile culture, it is easy to overlook the importance of being rooted in geographic particularity. In her book, *The Need for Roots*, Simone Weil wrote, "To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define. A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular expectations for the future."[371] Because people are so mobile, we hear less about the importance of place. Sometimes "sacred space" is emphasized as an alternative way of thinking. But the problem with this is that the concept of space is abstract and must be defined by place. It is ***place*** that creates the ***space*** to provide meaning and human identity because place is space where life happens, where history is remembered (re-membered), where relationships form, and where a future unfolds. Sheldrake states, "Place is space that has the capacity to be remembered and to evoke what is most precious."[372] Place is space where human

[370] Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, 7.

[371] Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind*, translated by Arthur Willis (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 40.

[372] Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, 1.

beings can be present in the fullness of their humanity to what is happening in and around them. When human beings are presence-centered, place is where they are present to the present.

Sheldrake wonders if our cultural move toward "de-emphasized place for the sake of values such as mobility, centralization or economic rationalization" has resulted in a "dramatically delocalized world" in which locality has lost its "ontological moorings."[373] In the quest to be mobile, keep options open, and willingness to quickly move onto the next chapter in life by moving to a new neighborhood or city, human beings may be sacrificing something essential in what it means to be human.

Landscapes, the Geography of Human Imagination

By changing churches to something more of their liking, or quickly accepting a new job, resulting in relocation, because they can make more money, are human beings sabotaging a fundamental need for *rootedness in place* in the shaping of human identity? Sheldrake writes,

> Apart from human embodiment the most common experience of place, or being placed, involves familiar landscapes. Any analysis of place inevitably has a subjective element. People learn to be who they are by relating to the foundational landscapes of childhood or to adopted landscapes that became significant because of later events and associations. Familiar landscapes are the geography of human imagination.[374]

Place is connected deeply to our memories. The things human beings remember are things that happened in specific places and therefore become a part of their story, both good and bad. Most people can clearly remember the place they laid eyes, for the first time, on the person who would become their spouse. When people spend time thinking through the many significant memories they have, they quickly realize how connected their memories are to a physical place. Sheldrake adds, "Every person effectively reshapes a place by making his or her story a thread in the meaning of the place and also has come to terms with the many layers of story that already exist

[373] Ibid., 9.
[374] Ibid., 14.

in a given location."[375] Memories animate and story those physical places. Memories and stories make meaning possible. Engaging in presence-centered spirituality informs our behavior, actions, relationships, and practices, which create stories and embed memories into our lives.

Stay Where You're From

To feel like they really "belong," people must feel connected to particular places, places which create space where people are in relationships with one another. To deepen a presence-centered spirituality it is important to consider a life-long commitment to place. A presence-centered spirituality is shaped most deeply for people when they ***stay*** where they're from. If a person has not stayed where they are from, then they should stay where they currently are. If, for a variety of reasons, they can't stay in the place where they are, they should, at least, live like they are staying where they are right now for their entire lifetime. Unfortunately, in the acceleration of a Secular Age, many people do not stay where they are from. But maybe they can catch the vision to become rooted where they presently are. If not, at least they can begin to think and act like they will be at the place they are for the rest of their lives. Why would a person go to the trouble to plant a tree that will take 20 years to come into maturity and provide shade if they know they are leaving that place next year? A robust theology of place provides a reason to plant the tree anyway.

Place, landscape, is important in Scripture. In the Book of Genesis, we read about the dream Jacob had in which a ladder reached from earth into the heavens with angels ascending and descending. The Lord spoke to Jacob and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give it to you and to your offspring… and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth… and all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, '**Surely, the LORD is in this**

[375] Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, 16.

place and I did not know it!'"[376] The event of God arriving to encounter human beings is a presence-centered occasion, and it happens in a particular place.

Incarnation as Rooted in Place and Presence

As Eugene paraphrased so eloquently, "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood."[377] Immanuel, "God with us," the Lord Jesus Christ actually pitching his tent among human beings as one of them. But the incarnation is even more specific and rightly described as the *scandal of particularity*. Jesus, of Nazareth was born at a particular time, to a particular family, to a particular ethnic group, in a particular place, and at a particular time. The incarnation is at the core of developing a proper theology of place. Jesus, who grew up in the Galilee, in a little village called Nazareth, was profoundly shaped by his particular experience, context, and knowledge of place. Jesus's teaching and way of thinking about spirituality, life, and the kingdom of God was deeply connected and narrated by the particularity of his cultural context and physical location. And Jesus never physically traveled beyond an approximate 100-mile radius from his childhood home of Nazareth, except of course, for the flight to Egypt as a child.

It was through stories from local agriculture (wine, olives, harvests, etc.) and cultural experiences (feasts, poverty, wealth, politicians, religion, etc.) that Jesus communicated the gospel and shaped human imagination about the kingdom of God. It is the experiences and specific language that develops within a community situated in a specific place over a long period of time that shapes the identity of that community and the persons in that community. Rosa states, "Social communities become 'communities of resonance' through their shared language."[378] The liturgies, rituals, practices, and rhythms of life for a presence-centered

[376] Gen. 28:13-16; emphasis added.
[377] John 1:14, MSG.
[378] Rosa, *Resonance*, 156.

community forms intentionally and carefully over a long period of time. This way of life doesn't happen quickly but becomes pregnant with deeply embodied meaning over a period of time. Luhrmann writes, "What rituals do is to remind people that gods and spirits matter."[379] These rituals, practices, and liturgies are curated among a specific community of people in proximity with each other, and they open up the possibility in that community of resonance with each other, with God, and the world. The places of community create the space for presence-centered spirituality to flourish. This kind of resonance is not built upon effective programs and ministry innovations but on relationships.

Presence-Centered *Communitas* Happens in Place

Deep, meaningful relationships develop over time and require presence in place with others to form. Robert Hamma writes, "Places shape us spiritually… They mark significant moments in our life stories, they provide a refuge and sanctuary in time of spiritual need, and they serve as gateways to the divine. And day by day, the ordinary places of our lives leave their mark on us. They become part of us, and we become part of them."[380] Sheldrake cites anthropologist Edith Turner's belief that sacred spaces create *communitas*, a "special temporary state in which conventional social and or other distinctions are transcended in a spontaneous sharing of experience."[381] Engaging in ministry together with and on behalf of others in a specific place create deeply meaningful bonds between people.

When a presence-centered community becomes rooted in place, they become stewards of place on behalf of the flourishing of humanity and all creation. Daniel Scheid, a theologian writing about the common good, in his words "the cosmic common good," associates it with a theology of place and rootedness. He writes:

[379] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real*, 17.
[380] Hamma, *Landscapes of the Soul*, 14.
[381] Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, 5.

> The cosmic common good provides a larger moral perspective, but it also exhorts us to "sink our roots deeper" into our native place and to work for the good of our place on Earth… Sinking our roots in our native place on this fertile Earth, but with the larger perspective of the cosmic common good, may we become like the righteous, "like a tree planted near streams of water, that yields its fruit in season," whose "leaves never wither," and that "whatever [we do] prospers" (Psalm 1:3–4).[382]

For Scheid, this kind of rootedness and I-Thou posture toward the uniqueness and sacredness of all creation inspire presence-centered communities to work for the common good of all.[383]

While this way of thinking seems counterintuitive for living in the immanent frame of a Secular Age fueled by exclusive humanism and expressive individualism, it is essential for presence-centered spirituality and life together. Although most people don't have this kind of *sense of place,* Sheldrake cites Fritz Steel's belief that people can develop a *sense of place.* And developing a *sense of place* as presence-centered human beings makes our human experiences richer and fuller. Brueggemann adds to the idea of place as vital when he writes, "Place is space in which important words have been spoken that have established identity, defined vocation, and envisioned destiny. Place is space in which vows have been exchanged, promises have been made, and demands have been issued."[384] Place plays a seminal role in a presence-centered spirituality in the Secular Age. Brueggemann's contends, "Place is indeed a protest against the unpromising pursuit of space. It is a declaration that our humanness cannot be found in escape, detachment, absence of commitment, and undefined freedom."[385] Without this kind of thinking, Rosa's concept of resonance is also void of possibility.

Presence-Centered Displacement

[382] Daniel P. Scheid, *The Cosmic Common Good: Religious Grounds for Ecological Ethics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 181-182.

[383] For three specific examples of the benefits of being rooted in place see Appendix C.

[384] Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 4.

[385] Ibid.

While the incarnation of Jesus Christ and the scandal of particularity resulted in Jesus moving into the neighborhood, becoming rooted in place, the incarnation of Jesus Christ also demanded *displacement*. Jesus Christ had to empty himself and become human, to enter fully into the concrete reality of a specific community of human beings. This move of *kenosis*, Christ's self-emptying on behalf of humanity, is essential for God's work of salvation. We read in Philippians 2 that God displaces Godself in Jesus Christ to enter the human condition becoming *enfleshed* as a human being. This movement of "kenosis" is one of the great and beautiful mysteries of God for humans to contemplate. As imitators of Christ, human beings are called to empty themselves out for the sake of others. Participation with Christ as minister who comes to people in their brokenness and pain allows the human minister to embrace the *kenotic* movement of emptying themselves out in presence-sharing[386] with the other. These moments and experiences of ministry are often experiences of profound resonance. But there is another aspect of *displacement* to be considered in a presence-centered spirituality.

While rootedness and staying in place is a vital part of presence-centered spirituality, this must be connected to intentional times of physical displacement. Being rooted in place for a lifetime could easily lead to the mindset that the culture of that place, where the person lives, is the way the rest of the world also lives. This could lead to a very narrow way of thinking about how God is at work in other places around the world. While staying in place, being rooted, is important for presence-centered life, ministry, and spirituality, occasionally it is essential to be intentional about pursuing times and opportunities for displacement from one's familiar place.

[386] Root has written a lot about Dietrich Bonhoeffer's concept of "*Stellvertretung*" or as he translates it, "*place-sharing*." The entering into the other's life, their pain and brokenness to be with them during their darkness and despair. In a conversation with Erik Leafblad, who did his PhD under Root's teaching and advisement, Erik argued that presence-sharing is a better translation of "*Stellvertretung.*"

Pilgrimage as a Practice of Displacement

The concept of pilgrimage emerges in the Old Testament. In fact, Psalms 120 through 134 were written specifically for the purpose of being sung by pilgrims on the way to Jerusalem and the Temple. Jesus, with his family, made it a practice to take pilgrimages to Jerusalem. Pilgrimage played an important role in the life of the early church. Origen (3rd cent.) said that followers of Jesus must walk with passion in the footsteps of Christ, of the Prophets, and of the Apostles. The earliest pilgrimages focused on taking up the "way of the cross of Jesus" (*via cruces*). The destination of the earliest pilgrimages in church history focused predominantly on the places connected to Jesus—Bethlehem, his birthplace, the places Jesus taught and did miracles (Sea of Galilee, Jericho, Bethany), and Jerusalem, the place of crucifixion, burial, resurrection, and ascension. A pilgrimage was for remembering, learning, and worshiping, that one may more passionately and faithfully follow in the way of Jesus.[387]

While pilgrimage in its earliest form was predominately a visit to the Holy Land where Jesus lived in order to walk in his footsteps, over the centuries pilgrimage gradually broadened to journeys to places all over the world. These pilgrimages were intentionally about leaving a familiar place of residence and becoming displaced in a journey to an unknown place. Spiritually, this moved the pilgrim to open up to new ways of understanding themselves, God, and the unknown world. Taylor describes similar dynamics happening within the rites of passages that communities develop in which, "the elders take advantage of this liminal condition to instruct the youth in the deepest lore of the society; as if these things can't be learned except by those who have become receptive through stepping out of their normal coded roles."[388]

[387] Mike King, "Pilgrimages," in *Sacred Life: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Living*, edited by Mike Wonch, 75-83 (Kansas City, MO: Barefoot Ministries, 2008).

[388] Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 50.

Exploring the Holy Spirit's activity throughout the world opens up the pilgrim to a liminal space to discover and realize their myopic view of reality developed in their particular place doesn't tell the whole story.

It is important for human beings who are rooted in place to find opportunities for displacement, especially in the immanent frame of a Secular Age. This doesn't mean that one must pilgrimage to the Holy Land or other familiar Christian pilgrimage sites around the world. Human beings can displace themselves by going to meet people who live in different parts of the city than they do. They can discover diversity in ethnic ways, socio-economic ways, and with different age demographics. These experiences of displacement actually help to deepen connections to a person's own community as they bring new awareness back to their own place and community. The movement of rootedness and pilgrimage (of staying and going) has the potential to nurture in human beings a profound sense of place both from the wonders of the world they encounter along the way and from the normal place where they live and move and have their being.

No doubt, God's Spirit sometimes calls people to leave from the place they are and go to a new place. Abram was called to leave the place he dwelled to go to a land God would show him. Paul experienced a vision to, "Come to Macedonia and help us."[389] Yes, this happens within God's economy, but this should be viewed as the exception, not the norm. The overarching narrative and default of God's economy is to stay, move into the neighborhood, and bear witness to the gospel in that place.

However, a survey through church history makes it relatively clear among those who we point to as saints (in the sense of the people we acknowledge as the best examples of what it means to follow God in the way of Jesus Christ) are people connected to place. Clare of Assisi,

[389] Acts 16:9.

Anselm of Canterbury, Clement of Alexandria, Francis of Assisi, Benedict of Nursia, John of Damascus, Teresa of Avila, Augustine of Hippo, Gregory of Nyssa, Irenaeus of Lyons, and Julian of Norwich, to name just a few, but the list goes on and on and on. In fact, place is so linked to the lives of prominent saints, it raises the question of whether it is even possible to be a "saint," in the manner of an exemplary, without being rooted in place. Would Dietrich Bonhoeffer be so beloved today if he had not returned to his Germany? Bonhoeffer had a profound experience (pilgrimage) embedding for a time in a black church in Harlem, the Abyssinian Baptist Church. This experience changed Bonhoeffer's life and profoundly influenced his theological work and teaching. He witnessed firsthand the ugliness of racism and may have been a big factor in his early recognition and defiance he developed toward the ugliness of Naziism growing in Germany. Ultimately, Bonhoeffer believed that God wanted him to return to his beloved homeland that was being destroyed be Hitler. This cost him his life.

Presence-Centered Time

Along with a counter-cultural view of place as an important component of a presence-centered spirituality, a counter-cultural view of time is equally important. Both Taylor and Rosa examine postures toward time in the Secular Age. Rosa explores how potential for resonance is impacted by how we interact with time. He cites the acceleration of time as one of the biggest characteristics of modernity. Rosa believes that technology and innovation push us to do more and more within the same units of time fueled by the fear that we may be left behind if we don't keep up and the fear of missing out (FOMO). All of this leaves human beings exhausted, trying to imagine a world in which they will have time to be present in, instead of their current bondage to *chronos* time. This is a huge problem because presence-centered spirituality doesn't happen fast. Presence-centeredness happens slowly, organically, over time. It doesn't happen in a

chronos time-fueled dynamic. Presence-centered spirituality is very much connected, realistically to *chronos* time in a rhythm of mundane actions and practices. But presence-centered spirituality longs for transformation that happens in *kairos* time.

A presence-centered spiritual journey requires a theologically rich view of time. Most of the time our lives are governed by the concept of *chronos*. *Chronos* is a Greek word that describes time as ordered, chronological, measured by hours, minutes, and seconds. In our performance-driven culture, we acquiesce to hyper-consumerism as a normative way of functioning and experiencing time. Because *chronos* time is given priority, the by-product is living a reality where people become frenetically enslaved to their appointments, schedules, calendars, and "things to do" lists. And, these *things to do* lists are usually motivated by the desperate hope to acquire the resources to actually enjoy the good life at some point in the future.

Kairos time has to do with *time being ripe*, with the concept of *the fullness of time*, with unhurried opportune moments, when God transforms, when God arrives. And *kairos* cannot be forced through formulaic efforts. Intentionally and carefully following and living in the church calendar with its practices, observations, and liturgy is essential for resisting enslavement to the numbing frenzy of *chronos* demands on our lives. Presence-centered communities embrace the church calendar as a way of reorienting their lives in the rhythms of God at work in the world. From the beautiful mystery of Advent, the festivities of Christmastide and Epiphany, to the spiritual examinations of Lent and celebrations of Eastertide, to the mundane aspects of Ordinary Time, the church calendar shapes the imagination, devotion, ministry, and passion of a presence-centered community.

Presence-centeredness anticipates but patiently waits for God's presence to break into the confinement of *chronos* time in an event of *kairos* time. While an encounter with God's presence

cannot be summoned at will, Christians can—through practices engaged with deep anticipation —long for it, wait for it, and enact and imagine it liturgically. While spiritual practices are critical for worship and adoration of God, and for the shaping and forming of followers of Jesus Christ, they have no efficacy in conjuring up an encounter with God's presence. In this life, bound by time, as Earle writes, "God is both our destination and our path, and God is both our companion and our guide. Celtic spirituality affirms the truth of both, and encourages us to remember that there is no place, no time, where God is not present. God will also greet us at the end of our journey."[390] In a sense, we are truly living in time as the already/not yet.

Sabbath and Time

One of the practices that should be incorporated into a holistic presence-centered rhythm of life is Sabbath rest. Keeping the Sabbath is one of the ten commandments. "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy… For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it."[391] Sabbath rest became one of the most distinguishing practices of Judaism reaching even into our present time. Stephanie Paulsell musing about the importance of the bodily practice and rhythm of sabbath rest writes:

> God's own work is punctuated by contemplative moments of rest, in which God gazes upon what God has made and sees that it is good. God brings light into being; God pauses to see that it is good. God creates the flowering earth; God pauses to see that it is good. God's work is not uninterrupted labor, continuous exertion. God's way of work is unrushed, thoughtful, appreciative of what is emerging. Every exertion draws strength from a profound desire for more life.[392]

[390] Mary C. Earle, *Celtic Christian Spirituality: Essential Writings, with Introduction and Commentary* (London: SPCK, 2012), 114.

[391] Exod. 20:8, 11.

[392] Stephanie Paulsell, *Honoring the Body: Meditations on a Christian Practice* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 131.

God is present to creation, not hurried or rushed. God does not depend on *dynamic stabilization* for the producing of good things and the giving of good gifts. God desires that we live in rhythms of life that nurtures wholeness, with time to laugh, work, celebrate, minister, love, and be human to the core of our being.

We must resist living in bondage to *chronos* time. Israel had been slaves in Egypt, but God was leading them to freedom and in doing this gave them instructions to practice Sabbath rest. There is a well-known saying about Sabbath: "More important than the Jews keeping Sabbath, is that the Sabbath has kept the Jews." Keeping the Sabbath has preserved the Jewish people for thousands of years. Sabbath rest reorients human beings to live more fully in the sacredness of time.

Sabbath rest helps recalibrate lives toward a more spiritual way of living in time. The practice of Sabbath rest is a way to counteract a crazy fast-paced life of consumerism and the disease of time famine. It helps followers of Jesus enter into a rhythm of life that celebrates the goodness and richness of life in God. Sabbath rest should include not only physical and spiritual rest but also emotional rest. The concept of Sabbath rest is an act of rebellion to the enslavement of the Secular Age and the immanent frame. Sabbath rest also opens up space for resonance with yourself, your loved ones, with others, with God, and God's creation. Engaging in Sabbath rest is an act of humility and worship that opens people up to a way of life that embraces trust in God's economy of the good life.

The Eucharist and Time

The Eucharist is a sacrament that beautifully incorporates a proper presence-centered view of time and place. The bread and wine are received in a specific place at a present time

(*chronos*) within a particular Christian community. At the same time, a *kairos* reality emerges, opening up space in that particular place for a resonant encounter with the living Jesus Christ. This encounter is beyond time and place as both a historic event transforming in the present moment and a future event of transformation opening up God's future to the participants. Sheldrake exploring Augustine's view of time, declares that Augustine, "possessed a deep sense that the world of places and *each and every moment* was equally filled with God's presence and activity."[393] While an experiential encounter with God is embraced as a mystical event of *kairos*, it is important to ask for, and nurture, eyes to see God's presence and ears to hear the Spirit's speaking even along the mundane path of *chronos* time.

Presence-Centered Rhythms of Life and Time

Christian practices incorporated into a communal, presence-centered rhythm of life help us think about and imagine human interaction with time in spiritual ways. Root writes, "We get back to some sense of the sacred in time not when we become timeless but when we live and move as persons in relation."[394] Practicing presence-centered spirituality together orients us to live the good life Jesus promises to bring even into the immanent frame of a Secular Age. In the Secular Age, time is stripped of all sense of sacramentality. Living intentionally in the present, with a mindful awareness that God's presence can be observed and experienced within a person, in others, and throughout God's creation, is a pushback on what Rosa calls alienation, or a mode of relationlessnes. Technology, innovation, apps, and social media—the pseudo-religious objects of the Secular Age—make the promise of more time, more efficiency with time, and more freedom to be a truly authentic person; but the reality leads more often to time-famine and alienation, personally and with others.

[393] Sheldrake, *Space for the Sacred*, 36.
[394] Root, *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, 256.

Rowan Williams, thinking about the efficacy of the Benedictine Rule of Life for shaping the life of the community and their interaction with time, writes, "It speaks to people of the extraordinary power of *stability*—not a static and frozen style of life, but a solid commitment to accompany one another in the search for a way to live honestly and constructively together in the presence of God."[395] Williams believes an essential part of learning to live unselfishly together is the acquisition of tools, practices that help us pay attention (be present) to each other and God. This takes time, the kind of time Silicon Valley and social media doesn't operate in. The time and rootedness in place, what Williams calls stability, creates the possibility that we "learn to sit still with whatever company arrives, in the confidence that God in Christ sits still with us; and the practice of this sitting still slowly permits us to stay in one place long enough for us to open up to God's gift in whatever is encountered."[396] Williams sums up the Benedictine Rule as developing the discipline to be where you are. Wherever (place) or whenever (time) you are present or presence-centered… time and place are with you. Williams also makes the assertion that the monastic paradigm (community of Christian practice) embraces the counter-cultural idea that "all of time can be sanctified – that is, that the time we may instinctively consider to be unproductive, waiting or routine activity, is indispensable to our growth into Christian and human maturity."[397]

Developing the discipline to be where you are, fully awake and aware, is the move of being presence-centered in which the beauty of life and all that it entails is embraced as becoming increasingly sacramental as we lean into God's future Shalom. Until then, presence-centered spirituality resounds with a holistic rhythm of life and practices creating the space to regularly sit at the feet of Jesus in a posture of learning and adoration, making real the tangible

[395] Williams, *The Way of St. Benedict*, 4.
[396] Ibid., 6.
[397] Ibid., 47.

presence of God and moving people into the imitation of God and participation in God's divine nature. This is the good life. Presence-centered spirituality should be infused with joy, a joyfulness discovered, experienced, and celebrated in community, fashioned by the beautiful unforced rhythms of daily life.

Appendix A:
Some Prayers of the Church

Christ as a light, illumine and guide me. Christ as a shield, overshadow me.

Christ under me; Christ over me; Christ beside me on my left and my right.

This day be within and without me, lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.

Be in the heart of each to whom I speak; in the mouth of each who speaks unto me.

This day be within and without me, lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.

Christ as a light; Christ as a shield; Christ beside me on my left and my right.

Lord, you have always given bread for the coming day; and though I am poor; today I believe.

Lord, you have always given strength for the coming day; and though I am weak, today I believe.

Lord, you have always given peace for the coming day; and though of anxious heart,

today I believe.

Lord, you have always kept me safe in trials; and now, tried as I am, today I believe.

Lord, you have always marked the road for the coming day; and though it may be hidden,

today I believe.

Lord, you have always lightened this darkness of mine; and though the night is here,

today I believe.

Lord, you have always spoken when time was ripe; and though you be silent now,

today I believe.

Christ be with me, Christ within me, Christ behind me, Christ before me,

Christ beside me, Christ to win me, Christ to comfort and restore me.

Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,

Christ in hearts of all that love me, Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

I bind unto myself the Name, the strong Name of the Trinity by invocation of the same, the Three-in-One and One-in-Three, by Whom all nature hath creation, Eternal Father, Spirit, Word. Praise to the Lord of my salvation, salvation is of Christ the Lord."

O Lamb of God, that takes away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us

O Lamb of God, that takes away the sins of the world, have mercy upon us

O Lamb of God, that takes away the sins of the world, grant us Thy peace

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Loving God, we offer these prayers, joining our voices to the great chorus of those who sing your praise and depend on you alone. We long for that day when all your children will live in your peace and praise your name. Until that day, give us sturdy patience and enduring hope, rooted only in Jesus, in whose name we pray, Amen.

Lord God, almighty and everlasting Father, You have brought us in safety to this new day; Preserve us with Your mighty power, that we may not fall into sin, nor be overcome by adversity; and in all we do direct us to the fulfilling of Your purpose, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Teach us, dear Lord, to number our days; that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.
Oh, satisfy us early with Thy mercy, that we may rejoice and be glad all of our days.
And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us; and establish Thou the work of our hands.
And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us; and establish Thou the work of our hands, dear Lord.

Ever-faithful God, you have knit together as one body in Christ those who have been your people in all times and places. Keep us in communion with all your saints, following their example of faith and life, until that day when all your saints will dwell together in the joy of your eternal kingdom, Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

God be in our head and in our understanding. God be in our eyes and in our looking.
God be in our mouth and in our speaking. God be in our heart and in our thinking.
God be at our end and at our departing.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let us sow love;

where there is injury, pardon;

where there is discord, union;

where there is doubt, faith;

where there is despair, hope;

where there is darkness, light;

where there is sadness, joy.

Grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;

to be understood as to understand;

to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;

and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Appendix B:
An Example of a Communal Rhythm of Life:
Youthfront's Rhythm of Life

Every Monday morning, at the start of the new week, the Youthfront staff gathers together. This is called "Sitdown." Every Sitdown starts with a 30-to-40-minute time for spiritual formation featuring a variety of things like introducing a prayer practice, breaking into small groups, watching a video, sharing testimonies, reading a book together, playing games together, taking walks if the weather is nice, journaling, etc. Sitdown concludes with a version of the Examen, taking time to share highlights and good news from the previous week, followed by sharing what's on the horizon for the upcoming week. Sitdown ends with prayer.

Every day at 9:00am the Youthfront staff gathers for morning prayer. Morning prayer features a variety of themes often based on the church calendar or other cultural events. Black History Month featured great black leaders telling their stories followed by prayer using *BlackLiturgies*[398] on Instagram. During National Women's Month, the focus was on great women of faith from all parts of church history telling their stories and celebrating their lives. Two months of morning prayer focused on homelessness. Each day featured a photo and the story of a specific homeless person. Praying for receptivity and compassion toward the homeless, the staff acknowledged that Jesus had no home during his public ministry. The pictures of the homeless people were taken by Leah Denbok, teenager, and featured in her book titled *Nowhere to Call Home, Volume Two*.[399] The stories of these men and woman are deeply moving. Morning prayer always includes a reading of Psalms from the Lectionary. Space is set aside for lament and confession that sometimes it doesn't seem that God is merely hidden but actually absent.

[398] https://www.instagram.com/blackliturgies/?hl=en

[399] Leah Denbok and Tim Denbok, *Nowhere to Call Home: Photographs and Stories of People Experiencing Homelessness, Volume Two* (Victoria, BC: FriesenPress, 2018).

At 11:40 am every day, the bells ring throughout the Youthfront offices calling for the staff to assemble for midday prayer. Midday prayer is in line with traditional fixed hour prayer liturgy, featuring the classic prayers of the church from the Book of Common Prayer, Celtic Prayer Books, Prayers from the Northumbria Community[400] and other sources. Scripture songs, written by a staff member, are sung. The daily Gospel reading from the Lectionary is read followed by a time for silence and then a time for open prayer. These prayers are prayed not only for the community of Youthfront staff, but for friends, donors, and young people in the broader Youthfront community; churches Youthfront partners with and their pastors; for events happening around the world; plus personal and community needs. Youthfront staff pray on behalf of our city, country, and the whole world. Praying the Prayers of the Church as a presence-centered community unites Youthfront staff with the whole body of Christ as we seek to express not only our own prayer but the prayer of the whole church, with awareness of the presence of Christ in us and among us.[401]

Every day, Youthfront staff gather to eat lunch together in community. This is a family table where stories are told. There is much laughter. There is dialogue and debate. Movies, shows, and books are discussed. Sports and news are discussed. The staff share stories about their families and experiences. Birthdays are remembered. Staff know that it is alright to linger at the table because this kind of table fellowship is essential for community.

At the start of Youthfront meetings throughout the week, an effort is made to begin with a short time of centering prayer, maybe reading a Scripture, taking some silence or a minute to take some deep breaths. Several Youthfront teams commit to making space consistently for

[400] https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/

[401] See Appendix A for examples of some of the more well-known Prayers of the Church.

theological reflection. Ongoing theological reflection is considered essential for the practice of ministry.

Periodically, the Youthfront staff participate in spiritual formation days to grow and learn. These days have included a visit to the Conception Abbey to attend their offices of prayer and learn about the Rule of Life of the Benedictine community that reside there. A resident Monk talked to the staff about the Benedictine way and answered questions. A visit to an Orthodox Church led to learning about their liturgy and way of life and the practices of their faith. Visiting and serving together at a Catholic Worker's Home ministering to the homeless and sex workers was a profound experience. The Youthfront staff have participated in Seder Meals. Visiting prisons and a penitentiary to partner with prisoners and work together to package meals for those suffering from food insecurity was a beautiful experience. Visiting the Federal Reserve Bank in Kansas City featured a spirited discussion about monetary policy with an official of the bank. Wandering around the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art for a time of *visio divina* with the art was a new experience for many. The staff have gone to the theater together to watch a film about racism followed by dialogue with a Black leader from our city. All of these times are for the purpose of being shaped together as a presence-centered community of Christian practice.

Time is set aside for celebration with parties and special events. Time taken to recognize staff member milestones, such as years served or special achievements, are an important part of community life. During those times, lots of stories are told to illustrate why these persons are so loved. Human beings cannot live meaningful lives without meaningful stories. Storytelling is an essential element in a presence-centered community of Christian practice.

Play is another aspect of the Youthfront communal rhythm of life. Play is important because play is something human beings were created to do. The Bible is mostly silent

concerning an explicit position on the issue of play. However, the Scriptures mention play, dance, creativity, and celebration often. Eugene Peterson, in his book *Working the Angles*, references Johann Huizinga's argument that culture is healthy only when it is at play.[402] Adults who still make time to intentionally play have discovered an important aspect of living and what it means to be a human being. It is wonderful to watch children play, but sad when they grow up thinking play is a childish thing to do. How delightful it is to see an elderly person who still enjoys and makes time to play. At least once a month the Youthfront staff play a game together as a community, as a part of our spiritual formation. This goes a long way toward creating a presence-centeredness with each other.

Every Christian community that desires to live in presence-centeredness with each other must go through a process of determining a rhythm of life that shapes and forms the spirituality of their communal life together.

[402] Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles: The Shape of Pastoral Integrity* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1987), 79.

Appendix C:
Examples of Rootedness in Place

Antoni Gaudi and the Basilica de la Sagrada Familia

Barcelona, Spain is filled with architectural masterpieces created by Antoni Gaudi. Gaudi was a Catalan Spanish architect who lived from 1852 to 1926. His architectural work was driven by his passion for nature and his Christian faith. In fact, he's often referred to as “God's architect.” His most famous work, Basilica de la Sagrada Familia, is absolutely one of the most beautiful, breathtaking and God-glorifying manmade structures ever built. It dominates the landscape of Barcelona. The Basilica is actually unfinished. Construction began in 1882 with the current completion date set for 2026. Generations of Spanish families have worked on Gaudi’s magnum opus. Antoni Gaudi reached a point (in 1911) in the prime of his productive life in which he ceased all other projects except for his work on La Sagrada Familia. In fact, Gaudi became so rooted in place that he moved into a small room in the basement of the Cathedral so that he could focus on this project.

On the façade of the church are hundreds of statues and sculptures depicting the birth, life, and passion of Jesus Christ. In addition, the structure is adorned with spires, towers, porticos, decorative columns, and arches, ornamented with symbols, geometric designs, carved fruits and vegetation, and decorative words from church liturgy. The architectural features are astonishing. The sacred space created by La Sagrada Familia is otherworldly. The careful design and construction of this place has created a space where contemplation, prayer, and worship are enhanced. Psalm 90 declares, “Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God. You turn people back to dust, saying, ‘Return to dust, you mortals.’ A thousand years in your sight are like a day that has just gone by, or like a watch in

the night."[403] The Psalmist reminds us that we, human beings, are but dust that has been shaped and given life by God who is our dwelling place. Our days are numbered. Our lifetimes are but fleeting moments in the scope of God's eternality. But we will be glad when we collaborate with God's work. With this sense of rootedness, of presence-centeredness, we open ourselves to be used by God and we join in the prayer of the Psalmist, "May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us; establish the work of our hands for us—yes, establish the work of our hands."[404] Being rooted in place enables us to cooperate with God and contribute to something that surpasses our own lifetimes.

Gaudi had worked on La Sagrada Familia for 43 years when he tragically died after being hit by a trolley. Well before his death, Gaudi was aware that he would never complete the basilica's construction. In fact, it was less than 25 percent complete when Gaudi died. La Sagrada Familia was consecrated as a minor basilica by Pope Benedict XVI on November 7, 2010. The goal for completion of the basilica was 2026, which would be the hundredth anniversary of Gaudi's death, but that is now being pushed back because of the pandemic. Even though Gaudi knew he would not see the completion of his masterpiece, he worked diligently to lay out specific details for every phase of the construction. The vision demonstrated by Gaudi for the construction of La Sagrada Familia, which he wouldn't even see completed in his lifetime, is astounding. Gaudi collaborated with God to create a sacred space and environment that wouldn't exist unless it was situated in geographic particularity, a place created by human hands but transcending the bounds of Gaudi's own life. They are still using Gaudi's plans today as they continue construction.

[403] Ps. 90:1-4.
[404] Ps. 90:17.

The Cathedral of St. John the Divine

The Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City was conceptualized in 1828, but it wouldn't be until 1892 that ground was broken and construction began. Presently, the cathedral is only two-thirds complete. While touring St. John the Divine, I listened to the story of one of the master stonemasons who was chipping away and carving a massive stone for the cathedral. He talked about his job with joy and the need to resurrect the skill of stone masonry for the construction of the cathedral. Someone from our group asked him how long it would take for him to complete the stone he was working on. With a slightly sad expression he replied, "I won't finish this stone because I'm retiring." Just as a ripple of sadness worked its way through our group, he smiled widely and said, "Ahh, but my son will finish this stone I've been working on. He has been an apprentice but now is taking over." The proper pride of a master craftsman acknowledging that the work he was doing was inspiring. That the work he had been doing for so many years and would surpass his timeframe to complete does not make sense to a consumeristic world that wants results now. The stonemason's exuberance that his son would take his chisel to continue his work was beautiful. Establish the work of our hands, dear Lord.

Claude Monet and Giverny

Another powerful example of the importance of being rooted in place is the story of artist Claude Monet (1840 – 1926). Monet was a leading influence on French impressionist painting. His paintings focused on expressing his perceptions of what he saw, instead of painting in a style that everyone would identify as realistic. His unique style was very misunderstood at first. In order to try and make a living off of his art, he felt compelled to constantly move in hopes of finding a market for his work. For years, Monet was barely able to eke out a living. Growing tired of his hustle he decided to settle down. In May of 1883, Monet rented a large house and two

acres near Giverny, France, 50 miles Northwest of Paris. In 1890, he bought the house and land and was well on his way to curating the primary subject of his most famous paintings done during the last 35 years of his life. As Monet's wealth grew, he more fully developed his garden at Giverny, with its now famous water lilies, pond, and Japanese bridge. The curated grounds provided many items to paint. He continued to serve as curator of his gardens even though his staff grew to include seven full-time gardeners. He gave very specific instructions to his gardeners every day on developing and caring for the grounds. The fruit of the Gardens in Giverny resulted in the some of the most beloved art in the world and has made Monet the most known artist in the world. If Monet had continued the early pattern of constantly moving around, if he had not rooted himself in Giverny, painstakingly nurturing the environment that became the subject of his seminal life’s work, we would have never had the astonishing paintings he left for humanity to cherish.

Appendix D:
Vows/Value of Presence-Centered Communities

Throughout Christian history, the following values generally made up the *Vows* that were taken by religious communities, especially monastic expressions of community. In the 21st century, neo-monastic communities and other communities striving to live as communities of Christian practice are recovering some of these values.

Stability

In church history, the issue of *stability* formed the basis of the monastic vow. Those who entered into a monastic community made the commitment to grow in Christ among people they would do their entire life with. Also, traditionally, the parish model that has existed throughout most of the history of Christianity is the antithesis of the North American church phenomenon of church-hopping. Doing life within a community for a lifetime had been the norm. In the last half of the 20th century, this has dramatically changed. We live in a very mobile society. We have also embraced an ethos of consumerism. Individuals in the Secular Age insist on the freedom to choose what suits them personally. If someone doesn't like the customer-service they get at a particular store, there is another option down the street. If a person doesn't like the way things are going at their church, there are a dozen others to choose within close proximity. My first ministry mentor, Al Metsker, drilled in me that giving up because of conflict or challenges and moving to greener pastures will only result in the need for you to take that test all over again. Some people spend their whole life in that cycle. Sheldrake states, "The point was stressed that if one could not find God in stability, there was no guarantee that God could be experienced by moving anywhere else."[405] *Stability* brings a quality of time into the equation. Benedict believed

[405] Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, 108.

that a monk who entered the monastery was coming there to die. What would churches and ministries look like if they took *stability* seriously?

Fidelity

Celibacy was a norm for the *Rule of Life* in the monastic communities throughout history. While *celibacy* isn't an option considered for most, *fidelity* should be. For presence-centered communities of Christian practice, *fidelity* is an important value and commitment. A commitment to *fidelity* in relationships is essential for lasting relationships in an environment where very few things are expected to last. *Fidelity* is also a necessity for relationship with Jesus Christ. *Fidelity* speaks of faithfulness and allegiance over an entire lifetime.

Simplicity

A commitment to *simplicity* in a presence-centered communal rhythm of life requires intentional safeguards to protect from the busyness of life that make us less than human. Unfortunately, we live in a culture that encourages people to embrace busyness as a sign of significance and success. Rosa's concept of modernity's *acceleration of time* works against presence-centeredness. Technology and innovation always makes the promise of creating more margin for human life and a higher quality of living. But in reality, the opposite happens and people's lives become even more complex and overloaded. Having a value of seeking simplicity can open up space in people's lives. That space can be a place of presence-centeredness. *Simplicity* can help people focus on their most important priorities, protecting their life-giving rhythms. *Simplicity* can also help people live within their means and avoid overextending financially. Avoiding the stress of debt is essential to live in the freedom of God, experiencing a presence-centered spirituality. *Simplicity* helps reserve energy for spiritual practices that form and nurture a presence-centered way of life. *Simplicity* as a value in a rhythm of life is a

commitment to a lifetime conversation and exploration of what is **enough**, what is a need versus a want, and how life can be ordered for generosity untethered to the consumeristic values of our culture.

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